



A
Brief History
of
Howard

A Novel

Robert M. Levin

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To the memory of my late parents, Bernard and Charlotte Levin.

Acknowledgements



There was a game I had as a child called the Shifty Gear Game. It was just gears, you could fill the whole board with interactive gears—the point seemed to be that each gear was vital to the whole. And so it is with this book. There is a long list of people all of whose names I will try to recall at five in the morning, having finished one of the last proofreads and edits of this manuscript. And if this sounds like I'm setting up an excuse for forgetting some names, you're damn right that I am. So, in no particular order I'd like to thank:

Rosie Vogelti, Don Sheppard, Howard Schwartz, Jarvis Thurston, Stanley Elkin, Dr. Richard Laitman, Evelyn Perlstein, The Heitholts (Jim, Kent and their wives), The Davids, Jennifer Elin Cole, Deborah Schneider, Mitchell Moskowitz, Ronni Moskowitz, Michelle Moskowitz, Melissa Moskowitz, Frank Mormino, Larry Friedman, Bill Mamer, Lew Prince, Phil Birsh, Daryl Darden, Stanley Hale, Larry Wilson, Mark Deutsche, Jim Nicholas, Ed Seelig, Vernon Nashville, Charlie Payne, Joe Charles and Alan, his trumpet player, Steve Kirby, B.B.'s Jazz Blues and Soups, John Alberty, The Broadway Oyster Bar, Gary Ludewig, Bob Edwards, Blueberry Hill (but I've never met Joe Edwards), Vintage Vinyl, Dan Levin, Paul Piccone and the St. Louis Telos Group, Ben and Miriam Shatzman, Chana Shapiro, Aaron Shatzman, Howard Mirowitz, Sheldon Mirowitz, Lisa Mirowitz, Nancy and Paul Steinhardt, Leo and Shirley Mirowitz, Carl Mirowitz, Fran and Marvin Yavitz, Joel and Nancy Levin, Diane Gish, Elayne Gish, Barbara Perle, Norman Perle, Joan and Dick Smith, Ruth and Herb Shieber, Bernard and Charlotte Levin, and my children, Amy and Jacob Levin.

And although there is no top of the list, there really is—and Iris, my wife, goes there.

Here's the disclaimer of sorts, the part where lawyers tell you to say any characters resembling persons living or dead is purely a coincidence. Well, this is the lawyer's way of explaining fiction—which isn't all that connected to the reality of fiction. The reality of writing is that you find the large intestine of the real world, so to speak, and fill it with fireworks. Then you light the fuse. In moments there is the explosion, the snap, crackle, and pop, the rocket's red glare, and all that Jackson Pollack-y stuff. And that's when you start writing what you see, leaving only a gossamer strand connecting the fiction to the reality we all know, love, and hate. So, don't play no match game between the names above and the characters in the book, cause there just isn't any point.

**Don't Skip
This Forward by the Author.**



*Although I Myself
Have Skipped More Of These
Than There Are
Blades of Grass On
A Baseball Diamond,
And Even Though I Understand
And Even Empathize
With Your Desire to Skip This
Forward,
I Strongly Urge That You Not
And
I Thank You For Continuing
To Read Directly
Below.*

I've got to apologize, really. I've always considered such Authorial Forwards to be a tremendous waste of time when others have written them, and so I've skipped them without feelings of guilt or feelings that I've missed something, always turning right to the beginning of the book to commence reading. My personal history is littered with such skipplings, mixing right in with all of those furniture and mattress tags I've torn away. So I wouldn't have dreamed of writing this unless it was absolutely important. I have to tell you a little bit about the process of writing, the publishing business, and this book in particular.

Process first. If you want to write a novel, a serious novel, it's important to have a good reader, someone knowledgeable about writing, someone who is well-read, someone who is honest with their criticism and praise. It's like having a navigator on a ship or an airplane, you, author, have to know where you are because blank pages don't come with a compass. So you give sections, maybe 40 to 50 pages at a time to your reader, checking to see if you are where you want to be—is the writing compelling, are the characters worthy of your caring, how's that verisimilitude going, and do you feel driven to turn the page? I was very fortunate to have just such a reader. She has her own publishing company for children's books and has written a book or two her own self. When she sold 20,000 copies she decided to shop the book to the publishers in New York who told her that her book wouldn't sell and turned her away. She's now up to 150,000 in sales. That tells quite a bit about those making the decisions in the Literary District.

But not everything and this leads us into the bit about the “Bidness” of publishing. I could easily go in the direction of the Keepers of the Bidness not knowing what’s good and what’s not. I’m not going in that direction simply because that’s not what’s going on. The Keepers of the Bidness think a little bit about what’s good, but mostly they have to think—given the thousands of titles at a normal book store, the tens of thousands of titles at a big chain, and not to mention Amazon—about the answers to two questions: On what shelf the book will be sitting, and how will they get you to notice it? So while I’m writing this novel knowing exactly what shelf it goes on—the one in your home that is not organized by any headings at all—the Keepers of the Bidness are thinking about how not to get ripped off by Barnes and Noble. See, Barnes and Noble gets to keep books for up to ninety days without paying for them, at which point they get to send them back to the Publisher free of charge (at least this is my present understanding). The Keepers of the Bidness think in terms of Suspense, Detective, Romance, Fiction, Best-Sellers, Non-Fiction, and the Dreaded Literature. I’ve written the Dreaded Literature. They publish the Dreaded Literature because they feel it’s their duty, and if they don’t publish it they’ll end up in some type of Dante Bidness Hell, the ring of those who have turned their back on Faulkner and Hemingway. They can distinguish the good Dreaded Literature from the bad because the good is impossible to read, nearly impossible to understand, and usually ends in some type of Existential Depression or Suicide. And the people who usually read Literature have come to expect such misery.

Which brings us to this particular book, and why I feel I need to lead you a little bit of the way, like a Sherpa, because I wrote this book to try to break that Literary paradigm, and not only that paradigm, but just about every paradigm my protagonist comes across. And so, there is suspense, but it’s not a Thriller. There is mystery, but it’s not a Detective novel, there is love but it’s not a Romance. And last, it is literary, but not depressing. (In fact, I’ve written it in many layers, so that every time you think about it you might discover something new. In other words, I’ve tried to make it a certain kind of fun. I find discovering things to be quite enjoyable.) There isn’t a category named Paradigm Shift but, beginning right now, let’s say that there is, and this is the first one written in the 21st century.

So now I will do my Sherpa duties and talk for a short while about paradigm shifts.

As soon as we talk about paradigm shifts, as soon as you begin to *experience* such a shift, you find yourself in perceptual and logical quicksand. That’s because everything looks the same. Here’s a small example: A couple I know recently had their first baby. We ran into each other at the grocery store and I asked how’re things? “Everything is the same,” she said, “but at the same time everything is completely different.” “Totally different,” he said.

“Yeah,” she said, “same house, same floors, same furniture, same everything, except it’s totally different.”

So, when we talk paradigm shift, we talk stasis. And yet everything is different.

One of most famous paradigm shifts—I mean if you had to think of ten this would probably be on the list, is the shift from the Ptolemaic Universe to the Copernican Universe—from the world being flat with the sun revolving around it, to the world being round and revolving around the sun. Conceptually, no pun intended, night and day. And yet, the ancient Greek and the Modern American, if they could be defying time and standing next to each other, would still see the same thing, especially if they were standing in the middle of Kansas. Lots of flatness regarding the earth, and the sun rising in the east and setting in the west, and if they were standing still, it would feel just like they were standing still, as opposed to the truth, that they are twirling through space at approximately 1,000 mph. Everything looks the same—but inside of their minds, behind the eyes of our two observers, everything is completely different. They see the same data and interpret it in ways that are pretty much exactly opposite. In other words, their common sense isn’t common. It, common sense, has to be learned—kind of. Common sense sort of seeps into the mind when you’re not aware, the way rainwater gets into the basement or crawlspace. And it happens in such a way that it feels completely natural, so natural that it becomes inconceivable that anyone at any point in the history of the world could think differently. Common sense is one stubborn belief system—that is usually false.

Does that mean that the earth doesn’t revolve around the sun? Well, no. In this case the falseness comes from the fact that there is just so much more. It’s not so much wrong as it is an increasingly smaller piece of an increasingly bigger picture. That 1,000 mph is actually the speed along one pathway, day by day. It turns out that there is another pathway, on which we are moving at 67,000 mph, yearly, and there are probably several more pathways that we don’t even know about yet and forget about the exact speed because we are *accelerating*. But it sure feels like I’m sitting here, sitting still, save for my fingers.

It is that way with this novel. If you read this novel as you were taught in English class or if you read it the same way you read the newspaper, then you will be looking at a flat earth with the sun revolving around it. Put another way, in school they will teach you to read with a 19th century mindset and we are already in the 21st century.

But this isn’t a 19th century novel, nor is it an 18th century novel, both of which lead to 20th century literary art, and as I said before, this isn’t any of those things. This is the first 21st century novel you’ve read, and that’s why there’s a forward into which we are about halfway through.

Let's step into the book for a moment. Not quite to the first word. Right here. You can see the first word across the flat plain.

Standing here and looking behind us we see some rules for writing novels, 19 rules to be exact, enumerated by Mark Twain, and I'm not the kind of writer who would disagree with or insult Mark Twain—although William Faulkner did exactly that. But I'm not the kind of writer who would question William Faulkner either. (Yep, I'm fully aware of the paradox.) But I followed those rules quite scrupulously, my comparatively little tiny feet springing jumps from Twain's giant footprint to giant footprint.

Okay, let's turn back around. This novel is about good versus evil, hence the reference to the 18th century Victorian novel, which is a riff on the even older story of David versus Goliath. Now it so happens that such novels are only as good as the villain, novels about good versus evil. And I've also had it up to here with novels that resolve due to 19th century technology—that is, steel and gunpowder. You know how such novels have to end—the bad guy shoots *first* and misses, the good guy shoots and hits the villain and he dies. wow. I mean that in an e.e. cummings sort of way. wow. Underwhelming at best. Even using James Bond advancements in technology, his small and more sophisticated tech is better than the evil dudes' big sophisticated tech—and yeah, we only watch James Bond for the science. Really, we do. It's the science. The point here is that the villain is starting out at a disadvantage, so Bond (Spy Thriller), isn't exactly Hitchcock.

No, I needed a villain with just about every strategic advantage compared to the good guy, my protagonist. Not just in size but in every conceivable way. I mean that if my villain takes the first shot, he won't miss and it will be a shot right through my good guy's heart. And he isn't going to get conveniently stupid, using some Rube Goldberg death machine when a knife would work quite well and the murder would take about a second as opposed to the long, lingering, sweat-filled torture. And my villain isn't going to be outwitted by some scientist he hasn't met who packs the power of the 3rd Armored Division in something the size of a shirt button.

I had to get my villain from a world, or I should more accurately say 'paradigm,' where the human potential is greater than the technological potential. In other words, in the western paradigm, if we think of the paradigm as a building, the room with human potential has a low ceiling, whereas the room with technological potential has a high ceiling, much higher than the human room. This is the 19th century paradigm, the 19th century building. Of course there is the contradiction that humans invent the technology, but I'm saying that the Western soul prefers to channel its gifts towards generating energy, for instance, by inventing the dynamo rather than learning to generate more and more life force, or *ch'i*, which the Western world hasn't even discovered yet.

I needed the opposite, a paradigm where the room of human potential has a much, much higher ceiling than the technological room. That paradigm is sitting around on this earth, it's a culture we see every day, we can order books about this culture because there are aplenty, and there are plenty of web pages to download. I didn't have to invent another planet with another culture, nor did I have to invent some secret society living in the alleys and passages of underground New York or Yale University. The paradigm is on my bookshelf and it has been there since my days in college. That paradigm is Chinese, where there is emphasis on acquiring wisdom instead of memorizing knowledge. Put another way, Lao Tzu would kick Alex Trebek's ass. Wisdom is more powerful than knowledge. We in the West like to say that knowledge is power. Wisdom is knowledge on steroids. In Lao Tzu's world, folks think in poetry, in our world, we think in nouns.

In this way, the father of my villain, in his own quest for power, using his own 'scientific method' for generating inspiration, kills several people in search of what he calls their "seashells" (metaphor, poetry), what we call our cochleas (our use of nouns). The language of poetry leads to wisdom, the use of nouns leads to knowledge. Both cultures share the need for inspiration, that moment of knowing. The difference of course, is that my villain has a clear method for being inspired, my good guy, a product of the west, stumbles around in the dark until inspiration hits him in the head. But is it luck, or soul, or something else entirely? That's why so many folks who consider themselves 'spiritual' as opposed to 'religious' know quite a bit about Asian philosophy.

So my villain is Chinese, and he is just about touching the ceiling, that is, he is approaching the point of becoming the most powerful man he can become. And he does bad things, in accordance with Mark Twain rule number 10.

With the deftness of Fred Astaire doing a move called the 'Ball Change,' with just the use of this villain, we move out of the Western 19th century paradigm. And good riddance.

Unfortunately, if we move sideways just a bit, we find ourselves stuck (and it is muddy, isn't it?) in the 20th century artistic/philosophical paradigm. Did it start with Picasso, maybe Hemmingway? Fitzgerald revved it up to full speed, at least I thought, until I got to Sartre. Do you want to know how bad this paradigm is? Because it is just a god-awful piece of thought. If it was software, and you downloaded it, your computer would crash. Not only that, but your house would lose power for a week. But it's art.

Here's a story about my daughter's first encounter with this paradigm. But first, some background about her. She has experienced only success and acceptance in her young life—the measurement being a school year. That is, she has overcome any adversity that has crossed her path the way a good umbrella overcomes a steady rain. She has won awards, received honors—and not that self-esteem building crap, but real stuff. She smiles a lot,

laughs, and then the teenage years hit, which is a paradigm all by itself, but that's another story. She was assigned *Death of a Salesman* followed by *A Streetcar Named Desire*. When she was done reading she came to me and told me that life is meaningless, that there is only darkness and hopelessness, and that at the end of all things there is only a twisted depravity. And this is from just two plays.

“Okay,” I said. “You’d better have a seat.”

“Why?” she asked with her shoulders slumping.

“Because we have to talk about this.”

“What’s the point?” she asked. “What’s the point about anything?”

“Sit.”

She sat.

“They lied,” I said.

“Who lied?”

“They *all* lied. Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, all of them. Fitzgerald, Hemmingway. They lied.”

“Have you read these plays?” she asked.

“Do you know anything about their lives?” I asked. “Their own lives show that their stories aren’t true. There is meaning, there is happiness. At the essence of things, there is an essence, not emptiness. Every day they sat down, did their work, got published, had their plays performed...heck, do you know how much money Miller made from just one year’s work, or however long it took him to write that play? He could have spent the rest of his life searching for love and happiness—which was all around him but he chose not to notice. I mean, Picasso had a blue period—did Miller have a Happy period? Did any of them have a Happy period? Did they even look? Here’s the general rule. The more suicides or suicide attempts there are in a book or play, the more descents into insanity you find, the less the author has to say, the less the author actually knows about life.

“How do you feel when you practice your music and get somewhere, you know, when actual music comes out of the instrument? How would you feel if you were the best at what you did?”

“Good,” she smiled, a real beamer. The lights were back on.

“How did you feel when you rescued the cat, or when the cat came back after it was gone for two days?”

“Really happy, really good,” she smiled.

“When you cry for happiness are those real tears?”

“Okay, I get it,” she smiled, laughed a little.

“How about in fifth grade...”

“I said *I get it*,” and then she teenaged back to her room.

But I’ve been reading that kind of literature for a long time, and when I started *it was already a cliché*. I suspect that the writers and artists who achieve status, at least in college, sort of ghettoize themselves and stay away from the scientists, who, if I recall, were much happier since they were asking questions and trying to solve problems that would benefit others. And then there’s the whole scientific method thing, where you have to prove your assertions as opposed to making the assertion while smoking a cigarette and saying it in French—which counts as science in the liberal arts part of the university.

So I think that life does have meaning, and although we can feel emptiness and horrible sadness, underneath it, there is something wonderful.

And this brings us to, just step forward a little, the last bit of this Forward. Because this story has a rather unique ending, which it has because I think that there is meaning to life. We are taught in literature class that the *ending is the key to the story’s meaning*. That is, the ending tells us what we can generalize—the moral of the story, to use a term referring back to an 18th century paradigm. Not here. We can generalize the journey, the ending is specific to my protagonist. The ending of episodes in you own life will be different than his ending, but if you were to meet my protagonist, you could talk for days about the journey.

Well, well, well, I think that about does it. You just finished the Forward. I’d say it’s time for an ice cream.

Prelude



Beijing

The Forbidden Palace

1795

Closest to the Emperor were the Sages in half circles, the pattern repeating, like the filigreed grooves of a seashell. Bent bows, the architect conceived of the daily convening, intellects sharp and true as an archer conceives his arrows, three spans of thirty sages, with the Emperor as the ninety-first, just in case the Emperor developed a curious thirst for democracy. But the Emperor never did, and there was always only one vote to be tallied.

The Sage Wang, therefore, to learn the highest art of persuasion, devoted considerable time to thought itself and discovered Linguistic *Ch'i*, as complex and simple as one blade of grass. A man without wisdom, thought The Sage, goes to a field, bends down and picks such a blade, holds it in his hand, and may turn it over once, twice—then this man lets it go without thought, at most to test the direction of the wind, for he is not a wise man. He is not aware that in this blade there is Sunfire. Nor is he aware that it contains the paradoxical Earth—a cooler *ch'i*, not at all a burning, but a churning, the steady power of a great ox that never ceases its plowing, a *ch'i* that creates the constant pulling down of all objects, massives like the moon and lights like raindrops, webs like the roots of plants and trees, pulling them into the earth itself. And yet this *ch'i* allows for flight as the same plants and trees defy this pulling by reaching as far into the sky as the earth itself wills it down, into itself. The Sage Wang, therefore, understood the considerable power in this blade—and that if one possessed knowledge of the Hidden Ways, to convert sunfire to earth and earth to sunfire, mountains would either move or mountains would melt. When the Sage Wang looked at his reflection in clear pools he thought himself to be a man aware of the power in one blade of grass.

And so it is with words, he thought, written language, logic, and grammar—so much power in what most consider to be of negligible weight. He had seen this power often, beginning in childhood, remembering it as he sat in the back of the large room along with the young apprentices and older judges, watching and listening to the arguments of The Sages, his father among them, and noticing with some question that the most logical man did not always find the Emperor's favor. His own father was always the most logical, his father always argued better than the others, and yet the Emperor and the other Sages could not see the correctness of his father's position.

But now the fleeting question of his youth assumed a great urgency and he needed, passionately, to answer this question. As he felt the extreme heat of this need the answer descended as if from heaven, and he knew with certainty the existence of Linguistic *Ch'i*.

He could have written a small tractate of its existence and received a small measure of fame, but he chose to keep it as a secret in order to achieve a large measure of power. The problem, he found, was that the inquiry quickly took him outside of the ancient paradigm, the Tao, its variation, the interaction of the Five Elements, and its method—the aphorism

attributed to no one, meaning that it achieved the status of a part of nature, like the sun, moon, and stars—that it is possible to learn everything there is to know about the universe without ever leaving your own backyard. That is, careful, methodical observation of what is around you is both—in European terms, both the finest telescope and the finest microscope.

If he could have avoided it he certainly would have—he had little respect for those who treated the traditions in a cavalier fashion. One type lived life as if there were no traditions, and yet followed them as one obeys the changes in seasons, for even though there is no tradition for this person, there is also no other way. The second type is not so benign, a person who does differently for difference's own sake, not considering the care and wisdom accumulated by the repetitions of the rituals for over thousands of years. And yet here he was, faced with no other option than to break tradition, to place himself closer to the hated second type than the tepid first type.

He needed to see the ear and see the brain, literally, not metaphorically, not meditatively—he would need to use cadavers. This was not presently done, and in his knowledge, it had never been done. There was no need. Disease and death resulted from an imbalance or lack of ch'i, and since death is the moment when the ch'i departs the body, the disease also leaves. Cadavers? No need, until now.

In the evenings he would go outside the walls of the city to graveyards, only to find that decomposition and its accompanying fragility made his dissections more of a disgusting mess than anything scientifically precise. And so he went to a cooper and commissioned four large boxes, about six feet by four feet, absolutely water tight. Then he went to the alchemist and commissioned him to prepare a brine that would preserve flesh, six large barrels. Next he went to a groundskeeper and a mason and commissioned them to build a secret tunnel out of and into the Forbidden City. When his merchandise was complete he went out that evening with his quiet wagon and his sharpest knife and killed the cooper, the alchemist, the landscaper, and the mason. He brought them in through the tunnel, into his Most Private Room, and stored them in the large boxes and filled the boxes with the brine. Now he could work.

Using the tools of fisherman, of carpenters, of sculptors, finally the tools of those who filigree jewelry of jade and gold he was able to harvest from within the ears of victims—the seashells, the beautiful, molded tubes that absorb sound and inflection, that generate meaning and emotion. If he were another kind of man, he thought, this would be the excitement felt upon the discovery of a hidden treasury of gold and gems. Or perhaps, even if he were another kind of man, the excitement would be of great scientific discovery, a vanity hiding the true desire for immortality, he thought.

He stared at the specimen. Perhaps he was the kind of man who likes gems after all, he smiled his very slight smile. There it was, sitting there, just a seashell, but—he knew it immediately, it contained the worth of a large rare pearl, just one, gleaming through the muck on this filed left side—this was the center, this was the *T'an Tien*, the source, the sun, of Linguistic Ch'i.

There was a soft, sharp knock, a low knock, on the very thick wooden door—which meant that his ten-year-old son was pounding his small knuckles against the thick beams fastened together.

“May I come in, father?” said the muffled high voice.

Sage Wang walked over to the door and spoke through the tight cracks. “No you may not. I am working. It is important that I stay by myself to concentrate.” He heard his son’s small shoes crack crack on the stones of the garden, the dimming noise telling of the long journey back to the main house. Wang continued his work. There were three other corpses, and the question was whether the knowledge and wisdom would come to him more quickly if he meditated on two or on eight. The answer would have to be six, as it turned out, since he became tired and slipped when attempting to harvest the final two.

In the next week, traveling at night, he was able to dispose of the corpses, the coffins, and the barrels. He dried and lacquered the shells and then he was able to begin the long process of meditation, of allowing nature to whisper its secrets to him as if he were a trusted friend or a favorite lover.

In his mind he always thought, pictured to the smallest details the possibilities, what might happen on The Most Important Day, never sure when this day would arrive but knowing he must be prepared. As he walked along the stones leading from his house to the Hall of Wisdom, holding the hand of his apprentice, his son, ten, then over time, eleven, then twelve, he was always in a state of incubation, allowing the knowledge gained from the previous evening to seep into his cells, the way sunlight is folded into green leaves. The power of the Linguistic Ch'i built. He noticed that he was gaining favor with the Emperor; that the Emperor would turn to him first, at first occasionally, then with more and more frequency.

When he became the most trusted advisor, during the evening’s meditation, a small group of six ancestors became visible to offer congratulations. They looked at the six shells, sitting on a small table, glistening in the low candlelight, and nodded in approval. He waited for them to speak, to teach him, but they said nothing more and disappeared. But he deduced one thing. Tomorrow will be the Day.

He walked with his son, now fourteen, whose voice was beginning to deepen, whose height was nearly his own, they walked to the Hall of Wisdom.

“Father.”

“Yes, Sung.”

“Today is the Day of the Princes, isn’t it?”

“I believe that it is,” said Sage Wang.

“Will you be teaching them?”

“If the Emperor wishes it so.”

“I believe I have noticed that the other Sages dislike you,” said Sung. “ever since the Emperor turns to you first.”

They stopped walking. Sage Wang turned to his son and looked down out of old habit and found himself looking at his son’s waist instead of his eyes. He raised his head and met his eyes, straight across.

“How do you know this?” said Sage Wang.

“When you speak they begin to watch you from the corners of their eyes.”

“Then you may be correct.”

“I also believe that the Emperor is afraid of you,” said Sung.

They began walking again.

“And how do you know this?” asked Sage Wang.

“When he turns to another sage he is higher than that person.”

“He is sitting higher than we sit.”

“But for you,” said Sung, “he sinks his chest before he turns. He relinquishes his height.”

Sage Wang listened. “You may be right once more.”

“Father, are we in danger?”

“No, my son, we are not.”

Sung could feel himself grow a bit, his chest expanded with pride. “Then it is they who are in danger,” he said.

“Yes, my son, that is correct again.”

On the higher platform, higher than the sages, but in chairs not the throne, sat the fifteen princes. There were always more princes since the task of the Emperor is to make decisions in the morning and make princes in the afternoons and evenings. And it is the task of the greater population to make farmers and concubines. The princes, to this point, have learned the teachings of past Sages and the history of their dynasty. They have learned to begin to master their ch'i; they have learned to begin to meditate. They have learned that they are always beginning. Today the Sages and the Emperor will learn if any of the princes have an aptitude for governing.

A servant brought out the watches, fine English and German pocket watches, one made of silver and tortoise shell, engraved with pastoral scenes on the facing, the others made of gold, delicately engraved, and if turned sideways, showing the gears, hundreds of moving parts, delicate as the bones in the ear, the mainspring, the verge and fuzee, the hands on the face pointing to stick shapes the young princes had never before seen, although they all recognized the phases of the moon, which was also displayed on some of the faces. They touched them all gently, they put them to their ears. Eventually one looked, then they all looked at the Emperor with wonder. The Emperor nodded to Sage Wang.

“Tell me about the people who made this,” Sage Wang said.

“What is this?” asked one prince.

“Tell me about these people,” Sage Wang said once more.

It felt, to these young princes, that a veil of mourning fell upon them, the strands of silk sharp as fine blades. They became self-conscious of their motions, aware that, for many the first time, that they were not in surroundings at their beck and call, they were being scrutinized and judged, for many, as coldly as they had judged others. They became vaguely aware, the double blade of the razor silk, of political intrigue—that perhaps the premature deaths of their older siblings were not solely the doings of cruel fate, and that indeed some of them right here may not see their twentieth year.

“You are princes, but I am your elder,” said Sage Wang. “Someone tell me about the people who make such tools.”

“They are very brilliant,” said one.

“They are very beautiful,” said another.

“They are more skilled than we are when working with metals,” said another, not finishing his sentence completely, as if the final sounds were sliced off by the sharpness of the European metalsmiths. “I mean to say that their skills with metals are very impressive.”

“You were correct the first time,” said Sage Wang. “They are better than we are.”

There was a silence, a very long silence. If Sage Wang were a composer of music this silence would be exactly what he would want. He knew what was next; such is the lot of the master of Linguistic Ch'i.

“Does that mean that their weapons are superior to ours?” asked a prince.

“It does indeed,” said Sage Wang. “And their ship building skills are second to none.”

The boys began to feel their Emperor Oats. “What kind of warriors are they?”

“A small band of them, wearing their metal, wielding the swords made of their metal, destroyed an entire civilization across the sea. One hundred killed one million,” said Sage Wang.

Another sage stood up and spoke loudly. “This must stop!”

“Sage Hu,” said the Emperor, “there is something you wish to say?”

“I wish this man to stop his teaching. He is preparing the princes for war with the English,” said Sage Hu. The Emperor looked at Sage Wang, giving him opportunity to respond.

“Is it war itself that Sage Hu opposes, or war that he believes we will lose?” asked Sage Wang.

The point was simple, that one could not sit with the Sages and be opposed to war itself. Sage Hu must mean, therefore, that the time for war is not propitious, or that China could not defeat the English, or that the English would slaughter the Chinese. And these are words that Sage Hu would not wish to say publicly, thought Sage Wang.

Sage Hu sat down, for his point was much more complex—that Sage Wang was evil, and that only evil and more evil will come upon China by following anything Sage Wang desires. But Sage Wang was eloquent and learned and possessed great beauty—who would believe such a man as evil since he embodies the ideals and appearance of goodness? Indeed, the time for the war that truly needs to be fought, to defeat and destroy Sage Wang, it is not propitious, thought Sage Hu. That is why Sage Hu sat down.

“Weapons,” Sage Wang continued, “are only as effective as the man who holds them,” he said to the princes. “The effective man is the effective warrior, and indeed the truly good man needs no weapons at all.”

Could Sage Wang have caught me like a fish, thought Sage Hu. The aroma of my defeat has made the words of Sage Wang more delectable to the princes—and even to the Emperor, thought Sage Hu. He was shocked as he looked around the great semicircle of wise men—for they, too, are excited by the words of Sage Wang.

“Who are the men who hold such remarkable weapons, these Englishmen? These Europeans?” asked Sage Wang. “They have great intelligence, yes, and they have the strength of domesticated animals. They have endless perseverance.” He paused. “And they have set themselves the task of possessing China.” He paused once more. If someone challenges this assertion then he must argue again, he must argue him to his seat as he had done to Sage Hu. But if no one challenges this, they are accepting his words completely, he can, as a sailor would say, open up the sails, let them stretch, and be carried by the wind. He waited. There was most beautiful silence.

“And yet, whatever they do,” he continued. “Whether they work, or invent, or think, even whenever they see and hear, they do not use their souls, their Elevated Ch’i.” More than a few heads tilted to one side. This concept of action without the foundation of the Elevated Ch’i, this was impossible, as if an apple detached from the tree branch and did not fall down. How can there be any action without its first cause coming from the Elevated Ch’i?

“It is like this,” said Sage Wang. “You have a wagon to be drawn by a team of four horses. For the wagon to move forward you must give the order to each horse. ‘Onwards Horse Number One. Onwards Horse Number Two.’ The two horses will move, but the two others will not move. The first two horses have to pull the wagon and drag the other horses along in addition. That is what it is like, to not use one’s Elevated Ch’i.”

“Then they are in turmoil,” said one prince.

“And they bring turmoil wherever they go, and they wish to bring it here,” said Sage Wang. He looked around the room, he felt the silence as if he were stroking the skin of a beautiful woman. The ears of the sages, the princes, the emperor, were open, their eyes were clear. Sage Wang felt a frisson from the silent sound of his own thoughts.

“And what is left of their mind, they divide and divide again, like a maze with many paths that end, and there is no path *to* the end.” Again there were confused looks from the princes—for such a person, such a culture could not live with itself, it was just not possible. “I will explain again,” said Sage Wang. “Their metalsmiths speak a language known only to each other, their architects speak a language known only to other architects, the makers of their fabrics speak a language only other makers of fabric can speak, and they cannot speak to each other.

“We,” continued Sage Wang, “all speak with poetry, the same poetry, we all speak of the beauty of harmony and balance. A sage can speak to a fine cook, who can speak to the gardener, who can speak to the calligrapher—all of us can, and indeed wish, to learn from each other.”

A prince laughed quietly. But not so quietly. He stood. “That wagon that is dragging two horses—it also has square wheels,” said prince, immediately unsure, had he lengthened or shortened his life? There was laughter, but Sage Wang waited.

Once more there was silence, but this time Sage Wang noted the aroma of fear—a fear of the English metal, a fear of the English misery. Sage Wang allowed it to grow until it pushed against the great wooden wall of the room.

“What can be done?” the Emperor asked.

“Across the oceans,” said Sage Wang, “they have begun to grow sugar, and because of this sugar, they wish to trade for our tea. They will offer us many different kinds of goods in return for our tea. But we should not take them. We should only take their silver, for their silver is like their blood. Tea for silver, they will bleed to death. And they will do this gladly—for in place of their Elevated Ch’i, there is craving. They wake up craving, they walk the earth craving, they go to sleep craving, and they dream of their cravings. Paradoxically, they believe themselves to be free men, yet they are truly enslaved by their cravings.”

“Remarkable,” said the Emperor. “I will set this task before the ministers.”

As Sage Wang predicted, the English agreed to trade silver for tea, thus beginning the slow bleed of the English economy. Months later, the morning after a particularly rainy night, the bodies of Sage Hu and his wife were found strangled in their bed, strangled with a particularly heavy rope. There was no sign of struggle save for the severe rope burns around the couples’ necks, as if they just laid quietly while they were being murdered. Their children were too young and frail to do such a thing, and most puzzling, there were no footprints in the mud outside of their house. The murders remained unsolved. Sage Wang found that the strange circumstances surrounding the deaths added a significant measure of fear to the respect he already commanded, which pleased him beyond measure.

Years passed. Mighty England wobbled and came close to ruin—until the English found that the Chinese farmers, illegally of course, were more than happy to bypass the government and trade their tea for the opium the English could grow in India. The farmers would then take their wagons into the city and sell their opium. This became known in the West as the Opium Wars—history is written by the victors. It did not take much of this present for Sage Wang to see the future. He would be beaten, China would be beaten. He aged quickly, and in his Most Private Room the six ancestors appeared to him one final time, shortly before he himself would be joining the six.

They told him that his son, Sung, must practice his routine diligently, regularly, daily. He must do so with great intensity and purpose. They told him of the development of ch’i that

in the womb as Yin unites with Yang, the ch'i forms along with the body, parallel with the body, developing its own organs and skills, its own capabilities. As the body deteriorates with age, the ch'i does not have to deteriorate, it can still grow, develop more skills, develop its own power and wisdom. The six ancestors told of ch'i's stages and transformations, ending with this: When son Sung reaches an age near 250 years old, he will achieve the power to avenge these terrible events. He must avenge them. Go. Tell him. He must begin immediately and waste no time.

"But how, father," asked Sung, now forty years old, "how will I live to two hundred fifty?"

"I don't know," his father said softly, "only I know that it is indeed the way."

His ancestors knew, although his father did not know, what a powerful man Sung had become, learning the intricacies of even practice and change. And he learned that heaven assists all who are serious. As he aged, as he approached fifty, after his father died and he was in despair—despite the regularity and evenness of his practice, tired now—it happened.

And as he hoped, expected, the heavens did not allow him to decline, to allow his vengeance unfulfilled. The answer came like a clap of thunder. On the Hill of Accumulated Elegance, in midst of shrubbery, he saw a gardener, a young man, manicuring the grasses. At that moment the second transformation occurred, Sung leaned against a nearby tree, nearly passing out, keeping his eye on the young gardener. Another energetic cell division took place, investing himself with wisdom and power few have known—and now he also knew, as simple as riding a bicycle, all 540 organs, as simple as picking an apple from a tree, he walked over to the young gardener, greeted him heartily, shook his hand with both hands, and took every bit of ch'i this man possessed. Wang Sung watched as the color drained from the young man's eyes, his pupils turning white as marble, his skin graying like an elephant's, his mouth opening, his tongue cracking like drought stricken earth, this young man, dropping dead within a minute. He had learned to be immortal.

Oh the rush of life force through his body, the heat of the high of it. His meridians tingled, then his arteries, his organs rushed with joy, his muscles popped with strength, the feeling of new youth, youth he can use wisely, his *T'an Tiens* crackled with lightning. His feet rose from the ground millimeters, for seconds he was flying, millimeters off of the ground, but flying nevertheless. But the next day, his skills had considerably diminished—the new ch'i needed to be molded and honed. It was clumsy and unresponsive to his will. It took him slightly over one year to regain his skill, and another year after that to build his new powers into precision.

He went into exile as China deteriorated into a vast dilapidated opium den. He went to Europe, learned the subtle way in which ch'i can be exchanged, or in his case, taken in small

bits, during sex, as his young wives aged quickly and died. As his new ch'i grew older, as it approached fifty and began to wane, he approached a young man in France who helped him retrieve his dropped umbrella, reached out to give this Frenchman a firm handshake—and voila! as they would say, he was rejuvenated once more.

Early in what the Westerners called the 20th century, Wang Sung noticed something quite subtle at first, but careful observation showed it to be quite clear. That ch'i itself, the life force of the earth was thinning. The ch'i he would take from young men would not be as strong, it would not last as long, and he found himself in the paradoxical position of having to help and heal the life force of these young men before he could ensnare it. He followed the currents of the earth, a mixture of politics and geology, and found himself after World War II migrating to the earth's political center, the United States, and within the United States, to its energetic center, the crossroads of the Mississippi River and the Missouri River. This is where he would be as he hovered near 250 years of age, where he would take the ch'i of one more young man, ch'i he would nurture and then take, the keystone ch'i, ch'i that would allow him his own final transformation, becoming one with the world itself, that even the earth and trees, the clouds and rain would express his rage and revenge on those who ravaged China.

**A
Brief History
of
Howard**



The Village

When Howard Stein was thrown out of Western Civilization he found the most frightening thing in the world. Howard wasn't, strictly speaking, thrown out in a conventional manner. He never received a pink slip or a telegram telling him that his services were no longer required, that Western Civilization was downsizing and his position in the world was being integrated into another division. Yet there are events that throw a person so far off the beaten path that one needs an observatory telescope to see where everyone else is walking. One of these events is when you nearly die. And that is exactly what happened to him. It changed every little thing. The morning look into the bathroom mirror became a small adventure. He would see the same thin face, but wonder if he wasn't a bit gaunt. He would see the same light skin, but wonder if it wasn't a bit pale. He would see the same green eyes and wonder if the whites weren't a bit sallow. Did his tongue have the same pattern of cracks and grooves yesterday? And did it mean something if it didn't? The doctors agreed something was wrong, his blood work showed this. But they couldn't tell him how close he was to death, which as it turned out, was very close indeed.

It was 1984, and he was a young man at the time, 26 years old, and he really hadn't prepared for this situation. In allegories, he thought, young men are always facing death. They are journeying into the woods and coming face to face with a monster or dragon. The young man is usually a prince or something, and he has skills, like being a great archer, or wrestler, or ice skater if it was written in Europe. There is something he can do to fight the monster. Not me, he thought. No training. No pedigree. No clue.

He was still in St. Louis then, it was the summer. Before there was a St. Louis, the native Americans briefly stopped on this land next to the Mississippi River and decided it was entirely too hot, and so they moved on to Cahokia, Illinois, and proceeded to create a pretty interesting civilization. Although the St. Louis summer is a normal three months long, the heat melts the boundaries lines that differentiate, for instance, Monday and Tuesday. All of the days and months melt into one, long, hot, humid day. The city is four hundred and something feet above sea level, but only because the sea won't go there, and will not go there under any circumstances, complaining to God that it is too damn hot, and choosing to spend its summers at the beach. At night, a person doesn't actually fall asleep in this city so much as pass out. In St. Louis, the expression "go to hell" is actually a wish of good fortune, as in "may the general conditions of your life improve." The word 'perspire' also has a slightly

different connotation, meaning ‘to squirt’ or ‘to have your insides wrung out like a used washcloth.’

Winters in St. Louis come quickly, with a bitter, intense, dry cold, coupled with every possible combination of frozen precipitation, all of which act to stop summer’s cooking process. It may occur to the casual reader that the milder times of year, spring and fall may be somewhat tolerable. It occurs to this narrator that the casual reader is probably not from St. Louis. These times of year are usually spent in the basement cowering in fear of tornadoes and the kind of severe thunderstorms that cause flash floods. One night, when Howard was in fourth grade, five tornadoes passed through an area easily visible from his house like nature’s version of the Green Bay Power Sweep. That year one of his teachers survived a more intimate encounter with a tornado and was not able to return to school for many weeks. When she returned she would freeze with terror every time she heard a plane pass over the school. Evidently, the young Howard thought, jet engines sound very similar to tornadoes.

As unpleasant as the present is, weather-wise, the future is even worse. In the only geology class he ever took, the professor explained how mountain ranges are formed. You start with a great river, such as the Mississippi. The river continually washes away land, which becomes sediment. The sediment sinks to the bottom, which is followed by more sediment. Mountain ranges, he said, are very similar to ice cubes floating on liquid. If you push an ice cube to the bottom of a glass and then let go, the cube will quickly float to the top, pushing quickly through the liquid. This is called isostasy, this floating balance. Well, the earth’s surface is actually liquid, and the falling sediment, after hundreds of thousands of years, forms a mountain range deep under the surface. At some point, like the ice cube, the mountain range just pops up to the surface. The Mississippi River, he said, will eventually be a mountain range. If you can picture this, it becomes clear that the English language doesn’t have a word or phrase to express the magnitude of this phenomenon.

The professor wasn’t finished, speaking of earthquakes. The earth is comprised of many different plates of land, like puzzle pieces. These plates do not correspond to any geographical boundaries. The United States, for instance, could be comprised of six or seven plates. These plates are always pushing and bumping each other, which creates a lot of tension. Eventually the tension is so great that the plates have to readjust. The readjustment is called an earthquake. The earthquake releases the tension. The San Andreas Fault along the West Coast of the United States frequently releases tension. This is good, because too much tension means that the eventual release will be a colossal quake. The really dangerous faults are the ones you never hear about, said the professor. I’ll bet you’ve never heard of the New Madrid fault, he said. Guess where it runs.



*A monster pounces on the young man
as the young man wanders in the woods.
The monster begins to beat the crap out of the young man,
but slowly,
in order to savor the process.*

Howard's apartment never had a female tenant, although he didn't know it when he signed the lease, not that it would have mattered. That's because the landlady, Mrs. Feilds (yes, that's right, e-i), understood that, by and large, men in graduate school don't care about violations of the building code. She left the second floor apartment of this duplex to the elements and didn't reinvest a penny of rent since 1946. The wallpaper was water stained, except for the parts that hung away from the wall like iris petals. The kitchen linoleum curled away from the floor like a shaving from planed wood. The carpet was worn through to the pad. The ceiling was yellowed. Only one radiator really worked. The back porch seemed to be attached to the house as an afterthought, and the front porch, fully exposed to the sun, did to sneakers what hot Teflon does to raw eggs.

But it was a very desirable apartment, as the landlady passed her parsimony on to the tenants. Rent was comparatively cheap for such a fine area. There were long lines of duplexes nestled under a forest of shade trees, biking distance to campus, but closer to the Delmar Loop, the hip street of fine music and unique boutiques. Mrs. Feilds lived in the first floor apartment, a grandmother, hard of hearing, eardrums as flexible as granite. This may have been the only duplex where you could play music as loud as you would like whenever you would like. And she did grandmother things, like cook grandmother food, and have the children over for family dinners and holidays. The wonderful aromas and softness rose upstairs and permeated the dilapidation to give it—Howard and his roommate thought—character. Nevertheless, the two different worlds of downstairs and upstairs remained separate. There was no socializing other than cordial greetings while passing on the sidewalk and more cordiality on the first of the month.

One early summer evening, at home, after dinner, after an afternoon of teaching guitar at Silver Strings, he felt a tension, perhaps gas, in his solar plexus. He changed position, stretched a little; hoping to release whatever was there. But it didn't release and intensified a bit, it became a dull pain. Okay, Howard thought, I guess I'm going to be sick, as in queasy and how queasy releases. Might be driving the porcelain bus, he thought. But it moved past nausea, into real pain. This had never happened, he thought. Real real pain. He doubled over. And then there was an explosion, not outside, but inside of him, it felt like. The pain in

his solar plexus burst like fireworks throughout his entire torso. He fell to the ground, and began to writhe back and forth. It was a pain picnic, a pain national holiday. Big crowd, wonderful to see so many of you! Today we're inside Howard Stein; we'll be having lots of fun and games all over his torso. Does everyone have their hammers and broken glass? Good. We'll be starting with all of his muscles and then moving into his internal organs. And remember, whoever draws blood wins a prize, finding the gusher of blood, grand prize.

It was over in about an hour. He lay on the floor, staring at the ceiling, trying to make sense out of things, trying to find patterns in the cracks and stains. There was nothing to do but get up and act like it didn't happen, and hope it didn't happen again.

But it did. One week later, after returning from a long bike ride to Ted Drewes, a frozen custard stand, actually a frozen Ambrosia stand disguised as a frozen custard stand. He rode ten miles to, ten miles fro. Then he came back inside and put up the bike, and then he sat down and fell to the floor. He writhed thirty minutes to, he writhed thirty minutes fro. Then he stared at the ceiling. He knew he had to see a doctor.

This is how he imagined the visit to the doctor: after a reasonably long wait in the waiting room, there would be a longer wait in the examining room. Then nurse would come in and take his temperature, and then she would check his blood pressure. And then she would say that the doctor would be with him shortly. After another long wait the doctor would come in and ask him how he felt. He would say that right now I feel fine, but that such and such had been happening. The doctor would humph a bit, lost in thought, and then tell him that his symptoms should be watched, but right now he couldn't do anything, since Howard was okay right now. Then Howard would ask, "so you're saying that you need to see it happening?" And the doctor would say yes. Come in when it's happening.

This is the real visit to the doctor: after a reasonably long wait in the waiting room, there was a longer wait in the examining room. Then the nurse came in, took his temperature and checked his blood pressure. Then she said that the doctor would be with him shortly. After another long wait the doctor came in and asked him how he felt. Howard said that right now he feels fine, but that such and such had been happening. The doctor humphed a bit, lost in thought, and then told Howard that his symptoms should be watched, but right now he couldn't do anything. Then Howard asked, "so you're saying that you need to see it happening?" And the doctor said yes. Come in when it's happening. And that's how Howard started to call 911 and visit the emergency room.

The first time, the ambulance arrived in twenty minutes, add ten minutes to put him on the stretcher and get him down the stairs, five minutes to get him into the ambulance and interviewed to determine the severity—he was not as serious as, say, a major heart attack or a severe bleeder. Then they took a leisurely drive to the hospital. They didn't even use the

siren, except for a flash of light and sound at each intersection. Howard ended up fifth in line behind three gunshot victims and a woman whose water just broke.

The second time went much better since he was much worse. His pain lasted for hours. He was even lucky enough to be writhing while lying on the examination table. He was swimming in good fortune as he was doubled over when they took a blood sample. And then the doctor came in. He said that he had the results of the blood test. And? And it looks like you have a high white count, the doctor said.

“Meaning?” asked Howard.

“It means that you’re sick.”

“With?”

“I’m not really sure. You say the pain is around here?”

“Solar plexus, yes, it starts there.”

“Well,” he said, “there’s really nothing there, no organ or anything.”

“Of course something’s there,” Howard said.

“What?”

“A lot of pain,” he said.



*Then the monster sat back and laughed himself silly,
leaving the young man the opportunity to escape.
The young man wanted to escape, but wondered whether to go back to the village or
run to places new.*

Howard was most definitely a St. Louisan, and St. Louisans, on the inside, where it is especially hard to see, are different than other people. They are different from San Diegans, where the weather is beautiful each day. They are different than Bostonians, who tolerate the harsh winter in exchange for magnificent summers and an intellectually vibrant culture. In the Pacific Northwest the people have traded away the sharp edges of each season in return for a year round briskness. Floridians choose the warmth and heat without the desert climate of the West Coast. But St. Louisans, St. Louisans have chosen the worst of each season, this climate wholly comprised of what others try to escape. This is like going to a restaurant and ordering the scraps from other customer's plates. St. Louisans are *much* different than other people.

Therefore, the institutions of St. Louis are absolutely essential for the continued survival of the city, creating in each person a computer program, an inner code, which makes nature's continual assault not only bearable but somewhat desirable. There are two such institutions, working together in a bit of YinYang pushpull. These institutions are the Catholic Church and the St. Louis Baseball Cardinals—and they create a particularly pervasive and sticky social fabric. The Catholic Church is the larger of these institutions. It is also the stickiest. If one had the ability to examine all of the atoms that comprise the entire city, including those of grass and trees, *all of the atoms*, one might find at least one electron in each of these atoms that was placed there by the church. And that electron would have a tiny voice, constantly telling everyone and everything that suffering is good and noble. Suffering is preferable to happiness and joy. Suffering will cleanse you. Heaven loves those who accept suffering, hence the Saint in Saint Louis.

Those church electrons and muons flew around inside of Howard too, even though Howard wasn't Catholic, those proselytizing subatomic particles. They confused him, mostly, making him feel as if he were walking through sand, like he was weighted with scrap metal. He tried to make a deal with his disease. What Howard tried to do was live his life more carefully, but continue with that life. He would walk to campus, the psychology department, he would walk the same path to check his mailbox, but he would walk a tad more slowly. He would play any softball game he could find, but he wouldn't get overheated to the point of exhaustion and then play some more. He spent less time with friends, fearing

an episode would occur. Having such an episode, which starts with writhing and ends when the writhing ends, but during some episodes writhing moved to—and until this moment, this has been tactfully avoided—intense intestinal cramps, which resolved in...how could he be anything but an outsider after that? Better to be alone.

But the particles didn't stop with romanticizing suffering. There was more, those come-hither quarks, beckoning like Bing Crosby to come in the doors for salvation and healing. Every other day in his life he wasn't interested in either, for the most part. Having one illness or another since birth, the idea of healing always managed to catch his eye no matter how fast he was riding his bicycle, no matter how hard he was throwing a baseball, no matter how lazily he was hanging out with his friends.

Today though, after walking through an empty summer campus, walking through this light, oppressive mist St. Louisans normally call air, after riding his bike fast through the neighboring city of Clayton, just to generate breeze to cool off, he stopped in front of St. Mary's—Bing Crosby turned into Julie London wearing a strapless gown. He stared at the doors. And he almost forgot about the admission fee. He first noticed the fee when he was younger, maybe ten years old.

Down at the Danbury's when playtime turned to dinnertime and Howard could stay for dinner, Mrs. Doreen Danbury often spoke of Church history, which annoyed Mr. Danbury. Howard quietly listened from grade school through junior high, until he actually understood what she was saying by the time he was in high school. The Church history, she said while making a sharp slap on the table, does *not* (she could emphasize one word like the crack of a whip, Howard noted) read like a slow march to enlightenment. Oh please, Mr. Danbury said, not again, not in front of Howard. (If Howard had dog ears he suspected he would have heard Mr. Danbury say the word 'the' and spell the word 'J-e-w.' But he didn't feel at all bad, he thought it was amusing.) Mrs. Danbury would explain how the Roman Empire transformed into the Church. You read too much, Mr. Danbury said. She looked at Howard while Kenny, his best friend, Connie, Christine, and Trish all screwed their eyes to the ceiling. Mr. Danbury tried to turn the clear cracks in the façade into humor.

“Other husband's take away their wives credit cards. Looks like I'm going to have to take away your library card,” he said. And on cue, everyone laughed.

“Oh remember everyone when we went to Europe three years ago, the monasteries are magnificent,” she continued. She spoke of Charlemagne during the salad course, how he took note of Church corruption and did his part to halt it. She told Mr. Danbury to go check the barbecue while she went through her short version of Medieval and Renaissance politics—the Church versus the Monarchs, does this sound like a fight about God, she

would say raising her voice a slapping the table. Mr. Danbury would come back in with a big plate of steaks and hear her talking about how the lay movements during the Reformation were met with strong showings of Church force, and he would say he's taking the steaks back out and they can all burn for all he cares. What I am saying, she would tell Howard, is that the Church doesn't give a damn about its laity. Mr. Danbury of course wouldn't take the steaks back out, but would serve them at the table. And Mrs. Danbury would complain about the Pope, causing Mr. Danbury would look nervously at the ceiling, as if he was looking for signs of an impending lightning strike. She would rail about the Crusades. Mr. Danbury would look nervously at the back door. She would scream about Church wealth and the poverty of some Church communities, how much food they could provide if they sold a few artistic masterpieces. Then Mr. Danbury would leave the room. It's true, she would say, her voice chasing after him. But why mention that old stuff, he would say, ask, beg. You want me to mention the new stuff? she replied, slapping the table. There always seems to be new stuff, Howard thought. Let's all go out for ice cream, Mr. Danbury would say, quickly grabbing his wallet and car keys. Yeah, ice cream, Howard would think. It always stopped at ice cream. But he always thought of Mr. Danbury as someone who paid the admission fee.

In the humidity and sun outside of St. Mary's, Howard took a deep breath, or as those in other cities would refer to it, a drink of water—in no other place is the line between air and water so blurred, Howard thought. And he looked at Julie London, exhaled, and thought that he just couldn't pay the admission. He got on his bicycle and rode on, hoping his solar plexus wouldn't be forcing him to go back. It didn't.

He turned onto Maryland Avenue and headed home, which meant not only riding to his apartment, but also thinking about baseball, the Cardinals.

Somehow, Howard felt, if you could trace his love of the Cardinals from his nervous hands, as he listened to radio during a tense ninth inning, up to his heart, and inside his heart, there would be some type of tunnel traversing time and space and lead to his father's heart and maybe even grandfather's heart, and then go back in time to 1925, the year before they won the World Series, beating the Yankees and Babe Ruth. The Cardinals were more than the hometown team; they were the next door team. The Cardinals stayed next door at the old Hamilton Hotel on Hamilton and Maple. Flint Rhem was a customer of his grandfather, a tailor. Howard's dad, then an eight-year-old, would go up on the porch and hang out with Sunny Jim Bottomley and Rogers Hornsby, Chick Hafey and Pop Haines.

He took his left hand off of the handlebar and wiped his brow with the not white cotton wristband (was white when he started today). He thought of Busch Stadium, which, despite

this insane plastic covering they use instead of grass, was still a place of pure emotional freedom. Busch Stadium is Woodstock for people who prefer tobacco and like wearing shoes. As he passed pedestrians wearing Cardinal Red, as he caught a whiff of someone's cigar, he thought of the games he went to as child, in the first Busch Stadium, the building originally named Sportsman's Park—the real grass, Lou Brock stealing bases, Bob Gibson against Sandy Koufax—he wasn't even ten years old, the colors were so vivid, the aromas so pungent, the sounds so crisp and clear—and he would get home very late, he would go right to bed but soon sneak out of bed to his baseball cards—which, as he was riding down Hanley, taking his right hand off the handlebars to wipe his brow, he still believed he could remember each card.

He stopped. He wasn't far from home, but he could feel the dull pain—was it *that* dull pain, or just something, medically speaking, an unknown something, from riding and sweating. Maybe it was something from his asthma—he had that, too. Rest, perhaps, and he walked the bike under a tree and sat, sipping water from his plastic bottle.

There were brief moments when he understood, just a flash of a moment, that through all of his talk and thoughts he was really describing his heart, the forces fighting inside, because those nouns, the med school nouns, the psych department nouns, just weren't up to any other linguistic task besides labeling, standing as far across the room as possible, tossing the noun dart at some object and hoping it sticks in, when Howard needed words that wrestle, words that act as enzymes and reagents, words that do something. His emotions, rather, the forces inside of him would crush the nouns as if they were cheap beer cans. And at these moments, when life overpowered language, Howard really thought that he was talking or thinking about baseball, or the church or St. Louis. But he had that small bit of him that wouldn't pay the admission fee, wouldn't let him walk away from his own heart, despite his intensive study of psychology, working on his Ph.D., drifting with the allure of *Dr. Howard Stein*, like a merchant ship to the sirens.

There are so many trees in St. Louis. From the top story of a high rise office building the city looks like a putting green. In the fall the city looks like an oriental carpet. In a gesture of profound empathy, his symptoms changed along with the weather. The pain vanished, but his skin was changing color along with the leaves. He didn't know it at the time, but the disease was burrowing deeper, becoming more virulent. You're looking a little yellow today, friends would tell him. He would just shrug because between the time he could schedule a doctor's appointment and the time he would be sitting in the examination room, the symptoms would vanish, only to pop up again when the doctor wasn't looking.

A Brief History of Howard

He was very disappointed when he could no longer wear his favorite gray chamois shirt, because the gray of shirt matched the color of his skin. You really don't look well, friends would say. But I probably look better than I feel, he would reply.



*“What’s so funny?” asked the young man.
The monster stopped laughing
and looked at the young man,
narrowing his monster eyes,
as if it were assessing the situation.
Then it assumed a look of fierceness
and roared as loudly as it could.
“I know that you can talk,” said the young man.
Again the monster narrowed its eyes.
“Okay, okay. I can talk,” said the monster.
Then the monster might have raised an eyebrow,
might have,
since its face was so hairy.
“Because you laughed,” said the young man.
“Animals that can actually laugh
also have the ability to speak.”
The monster nodded,
fully comprehending the young man’s words.
“Now here’s one for you,” the monster said, “I don’t think you are nearly as brave as
you are acting right now.”
The young man took a deep breath, then another.
“That’s true,” said the young man.
“If I would run away you would certainly catch me,
I am slow, weak, and in pain. And even when I’m not in pain I’m still slow and
weak—that’s what you thought was so funny, wasn’t it?”
The monster smirked—a monster La Gioconda smirk, but the young man knew
exactly what it meant.
“No,” said the young man, “you laughed because running away was the only
solution I could think of.”
“Very clever,” said the monster, extending its sharp claws.
Then it got up, stretched from sitting in one position for too long, roared loudly, and
leapt toward the young man.*

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Something happened before the Fall. Howard’s lease was going to expire August 1, and once again, he would have to find a new roommate. The previous two moved a stone’s throw from campus. Throw is too strong of a word. Light toss. They moved a light toss from campus. His criterion was simple, very basic. Everyone who is not from a Soviet bloc country is welcome. He grudgingly added this stipulation one roommate too late, a math graduate student from Poland. Frequently he would come home to find everything on the walls had been thrown to the floor, and Tadeuz would be locked in to room refusing to explain himself.

“Were there burglars? Are you alright?”

“No burglars.”

“Come out of your room. What happened out here?”

“Nothing happened.”

“Something happened.”

“Nothing happened.”

“Did you break these things? Are you going to pay for this?”

After a half-hour of door knocking, wheedling, threatening, cajoling, and whatever you do to communicate with an extremely stubborn person, the truth emerged. Taduez thought there were listening devices in the room and that Howard was KGB. “I know exactly what gave you that impression,” Howard said, nodding. “What?” he was looking at Howard with great suspicion. “It’s that this apartment is so so so far from campus.” Actually, it was that the wallpaper and flooring could easily give one the impression that the apartment was subject to frequent violent and thorough searches.

Harry answered the most recent ad, as time was rapidly running out. The cordial greetings between Mrs. Feilds and Howard now contained a gentle inquiry whether anyone has been by to look at the apartment. Thank goodness for Harry, that is, Harriet. Don’t call me Harriet, I’ve killed for less. Sounds like Ozzie and Harriet. You have any idea what it’s like to hear that, how many times now? What number’s the McDonald’s sign up to? That many times, Hi Harriet where’s Ozzie?

Howard looked at Mike, his present roommate who would be moving out in a week. Mike looked at Howard. Sense of humor, what else do you need? Well, get the lease, she said. You aren’t always this slow, are you? And no, I’m not from New York.

There was a brief silence before Howard went downstairs to get the lease. In that brief moment he did hundreds of mental experiments, imaginations of the smallest daily conversations, each one acting like a geyser releasing this woman’s tension. Could he live with this—if he kept a reasonable distance, he could. From the right emotional distance she could be downright amusing.

“Mrs. Feilds I have someone who wants to sign a lease.”

“Oh good, good. What’s the name?”

“Actually, Harry is all I know. The conversation’s moving pretty quickly.”

“Okay, I’ll be right up as soon as I find my glasses.”

In a few minutes Mrs. Feilds came into the room. “Okay,” she said, “Where’s Harry?”

“I’m Harry,” said Harry.

There was a very long pause. Mrs. Feilds kept looking back and forth at Mike and Howard for some answer, but they didn’t know the question.

“Um, here’s the lease, um, you just sign right there. And there. And there. Good, good. And here’s your copy. Um, you can move in next week, then. What is it exactly that you study?”

“I’m not a student,” she said. “I work.”

The old lady looked bullets at Howard, or perhaps musket balls would be more accurate. But Howard didn’t have any idea what was going on.

“And where exactly do you work?”

“At a real estate office.”

Oh.

“Oh,” said Mrs. Feilds. “Oh,” said Mike.

On the second day of Harry’s reign she went around, not just the apartment but the whole building, making notes. She filled out two pages front and back, and took this document to Mrs. Feilds, requesting that the following repairs be made. The request was politely turned down. Harry, just as politely, told her that she had just made a very unwise decision.

Three days later, Harry and an officer of the zoning commission took a tour of the building. The result of the tour was a very very long citation carefully noting what needed to be fixed by what date, and exactly how much the fine would be each day the work was not complete.

Somehow the grandmotherly warmth of the apartment evaporated. As if by Mrs. Fields’ pure willpower the aromas of the grandmotherly meals did not reach the second floor. On most days for two months an old fix-it man came in an old fix-it man truck, and steadily brought the place up to code. Harry actually bought things to make the place look nice, things with color, like paintings and posters, living things like plants and flowers. She would do strange things like clean. And then she would stand there looking at Howard like he was supposed to help, which, after years with male roommates was an odd experience indeed.

“Do what?” he asked.

“Mop the floor,” she said.

“The floor is fine,” he said.

“It’s dirty,” she replied. Now, this was many years before Howard was married, and he didn’t fully grasp the prima fascia logic of this statement. It’s dirty, therefore it must be cleaned. He was under the mistaken impression that you only clean it if it attacks you in some way. Although Howard was completely convinced of the inherent peacefulness of the floor, he wasn’t as assured when it came to Harry.

“Using...”

“A mop, bucket, and Mr. Clean. Is there something complicated here? Am I missing some nuance of hygiene and health that is causing you to pause?”

“Well, uh...”

“Oh and look! A new bucket and mop, I noticed that you didn’t own one, so I took the liberty.”

Here are some thoughts that actually went through his mind while he was doing the floor. He was not sure where these thoughts came from. He never had them before. He hasn’t had them since. Thoughts like, who the hell does she think she is ordering me around? Or, I am nobody’s maid, I am a graduate student working on a Master’s degree. And, I have many more important ways I can spend my time like reading and studying. I have papers to write, I have music to practice. And then he had a mild revelation, the same type of revelation felt by a student in a Buddhist monastery as the monk snaps a stick across his bare back. I believe, Howard thought, that I am supposed to agree with my own thoughts, they seem to be begging for affirmation. My mind should sound something like— who the hell does she think she is? (pause) Damn straight! Other ways of affirming these thoughts would be to mutter out loud. But he was so astonished that this was his internal ticker tape, that my thoughts weren’t my thoughts, but thoughts waiting for confirmation, and confirmation does indeed make them a part of you. He left the floor clean and left himself with the question of where do thoughts come from? Oddly enough, the question never came up in school, and if it did come up it was whimsical, in the category of How Deep is the Ocean, How High is the Sky. But he wasn’t letting this question float away, because what’s at the bottom of the ocean can effect the food chain, and what’s at the top of the sky can effect everything from breathing to foliage, to rainfall. Being a Dr. of psychology without an idea of the nature of consciousness, well that was like being a biologist without a definition of life itself.

If this were a movie, Howard thought, the platonic arrangement would collapse into romance. But this isn’t what followed. He only set foot in her bedroom to move things in, and she didn’t even set foot in his, choosing to stand outside the doorway to tell him what to

clean or straighten. And she continued this well after code had been reached. Her giving orders was the bulk of their communication. It seemed as if she viewed him as an appendage to her life, and her moods and desires, in her mind, were always trump to his. There were times when she was callous, and a few when she was downright cruel. There are pathways in life that you just have to walk through, trudging in knee high grass and vines, he would think, some with pitfalls and snares. And this one, he thought, completely ends in June. There was no way the lease would be renewed.

She would sit for quite some time, feet up on the lounge chair, eyes closed, in a semi-meditation. During these times he would study or take a walk, even though he frequently would have preferred to be practicing his guitar. She would have friends over, he would go to campus. He would have friends over, she would go to Blueberry Hill.

One day in April, the 1985 baseball season had started and the end of the lease was in sight, he arrived home to find Harry and her friend Betty both crying. Harry was in the lounge chair both feet up. In the Platonic world these moments require a quick decision, her business or our business? He decided the former and walked halfway to the kitchen. Then he stopped, and walked back.

“Um,” he could only hesitate, since this may very well not have been any of his business.

They looked at each other.

“She has cancer,” said Betty.

“It’s back, I mean I thought it was gone, but it didn’t go,” said Harry.

Howard sat down, on the floor, he didn’t bother with a chair. Then he said something, closer to just a sound, not even a word.

“It’s all over, in my bones, my lymph glands. And I’m not doing chemo again. No way.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, “I didn’t know.”

“That’s what I would do in this chair, I was visualizing the cancer leaving through my toes.” She looked at him. “You didn’t suspect? Didn’t you wonder about the wigs?”

“What wigs?”

She screwed her eyes toward the ceiling. “I can’t believe you didn’t figure it out.” She looked at him again, with mop-the-floor determination. “Do one thing for me, you have to promise.”

“Sure.”

“Don’t treat me like I’m sick.” Then she screwed her eyes straight at him, like increasing the torque of a drill.

“Okay, I understand,” he said. More eyes. “I do, I understand,” he insisted. And that’s the way it went until the lease ended.

If this were the movies, Howard thought, she would never have crossed the border to leave the land of quirky, there would be a touching death scene, where maybe they each express feelings they’ve been holding in for so long. But the reality is that they each found new apartments, and that she left Howard a forwarding address somewhere in southern Illinois that wasn’t even valid. But we’re getting waaay ahead of ourselves.



*“You can get up now, and open your eyes,”
said the monster.
The monster was picking its teeth
with a stalk of long dried grass.
The young man got up and started walking, walking east.
“Where are you going?” asked the monster.
“China,” said the young man.
“You’re leaving the village?”
The young man kept walking.
“Let me tell you,” said the monster,
“You’re going to hurt over this, you’re going to bleed rivers. And what’s funny is that
I can take a vacation,
I don’t have to lift a finger for you to hurt.
Mister you better turn right around and
head back to the village.”
The monster was walking along side the young man,
who waited a long time before speaking.
“Are you following me to China?”
“Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” said the monster.
“That wasn’t an invitation.”
And together they walked.*

“I think we’ve got it narrowed down,” said the doctor in late September.

“You have it narrowed down?” Howard asked, wary of the grammar.

“I think we’ve narrowed it down.”

Howard paused. “It’s not narrowed down, is it?”

“It might be narrowed down. If we’re right, it’s narrowed down. If the symptoms you report are accurate.”

Howard took a very deep breath, as audibly as he could, as visibly as he could, puffing his cheeks out on the exhale.

“We think it could be Crohn’s disease. Or something worse. We’ll need a barium X-ray to make sure.”

“What’s a barium X-ray?”

The doctor explained in sufficient detail to stimulate the little voice, the mopping the floor voice. But this time the little voice didn’t sound so self-righteous. It sounded

downright veracious. “No fucking way,” said the little voice. “Damn straight,” Howard affirmed.

“I’ll let you know,” Howard said. “I’ll call you, I will.”

Jazz sits on the heart of St. Louis, much like our own sinuatrial node, much like our own atrioventricular node, much like our own bundle of His, much like—What? These three things make up our ticker, they make our heart beat. They couldn’t be more important, but only one person in ten thousand could even begin to tell you that they’ve even heard of them—and if you exclude those affiliated with the medical profession, these essential parts are virtually unknown. Such is the case with St. Louis jazz, virtually unknown. Like seashells holding the sounds of the ocean, St. Louis musicians hold the sounds of the Mississippi River, as much of a force of consciousness as it is a waterway. When St. Louis players release the sounds, my oh my. My oh my, Howard would think. He had free access in this world, he was a guitar player. And a bad one at that, he thought, he suspected. He didn’t know for sure. The slang for ‘good,’ of course, was ‘bad.’ That boy’s bad, meant that that boy’s good, that boy could play well. Boy, of course, had no reference to either race or age. But Howard did not think in, nor could he speak slang. Every time he tried it he thought it sounded awkward, it sounded so white. White, of course, being a synonym for awkward. So, when Howard thought he might be bad, he meant that he may not be a good player.

He was good enough, though, to get occasional jobs, to be a member of a few big bands, and to be allowed to sit in with various house bands. Howard’s strength was that he could read chords, he would play full chords, and he had a gut level understanding of voice leading. This made the chords feel large, yet sound soft. His chords flowed nicely. Other musicians definitely like his chords. But jazz is about the solo, and around this part, he was so uncertain. And this meant that he sounded uncertain, which isn’t good. He would get confused, he would lose his place, his hands would feel like rocks. On other days the solo worked well. He just never knew which pair of hands would show up to play. His heart would almost freeze up if someone turned on a tape recorder. The tape recorder was an engraved invitation for his rock hands. He rarely recorded well. When the tape was played back, he frequently wondered whether he should even continue playing,

And this doubt pained him greatly, since his love of jazz was deep and profound. He knew that somewhere inside of him, somewhere, there was music. He just couldn’t get to it.

And then there was the feud, a musical feud. In a way there were good guys and bad guys, in a way. The good guys weren’t necessarily good people, and the bad guys weren’t necessarily bad people. It became very confusing when the good guys were real sonsabitches and the bad guys were warm and kind and giving. Howard began playing towards the end of

the feud, the battles were already lopsided, the bad guys stomping the good guys like the Jolly Green Giant pissed off at the Little Green Sprout. He learned the history of the feud by hanging out with the old guys, who were gracious, very funny, and wise. There was softness in their thoughts, in their words. Mr. Vernor had seen the most. (Howard could not bring himself to call Mr. Vernor by his first name, Vernon. A public school teacher for over forty years—if anything deserved a ‘Mister’ that deserved a ‘Mister.’)

After practice they would sit around and tell stories, Howard would quietly absorb as much as he could. Mr. Vernor would say, “...Oh yeah, Bobby Danzig. Charley, you remember Bobby Danzig? Yeah.” Mr. Vernor would lean his head back slightly, listening to the music Bobby Danzig used to play. “You know, everyone else on the bandstand would play such long, fast lines, it was bebop time then. But Bobby would play only three notes and make everything else that was played go up like smoke, just make it all meaningless. He and Miles Davis used to hang out all the time. You remember, Charley? Yeah. They used to call each other up on the telephone and play to each other.” Mr. Vernor would look at Howard. “See, Bobby was crippled. He didn’t have but one arm and one leg, and Miles and he would hang out and Miles would help him.” Then Mr. Vernor turned back to the room. “Then Miles went to New York, he was supposed to be going to Julliard, but he was always skipping class to play jazz. You know, when he made it big he never called Bobby. I never forgave Miles for that.” There was a brief silence. “You know why,” said Mr. Vernor. “Bobby could outplay Miles and Miles knew that.”

One day Howard mentioned that he purchased a Jimmy Forrest recording. “Jimmy Forrest! Jimmy Forrest. Charley Sikes, you hear that? Jimmy Forrest.” Again Mr. Vernor would lean his head back. “Man. You know, no one could outplay him. On the same bandstand, no one could outplay him. He used to play in that club on Washington, I can’t remember the name, but he could blow the paint off the walls if he wanted to. He used to play with Jay McShann. Charlie Parker was in that band. You know who used to get the most applause after a solo?” Mr. Vernor looked at Howard. “It was Jimmy Forrest.” He turned back to Charley. “Charley, what’s that album he did with Elvin Jones? Elvin was just starting out then. Beautiful drums. You don’t really think of the drums as a beautiful instrument, but on that recording, just beautiful.” Charley chuckled. “Remember what Elvin said in Downbeat years back, about Joe Charles?” Charley asked. “Elvin said in all his life he only heard but one drummer who could outplay him, and that man sells fish in St. Louis. That’s Joe Charles.” Mr. Vernor continued. “Joe doesn’t come out much anymore, diabetes and all. Too bad.”

Howard just knew things, since high school. He didn't know how he knew them, it was like they, the things, popped in with his breath. He called these his 'knowing breaths,' which he thought was ironic because he always had trouble with his breath, asthma and all. But that was how he decided to pursue psychology, him being an easy going chap, and most unfortunately in the getting laid department, a safe person. People perceived and, to his dismay when attempting to get laid, frequently told him. But they would tell him everything, and they would ask his advice or opinion, and then when the thing worked out exactly as Howard said it would, they told him he was amazing, but he still didn't get laid.

"So I was at this party the other night in one of those mansions in Portland Place, and this guy comes on to me," said a friend from the History Department, who, he would never think of as having great breasts and an ass like an alabaster statue. He would keep reminding himself never to be thinking those things, 'Why do you think guys always come on to me?'

"Anyway, there was this fabulous chemistry, you know really hot, and I wanted to say 'no way,' but I couldn't because, I don't know, I can't help it, it felt dangerous, electric, you know? So, we're spending the weekend having all of this hot sex (in Howard's mind there was a clear message—Get The Hell Away From Her, but his idiot penis kept saying—There Is Still A Chance In Hell That Your Chance In Hell Will Come Through, so he stayed and listened), and then I get the feeling he's starting to smother me, you know, being real controlling, and I don't know how to get away. What do you think I should do?"

"Are you asking me because you don't want to get away, but are willing to lie to yourself that at least you tried to get away, or do you really want to get away?" Howard asked.

"Actually, that's a good question," she said. "I want to get away."

"Then you have to invite him over," Howard said. "And while he's there you need to invent a stupid rule, the dumber the better, the more inconsequential the better, and then you have to tell him he broke the rule, and explain the rule to him so that he won't break it again. That's it."

"That's it?"

"That's it," Howard said.

Two days later, "Howard Stein you are amazing, I told him he loaded the dishwasher wrong, this is how I want it done, and two minutes later he's very serious saying 'we need to talk,' and he breaks up with me. How did you know?"

"Honestly, I don't know, I just know," he said. But he was angry, not really angry, chafed, as if this was God's little joke on Howard, because for all that Howard could understand and see with others, he was blind as a bluesman when it came to himself.

Or, in a situation that for Howard was not a decision by committee, an older gentleman, in his early fifties, signed up for guitar lessons. He said he always wanted to play the guitar. Out came the Mel Bay Book One, and Howard noticed something just by the way he handled the book, the way he turned the pages, the way his eyes moved. Howard wouldn't be able to tell you what he saw, and Sherlock Holmes would think Howard to be very sloppy, but Howard asked the gentleman, "Answer me honestly, do you know how to read and write?"

The gentleman paused a long pause. "No, I don't."

"Do you know the alphabet?" Howard asked softly.

"Yeh, I know that," he said.

"What's this letter?" Howard said gently.

"That's an E."

"Do you know how all of the letters sound?"

"Not exactly," the gentleman said.

If there were a National Association of Music Teachers Who Teach in Little Cubicles at Mom and Pop Music Stores, of which Silver Strings was a certified venue, then Howard could have gotten in quite a bit of trouble, because he didn't teach this man any guitar for three months. Instead, one lesson a week, he taught him how to read, and never told a soul. But he did tell the gentleman that writing was up to him.

Howard's ease of manner allowed him to move freely around campus, not that there were any rules barring free movement, it's just that he would go to the law school, hang out with the law students and end up helping the Mock Trial team, or hang out with the Chemistry Post Docs as they spent the evening making MDMA. Most students stuck to their departments, but he would wander, seeing what other folks are about, what they do, and eventually going out to the field with them and playing some softball or baseball, which is one of the ways he knew he was becoming quite sick, he was losing his ability to throw—not in the Lou Gehrig sense, but in the sense that he could no longer knock the nose off a worm at fifty paces, or more accurately, a trash dumpster from fifty yards.

But at the end of the day, he wasn't a law student, or a chemist, or an engineer, or a biologist. And he was beginning to have doubts about whether he was a psychologist. He could do it all right, and be quite good. But there was a foul whiff, not yet a foul wind, not yet measurable since the scent was so random, but something was going on in the field, and it seemed as though there might be an admission fee, he was starting to think.

Two things. The first is the words ‘appropriate’ and ‘inappropriate’ popping up in staff meetings and treatment planning meetings. ‘Appropriate’ was used in the same context as a doggie treat, with a slow nod occurring in the same context as a pat on the head. This was used when addressing both patients and colleagues. ‘Inappropriate’ was used with a similar tone as a Grand Inquisitor when having someone put in a pillory, also used for both patients and colleagues. And both were used regarding jokes, not ethnic jokes, but jokes per se, as if humor was becoming taboo, as if laughter or non-laughter wasn’t enough feedback, a Ph.D. has to render his or her judgment in addition. Not a good sign for the future, Howard thought.

“Seems like you guys are walking around with sticks up your asses,” Jim said.

“Tell me about it,” Howard said.

Jim knew what Howard was going through, even when Howard was telling everyone that he felt fine, and most people would say ‘good’ in that very polite way and go on about their business. For the first few weeks of school, Howard would tell people of his episodes during the summer, not quite in passing, but as something to fill in the conversation bubbles that pop up when people meet. He only said it once but that was enough. Howard would see the thin glaze come over their eyes and so he knew in the future to answer ‘better,’ ‘fine,’ ‘much better’ to their how-are-yous—it wasn’t that they didn’t care, but that they didn’t know what to do, which caused them to retreat. They wanted to offer advice or insight, but the standard ‘perhaps there’s something you’re not in touch with’ felt both hollow and shallow to everyone as soon as it was spoken.

But Jim was not one to retreat. In his own way, he was always on the attack, but so softly. He was against the use of fossil fuels, but rarely told anyone, choosing instead to live a life that minimized their use—he owned an old MG that sat in the garage and was the home of whatever crawled and hated sunlight. He rode, he cycled everywhere, even in the rain, even in the cold rain, even in the winter. He didn’t follow or particularly like spectator sports, feeling that sports were something that ‘people are supposed to do’—he said this exactly once, along with telling Howard that ‘you see how they’re (the Cardinals) are doing everyday, but I don’t see them returning the favor and calling you to see how you’re doing.’ So he would swim and run, and eventually began to compete (compete, of course, is the wrong word here) in the first triathalons. He didn’t preach, but he wouldn’t hesitate to tell you if you’re full of shit. His mind was logical and precise, and he had a nose for hypocrisy—he would put his friends to the same Socratic rigors he faced daily when looking in the mirror. Howard admired the clarity of Jim’s heart.

Jim knew the names of every bit of grass, flower, and foliage, whereas Howard couldn’t get any farther than the terms ‘tree,’ ‘bush,’ ‘grass,’ ‘weed.’ And although Howard was

asthmatic and allergic, Howard would help Jim from time to time as Jim took care of several vacant lots, and did general gardening, keeping his neighborhood that teetered on the edge of disrepair from falling into neglect. Howard didn't help half-heartedly. He was ferocious, pleasantly so, surprisingly so, taking on tough, hard, rocky soil in order to plant...whatevers, diving into years of overgrowth and tearing out weeds and vines.

"Man," Jim would say, "put some pruning shears or a hoe in your hands and you're the Tasmanian Devil."

When resting, drinking some water, Jim would ask Howard how he was—and this was the byproduct of Jim's life, Jim was completely unfettered by time, never had six things he had to do in the next hour, because he didn't have the technology, i.e. a car, that allowed him to try to do six things in one hour. So Jim would wait for an answer, and then think about that answer, and ask something else, think again, didn't even wear a watch, and eventually Howard was telling Jim the whole truth, the dull pains after eating, that he wasn't eating as much to avoid the pains, flashes of fear, lousy doctors, fleeting hide-and-seek symptoms, thoughts of death, not suicide, just wondering what death is like, you know, Howard would say, the usual.

Jim listened patiently, considered everything several times before saying, I don't know, and then he asked Howard how he felt right now. Fine, Howard said. You're sure? I'm sure. Then are you up for some more digging, Jim asked. Might as well, Howard said. When in doubt, said Jim, dig.

In the early fall, Jim introduced Howard to Carolyn, an action Howard thought was, well, magnanimous. Because Howard and Jim were in similar positions regarding lousy roommates and girls. Jim's lousy roommate, Harold, was moving out, and Carolyn, who was moving to St. Louis from Belton, a small town somewhere else (that's how St. Louisans see Missouri—St. Louis, Kansas City, and someplace else you've heard of maybe once) was moving in. Regarding girls, pardon, regarding women, both guys, pardon, men—nah, thought Howard, guys, were having world class droughts, for years, and years. They both dated occasionally, but there was nothing serious or joyously shallow. And it became a comfortable part of their conversation, so that even when Howard became ill, and Mount Fear of Embarrassment became too tall to climb, they still spoke of women they met, where to meet women, what's wrong with women, look at that woman, although look at that woman was increasingly frowned upon behavior among enlightened people. For Howard, that was part of the problem. There were two sets of equally valid rules, the old ones of chivalry and the new ones of equality, and there was no way of knowing which set was operative at any given moment. Howard could be on a date with a woman wearing a feminist

t-shirt who would get upset because you didn't open the door for her, demonstrating your callous disregard for her being. Or he could date a woman dressed like Barbi who would get upset if you tried to pay for her dinner, demonstrating your callous disregard for her being. Howard hadn't yet reached the level of cynicism needed to understand that the way through this mine field was to possess gobs of testosterone and righteous political anger for the former type, gobs of testosterone, money, and cocaine for the latter type. He was still assuming he was lacking some inner quality of soul.

Jim's drought had a completely different cause than Howard's drought. Jim was exceedingly handsome, and other women would tell this to Howard. Not only their women friends that both of them knew for some time ("By the way Howard, are you aware of how extraordinarily handsome Jim is?") but also strangers ("Who's your friend, he's so handsome?" they would ask). Jim didn't have a girlfriend because he felt strongly that the things women normally do to attract men made them seem dumb and ridiculous.

"Look," Jim would say, "you get older, you gain weight, you lose muscle tone, you sag, both of you, so there better be something there besides the superficial. And all that primping and makeup—and it's not like the guys around are worth the time for that camouflage. By and large we can be assholes all day long."

"So she's not attractive?" Howard asked, feeling a pang of guilt that attractiveness should be even the least bit important. They were riding through Flynn Park, looking at the changing leaves, the little kids walking home from school, some bundled up enough to waddle home.

"Haven't seen her," Jim said. "For all I know she could be intelligent and gorgeous, but I have to live with her and that's the relationship I have to build." They were coasting down Pershing. "I've had it up to here with bad roommates," he said. "You understand that. You live with Attila the Hun. Is she speaking to you yet?"

"She leaves me notes every day, a list of things I'm supposed to do."

"Do you do them?"

"If I did them, I suppose she would be speaking to me," Howard said.

They rode a bit farther.

"Your eyes look a little glazed," Jim said.

"I feel like shit," Howard said.

Howard's first thoughts when seeing Carolyn were 'try not to fall in love.' She was beautiful in a lovely, subtle way, not the hard-boiled detective line that she was so good

looking the eyes of a pair of dice wouldn't be able to stop staring, but subtle. Yet Howard couldn't help notice and notice again and again the very features he should no longer be noticing, being an enlightened sort. And she didn't just stand around telling Howard and Jim what to do, using phrases like 'big, strong men' and all of the less obvious derivatives, or dropping things in that rehearsed mode of cute that is generally effective on guys, whose natural response is to flex a bicep or two and come to the rescue. She didn't do that. She just got to work as if there would be no help at all, lifting things that were a bit too heavy and struggling with them up the stairs.

"I've got it," she said. "Go get something heavy."

In Howard's heart it was raining paradoxes. On the one hand he was bit once too often by the unrequited love bug and was determined not to fall into that delirium once again. Although, if he were to be in love with her and wished for it to be mutual, then for him to fall in love would be the worst of all occurrences, since women generally don't fall for guys who are falling for them. On the other hand, if he is too distant then she would immediately begin looking for someone else, if indeed she is looking to be attached in the first place. And yet if she was looking, why would she choose him when she could choose Jim, who is bigger, stronger, squarer jawed, all in all better looking, properly detached, and who will frequently be naked in the same apartment that she is in. And if such a thing was to happen, and Howard would be in love with her, wouldn't that be a quicksand of pain. Or, if she were looking, she's working at Barnes Hospital, one of the teaching hospitals for the medical school, so why would she choose Howard or Jim when she could find a doctor. She was pretty enough, beautiful enough, Howard thought—no no, he stopped himself. Pretty, he thought, pretty pretty pretty. Beautiful is falling in love thinking, pretty is a statement of fact, she was pretty enough that all she would wish for would be viable possibilities.

And yet, thought Howard, why else would he be twisting his mind so if somewhere in his heart he wasn't already falling in love which is the worst possible thing he could do. Now would be the perfect time to be deathly ill, he thought. And if his illness were psychosomatic, then he would start doubling over about now. But nothing happened. Unfortunately, his illness was real, and it was attacking his body in deep, imperceptible ways, as if his bones were being eaten by termites.

"Why don't you two go to dinner?" Jim said. "I'll finish up." No we should all go, we should all help to finish, blah blah blah blah, but Jim got his way.

Things couldn't have gone worse for Howard in that things couldn't have gone better. The first terrible thing was that he felt comfortable, absolutely at ease with her. It was awful.

And he felt the shock of déjà volt, a feeling that came upon him after high school, and he didn't feel it often, just often enough that it required a name. It was an immediate feeling, occurring the first time he met someone. If déjà vu was a creek, déjà volt was a river— instant familiarity, instant history, instant closeness, and he felt this only with people who would become his dearest friends, such as Cathy who founded the Limit Avenue Food Co-op, Lew who founded Vintage Vinyl, Eve who founded the first Japanese art boutique in St. Louis, and Phil of New York who founded a campus humor magazine and found that it was easier to get hit by a car and transfer to Boston U. than it was to get the folks on campus to walk around with a smile. There was also Kirby the bass player, and of course, Jim.

(Howard didn't spend all of his time with these folks—that only happens in movies and television, where closest and dearest friends are like Siamese twins but separate. In the real world, closest and dearest friends have things they wish to accomplish and spend their time doing those things rather than going on adventures filled with hijinks and farce.)

If only Howard and Carolyn went for a walk in the park, fell into passionate embrace, and had sex after pizza. This would have been ideal since relationships that begin like this are over before you know it, both partners choosing to bypass the heart altogether—practicing safe love.

Instead, Howard tried to still himself as he sat across from her, trying to keep whatever sparks he was generating inside himself. He didn't want them leaking out of his eyes that wanted to go ga ga, or pop out of his mouth as corny, forced compliments, and he didn't want them to melt his muscles into sensitive goo. She was also still, reserved, but what else could she be, a country girl in the city where the air's cleanest aroma is that of fresh soot.

And yet there was common ground between them. She said that she felt a bit on the outside of her town, thinking and feeling different things than everyone else, although she didn't elaborate, even when asked. But it was hard, she said, moving to the city, since her family had lived in that part of the country for over a hundred years. This was a difference between the two of them, Howard's grandparents on both sides were immigrants. And then she said something, well she might as well have said she was from another planet—she said that in her entire life, and she was a few years older than Howard, she said that in her entire life she had never locked a door.

“Not even growing up?” Howard asked. “Not even when you went to the bathroom?”

“Nope. Just closed it,” she said. “Of course you'd think about it, but by then it was too late and you'd best just finish up your business. But locking a window, front door, back door, car, garage, never thought about it. Not once.”

Howard knew that he made a mistake, mentioning the bathroom. And he waited for her body language to show it, her shoulder tightening ever so slightly, her jaw clenching just a tad, her looking away from him, something. But the something never happened.

“I can see it right away,” she said. “The people here are different because they lock doors. They just look at another person who looks at them, two strangers could say hello, they could greet each other, but no, they both lock up. It becomes your instinct.”

Howard was quiet. He knew exactly what she was talking about but never noticed it in those terms, never attributed it to something so simple, but no doubt, there was great truth in what she was saying.

“You think I’m strange, don’t you?” she said.

“Not at all,” said Howard. “I’d like to hear more.”

“You’re just being polite.”

“How could I be polite if I brought up your bathroom? I’m serious, I’d like to hear more,” Howard said.

She nodded. “That makes sense,” she said. “Maybe someday I’ll tell you more.”

Over the next several weeks they spent a good bit of time together, Howard acting as her guide, accompanying her to set up her banking, mail, showing her enjoyable restaurants, going to a movie or two. He was able to keep his pretenses for seeing her plausible, as much for himself as for her. If he used any transparently false reason to see her he would know that he was falling in love, or more accurately, falling in love with love all over again. And besides, if he really was falling in love with her, then simultaneously being in love with love was an ingredient leading to relationship failure, no getting around it. Another tactic he wasn’t using was asking Jim what she was saying about him, if she asked about him, or if there had been any mistakes in the shower schedule. Not using this tactic was particularly difficult, since when he was with Jim, Carolyn was all Howard wanted to talk about. But he didn’t mention her name once, holding his tongue, and feeling, when holding his tongue, that energy was backing up and would send him flying about haphazardly, like a loose garden hose with the spigot wide open.

And yet when he was with her he managed to be cautious and measured—which, he supposed, could have been interpreted as distant. But what else could he do? Trapped by his own sensibilities—disliking, strongly, the materialism of so many, the you-are-what-you-own crowd, or the I-am-my-family-name group. Perhaps, he thought, he would have felt differently if he owned a lot, or if he was from a prominent family. How wonderful it would

be if he could drive up in a Porsche, toss tips around like confetti, and introduce yourself as a McDonnell or a Busch. Yet, if his circumstances were this different, and he retained even a little bit of Howardness, perhaps he would have taken the self-destructive route of alcoholism, drug addiction, or self-mutilation in order to distance himself from these traits. He just didn't like peacock in a world where peacock was the way to be. Relationships were a matter of soul to soul, and try as he might, many times he tried with all of his might, he couldn't change this.

But Carolyn didn't interpret his actions as distant, saying that she liked his thoughtfulness, saying that he seemed to be a person who cares more about what's inside of a person. And she said this approvingly, as if he had a choice in the matter and he decided to take the noble route.

"I'd trade it in in a second for a Mercedes and a house off of Clayton Road," he said.

"I don't believe that," she said. "I don't think you can help it."

Now this bugged him. He wasn't at all this egoless monk, and when it came to human insight, he could inflate his sense of self like a dirigible. Yet she seemed to know him better than he knew her. Not only that, but there was a part of her that she was particularly skilled at hiding, as if she was jamming his radar. It was enough, being bugged, to keep him looking into her eyes and keep him from gazing longingly into her eyes, to keep his backbone straight and keep it from turning into male mush, and to keep him listening and keep him from getting all sensitive.

She insisted he play guitar for at least a few moments each time they were together. Usually when he played others took it as a cue to do something else, turn to each other and talk, straighten something up if he were at someone's house, or if he were performing in a club, order another drink and try to feel up the waitress. To most folks, a guitar chord solo was background music—it was almost Pavlovian, for background music to be background music, you must be doing something else to put it in the background. So as soon as anyone hears the first three notes to "Misty," it's time to find that cute waitress. And Howard didn't do anything to stop the salivating, didn't do any rapid flourishes or use exotic chord forms that would cause arthritis in his later years. He played the song as straight as possible because he felt the harmonies were beautiful and he wanted to showcase the composer, not the guitarist. Carolyn seemed to appreciate this. She would listen quietly, and then she would ask him to play another.

"I like the way your hands move," she said. "I think you can tell a lot about a person, deep inside that person, by watching their hands."

"You may be right," Howard said. "Deep inside I make a lot of mistakes."

“That’s not what I mean,” she said.

He put the guitar back into the case and leaned it against his amp. Then he joined her on the couch.

“Did Jim tell you that I was, am, might be, pretty sick?” he asked. He was watching her carefully, for any sign of politeness, politeness meaning a verbal ‘no,’ when the truth was ‘yes.’ And she thought for a moment, meaning that he mentioned it. She had to decide whether to be polite or honest.

“He said something, yes,” she said nodding. “You want me to be honest, right?”

“No,” Howard said. “Maybe. If I wanted to date you, and if I were to be in love with you, or at least thinking about you most of my day, and it was mutual, then I’d want you to be honest. But if we’re just friends, and friendly friends, not close friends, then I’d want to you lie and be polite.”

“Is that so?” she asked.

“That is so,” he said, putting his guitar away.

Then Carolyn leaned into him closer and rested her head on his shoulder, holding his hand and squeezing gently. He responded in kind, and soon they were kissing, and then kissing passionately. When they were walking to her bedroom Howard had a fleeting thought, amusing as he felt a bit nervous, that his virginity seemed to have grown back, it’s been that long.

It seemed, until Thanksgiving, that everyone in Howard’s solar system was balancing very well on the line between politeness and guile, Howard included. Howard could not get Carolyn to divulge what Jim told her about his illness, and he couldn’t wheedle the information from Jim, and it only bothered him because he couldn’t seem to get the truth out of himself either. He saw the doctor a few times, complaining of paleness, dull pain—his blood continued to show a low level of infection and was prescribed accordingly, and although the doctor was polite, Howard inferred from the doctor’s manner that he was wasting the doctor’s time, which he thought could be a simple case of medical arrogance, nothing personal. But it could be personal, he couldn’t tell. Harry usually told him where she was going when she went out, so that her friends could meet her, but now she wouldn’t say one way or another and just disappeared, leaving the echo of the slammed front door and a note saying what she wanted him to do. Some nights he thought he could hear her weeping, and when he would knock on her door to see if things were alright, she would be vexed, saying that she was sleeping what’s the goddam problem. Jim was regularly asking him to

cover for him at work in the library without giving a reason, two things which, for Jim, were as rare as Haley's Comet.

And there was the something that Carolyn wasn't saying, which she would readily admit.

"There's something you're holding back," Howard said.

"You're right about that," she said. "There's something I'm holding back."

"Are you seeing someone else?" Howard asked.

"A. That's not something I would hold back," she said. "And B. Are we seeing each other enough for there to be someone else when it could just be seeing someone period?"

"Okay okay," Howard said. "That's a good point."

"There's a question sitting right here," she said pointing to the air between them.

Howard could only nod.

"Now who's holding something back?" she asked. "And that question is sitting right here." She pointed to the space next to the first question.

Carolyn went home for Thanksgiving, as did Jim, as did Harry. Howard slept a lot, caught up on some reading, and practiced some songs. He was just tired. He couldn't even get his body into the anxiety of whether or not to commit to committing to a relationship. His body music stopped. Normally, just walking, just thinking, eating, doing anything at all, he would have music flowing through his mind, part of his stream of consciousness, part of it the way wetness goes with water. His body didn't seem to be paying attention. It was sluggish. He wasn't hungry, even at his aunt's for Thanksgiving. He sat quietly and watched football games. And this was one of his favorite events of the year, this dinner. No one could cook as well as his Aunt Fran.

The sweet potato casserole, the stuffing, the turkey, the green beans—but he just couldn't bring himself to eat very much.

"What's going on?" his aunt asked. "Isn't anyone eating? I'll have leftovers for two months!"

"Deep middle-age," his uncle said. Then he turned to Howard's father. "Man, remember the days in our teens and twenties when we could eat the asshole out of a skunk?"

Howard laughed, as did everyone, but it didn't help his appetite.

Winter strikes St. Louis much sooner than December 21. It strikes suddenly, like a cold slap on the back, the cold air rattling around in your lungs like the marbles in aerosol paint cans. It usually hits right before Halloween. Howard remembered many trick or treatings where he was so bundled up there was no point in having a costume. For those with a hearty constitution, the change in season is often accompanied by a deeply chilling rain, nature just wanting them to work a little harder. And for those capable of generating enough body heat for a small family, a low layer of gray clouds appears for the purpose of filtering all of the joy from the sunlight, which has the effect of also filtering away the body's natural will to health, resulting in a four month combination of headache and nausea that moves softly and stealthily under one's pain threshold. So you don't even notice it. The clouds stay until they are blown away by the tornadoes of spring, and the headache and nausea only leave when baseball season begins. From Thanksgiving until Christmas the temperature drops until that cold slap is frozen into a sharp knife, and from Christmas until March one is effectively mugged every time one steps outside. At night a person's breath can freeze so quickly that it turns into an iced tumbleweed, and from a living room window, one can see the frozen breaths scoot and bounce along on the ice and snow. And yet, you brave through it. Just like the Great Depression provided the real training for those who would become soldiers, the weather in St. Louis helps to hone the ability to brave through it, whatever it is.

The car heater was now keeping up with their breath, keeping their breath breath instead of each exhale turning into windshield frost, and the frost accumulated was now retreating rapidly, as if it were following a French military manual.

"I didn't think St. Louis got this cold," Carolyn said with a clear shiver in her voice. "It's got to be the wind coming off the river. It just cuts right through you."

"Cuts through metal and brick, too." Howard said. "If I would turn off the heat for just a second..."

"Don't you dare," she said.

Howard was now driving against the wind, not into the face of it, but against it, as if it were a sly opponent. The gusts were pushing the car into the oncoming lane, and Howard had to lean the car to the passenger side, just to keep going straight. The gusts would abruptly stop, the car would veer right, he would adjust left, and the gust would mount another assault, catching the car as if were a lateen sail, pushing it towards the approaching headlights.

"I like jazz now," Carolyn said, no longer shivering, her teeth no longer chattering. "I'd never heard it growing up."

“Me neither,” Howard said. “I am an only child, and there was never any music in the house. Not a note. Even at friends’ houses, no music. Did you know that I missed the Beatles? I know them now, but when it was happening, not a clue. So, I’m a little bit behind on the learning curve.”

“So what came first, Rock or Jazz?”

“Rock,” Howard said. “Socially, when social meant school instead of the kids next door, so I had to like it, I had to have a stereo—my parents didn’t even have a record player, and I had to buy records, whatever was a hit.”

“You sound like you didn’t like it.”

“I thought I did—until I heard Jazz. I mean I liked it, Rock, but I love, I love Jazz, and who would you rather be with, someone you like or someone you love?” Howard said.

They rounded the big curve in the street named Big Bend. “It was like this road,” Howard said. “I had to follow it, the music was so—it was like there was no friction, absolutely smooth, the sound of the walking bass.”

They continued, over the potholes, over gaps that developed between the sections of road, the blocks of pavement shrinking and cracking from the cold.

“It’s the opposite of so much music,” Howard continued. “where there’s a beat beat beat beat beat. Listen to this road, listen to the car hitting the potholes, beat beat beat beat, friction, damage. But Jazz...Have you ever heard of Charlie Parker?”

“It’s familiar, but not really.”

“Great Jazz musician. His nickname was Bird, for a songbird. But there’s the flying. Usually, when composers write music for flying birds they write swirling violins, and if you are watching birds, then swirling violins are what you feel. But if you get inside the bird, inside the bird’s heart, and give the bird a real mind, an ability to smile, tell a joke, to see irony—then you get, along with the gliding and soaring, you get the walking bass, jazz.”

“And you just stopped listening to Rock?”

“Cold.”

They pulled up to a stop light.

“Socially...” Carolyn said.

“So what’s new?” Howard asked, not even needing the skill of a mind reader to finish her thought, his social life atrophied like a limb going through muscle death.

They turned into Webster University, into the parking lot of the Loretto-Hilton theatre. They sat for half a second, bracing themselves. Carolyn counted to three, they got out of the car, and then joined each other as quickly as possible, trotting in lock step to the doors. The coat-check was overflowing, they decided to bring the coats to their seats. It was an intimate theatre, every seat a good one. The rhythm instruments were already on stage, the drums, piano, and upright bass. Amplifiers, microphones, and speakers encircled stage. Then the lights dimmed, the emcee came out, and there was mild applause. One by one, each musician walked to their instrument. They were ready.

Then from the sides there was a trumpet fanfare, notes upon notes, rapidly fired, popping like musical corn, a rolled out red carpet of harmony. And on this carpet walked the man playing these notes, one bullfrog stapled to each cheek, the bell of the horn, bent funny, pointing to the heavens. The crowd applauded so quietly, not wanting to miss one note. Dizzy Gillespie nodded to the crowd, and then nodded to the band. The drummer joined in, not beating a beat, but sizzling a beat like a piece of hip frying bacon. Then the bass player started to thrum, even strokes, the most beautiful of heartbeats, and finally the piano player dropping chords into the mix like he was seasoning a fine dish.

The crowd dropped into the jazz wave, actions meaningful and subtle, around the room, left to right, eyes closed, heads tilted back, feet quietly tapped. Used to be that jazz made you want to jitterbug, now it makes you want to dream. Carolyn and Howard reached for each other's hands, his thumb tapping her hand, her forefinger tapping the back of his knuckle. And gradually time changed, the daily tick tock slowly melted as it does in the deep of each night, where fifteen minutes of clock open into hours and days of a long dream. The air of the theatre, dried from hours of the running furnace, turned into the waters of a cool pond. The band was spinning ribbons and threads of tune, ribbons upon ribbons—Rumpelstiltskin rehabilitated, sweet and savory aromas of tunes, desserts of tunes, toys of tunes.

And then the bottom fell out, inside of Howard the bottom fell out. First his stomach, then his liver, his kidneys next, both intestines, his lungs, and then his heart, fell ever so slightly, at least it felt like they were falling. Way inside, in the darkness where nobody goes, at the bottom of the anatomical sea, the alarms went off. No pain this time, beyond pain—the nervous system's telegraph was superseded by a clear, full awareness of imminent death. He held Carolyn's hand more tightly. The song ended, the applause was loud and long. Howard was as enthusiastic as his energy would allow. Another clear awareness—being completely at the mercy of this energy. Carolyn was standing and applauding.

Howard needed more awareness, he needed some sense of time—how much was there. He needed a sense of what to do, to leave now, to wait? And if he waits, what should he do

after that? He closed his eyes, where else would the answer be? Dizzy was explaining the word Bebop.

“Okay ladies and gentlemen, all together, what sound does a dog make? Right, ‘bow-wow.’ (Thank you everybody for that wonderful bow-wow.) And a cat? That’s right, meow. (Very good, y’all, very good.) But a dog doesn’t really say bow-wow, and a cat doesn’t really meow, that’s what we say they say. We put words on the very pure sounds that they make. We do this all the time and don’t even think about it. Like tick tock tick tock. Now back in the forties we would write some songs, and we would learn the songs before we would name the songs. Now you can see already, okay I can hear some of you giggling—which by the way is another example of this phenomena, the word ‘giggle’ sounds like a giggle. As I was about to say before some of you got too hip for your own good, that learning the song before naming the song caused a bit of trouble in rehearsal. You want to play the song, but you can’t call the song. And so to rehearse we would say, ‘Let’s play that new one, you know, Oo Bop Sha Bam. Or Wee Dot, or Oo Ya Koo, or Bebop.’ And, not to mention the one we’re about to play, song that we finally named, ‘Salt Peanuts.’”

He turned to the band and counted, “Ah Oh Ee” and then he stopped, and turned back to the audience. “And you can undo that process, too. You can take established words, like ‘one, two, three, and four,’ and change them back into their pure sound. Like so. He turned back to the band and snapping his fingers. “Right here. Ah Oh Ee Unh...”

Howard thought, the music played. If, he reasoned, I have only moments to live, minutes and seconds...salt peanuts salt peanuts...then dying while listening to Dizzy Gillespie is high on the list of Preferred Ways to Go...salt peanuts salt peanuts...If my moments are longer, days and weeks, if my soul or whatever, is trying to live, then I might have enough time to do something, in which case I can still stay for the rest of the concert...salt peanuts salt peanuts.

Laughing, Carolyn leaned to his ear and said, “the notes in the song really do sound like the words ‘salt peanuts.’ Her warm breath on his ear made Howard think of some other items on the list of Preferred Ways to Go.

“Okay, I’m getting it. I could love this music,” Carolyn said, nodding, smiling. “Where I’m from is a very Country Music kind of place.”

Normally the radio would be on, normally Howard would have responded by asking her more about where she came from. But both the radio and Howard were still.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Not sure,” he said. “I had a moment of extreme clarity in there, I’m not completely sure what to make of it or what to do about it.”

“I’m listening,” she said.

“But it was more than just a thought. Something changed inside of me and...something’s wrong,” he said. “Something is very wrong.”

She didn’t say a word, she just reached over and held his hand. In silence, they drove the rest of the way and then parked in front of her apartment. Howard took a long, deep breath.

“I think that I’m going to die soon,” he said. “That feeling in there, I’ve never had it, and I’ve never heard of it. But something tells me it’s bad.” He knew that it was extremely bad form to cry on a date, to get weepy and weak—no matter how modern people say they are, it could change everything, and in his swirling thoughts he decided to stay strong, deciding he could handle dying better than another episode of ‘Let’s Just Be Friends.’ “It feels like my internal organs are dropping and I’ve never heard of any symptom remotely sounding like this.”

“Do you think that they’re really dropping, because I don’t think that they can do that.”

“All I can say is what it feels like.” They sat for a few moments, each watching their breath begin to ice the inside of the windshield. “Let’s go upstairs,” she said, tapping his hand.

They quickly got out of the car and ran up the walkway to the building’s front door. Howard jumped up and down as she went through her purse, muttering “Key, key, k-key, k-key.”

They went upstairs, into apartment 3. Jim was stretched out on the sofa eating some popcorn and reading a book. He was wearing a T-shirt and gym shorts, his skin had a mist of sweat and the side window was open ever so slightly. It was really hot in there.

“Either Randy’s wife laid down the law or he’s cheap the rest of the year just to crank the heat in the winter,” Jim said. Randy was the landlord who owned this building, the one across the street, the Yoga center, and two on the next block. He and his wife lived in apartment 1, right underneath. “Whatever the reason,” Jim continued, “I think I’ll have to bake him a pie or something, do something nice. You guys want some popcorn?”

They took off their coats and sat around the bowl like it was a campfire.

“How was the concert?” Jim asked.

“Fine,” said Howard. He looked at Carolyn, Carolyn looked at Howard.

“What’s up?” asked Jim. “The guy’s cheeks blow up or something?”

“No,” Carolyn said, “nothing like that. The music was wonderful, the guy is fine.”

“Then what’s up?” Jim asked. “Wait, I know. Are you two engaged?”

“No nothing like that,” Howard said.

“Howard had a bit of a revelation,” Carolyn said.

“You’re going to ask her to get engaged?”

“No no,” Howard said. “It’s actually not very good.” He paused. “This is going to sound strange, it feels like my internal organs are dropping—not a lot, just a little bit, and I had the accompanying feeling that...”

Again a pause.

“That...” said Jim.

“That I’m going to die soon.”

Now Jim and Carolyn looked at each other.

“I’ll tell you what,” Jim said, “when I was in Vietnam I had that same revelation every day. After a while I just looked at it like my five o’clock shadow. Even when I got shot,” Jim continued, “it was my five o’clock shadow.”

“You were shot?” Carolyn asked. Howard smiled to himself.

“Right here,” Jim showed her a long, wide scar on his right calf.

“Did you get a Purple Heart?” she asked.

“My C.O. wanted me to put in for one, but it was just this jerk in the next bunk who wasn’t paying attention when he was cleaning his gun.” Then Jim looked at Howard. “You’ve got to spend the night here. If you feel bad you can’t go home to that cold, drafty place of yours. You have to spend the night.”

Howard and Carolyn reached for each other easily, without thought, as if they’d been together for years. They kissed softly.

“Then it’s settled,” Jim said. “I’ll go make some more popcorn while you guys work out the details. But Carolyn,” he said, “remember our boy’s sick here, he probably needs all the warmth he can get.” He winked and then walked into the kitchen. Howard and Carolyn walked into her bedroom, closed the door, turned out the light, and figured Jim would figure out the rest.

Normally, that is, if Howard were feeling normal, he would have undressed quickly. And he would have done it without the very audible sigh that just seeped out. Under the covers, as he touched her, he could feel from just that touch, the smoothness of her skin, how beautiful she was, as if his hands could electronically scan her image into his mind.

“We don’t have to do anything tonight,” she said. “We could just lay here. Don’t feel as if there’s some role or performance requirement. That’s all nonsense.”

“You say it’s nonsense,” Howard said weakly. “Shit, I’m feeling weak and tired,” he said.

“No,” she said. “It’s nonsense. Men who feel like that, there’s problems with that. I know.”

He was so tired. He knew that he could probably ask her something personal right now, ask her what’s behind the wall, and she’d tell him. Except that he was falling asleep. The last thought he had before he drifted off was that he had to teach guitar tomorrow, and he may have mumbled something about setting the alarm.

Howard pulled into the parking lot. There was a bright, cold sun that morning. The sleep did him well, although he was sore inside, underneath his bones, underneath his ribs, which didn’t hurt as much as the thought of going one more time to the emergency room. He walked into the store, said hello to Ed and Chuck, picked out the guitar he would use that day, set up his studio, and walked into the front room to wait for his first student. He stood looking out the front window, at the cars on Olive, at the store across the street. Stupid. Howard thought, stupid. He was a guitar teacher for four years at Silver Strings, looking out at the same street scene for four years, looking across the street at the same Wang’s Special Food store for four years, looking at the same small sign at the upper left hand corner of the building for four years, and until this day, never saw it. The sign had an arrow underneath, pointing, as it were, around to the back of the building. Above the arrow, as it has always been, was one word: Acupuncture.



*There was a clearing on the other side of the trees.
The Young Man and the Monster traveled
through deserts, jungle, plains, and forests.
There were times the Monster went ahead out of view.
The Young Man would hear sounds of a fierce fight, roaring,
the thumps and thud of animals falling or being thrown,
and then see the Monster emerge,
brushing his hairy self off, and then making some remark to him about the weather,
as if nothing happened.
This would confuse the Young Man and he would ask the Monster if he was still
trying to kill him.
“It’s what I do,” the Monster would answer.*

*They stood at the clearing and found a narrow path,
etched like a crop circle into the pale, green grassy plain.
The Young Man eyed the pathway all the way across,
as the flat turned into a steep incline
that rose high to line the horizon.
A creek ran crosswise, like the X-axis of a graph,
and they both stopped to drink.*

*Dusk fell as quickly as a curtain.
They stopped at the top of the hill,
which turned out to be an escarpment
overlooking large badlands.
Dangling their feet, they watched a fog settle in,
covering the base of the rugged rocks,
lining up along the lines of sedimentation.
It would be too dangerous to navigate in the dark,
and so they would have to sleep there.*

*They turned over onto their stomachs, watching the rocks.
By now they were as used to each other
as a long married couple,
knowing each other without words.
The Young Man looked at the Monster and
raised an eyebrow.
The Monster looked back,
quickly lowering the hair above his eye,
what would have been an eyebrow.
“Am I safe?” the Young Man no longer needed to ask.
“As safe as you are stupid,”
the Monster no longer needed to say.*

*In the darkness, in the badlands,
the Young Man saw fires lit, ten, fifteen, twenty-five fires.*

*He picked his head up and turned to the Monster,
who was lying on his side,
his hairy back facing the young man.
“You didn’t notice all of the caves, did you,”
the Monster sighed.*

*There was music in the morning coming from the caves.
The Young Man awoke to see the monster standing,
palms open, claws out, looking into the rocks below.
A man was looking back at the monster.
Something was happening.
The Young Man could feel it in the air.
The Monster did not want to break concentration,
but said, out of the corner of his mouth,
“You’re becoming more sensitive, that’s good.”
“I’m going down there,” said the Young Man.
“Sell tickets to this one,” said the Monster.
“And by the way, welcome to China.”*

After his last student, Howard walked across the street, down the broken asphalt driveway, the black washed and cooked away into a pale gray. He nearly tripped on the two-foot raised concrete border, the area of a very large coffin, inside of which was a staircase leading into the basement of the building. He took a deep breath and descended. As he opened the door he heard the familiar tinkling bell, but that was all that was familiar. He noticed the aromas first. Incense? No. Marijuana? No. But it was what those two men were smoking, what looked like rolled bay leaves. If it wasn't dope it was dope's first cousin. The men were speaking Chinese. One was blowing smoke rings. Howard quickly took in the rest of the room, in a flash trying to decide whether to stay or go.

There was a wall of drawers straight ahead, to his right a wall of jars holding twigs and barks and dried vegetable things. There were posters of men and women, silhouettes filled with lines and dots, the lines and dots labeled in Chinese. Then there was a doorway with long strands of beads for a door. Well, he thought, if I need to do something different, this is certainly what different would look like.

“Can I help you?” said the man blowing smoke rings, still seated in an area looking more like a living room, with two soft armchairs, a rug, two floor lamps giving off a rather warm and cozy light.

“I think I need acupuncture,” Howard said, walking slowly around the room, looking here and there, a stranger in a strange land.

“What makes you say that?” asked the man. He was Chinese and spoke with somewhat of an accent, its hard edges smoothed away like an edged rock nestled in a running stream.

Howard stopped and turned towards the man, it wouldn't be polite not to make eye contact—at least in America, he didn't know about China or Taiwan, or anywhere in the Orient, even if it's correct to call it the Orient. He took a roundabout route to the chairs—seeing the man in light, from varying angles, and this was new to Howard also, because he had never seen another man's appearance, this man's age, for instance, change quite so much. From one perspective the man could have been fifty, from another, maybe seventy, and from another angle—Howard dismissed this thought as soon as it popped in, shooed it away like a small insect. But the coziness of the light and the softness of the chairs drew him in like a moth at night.

“Well, I've been having these symptoms for a while,” Howard paused, “and I think they mean something, but the doctors I've seen don't...”

“Symptoms like what?” the man said quickly.

“Pains in my torso, cramping, bad cramps, I'd have to go to the emergency room, like my body is going to blow up, my skin would change color, to yellow or gray...”

“Stick out your tongue,” said the man, getting up out of his chair.

“Should I say ‘ahhh?’

“No, just stick out the tongue.”

“Ahhh. Sorry, it's a reflex.”

“Tongue.”

Howard stuck out his tongue. The man looked at it carefully.

“Weak ch'i,” he said, “Bad ch'i, very bad. Pains in side, pains around here?” He circled his hands around his torso.

“Yes,” Howard said, “I said that.”

“Falling inside,” he said.

“What?” Howard said, feeling ripples of excitement build and swirl around him.

He motioned with his hands again, if it were charades Howard would have said ‘breasts...sagging breasts.’ “Feeling inside like falling?” the man asked.

Howard was definitely staying. He nodded, and opened his mouth to say something, but the words bounced off the back of his teeth like little handballs. The man turned to his friend, or patient, and began a conversation in Chinese. The other man stood, nodded towards Howard, smiled, and left.

“Have a seat,” said the man. “I am Dr. Wang.”

“I am Howard Stein.”

Howard sunk into the empty, warmed, soft chair. Dr. Wang brought back a clipboard holding a sheet of notebook paper. He began writing.

“You have had many antibiotics in your life?” Dr. Wang asked.

“I have had antibiotics like most people have Chicklets,” said Howard. Dr. Wang continued to look at him. “Candy,” said Howard, “like most people eat candy.” Dr. Wang still looked. “Yes,” Howard finally said, “many antibiotics.” Dr. Wang looked to the paper and wrote.

“You have had them recently?”

“Yes.”

“Within the year?”

“Yes.”

“How often?”

“Daily.”

“Ahh,” said Dr. Wang. “You are how old?”

“Twenty-six when it started. Twenty-seven now.”

Dr. Wang continued to write. “Yes,” he said, “acupuncture is necessary. Please go into the other room behind the beads and change into the shorts that are on the table. I will be in momentarily.”

“Will I leave my shirt on?”

Dr. Wang looked at him. “Shirt off, cover yourself with the blanket. Then lie quietly on the table and relax. I’ll be in. Ten minutes.” He nodded and smiled.

There were more posters of bodies with lines and dots, a table low to the floor with a futon on it, dim lighting, no it was warm lighting, he thought. He changed into the shorts and lay down on the bed, covered himself with the blanket. He looked at the white ceiling and thought about his old file when he was young enough to go to a pediatrician. He and his mom would be in the waiting room with other kids and moms. The nurse would put their files on the ledge of her window, and take the file into the examining room when the patient was called. If two other patients were waiting along with him, there would be two files pamphlet thick and one the size of a Russian novel. It seemed he was always sick, probably entitled to discounts, charged a prime fee like big banks receive the prime interest rate. He

was to Dr. Pulaski what Chase Manhattan is to the Federal Reserve. He nearly flunked kindergarten, no, this was true, he would always have to say, I'm not exaggerating, because I was sick so much. He was sick a lot in first grade too. His mother would try to prevent him getting sick by doubling and sometimes tripling the coats he needed to wear. His teacher would have to call in help just to get him ready for the bus home, with boots, a sweater, a coat on top of the sweater, a raincoat on top of the coat, wait take some stuff off, we have a hat to go under the hood, go find his other mitten, and a scarf, okay now the raincoat, Howard can you see out from under there? Then one teacher would say to the other, I don't know why his mother doesn't figure out that bundling him up is probably what's making him so sick. Then the allergies started in third grade, asthma in fourth, braces in fifth, Howard had to close his eyes, force himself to change the subject, before he got to acne and the daily doses of antibiotics, tetracycline starting in high school and continuing until, well they haven't stopped. No age limit for dermatologists.

Dr. Wang came in and kneeled on the floor next to him. "I want you to think about something for a moment before you answer my question. Okay?" Howard nodded. "You like Chinese food, right?" Dr. Wang asked. Again Howard nodded. "But you know you've never had real Chinese food, right?" Howard agreed, he had heard stories about ingredients and techniques not all suited to American culture, like monkey eyes, or recipes that take a week to prepare. "Well, the same is true of acupuncture. There's acupuncture we do for Americans, to stop smoking or relieve pain, and then there's the real thing. Would you like the real thing? Real Chinese acupuncture. How about that?"

Howard followed directions and took time to think. He took a deep breath. Dr. Wang was watching him very closely. Would a restaurant owner serve monkey eyes to a first time customer? There seemed to be some breach of etiquette here, something not quite right.

He took a deep breath and hoped that it would be a knowing breath, he hoped he could see the whole puzzle from just the dust of the few pieces he has here, he hoped this breath would be like a line of ticker tape. And it worked. He knew what the conversation was about, between Dr. Wang and the Chinese man, and he didn't speak or understand a word of Chinese. The other man was a patient, scheduled for right now. Dr. Wang told the man that this young man needs emergency treatment, to accept his apologies and reschedule. The other man was indeed accepting and would see him later, in a few days.

"Was the other man who just left a patient? Was he scheduled for this time slot?"

Dr. Wang raised one eyebrow very slightly. "My first instinct is to say that is not true. But I believe I will tell you the truth and tell you that is indeed the case. You speak Chinese, then?"

"Not a word," said Howard. "I believe I will have the real acupuncture, then."

Dr. Wang bowed slightly. “Good, then let’s begin.”

Dr. Wang lifted Howard’s right wrist up near his ear. The doctor tilted his head close to the wrist, almost listening to it, like an upright bassist tilts his head towards the scroll of the bass. Then he lined up his fingers along Howard’s radial artery, like a guitar player spacing his fingers along the first three frets. And he pressed his fingers, one at a time, just like he was playing a song. Quickly, softly, delicately, he leapt to the other side of the bed and repeated the tune on his left wrist. He held both wrists, one in each hand, three fingers spaced. He leapt back to the right side. “Tilt your head back,” he said. Still holding the right wrist, he felt the pulse in Howard’s neck. Another leap, now holding the left wrist and feeling the pulse on the left side of his neck.

“Do you still have problems with asthma?” the doctor asked.

“Yeah,” said Howard, “sometimes. I didn’t tell you I had asthma, did I?”

“Your pulses tell me everything,” he said. “Pulses. More than one pulse. They tell me secrets of the body better than many X-rays and chemical tests. Now quiet your mind.”

“Easier said.”

“Shhh.”

He went behind a bamboo, three-panel screen, and rolled out a tray that held rows of needles, a bowl of cotton, and an alcohol dispenser. And then he put needles, well, Howard thought, everywhere. There were needles in both of his arms, there were needles in his feet, near the inside ankles and on the tops. Sometimes, right after a needle was in, Dr. Wang would move it in and out, up and down, ever so slightly, like he was fishing in a very, very tiny pond. There were needles running up the outside of his legs, up the center of his legs, up the inside of his legs. Four times, as the needle dropped into his skin, he felt electrical shocks, his arms and legs would jump. Howard would gasp. Dr. Wang would smile. “Caught the ch’i,” he would say. Howard wondered if Kansas felt like this, earlier in the century, when they first put up telephone poles.

“Okay,” said Dr. Wang. “You rest now, about a half hour.” And he walked out of the room.

For a moment, Howard stared at the white ceiling. If I itch I’m screwed, he thought. I sure hope I don’t itch. My nose will probably itch. But if I think about itching I’ll talk myself into itching. He closed his eyes. Just breathe, he thought. He started to relax. This isn’t half bad, he thought. Breathe. Breeeeathe. His thoughts were getting so much softer. Breeeeathe. He opened his eyes. White ceiling. Whiiiiite ceiling, with a patch of red exploding like fireworks. And exploding green over there, there goes a comet of purple, now a deep blue one. There’s a sun over there.

“Dr. Wang,” he called, calmly.

“Yes?” came the voice from the other room.

“I’m hallucinating.”

There was a short pause. “Enjoy it.”

“Okay,” Howard said agreeably. “I can do that.”

He continued to watch the ceiling, drifting closer to sleep. And then Howard had a vision, a feeling as clear, as certain as arithmetic. He felt, he knew, that not only could he recover, heal, from this most recent illness, whatever it was, but he could heal the whole thing, like his body had been spiraling out of control since he was one year old and had pneumonia, into all of the sickness from which he never fully recovered. Every disease left its imprint, binding his body into thinness, his ribs always visible, into weakness, he couldn’t do a chin up, pull up, or push up, into frailness, he couldn’t run for long distances, he had no stamina. Howard closed his eyes, and he could feel deep inside of him, he could feel another him, but in radiant health, strong, breathing—oh the breathing—full and powerful.

He heard the ding of an egg timer in the other room. Dr. Wang came in and quickly removed the needles, swabbing his arms and legs with an alcohol cotton ball. Then he checked all of the pulses once more, nodding his head with a subtle smile, like a chef tasting his perfect sauce. “Now we will do phase two. Lay still. When I say so, breathe deeply ten times.” He took one needle and placed it over Howard’s solar plexus. “Okay, now.” He barely pierced the skin with this needle, no thicker than a human hair, at a depth no deeper than that same hair.

Howard could not breathe he could only gasp. He could not relax, he could only dig his fingers into Dr. Wang’s arm. He could not imagine so much pain, he could not imagine so much pain was possible. Shards of glass and electric shock, it felt like, streaming out of this microscopic hole. As if his body was filled with carbonated pain, all shook up and spraying out of him. “Relax! Breathe!” said Dr. Wang. The first breath was the most difficult, the second easier, finally he could breathe deeply. “Five, four, three, two, one. Okay. It’s out.”

Howard was trembling. He sat up, looking at his feet but really gazing into space around his feet. “What was that?”

“Toxic energy. Your body is filled with poisoned energy. Toxic ch’i. We call ‘energy,’ ‘ch’i.’ Ch’i is life force.”

“That pain was inside of me?”

“Unfortunately so.”

“And there’s more?”

“Much more. Much more. Put your clothes on, I’ll talk to you more sitting in my chair.”
Dr. Wang got up and left the room.

Howard sat up and had no thoughts, his brain perfectly silent. He was aware of a buzzing around him, he could feel this, there was no sound, a soft vibration around him like flannels. He dressed and went out to the chair across from Dr. Wang, the soft reading lamps highlighting the smoke rings floating in the air. Dr. Wang exhaled two more rings and watched Howard carefully. Howard was still silent, breathing as softly as when he would sit in the park at three in the morning, his mind an extension of the darkness.

“Howard?” said Dr. Wang.

Howard looked through the smoke, beginning to feel more like himself, seeing the smile lines near Dr. Wang’s eyes and mouth, the thought lines across his forehead. “So, you like real Chinese acupuncture?”

Well, he wasn’t all there like himself. He could only sit silently, which Dr. Wang thought was amusing.

“You’re not used to a quiet mind, I see. A quiet mind is good. You enjoy it, come back in three days. Okay?”

Howard nodded. As he was leaving Dr. Wang said, “One more thing, no antibiotics. Got it?”

“Got it.”

He stepped outside into the winter dusk. The cold shocked his, his what, inner voice, inner self, his mind, back into its normal patterns. He looked at the gray sky, noticed his breath, turned around and saw the thick trees and dark ground. But his body didn’t return to its normal pattern. His first few steps were awkward, his legs almost moved on their own, taking strides of a much different length. He stopped. He would have to run across the street in a few moments and he would like to have a much better idea of the outcome than he did right now. He picked up a piece of broken asphalt, about the weight of a baseball, and threw it at the trash dumpster, what, fifty yards away. Bang! He stood for a moment. It’s back, he thought. He could throw again, throw being defined not as a simple act of throwing, but being able to throw a runner out from left field, being able to throw a strike from fifty to sixty feet. One of the many little things he noticed over the last several months, things that he loved that seemed to be going away, was his ability to throw accurately. But there it was. He took off his coat, grabbed another piece of asphalt, whirled left arm around a few times, frontwards, backwards, hop step, hop step, right over the top, a clothesline throw and BANG! Goddamn, god damn.



*The young man came out of the cave smiling,
but he wasn't smiling for long.
He stood and looked around him all 360 degrees,
once, twice.
Then he looked at the monster.
Something's funny here, he said.
You notice it, he said to the monster.
You seem to notice everything.
I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about,
the monster replied.*

There weren't any internal light and lightning shows during his second visit to Dr. Wang. The second phase was just as painful, but Howard was expecting the pain, and he quickly took the ten deep breaths, making the actual and perceived times around ten seconds, compared to the first time when the actual time was fifteen seconds and the perceived time was the running start for eternal damnation. He was lucid afterwards and able to converse with Dr. Wang, who quickly went to his chair for one of his cigarettes.

"Do you roll those yourself?"

"No." He held up a little pink pack with 501 on the bottom and a man with an elephant head on the side. "But we are not here to talk about me. I would like to hear your impressions of the first two experiences with Chinese medicine."

Howard thought carefully. "Surprising." He paused. "I don't think I could have imagined what was going to happen, and I certainly couldn't have imagined the sensations I felt. The second phase was literally the most shocking thing that's ever happened to me. I could never have imagined that. So I think it was real, whatever it is."

"It is your ch'i, your life force."

"My ch'i."

"Your ch'i."

Another pause. "So, how is my ch'i?"

"Same question to you. How does your ch'i feel?"

Howard took a deep breath. "Better. When I came here it felt very bad. Very bad."

"That is correct." Dr. Wang nodded his head ever so slightly, and smiled just as so slightly. "You are beginning to feel your ch'i. This is good. Continue to get acquainted with it. It is well worth knowing. No more antibiotics?"

“No more antibiotics.”

“Also good. Come back in three days.”

In two days Howard came down with a real St. Louis cold, a jack hammering, teeth chatterer, an unbalanced washing machine shiverer, a giant bring-Lake-St.-Louis-to-a-boil-and-add-700,000-chickens-soup special kind of cold. If it was the flu, he thought, he would feel better, because at least things would be exiting his body. But this was a cold and he was holding onto every particle of misery his body could generate. And then came the sore throat, a rivet red, cast iron skillet sitting against the root of his tongue, and his nose became so stuffed he couldn't even clearly think the sounds, ed (n) or tee atche (th). The next day he forced himself to become mobile enough to get to Dr. Wang's.

“Ah,” said Dr. Wang. “You are suffering a more conventional misery.” Howard could only cough. “What color is the phlegm?” the doctor asked.

“Huh?”

“The phlegm. What color?”

“Oh. It's yellow.”

“Ah, yellow,” said the doctor. He held aside the long strands of blue beads, Howard went right into the treatment room, changed and lay down on the table. As he changed, Dr. Wang set up a few space heaters and brought out some more blankets. As soon as Howard lay on the table Dr. Wang covered him in blankets. “Rest, then I will check your pulses.”

The room quickly became very warm, and under the covers Howard broke into a light sweat. Dr. Wang checked his wrist pulses and then his throat pulses, then nodded as if, once again, his suspicions were confirmed. He went behind the screen and came out with a tray of, well, it looked like a footlong stick of fireworks and a ball of dust. Dr. Wang sat at Howard's feet. Howard leaned up on his elbows to see what was happening but Dr. Wang asked him to please lie down. Howard stared at the ceiling, listening to a lighter light, smelling another new aroma, and then feeling a stinging on his toes.

“Could you ad leasd tell bee whad you are doigg?”

“Moxibustion.”

“Box o' whad?”

“Mox-a-bust-shun. I am putting heat into your meridians.”

“By beridiads?”

“Lay quiet please, I need to concentrate.”

The stinging continued for what seemed like fifteen minutes.

“Okay, now we do phase one.” The doctor put needles into his feet, legs, and arms. Howard’s breathing became deeper and slower, his eyelids became heavy, and in a few minutes he was asleep.

The egg timer sounded, Howard opened his eyes, and Dr. Wang attached a head piece to the table, a padded square with a hole in the middle. “Lay your face into the hole, please.” Howard did, he could easily sleep some more, except that it was time for the dreaded phase two.

“Time for phase two?” Howard asked.

“Not yet. More phase one.” The doctor placed needles along Howard’s spine and several places on the back of his legs. Again Howard fell asleep. Again the egg timer sounded. Dr. Wang was right there.

“Phase two, ten deep breaths.” Without giving Howard time to even think about it, there was a needle somewhere in his left trapezius, there was the deep electrical pain he didn’t think he would ever get used to, the needle was out and quickly placed somewhere in the right trapezius.

“Three, two, one, now quickly flip onto your back.” Howard did so. In a blink a needle was in the back of his right hand, at the base of the puffy part between the thumb and first finger. Both the pain and the rapid breathing caused him to break into a substantial sweat. Now the needle was in the same part of the left hand. Howard grunted from the pain, choosing the grunt over the moan, needing as much toughness as he could muster.

“These next few will hurt, so we will only do three deep breaths.”

“Where...gnnnaakkk!”

“Three breaths! Two, one.” Right over the left sinus. Then the right sinus.

“Gocckk.” Now he was sweating and soaking the blankets. “How much more?”

“Two more.” Dr. Wang went to the other end of the bed, and put the needle to the side of his right little toe. Ten, nine, this wasn’t too bad. Maybe the worst is over. Two, one. Wrong. The needle in the left little toe was excruciating, but as he breathed he could feel the soreness in his throat go down, like the mercury in a hot candy thermometer placed into the snow. And when Dr. Wang took the needle out, his sore throat was gone.

“My sore throat is gone! My...sore...throat...is...gone! Mmmmm. Mmmmm. My, my, my. Mmmoxibustion! Mmmmy mmmmeridians! I can’t believe it. I...can’t... believe...it. You cured a cold. You...cured...a...cold! In one hour. One hour.” Howard looked at Dr. Wang. “How can needles kill a virus?”

“That would be your first mistake, thinking a cold is caused by a virus. Get dressed. I see you outside.”

Quickly, Howard got dressed, pulling his shirts over his head, hopping around the room into his pants, socks and shoes. Sitting across from Dr. Wang, Howard picked up the Chinese newspaper next to his chair and waved it in the air, scattering the smoke cloud that hovered around the doctor.

“I want to see you clearly when you speak,” Howard said.

“What would I be saying?” Dr. Wang asked.

“You would be telling me how you cured a cold.”

“You would want me to summarize in five minutes what I have learned since I was five years old?”

“Maybe just a small hint,” said Howard.

Dr. Wang leaned forward, taking a long inhale and exhaling even more. The smoke hung in the air like a heavy curtain.

“No.”

“No?” Howard asked.

“No.”

“How about books? Are there any books I should read?”

“No books. Just feel your ch’i.”

Howard thought about putting a little plead into his voice, a little puppy, maybe some doe eyes, but he changed his mind, figuring he was too old, and those manipulations of body language and vocal tone probably didn’t translate into Chinese. Howard walked to the coat rack, put on his scarf, coat, and gloves. He pulled the knit hat over his head, down over his ears and heard Dr. Wang’s voice in a mumble. He lifted one ear and heard, “Feel your ch’i. Wake up!” Then he turned to Dr. Wang, but he saw only the swinging beads that hung over the other staircase. Dr. Wang had gone upstairs.

Howard let himself out, walked up the driveway to cross the street, but took time to look in the window of Wang’s Special Food Store. Dr. Wang was working the cash register. Howard crossed the street and drove home, kite high, wanting to tell the world that someone had indeed cured the common cold. But two traffic lights later his spirits were once again earthbound, a little lower actually, when he realized that no one would believe him.

Howard would have told Jim, but Jim was missing for a few days, not completely missing, Carolyn cited compelling proof of various household...uh, aromas in the morning, letting her know that he was around, just orbiting where he couldn't be found. And by the time he showed up, Howard was so nonchalant about it that empirical Jim just nodded and said 'How about that?' Carolyn had no trouble believing it, although she couldn't get enthused because she was telling Howard about her job, her boss, at Barnes Hospital. "When she and her friends go to lunch, you know, for a pizza and a couple of beers, I think they leave the pizza."

"What's that song you're playing?" Carolyn asked.

"Round Midnight," Howard said.

"It's beautiful," she said. "Are you doing anything different to it, jazzing it up, that's what you say right?"

"Nope," Howard said, continuing the song, half-listening, make that a third as he started the bridge. "To both questions."

"Then what do you say?"

"I...just try...to play it...and then...I...try to play it better," he said finishing the song, for now.

"Do you write your own songs?" she asked. "Have I asked you this before?"

"No to the first. Yes to the second," Howard smiled as he looked down at the guitar.

"And then we talked about your hands," she said.

"Yes we did."

"Well it's true," she said, "I've never seen anyone move their hands like that. I've seen lots of guitar players..."

"Guys who sing," Howard said.

"Yeah, they sing and play."

"Well I don't sing, so my fingers have to sing for me, they have to do four times as much work."

"It's like each finger has its own brain, its own will power," she said. "I'm fascinated."

Howard nodded. "In a way that's true, you have to trust your hands, turn the brain down, like you lower a flame when you cook, and let your hands find the way. Unfortunately, my hands too often work like the Keystone Cops." He started to play 'Skylark.' "I need to ask you a question," he said. "Why are you with me?"

“What?”

“I mean, you’re beautiful. I’m...not,” he said. “There’s usually some equivalence there. It’s not true that you see beautiful women with plain guys, unless they’re rich plain guys. So why are you with me?”

She stood, folded her arms, and looked to be deciding whether to even dignify the question with an answer.

“How should I answer this, Mr. Psychology? That I’m older than you, so I’m not just a superficial child? That I prefer some depth in the people I date? Ah, I know. Perhaps I see things in you that you can’t see yourself? A, B, or C?”

Howard was still for a moment. “I seem to have misplaced my brain,” he said. “Maybe it rolled under the dresser, if you could you check there I’d appreciate it. I’ll check between the sofa cushions thank you.”

Classes began in mid-January. There is a point in the development of curriculum, when for whatever reason, the whole thing begins to repeat itself. In Psychology, it could be that there just isn’t that much knowledge. In Experimental Psychology, for the umpteenth time since he was a freshman, the professor opened with a film of the Milgram experiments, arguably the most famous of all. Done in 1961, they showed the ease with which peer pressure and authority can force someone to relinquish their own self. A subject, someone *not* in on the experiment, was placed in a room with several others who *are* in on it, the experiment. The task is simple, verbally identify the longest line of these five. The second one is clearly longer by as much as seven inches, but the others start choosing the third one. The subject goes along with the crowd. It’s definitely the third line, he or she says. But it gets stranger. The subject chooses the third line, and others follow, third, third, third, third, second. (Remember, the person who said ‘second’ is also in on the experiment.) Why? Dissent? An argument ensues, and often the person most vehemently arguing for the third line is the subject. Not only do they go along with this insane parade, they decide to be the drum major.

In another experiment, the subject is placed in a room with a man in a white coat, the authority figure. The subject is to ask a man in another room a series of questions. For every incorrect answer the subject must push a button that will give the man in the other room an electric shock. After each shock administered, the voltage is turned up a little, the dial inching closer to the red area marked ‘lethal.’ The shockee is an actor who can scream loud enough to be heard through the Sheetrock separating the two rooms. The reality is, there is

no shock, but the subject doesn't know this. Time after time, despite the man's screams of pain, the subject pushed the button leading to a 'lethal shock,' following the orders of the man in the white coat. The subject, merely on orders from a man in a lab coat holding a clipboard, with virtually no resistance, a tiny physical reluctance, and mild verbal objection, but when the man in the lab coat insisted, the subject *pushed the button*, making the choice to kill another person. They didn't *really* kill another person, but they *really* decided to.

"Clearly," the professor said while stopping the movie projector, "the roots of fascism reach much deeper than we like to acknowledge."

"How deep is deep?" Howard asked.

"I don't know Mr. Stein. How deep *is* deep?" the professor said with just enough irony to cause one to infer the professor also possess great wisdom along with wit. The professor puffed his chest a little, turned the knob, and the clickety clack of movie continued.

This is how Howard usually played his classes. He learned in high school that there is a way to get A's, and it is a skill not at all dependent upon intelligence. Kissing ass is *not* this skill. Raising your hand with two minutes in class to remind the teacher to assign more work is not this skill. It's a subtle skill, and it will not get you an A if your average is in the sixties, but on an essay question, on the cusp of a B+ or an A-, this is the skill. It's a matter of timing, asking the right question, a good question, at the right time—essentially setting up the professor to respond with wit and charm. Howard learned this while watching girls trying to attract guys or bolster relationships they were already in. And it was fabulously successful. Not only did they catch the fish, the fish would be overjoyed and flop around on the hook like it just discovered it had the biggest dick in the sea or lake, even if it was a Bluegill. But from across the room, the woman's tactic was transparent, which is like fishing with thin line. And so Howard made a slight adjustment.

Honesty. It was sparkingly effective. Tired? Instead of skipping class (this is in high school) and making up an excuse, he simply told the teacher he was tired and wondered if he could go to the nurse and take a nap. And the teacher allowed it. Howard was astounded. He tried it again. Even though there was a rule against going off campus for lunch, he informed another teacher that his he and his buddy would like to go out for pizza during lunch, we'll be back in time for class, would this be okay? And again the answer was yes. Put these two events together, and you have one big life changing event.

And so Howard genuinely wanted to know how deep is deep, the question he was sincerely saving, he took it out of the pantry and put it on the table. What exactly is it that is inside of us, that somehow sits next to and interweaves with our bones and DNA? Is it finite, is it infinite, or is it finite but feels infinite, or infinite but feels finite? And speaking of how much space is inside of us, what is the nature of what fills it? Are feelings real or

imagined, and if we don't know what they're made of, and we are barely aware of what they do, how do we know that the way we treat them, with non-judgmental conversations filled with unconditional positive regard (would it kill anyone to invent jargon with a little poetry, a little music, Howard thought), how do we know that this is the best way to deal with them? What if it ends up creating more problems than it solves? What if it's iatrogenic? To Howard, these should be the central questions of Psychology, yet no one asks. Come to think of it, Howard thought, it seems as if no one even thinks about asking.

In the movie, a subject was pushing the button, there was the hum of electricity, and a scream, all of which coincided with the shudder flying through Howard that left a contrail of goose bumps. And then Howard tossed aside his rules. He raised his hand. The projector stopped. Terrible timing, just the worst timing, Howard thought, but he went ahead.

"Mr. Stein," the professor said.

"Aren't we the guys in the white coats? I don't mean just knowing how to do experiments, I mean, socially, in society, in the real world, don't we function as the guy in the lab coat, aren't we the ones creating that intimidating peer pressure?"

"I hardly think that we as a profession are in any position to order people killed," the professor said. "I believe we are in the business of providing insight, helping others cope and get through the harsher moments of life."

He wanted to use a tone that sounded hesitant and unsure. But he couldn't. His perception was too clear. "So you're saying that the problem with Milgram is that the authority figures are forcing the subject to do harm, to believe what is false?" The last thing he wanted to do was sound certain, and that's exactly how he sounded. But he couldn't stop. "We wouldn't even have this movie, we wouldn't wonder about the heart of evil if the peer group was true about the line lengths, or that the subject had to plant a daisy for every wrong answer?"

"I'm saying that our profession works for the greater good," the professor said.

Howard looked around the darkened room, trying to see if the irony of this situation was registering in his classmates. It wasn't. The atmosphere in the room changed, and Howard felt, well, pressure, real pressure to stop talking. He felt it on his neck, like an atomized vice, along his trapezius, it felt like a roller, forcing him to bend down. But he couldn't stop, even though he was politically astute enough to know the ground on which he was now treading. He was able, however, to speak calmly.

"Milgram wasn't studying the wisdom and intelligence of people in authority," Howard said. "He was showing evil in action, and it won't go away until the subject in the first experiment stands up and says, 'Okay, let's just take out our rulers and measure the damn

things,' or the guy in the second says 'Not only will I not push this goddam button but I'm going to go into the other room and unhook the other guy,'" Howard said. "And I don't think that we're helping people to reach that moment with the necessary levels of intensity."

Then there was a second of silence.

And then the professor said, "That's enough, Howard, let's move on." The professor turned the knob, and the movie continued.

Howard wasn't sure if it was possible to think so loudly as to be audible, but he was pretty sure everyone heard him think, "That proves my point." Which he knew was stupid, getting in the last word even if it is a thought.

After class, he walked home through the snow. It was going to be a long semester. If he became a drug addict, fine, child molester, fine, armed robber, fine, he would be forgiven for all of this. But he committed the cardinal sin and he knew it. There would be no forgiveness, for it is a grave sin. He fucked with the paradigm, fucked with the paradigm, fucked with the paradigm. He looked under the wig, rattled its bones, stirred up its blood, twiddled its clit. The penalty is no less than the guillotine, but the modern version. It goes like this: You wake up one day and your foot is missing. Somehow, when you weren't looking, sleeping too deeply, they cut off your foot. You go outside and see a sign. It says *The Shop to Help People Who Have Just Misplaced Their Foot*. Of course you go in. They say, "Oh my oh my, you've misplaced your foot!" They empathize with you, tell you they know plenty of people who have also misplaced their foot, maybe recommend you join a group of people who share the experience of misplacing their foot. And they tell you that from now on your life will be one of notable limping. The good news is that notable limping can be cured, would you like to try the cure? As soon as you nod yes they cut off your other foot. There are other shops. There is *The Shop to Help People Who Have Lost Their Leg up to Their Knee* and *The Shop to Help People Who Have Lost Their Thigh* and so on. When your head is all that is left, they will drop the 200 pound weight on your skull. But they don't do that until you thank them for all of their help through this confusing and stressful time of your life.

The cold was bitter, but he could outbitter the cold. His eyes were pissing on everyone and everything he saw. So he kept his head down and listened to the sound of his boots packing down the new snow. He walked evenly, creating a rhythm, and he listened to the rhythm and let his mind wander, and whenever it wandered it wandered to music, and since high school it wandered to Jazz exclusively.

Wind through leaves reminded him of the drummer Philly Jo Jones using brushes, windshield wipers reminded him of songs by Dave Brubeck, cats' meows reminded him of

-muted trumpets, talking reminded him of saxophones. A few sounds here and there would remind him of certain songs, “All the Things You Are,” “There Will Never be Another You,” “Cherokee,” lots of Blues. Now the scrape of his heavy boots on the sidewalk kicked in a nice rhythm. Swush swush, da da, swush swush, da da. He started to bob his head with the beat. He went down the driveway by McMillan Hall working his way towards Millbrook. He popped his gloves on his thighs to join in. Swush swush, da da, ba da bing, da da. Swush swush, da da, ba da bing, da da. Then a melody wandered through, one he hadn’t heard before. It was lyrical, and kind of catchy—it was really good. He didn’t want to forget this, he wanted to write it down. Little things were always popping through his head, but they would be gone in a minute. But this one, he was going to write a song. He had to sing out loud just so he wouldn’t forget, frosty breath and all. He waited at the Millbrook crossing, a bundled and packaged Fred Astaire, bopping and tapping and humming. A girl came up next to him, also waiting to cross. She looked at him, heard his quiet humming and then she did that pursing thing with her lips, screwed her eyes up, and turned away from him. He was doing something that someone could think was embarrassing, and he needed to be shamed.

He lost his focus for a moment, there it is, he thought, that spraying shame shit. But then again, he thought, maybe he was just too sensitive. So he did it to her. She turned back to him, probably to get a sense of whether she was safe, and he screwed his eyes away from her. She felt that moment of shame too. But then she did something he never does, he’s usually too hurt and angry and—well, ashamed. She turned back to him and asked if he was a music major, smiling like she was posing for a headshot. He smiled back and nodded, still thinking of his song. That’s so cool, she said as they crossed the street. Well, nice meeting you, he said. Yeah, nice meeting you. They walked their own ways, and in his mind he played the encounter in slow motion. Inside of the words, inside of the conversation, was another conversation. I think you’re a piece of shit. Yeah, well I think that *you’re* a piece of shit. Then let’s be friends. Howard shook his head. How can you build on that foundation, he thought. But people do.

Now he forgot the tune. He walked toward the Delmar Loop, recreating the rhythm. But another tune was popping in, two songs were now popping up like summer tomatoes. He picked up his pace, hurrying home to write and play, holding on to this new song, trying to remember the old new one. Maybe he should stop in the music store and get this down, he thought. He was trotting now, breathing harder, puffing lightly, his heavy rubber soles were clump clumping on the street, in $\frac{3}{4}$ time. And then there was another melody. “What?” he said out loud to no one, maybe to God, “Now I’m Johnny Mercer?”

He reached Delmar and decided to head home, trotting towards city hall, moving in between pedestrians like a squirrel crossing a busy street. He was now moving faster,

breathing harder, and then, damn, his chest tightened, the beginnings of an asthma attack. He slowed to a walk, a moderate walk and forced his breath, a deep purposeful inhale that would not touch bottom. There was a bottom to each breath, as if the breath touches ground, and from that point the oxygen feels like it spreads through the body, like the inhale has completed its task. During an attack, the breath never spreads, it never touches bottom, it just goes in and out of the lungs, a short breath. He tried to force the breath to the bottom, inhaling harder, holding it longer, inhaling slower, forcing it deeper—it would not go deeper. He had to decide whether to stop inside the library, where it was warm and he could rest, or try to make it home.

He put his hands deep in his coat pockets, forcing his shoulders as high as they could go, while trying to push his breath in. Now he was walking very slowly as he passed the library. If he could get one breath to touch bottom, he could make it home. He didn't want to stop and risk forgetting the songs, they can come in to your head so quickly and leave in a blink like—Howard smiled and shook his head—hummingbirds. Again he said out loud, maybe to no one, maybe to God, "I need a breath. I'll trade three bad jokes for one good breath." He stood and breathed some more, and then one hit bottom. It broke through the wall and touched somewhere in his solar plexus and lower back, and he could feel it spread throughout his back and chest, his butt and legs, his arms and hands. It came up the back of his neck and out the top of his head. A simple breath is such a great feeling, he thought. And then he said out loud, "I remember the good ol' days when being an atheist was so easy. All you had to do was eat pork and not get struck by lightning."

Usually one good breath will open the way for more, and he waited a few moments before heading home, careful in his pace, varying the rhythm of his feet to make it easier to recall the tunes. After passing through the baseball field at little Lewis Park, he knew the songs easily. Home and hot tea were minutes away. Then he would be in his room until who knows when.

Jazz tunes are different than regular songs, sometimes. There were plenty of regular songs that used to make it into the Jazz argot, but less so as time passed from the 1950s to the 1960s, 70s, and on and on. And not surprisingly, people were talking about the death of Jazz in the 1960s, 70s, and on and on. Reality, popular music, and Jazz parted ways circa, 'roundabout, nearabouts November 22, 1963, 12:30 pm and you can guess how many seconds Central Standard Time. Oswald's bullet hit the planet with the same force as the asteroid ending the Jurassic age. In the latter the planet was knocked out of orbit, in the former the world's collective consciousness was knocked just as far. Except for Howard's. Way way deep inside of him, in the timeless parts of the soul, at the street corner of Heaven

and Earth, Howard managed to hold on, he didn't know how, even in the depths where you actually know something, he didn't know. Although with the television on, and Walter Cronkite talking, and his mother watching and doing the ironing, all Howard was aware of, was that he was pushing his fire truck across the floor in the den.

The flowing melodies would still seem beautiful to the very young Howard (if there were any music in his parents' house) at the same moment they became corny for everyone else, when Oswald's bullet hit. The chord progressions would have seemed lush and mysterious to Howard when everyone else thought they were sentimental, a word which fell into disfavor. When he was older and could express and enjoy his sensibilities, nothing changed. The sixteen bar jam tunes, the catalyst tunes, the enzyme tunes—the short tunes that made a pop to stimulate improvisation—he thought were cool and snappy when everyone else who never held an instrument just thought they were short and kinda jumpy I guess. And so he finished his tea and closed the door to his room and began to write tunes that no one wrote anymore. But so what.

He took out his guitar, plugged into the amp, and tuned up, trying now, and this is the hardest part, internal brain surgery, to get this vague tune floating around in his head to find its way through his arms and hands, onto the fretboard, melody, chords, and all, and finally onto a piece of paper. His body first had to become the musical instrument, which then attaches to, in his case, a guitar, or a bass in Kirby's case, or a trumpet in Dizzy's case and on and on. It is no wonder so many musicians have used so many different kinds of drugs and alcohol, and why so many die before their first wrinkle, the Jazz road, especially, being paved with tombstones having easy math.

Howard did not use drugs to play, or compose, but if he did, this would be the time to light up, he thought. It just didn't work for him. He tried it before, smoked some pot in the alley with the guys before playing. It was a disaster, he kept losing his place, couldn't keep time, couldn't coordinate his hands. Now when he turns it down, I'll pass on the pass, people say man I wish I had your will power. No, Howard would say, it's more practical than will power.

He sat there, hitting a note, humming, trying to match the note, trying to match the phrase, trying to match the chord, writing it down. There's Kirby's theory of creativity, Howard thought, that it's just taking the extra time to do the extra work. A right note trickled out followed by a right chord. This was going to be a blues, Howard thought. And then a surprise trickled out, followed by another surprise. This was a blues, but it certainly wasn't a regular blues. It has kind of a, well, he thought, beautiful quality about it. The chords, he thought, are going a different direction than I would take them. Back the ego out

of here, Howard thought, follow the song itself, like floating along the river. And over the course of the evening, Howard slowly backed out of each song.

When he closed the door it was dark outside, at eleven he turned off his amp and played in relative silence, when he finished people were driving to work. He had five songs. He had five songs that were too hard for him to play, that is, to solo over. He looked at the tunes. He played them again. No doubt about it, he said, these songs are better than I am, at least right now. Somehow he managed to jump years ahead of himself, how many years, he didn't know. Inside of him, where these songs came from, he hadn't been there before, although he was searching for the spot for the longest time. And from now on his musical task would be different. No longer would he search for this spot. Now he would have to concentrate this all night process into one brief brief moment that would continually and fluidly replicate. That's Jazz, playing what you know and feel while simultaneously leaving space for what you don't know to emerge, playing and not playing at the same moment.

His blues had a melodic phrase that almost sounded like the words 'blues for my love,' which is what he named the tune. He wrote a child's song in a quick waltz tempo, with complex chords, which he named 'One Hip Nursery Rhyme.' Then he wrote a song that moved fast, so fast that if he soloed for more than ten seconds his fingers would stumble all over themselves forming a four car pileup on his fretboard highway. For no reason, other than the name just popped into his head, he called it 'Joe Moon.' He wrote a song with a hard, angry feel, but still melodic. Again the title popped into his mind, and he named it 'Up in the Air.'

Which brought him to the last song. He started at the break of dawn, and he started this with more of a purpose than the others. This one would have to be for his teacher, Bill Mamer. Bill taught differently than anyone else, anyone else he'd ever heard of. This is probably because Bill, according to, well, everyone, climbed to the top of the mountain.

Howard first knew something was going on here the first time, as a high schooler, he was at the vintage guitar store, Silver Strings. There is always a guy working in these types of stores who is the historian, knowing details about every type of guitar ever made, a guy who has heard the crackling blues recordings of Johnson, classic Bluegrass, Rock, Country, and Jazz. The walls of Silver Strings were papered with backstage passes, personal photos of guitar greats sitting in the shop playing the rare guitars. In casual conversation Howard mentioned to another customer that his teacher was Bill Mamer. The historian stopped his work fully, quieting himself.

"Excuse me, did you say 'Bill Mamer?'"

"Uh, yeah," Howard said.

“Whatever happened to him?”

“He’s teaching,” Howard said, “Why?”

“You don’t know who he is?” The historian was looking sideways at Howard, unsure if Howard was kidding, playing dumb.

“I guess not,” said Howard, looking around the store for some clue or hidden camera.

“Bill Mamer is one of the ten finest guitarists I’ve ever heard, I’m counting recordings. The Crusaders wanted him to be in their band—and they already had Larry Carlton. Buddy Rich asked him to play in his band. Let me tell you this, and this is taking nothing away from Larry Carlton—but Larry Carlton isn’t fit to tie Mamer’s shoes.”

The same thing happened to Howard years later at B.B.’s. Howard went to listen to Willie Aikens that night. The band included bassist John Mixon, who played on some recordings with Charlie Parker. In between sets the band was standing at the bar, Howard was sitting next to them. They were joking, relaxing, smoking, drinking, just taking a deep breath. Mixon turned to Howard, they’d never met, and Mixon asked if Howard played.

“Guitar,” Howard said.

“Study with anyone?”

“Bill Mamer.”

There was that quiet.

“Mamer?” said Mixon.

Howard nodded.

“You hear that guys,” Mixon said to the band. “This cat studies with Bill Mamer.” Now the whole band did the quiet thing.

“Whatever happened to him,” the drummer asked.

“He’s out in St. Peters.”

They looked at the floor, shaking their heads oh so slightly. They were remembering his music.

“He was remarkable,” Mixon said. “Absolutely remarkable.”

“Fabulous,” another muttered, not to anyone, just standing there remembering.

“Well,” said Mixon, loudly, loud enough to jar everyone out of their trance, “let’s get back for the next set. You come by anytime,” he said to Howard.

And so Bill taught, not like a Sherpa leading an Englishman, but like a Sherpa teaching a Sherpa. You are going to have to climb this all by yourself someday. And until you do, you haven't climbed it. First, find your center. For a real Sherpa, it's the center of balance, for the musician, it's the fountain of music. And here's the rub, the paradox: If you give the Sherpa a pole or a rope, it will keep him from finding his center of balance. And if you tell a musician, or show a musician what to play, you keep him from finding the fountain. This little irony, true as it may be, and Howard sensed this in his heart, it was way beyond Howard the high school student who knew nothing of digging and searching inside of his soul. Although he learned chords and voice leading, he was not climbing when it came to soloing. He did a lot of stepping and falling. And then he quit, kind of. He could have found another teacher, the Arthur Murray put your finger here now here now here and here kind of teacher, but he knew that wasn't the way to go.

In college, he tried again, he called Bill but Bill had moved. So Howard became Sherlock Holmes for a few months until he found Bill in St. Peters, out past St. Charles, across the Missouri River. He phoned, Bill wasn't interested, no students, no nothing. He was retired. He was just a pharmacist now. Howard called again, and again until Bill agreed to see him. It was an audition. Bill listened, nodded his head. "When we left off last," he said, "you couldn't play shit. Now you can play a turd." And then Bill smiled. They began meeting weekly for years until Bill moved to somewhere in Massachusetts. In between, Howard heard some of the finest music, still to this day, which he has ever heard—anywhere.

Howard began writing this tune, a Bossa Nova as it turned out, and he called it "Bill's Bossa," trying somehow to capture both the beauty of Bill's music—gone like the smoke of his cigarettes, the truth of that search for the place of inner music, and the joy of finally finding the damn thing. When he finished, Howard put away the guitar, unplugged the amp, pulled the shade, dropped into bed and mumbled the need to get with Dan Levin to record these songs. Then he fell asleep.



*The monster doubled over and fell to the ground,
as if he had been kicked
in the solar plexus.
The monster coughed and panted
and gasped for air.
The young man decided that the monster wasn't hurt badly
enough for him to escape by running.
And that he was hurt badly by something
that he, the young man, did.
It would be best for him to figure out what this was
and do it some more.*

Howard woke up at seven—PM. It was enough time to eat, shower, dress and get to Carolyn's on time. Carolyn buzzed open the front door and Howard made his way up the flights of stairs, hopping three steps at a time, because he couldn't wait for the blast of heat as she opened the door, which was not a surprise. What was a surprise was how nice, actually beautiful, Carolyn looked tonight. Howard knew nothing about style, knowing that it took some work to look good, but having no idea how *much* work it took. Anyway, she did something great to her hair, she said it was that she didn't get a chance to do something, it didn't look as, what was the word, precise, as it usually did, kind of windblown, more natural.

"You look great," Howard said.

"I added some highlights," said Carolyn.

"Whatever, it's really...beautiful," Howard said, feeling that may have sounded corny.

"You also seem different tonight," she said. And Howard told her about his night of composing. She gave him a hard hug and a hard kiss on the lips. I knew it was in you," she said. They went downstairs and hurried to the car. It was still warm from the drive over, and off they went.

"I think something happened to Jim, too," she said. "I think he met someone."

"Romantically? He met someone romantically?" Howard asked.

Carolyn nodded with excitement. "He's out with her now."

Astonishing, Howard thought. "Did she pursue him, or did he pursue her? And has this been going on long?"

"I don't know any details," Carolyn said.

Over the years Howard mentioned to Jim that he was like the Sphinx, and Jim readily admitted that when it came to women, well actually, when it comes to a lot of things I guess I can be like the Sphinx. You have to be able to answer the paradoxical riddle to get in, or possess that certain quality, he said. I can't help it, that's just the way I am, he said.

"Other than she's an engineering student from Los Angeles," Carolyn said.

Ah, okay, Howard thought. She's science minded. And she probably isn't afraid to work hard—maybe she mentioned, casually, that she replaced the windows in her parents' home by herself, or dug the ditch for a new sewer line for a neighbor, while still retaining her God given Yin.

"So what's Gaslight Square and who's Barry McKee?" Carolyn asked.

"Used to be one of the hippest spots in the country, like Greenwich Village or Sunset Boulevard," Howard said turning left on Forest Park. "It was one of the spots where, Barbara Streisand for instance, would perform when she was tuning up for New York. The Smothers Brothers, Lenny Bruce, Dick Gregory were also there. I think there was a playhouse down here that used to premier plays by Edward Albee. Then it emptied, closed down, and became another canyon of memories. So, the Prestige Lounge opened down there, and Barry McKee is playing there tonight."

"Barry is good?"

"Barry will make you jump out of your seat and scream 'Yeah.'"

"Well, I don't jump and scream. So don't get your hopes up," she said.

"I'm not hoping anything," Howard said quietly confident. Barry had toured with both Albert and B.B. King. "He's that kind of player. You'll jump, you'll scream."

"We should bet," she said.

"Yeah," Howard said nodding his head. "We should. You'll be trying to keep yourself in the chair, you'll ask the waiter to tie you to your chair, and yet you'll still manage stand up and scream. Perfect idea."

"Okay, what should we bet?"

Howard paused. "Well, I have something in mind, where if you win, you win—but if you lose, you also win. I'm just that kind of guy."

"Ahhh," she said moving closer to him and rubbing her hand on his thigh. "And do these payoffs entail a little standing and screaming 'yeah?'"

"Not standing," Howard said turning right on Olive.

The Prestige Lounge was the only inhabited place on what could have been a back lot at MGM. The light from its windows and in front, the only working gaslight on the street, only highlighted the hollowness of the other buildings. Perfectly wonderful buildings, tightly built, sharing walls—that could easily be open and alive, if people here, as a matter of lifestyle, went out. There weren't even very many cars parked in front of the nightclub.

“Why is it that all of the places you like seem haunted?” Carolyn asked.

The sounds of the band were coming through the plate glass windows. Barry had a horn section tonight, a rhythm and blues feel, and all Howard could think of were the words ‘I win the bet, I win the bet.’ He opened the door for her, and it was as if someone threw a bucket of back beat on the both of them. She paused, and went in. Then she said into his ear, her lips touched his ear as she spoke, “it looks like you might be the one screaming ‘yeah’ a little later on.”

“Do that a few more minutes and I'll start screaming now,” Howard said. Suggestive is cool, Howard thought, nice compliments are awkward. Oh yes, he thought, for both sexes, the world is our asylum, pardon me, locked residential treatment facility.

Cigarette smoke floated in the air like small roller coasters and the darkness of the club held them like a warm blanket. The music changed their walk into a stride, and as they reached for each other, holding hands, their feet demanded jitterbug. But they did not jitterbug, as Jazz clubs, nowadays, require subtle movements as upscale restaurants require a coat and tie. But not all Jazz clubs. There is Miss B's, down on Manchester, a dark, worn down section, where the band wears old knit shirts and the sax player honks and growls loud and long like Arnett Cobb, and the crowd yells at the right times like a church chorus. The drinks are cheap and the food is bad and the musicians play for love because Miss B can't pay much.

Not so with the Prestige Lounge. It is a lounge, it is not, definitely not, a bar. And Jazz from this point on is very sophisticated, and the band shall wear coats and ties, and the crowd shall dress to the nines, and if a musician has a house payment, this is a good place to play, and Barry had a house, and if he wanted to keep that house he had to play ‘On Broadway’ exactly like George Benson, and ‘Theme from the Love Boat’ for the white folks at Westport, but down here to satisfy the owner, he only had to play ‘On Broadway’ just like George Benson—which they started to play, meaning, for Barry, it was the last song of the set.

In between those moments of teeth gritting necessity, there is a more delicate necessity, and Barry mastered this like an expert salesman, that immediately, as you walk in the door,

he will size you up and guess your favorite song in only three steps. And then he will play that song, or that style, which brings him a following, which keeps him in his house. And in between those moments, he can flat out play.

Which is how Howard and Barry became fast friends, part one. Just so happened, and what a shock this was to Barry's radar, that both he and Howard loved, deeply loved, how deep is the ocean loved, you'd be so nice to come home to loved, Wes Montgomery. Music physics. When the band loves what the audience loves—and this doesn't happen too often, it doesn't work with 'likes.' When the band likes what the audience likes, you get nothing. But with love—you get electrons spinning, you get time itself blasting little mushroom clouds, neutrinos bopping on muons, the carpet of cosmic strings takes off and flies. Natural psychedelics.

And during breaks they would talk, and Howard would say 'don't just imitate Wes Montgomery, I want to hear you play *you*,' which no customer ever said in a world where musicians are generally considered to be living juke boxes.

Part two of Howard and Barry being fast friends has to do with the Berklee School of Music, whose graduates fan out across the globe in a blitzkrieg, attacking each city until they achieve tonal victory. Howard didn't have the skill to resist them, but Barry pounded them back and held on like jolly old England. Howard first saw this several years back at Monday Night Jam at B.B.'s Jazz, Blues, and Soups. Howard was the guitarist in the house band and as the evening wore on, other players would come to the bandstand and sit in. Like the buzz of a bee or the hum of a hummingbird, the word 'Berklee' moved through the room, which Howard understood as 'Berkeley' as in 'University of California at.' What began as a relaxed evening, a convivial evening, turned quickly bitter, and if the players' axes were real axes, there would have been lots of blood. There was blood everywhere they came to play.

The Berklee Boys came to the bandstand to embarrass others, to pick tunes to make lesser players sit down and shut the fuck up. That is their universe, Jazz is for judging technique, hard tunes are for punishment, harmonies are to show the crowd how much they, the casual listener, the aficionado, how much they (now spit) don't understand about music. (*Memo from the Berklee School of Music, Department of Patronization: And do you want to know how stupid the average music listener is? Any idea how unhip, uncool, unsophisticated, unwashed, untutored, any idea how much otiosity is in the hoi polloi? Why, they don't even buy our records—now buff). They don't come to Jazz clubs to hear us play—buff more*). Unresolved anger? Rock musicians, the guitar smashers, the tongue piercing screamers, the onstage masturbators, have nothing on our Berklee friends. The rock musicians, at the very least, have enough affection for the audience to want to have sex with each and everyone there.

So Barry walks in, and he is derided with razor whispers. He's a Blues player not a Jazz player, the Berklee Boys say, he copies George Benson. He can't play our tunes. He doesn't practice scales. He doesn't play all the changes (*Memo from the Berklee Department of Hip: Say 'changes,' don't say 'chord changes.'*). And Barry played the blues, and the crowd clapped to the back beat, and the crowd enjoyed it, they even applauded loudly. Afterwards Howard and Barry were standing next to each other and Barry asked, pointing his nose at the Gang From Boston, "What do you think of our boys over there?" Howard said, "They are anti-musicians." Fast friends from then on.

Within a month of Mondays, Tone Houston, who played all of the changes, had taken Howard's job. Shortly thereafter, our-boys-over-there were the house band, they would not let Barry on the bandstand, and within five months, there was no Monday Night Jam. Job well done.

Carolyn was massaging, caressing his right hand, and Howard leaned his head toward her, moving his chair as close to hers as possible. Just touching her made him feel as though for the first time he could relax, literally unwind — it was as if for years his DNA had been wound too tightly in each cell. The band was now on break, which for some players means it's time to meet women, for others, a rest is needed, for Barry, it's time to build a clientele. Carolyn continued to ask about Jazz, about Barry, and Howard obliged, always. He seemed to talk a lot, more than he would prefer, becoming that man-talker – me, me, me, I did, I was...and so on. But she kept asking questions, letting him build her wall for her, the way Tom Sawyer got his fence whitewashed.

Carolyn was now caressing his left hand, he held her along his right side, softly massaging her shoulder. The place was filling up, there was steady clink clink of glasses, more swirls of cigarette smoke laced the air, and there was loud talk and laughter. Barry came over to the table. Happy to see you. Happy to see you. Maaan, you are beautiful, what's your name and what *are* you doing with him? Blah, blah, small talk, small talk.

"What do want to hear?" Barry asked.

"Whatever you want to play," Howard said.

Barry thought for a moment. "Okay, I know what'll work. I got just the tune."

"Should be eleven o'clock about the middle of the set," Howard said.

Barry shook his head. "Don't I know it," he said.

"Do you think our-boys will be here?" Howard asked.

"I expect that they will," Barry said with an eye to the door. "I best be getting back to work."

He went back to the bandstand, the other band members saw him strap on the guitar and joined him. He stepped to the front, turned around to the back, checking that everyone was ready and focused, and quietly called the tune. Then he counted an easy groove and by the first three notes of “Unit 7” the room was transformed into something quite cozy and all bodies became Barcalounger’s for all souls. He followed this with “My Little Suede Shoes,” a cute Charlie Parker tune that brings you to a smile just short of a laugh, leading to “Softly, as in a Morning Sunrise,” which coaxes a soaring sensation in the soloist, who pulls the room through the sky along with him, and lo and behold, we’re not in Kansas anymore, and Barry was playing “Somewhere Over the Rainbow.” Carolyn’s eyes were closed while Howard couldn’t quite let his eyes close completely, the temptation to watch Barry and try to learn something was overwhelming and always futile, their techniques were so different.

And then it was eleven o’clock and if this was Prohibition Era Chicago everyone would have overturned and hid behind their tables or dashed for the fire exits, because our-boys stepped in, five of them, carrying their axes in large black cases (*Memo from the Berklee School of Music, Department of Hip: please don’t tell me that you are so unhip that you don’t know that an ax is slang for your instrument whatever your instrument is. You didn’t know? Then why don’t you just leave the club, just go. Just go and listen to your little Captain and Tennille 45s.*) The room changed again, not even back to the normal Prestige Lounge, but to somewhere where you hoped you were somewhere else. Many cigarettes were lit, more drinks were ordered (which always confuses club owners who mistakenly think something good is happening), and inaudible conversations became a little louder. But Carolyn sat up, attentive as a bird dog.

“That’s them, aren’t they?” she asked.

“They’re them alright,” Howard said.

Their leader, Tone Houston, had a little chat with Barry as the other boys unpacked some horns and a bass. Barry’s band left the bandstand and joined the crowd. Then Barry went to the microphone and told us “the boys from around here, I’m sure you know everyone up here, I’ll introduce them later, have all graduated from the fabulous and world famous Berklee School of Music up there in New York, What? Not New York? Boston? In Boston ladies and gentlemen, and they’re going to favor us with a few of their tunes.” Which sounded nice. But this was an attempted musical coup, Tone was going after Barry’s job.

They called “Moment’s Notice,” a tune by John Coltrane—wuup, mistake—(Memo from Berklee School of Music, Department of Hip: a tune by Trane—you’re not supposed to say the entire name, very unhip, uncool, unsophisticated—you have to say Trane. And you have to say it like you two were best friends, like you two used to hang together, in fact, if you say it just right you can make it seem like he used to come over to your house and ask for your advice [“Maybe I should be playing fewer notes. No no Trane, more notes.”] You

can't say 'Charlie Parker,' you have to say 'Bird,' and you have to say it in just that way that makes it seem like it was you who told him to play the B natural instead of a B flat in the first bar to the bridge of "Confirmation" because the B natural sounds so much better. You have to say "Diz," can't say Dizzy Gillespie, and if you say Dizzy Gillespie then just get off the bandstand.)

Tone counted off "Moment's Notice" faster than a foot can tap, faster than the heart can follow, much faster than even John Coltrane played it on the record. Our-boys all took long solos, they played uncommon intervals, they played outside harmonies, they played quotes from other tunes, and even quoted other solos on those other tunes and if you missed it, if you didn't see the brilliance—why are you still here? No one hated it, no one liked it, they sat there, made mental note that these indeed are good musicians, and struck up conversations, sipped drinks, smoked cigarettes, laughed, hit on, kissed, fondled under the table, all the usual things people do in bars when there isn't any music. (Although Carolyn was sitting upright, watching, attentive as an eagle.) If the club owner lived in Mr. Roger's neighborhood, the word for the day would be 'jukebox.')

Then Barry soloed, and once again the crowd was connected, spinning in the frenzy of notes. Some even called out "fast, baby." And the enjoyment in the room was not at all what our-boys were hoping for. And so the next tune was even faster, "Giant Steps," also by...Trane. And in this round of King of the Hill, Tone didn't fare any better, as tumbleweeds rolled through his solo, which kept getting longer and longer until someone in the audience clapped (ah, we get it, if you clap they stop playing). During Barry's solo there was spangle, twinkle, and gleam—because as much as our-boys liked to say that Barry didn't practice, the truth is that Barry always practiced. As the song ended Barry took a long cadenza, during which, he motioned his rhythm section back to their instruments. Our-boys at the drums, bass, and keyboard had to sit down, after which, he counted a hard four and began to play a blues, a barbecue drippin' white bread sauce soppin' blues. A blues that our-boys consider to be, not the roots of Jazz, but low class, a blues scale is not simple and powerful, but cheap and easy music, and Tone's solo embodied all of that contempt, and he was pushed off the hill. Daryl came back in hard and screaming, his horn section back, popping and punctuating just right enough to get everyone in the place up and out of their seats, Carolyn included, screaming "Yeah!"

Their breath froze to the inside of the windshield as the car warmed up. They sat cuddling.

"Careful," Howard said. "I'm about to get excited and breathe an inch of frost in here."

“Good music,” she said, “good good music.”

“You liked the Berklee boys?” Howard asked. “You were watching them carefully.”

“Oh, they were okay. But something really caught my eye,” she said.

“What?” Howard asked.

“Nothing,” she said. “I might tell you later.”

They drove a bit further.

“You can’t really play, solo, like that, can you?” she asked.

“No,” Howard said. “I can’t.”

“Why not?” she asked.

Howard took a deep breath and let out a nice frothy exhale.

“Two reasons,” he said. “One, I think that music is something already there, deep inside of you, and you have to, in a sense, dig to get it out. I happen to have layers of granite between my hands and the music.” He turned right on Kingshighway, hoping the time it took to turn, his silence during the turn would be mistaken for concentration while driving, as opposed to sadness. He would like to have a wide open channel, like the irrigation from the Colorado River feeding California, music churning out of him like high voltage, like so many others, not even famous others. But like it was confined in a penitentiary, Howard knew his music would not come out quickly or easily. “It’s just going to take a long time,” he said. “What I could do,” he continued, “but I won’t do, is study it academically, practice different scales, view each song as a vehicle for scales, what I would do if I went to a music school. But as you heard tonight, even if I play better faster, getting better more quickly, something’s lost in the process. The music is lost in the process and you changed the subject.”

“What?”

“I said that you changed the subject, we were talking about what caught your eye,” Howard said.

“Oh,” she said. “I didn’t realize I changed the subject.”

They drove a bit further.

“What’s going on with acupuncture?” she asked.

“Bad ch’i, Dr. Wang says, very bad ch’i. Toxic ch’i. Badly damaged ch’i, he says,” Howard said. “I’ve started some herbs and vitamins. I feel better.”

“You look better,” she said. “What causes that damage?”

“Lots of things,” Howard said. “He told me to stop thinking so much. Overthinking can damage your ch’i.”

“Really?”

“You changed the subject again,” Howard said.

“What?”

“I said that you changed the subject again, from what caught your eye,” Howard said.

Traffic lights are coordinated late at night, lining up green, allowing the car home as easily as the crossing of the Jordan. They hurried up the stairs, in the door—and saw by the little things left on the couch and dinner table that Jim also had a guest. “Hmmm,” they both said simultaneously. They didn’t linger, and quickly went into her room.

Like a magnifying glass, the windows of the French door leading to the balcony focused the dawn sunlight on Howard’s face, waking him up. He turned over and found Carolyn also awake, staring at the ceiling. “I was just thinking,” she said, “that you and Barry seem so different.”

“What?” asked Howard.

“That you and Barry seem so different.”

“I’m sorry, I’m just not following this.”

“I mean, what do you two talk about?”

Howard thought for a moment. “Mostly, the time we spend together, he’s working. I’m in the crowd. Between sets we’ll walk around, joke, talk about his last set, music in general. After the gig it’s one o’clock and we both have to get home. So I’ll spend three hours with him and only talk for about thirty minutes, if that much.”

“But you seem like close friends, his face really lit up when he saw us, you.” She turned over, facing Howard. Howard sensed a soft insistence in her voice. She propped herself up on her elbow.

“I think we love each other, you know, like brothers,” Howard smiled. “But there’s a cultural gap between us. I’m from the suburbs and he’s from the projects. So I think there’s so much to talk about that we never talk about it. We wouldn’t even know where to begin.”

She didn’t respond, just half smiled, keeping her lips pursed. She had that look, that ‘you aren’t done talking’ look. Howard took a deep breath and turned over onto his back. “We talk,” he said hesitantly, “about religion, more and more.” He glanced over to see her reaction. Her face, right now beautiful but irritating, quietly told him to continue. He looked

at her. “I think it started one time we were having dinner,” he said. “The food came and I started eating. I looked up and he’s staring at me, he hasn’t touched his food. And he asks, ‘don’t you say a blessing before you eat?’ ‘No’ I said. And I continued eating. But I felt kind of uneasy about that. I looked at him, he shrugged his shoulders, as if he wondered what planet I’m on, then he said a prayer quietly and started to eat.”

She turned onto her back, stared at the ceiling. “I used to do that, I used to say a prayer before I ate. In rural Missouri, that’s what you do. I am forcing myself, now, to not do that. It’s still pretty much my instinct.”

Howard began to feel that kind of religious qualm that had nothing to do with religion. It had everything to do with culture, though. In St. Louis, where the wind whispers the Church’s teaching, where a room full of atheists will, over time, split into groups—Southside atheists, West County atheists, ex-Catholic atheists, ex-Jewish atheists, Black atheists, ex-Baptist atheists, religion can bridge great differences, like between he and Barry, or break friendships, like between he and Gerald. Howard knew Gerald since first grade. They played baseball together, saw the Cardinals together, hung out after school together, sat next to each other in class. When they were seniors in high school Gerald told Howard that he believed Howard was going to hell. Nothing personal. Fuck you, Gerald. Nothing personal.

“Why are you trying to break the habit?” he asked.

“Why did you feel uneasy?” she replied.

There was an awkward silence. They both pulled the covers up closer to their chins. Then they moved closer and held each other.

And then Howard had a knowing breath, but this one wasn’t nearly as clear as his others, vague and misty, a remedial bird dog pointing to something in the woods that could be just about anything.

“Are we in the general ballpark of the thing you won’t talk about?” Howard asked.

“No,” Carolyn said. “Not even close.”

Howard knew that he was close, and about this time they began communicating through aroma, smoke signals from inside the body, cellular Pony Express. People do this all of the time not even realizing it, when their words break off from the truth (hence the phrase ‘forked tongue’) and then the glands turn into eyes and ears. Relationships break up, marriages end in moments like this, Howard saw this happen over and over. The common mistake, actually the only mistake one can make during these linguistic fissures, is to stop paying attention to the volumes of non-verbal meaning and pay strict attention to what the other person is saying, their literal words, which aren’t at all related to what they actually

mean. In fact, the words, if that's all you choose to look at, are the opposite of what is really meant.

And so Howard was silent, and he held her closely. And he allowed himself to feel disappointed, to feel sad that she didn't trust him, and to allow the cellular wind, the mitochondrial farts, to carry this message over to her biological territory. She read the message perfectly, Howard could feel her muscles relax, the wall coming down.

"Don't leave me if I tell you. It's happened before, they would leave after I tell them."

"If it's that you're an ax murderer, I would understand that," Howard said.

"Well I'm not an ax murderer," she said. And she paused. And Howard didn't interrupt her pause. "But I do see angels," she said.

Howard paused for a moment.

"What do you mean, that you see angels?" he asked.

"I mean that I see angels," she said.

"You mean like, angel angels?" Howard asked.

"That's what I mean," she said.

"You mean like, wings, halos, harp angels?"

"Well, yes, but no, since that's not how they look at all," she said.

Howard decided that quiet, right now, would be best. Not for too long since awkward silence would not be helpful.

"Do you know anyone else that can see angels?" Howard asked.

"Plenty of people," she said. "Babies. Most babies see angels. Do you notice how they seem to stare off into space and laugh? Well, they're not staring at nothing. There's usually an angel there doing something silly. Except that as their minds, the babies' minds, begin to figure out spatial relationships and learn language, they lose the ability, it's like they refocus, and can no longer see them. I suspect that I just figured out a way to see objects and speak language without losing that way of focusing on the world."

"That actually seems plausible," Howard said.

Carolyn elbowed him in the ribs. "Thanks for you approval," she said.

Swarms of thought came to him, like gnats at a dusk picnic. In two long breaths, in the time it took to gently run his hand down her stomach and down her thigh, to caress her face, to bury his nose in her hair and softly kiss the side of her head, he examined all of that thought, all of the reflections from that prism.

She wasn't crazy, he decided. He worked with the crazies during one of his internships, not those merely unique, or eccentric, or artistic, no, the ones who really hallucinate and lose touch with reality, those whose mind enters a dream and sticks there like it rolled through a tar pit, the ones with vapors of narcotics or alcohol that will never leave their systems, those whose neurochemicals flow like concrete or lava depending upon the moment, the luck of DNA, the stars, or the instructions from the television that is meant only for them. Carolyn definitely was not like that. She was warm and beautiful and her train of thought was as sure and quick as the Tokaido Shinkansen.

That left the other possibility, an uncomfortable possibility, that there really are angels, that she is making observations as solid as Galileo's (what an ironic reversal for the Church), or as obvious as Semmelweis' (the physician who noticed the effects of germs before germs were discovered—wrote extensively that doctors should wash their hands before operating, for which he was ridiculed, fired, and forced out of the profession in shame). And then, Howard smiled, it occurred to him that if she was making solid observations, then so much of western philosophy might be boxed up for the trash heap because she really could tell you exactly how many angels were dancing on the head of a pin.

“How many guys left you after you told them?” Howard asked.

“Just two,” she said. “One thought I was crazy, and the other believed me and figured we could go to Las Vegas and clean up. He left when I told him it doesn't work that way.”

And then Howard put away all of the true/false debate, his this way/that way notions because it was just so easy to believe in Carolyn with so little effort. And he smiled again, his own thoughts circling this moment, as he wondered how many ticks of calibration really do separate the locked ward from the normal world. He could almost feel her as a child, sitting in school, and having to make a decision, an adult decision, whether to trust her eyes and instincts or follow convention. He could see her in art class, expressing herself under the radar, drawing what was for her a mundane still life, to everyone else, a splash of creativity and fantasy.

“Is that why you came here?” Howard asked. “This part of yourself, you decided it was, I don't know, the heart of who you are, not just a small optional part?”

She hugged him tightly, pulled him closer to her. He felt her nodding yes against his cheek.

“Wait a second,” Howard said quietly. “Do these angels talk to you?”

She reached across his stomach, took a nice bit of skin and what he had of fat between her thumb and forefinger and pinched.

“Owww, what was that for?” he asked.

“For changing your tone of voice,” she said.

“I was quiet,” he said.

“But your tone changed.”

“No it didn’t.”

“Yes it did.”

“Okay, maybe a little.”

“Just enough,” she said. “And, no. They don’t talk to me—and I don’t talk to them. I used to try when I was, what, eight years old or so. They just get angry. And the menacing ones”—she paused, speaking in a halting manner, stepping each word gingerly, familiar with this mine field filled with bombs of patronizing responses, returned looks of vacant eyes, replies of changes of the subject quick enough to cause whiplash—“one time,” she continued, “one time one was just hovering over the intersection at Warren and Maple, I must have been eight.” She took a deep breath, and Howard could almost, almost picture what she was about to describe. “And I saw it,” she said. “And it knew that I saw it, and I knew and it knew that I wasn’t supposed to be seeing it. It just shrugged and turned its back to me. About a minute later there was a big car wreck, a car was hit by a speeding truck. There were injuries, a fire truck, an ambulance, police. As soon as the truck hit the car though, it vanished.”

Howard held her tightly and she held him just as tight.

“I didn’t see another one of those until the sixth grade,” she said. “I got on the school bus, first day of school, and there was one sitting next to Andrea Balladi.” Now Carolyn paused for a long time, seemed like two minutes, which, as pauses go, contain the same amount of silence as the distance that light travels in two months. Howard didn’t push her, didn’t give verbal cues or gentle nudges. He waited with her. “Later that year Andrea got leukemia and died. She was the first person that I knew who died. I don’t see them very often, you know, occasionally there would be a tall one, as big as a silo, and I’d know it was as big as a silo because it was standing next to a silo. And that night a thunderstorm or a tornado would come through. And the next morning there was no more silo.”

All Howard could do was listen, hold her and listen. Like a tuning fork, his emotions hummed ever so slightly in harmony with hers, the deep sadness for the moment she recalled her friend, the fear of seeing the giant...

“And these are—menacing angels?” he asked.

“Evil. The vernacular seems to be ‘evil angels,’” she said.

“That’s old vernacular,” Howard said, stroking her hair. “The new vernacular is “borderline.” “Borderline Personality Disorder.” It’s the word ‘evil’ in a tuxedo.”

There’s only one way of knowing when a Borderline is sitting across from you, Howard thought, when the tuning fork in your gut, right in the solar plexus, gets stiff and twists, when you feel like you have a rock right in the pit of your stomach. It comes suddenly, as the person sits down for the first time and begins to speak, and it’s a bit frightening. That tuning fork, Howard thought, never lies. It tells the difference between crocodile tears (no response inside of him, the listener, the therapist) and real tears (the tuning fork hums sadness, real sadness inside of him), ego driven anger, as in ‘things didn’t go the way that I wanted them to’ (no response), and real righteous anger (the tuning fork hums damn straight, fuck ‘em and everyone who looks like ‘em).

“And the good angels?” Howard asked. “I mean, are there, you know?”

“Well, yes, there are. And I’ve seen them pop in and out, but I don’t know why, and I can never tell what they’re doing,” she said. “Although sometimes it’s pretty clear why they’re there and what they’re doing.”

“Like when and what?” Howard asked.

“Like last night at the club,” she said.

“What happened at the club?” Howard asked nonchalantly, before the words fully took root—that there were angels popping in last night at the club. “Wait! What happened at the club?”

She had to shush him.

“Okay, what happened at the club?” he whispered.

“You know,” she said.

“No I don’t know. I can’t see angels.”

“Everyone knows, everyone is aware,” she said. “I don’t know how, since they can’t see, but if you take a guess, think carefully and guess when some angels popped in, I’ll bet you get the right answer. Go ahead.”

“Okay, but I’ll probably guess wrong,” Howard said.

“Try not to.”

Howard rolled his eyes but gave it a good try, starting from when they walked in the door, replaying everything until...

“Was it when Barry started the blues and made the boys from Berklee sit down, and everyone else stood up?” Howard asked. “It was then wasn’t it?”

“Now how hard was that?”

Howard kissed her, a nice long kiss.

“What was that for?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I just felt, you know, just felt...”

And then she kissed him, a nice long kiss.

“I think I feel it too,” she said.

“You may want to give people more of a chance,” Howard said sleepily. “Trust a little bit more.” Carolyn mumbled something that could have been ‘I’ll try’ or ‘okay.’ Then they dozed off at dawn.

The smell of bacon floated into the room, Jim knocked on the door and said, “Breakfast.” The aroma of homemade biscuits followed. Howard and Carolyn woke up, they each took a slow, deep breath, and couldn’t resist. They dressed quickly and went into the kitchen. Jim was at the stove, managing the food like a short order cook. Eggs, waffles, pancakes, and sausage, butter sizzling softly were like a tuning orchestra and Jim the conductor. A tall woman, hair as black as an eight ball, slender with tan skin, sculpted features, olive eyes, wearing tight jeans, and—a built up shoe, her legs were not the same length—was at the pantry getting the maple syrup and some potatoes. I’ll bet that was it for Jim, Howard thought, her legs. This woman was beautiful, but not encased in the perfect beauty, that cold heart beauty that is usually packaged with the expectation that the rest of civilization is merely the help. Jim must have fallen for the flaw as much as the perfection, Howard thought—because such a flaw, one that can’t be hidden, has a way of softening the soul, and making someone more beautiful.

“You all want some hash browns, too?” Jim asked. “I’m in the mood to do a little cooking.”

“I’m glad to know that you can cook,” the woman said smiling, a lovely smile. She also had an accent, Spanish almost, but softer. Portuguese, Howard thought. Brazil, Jobim. Bossa Nova, Bola Sete.

“Celeste,” Jim said, “this is Howard and Carolyn. Howard and Carolyn, this is Celeste.”

“Yes, hash browns,” she said to Jim. “Pleased to meet you,” she said to Howard and Carolyn.

“You two take out the dishes and get the table set,” Jim said. “We’re just about ready with the rest of this.” He quickly took the potatoes, washed them, peeled and dug away a

few eyes, and began to chop and grate. Howard went to the cupboard for the dishes while Carolyn went for the tablecloth, napkins and silverware.

“We’re going to have more food than the table can hold, so we need to clean off this workspace and serve from here. Howard why don’t you get on that? Who wants to start on the coffee? Celeste?” Jim finished the prepping. He went to the sink and quickly washed a large cast iron skillet. Then he put it on top of a high fire, went to the refrigerator for a big tablespoon of butter which he put in the pan with a clank of iron spoon on iron skillet. Howard, Carolyn, and Celeste were ducking and dodging to stay out of his way, to not break his rhythm.

If Jim had a magic wand or an orchestra baton to flourish, things would not have come together any better. The cleared workspace was filled with food in old glass and ceramic serving bowls. The coffee was ready, the table set.

Jim said, “Line up and get it.” And they all did.

The food was fabulous, they were having Norman Rockwell’s breakfast, and for a good fifteen minutes no one spoke, the only sounds were of silverware and soft chewing, an occasional slurp of coffee. Then the polite small talk began.

“Jim,” Howard said, “you really outdid yourself here.”

“Don’t like to toot my own horn,” Jim said, “but sometimes when I cook, and I get in the right groove, I amaze myself.”

“Like my aunt’s cooking on the farm,” Carolyn said, mouth full. She took time to chew and swallow. “I suspected you had it in you when I saw all the black cast iron pots and pans in the cupboards.”

“You lived on a farm?” Celeste asked.

“When I stayed with my aunt and uncle during the summers,” Carolyn said.

“But the area is all farming, isn’t it?” Celeste asked.

“Not as much as it used to be,” Carolyn said. “But I’d say everyone I knew back home had killed their fair share of chickens for supper.”

“I’ve done that,” Celeste said.

“Me too,” said Jim.

And Howard was the odd man out, the only one who hadn’t killed dinner.

“What brought you to St. Louis?” Celeste asked.

We're not there yet, Howard thought, but we're getting pretty close to Celeste paying an inordinate amount of attention to Carolyn. And as soon as the thought completely dissolved he understood that, for Celeste, it was a wise thing to know as much as possible about the woman who is living with her boyfriend. Does she need to be jealous, does she need to move in, does she demand that Jim move out, or does she leave it alone? Carolyn reached under the table and held Howard's hand firmly. He saw her take a deeper breath than normal, she glanced at Howard, and waited for Howard to return her glance, which he did promptly. She was going to try to trust people more, she was going to debut—the reason she moved here in the first place.

"I have...talents," Carolyn said. "I needed to get away from home, get some perspective, find some people, you know, who I have things in common with, regarding, you know, talents."

"You're talking about something else other than killing chickens for dinner?" Jim asked.

"What kind of talents?" Celeste asked.

Carolyn paused.

"Let me put it this way," Carolyn said. "I believe that I have perfect pitch, visually," she said, nodding to them, nodding to Howard, smiling. She seemed pleased with her turn of phrase, as well she should be, Howard thought.

"You want to explain that more?" Jim asked, taking some more hash browns.

"Well, perfect pitch, you understand that, but visually," Carolyn said.

"So, not only do you hear the notes but you see them floating in the air?" Jim asked.

"Sometimes. Sometimes I see other things."

"Like what?" Celeste asked.

"Like, well, heartstrings, for instance," Carolyn said. "Sometimes the strings go inside of a person, sometimes they wrap around on the outside, sometimes if people are married or in love they both have heartstrings that wrap around each other."

"You're sure you're not making it up, seeing things after the person suggests it?" Jim asked, crunching on some bacon.

"The other way around," Carolyn said. "I don't say anything. I'll see, for instance the heartstrings, and then someone else in the room mentions the word. And this happens for a lot of different expressions, like something embarrassing giving someone a black eye, biting the bullet for something unpleasant, a bird in the hand—I'll see the bird, I'll see the bullet in their teeth, I'll see the ring around their eye. I'll tell you what's hard for me to understand. *I*

get it if I see something and decide to use the expression. But how does everyone else *almost* see it? How does a person *almost* see something, and *what do they almost see it with?*” Carolyn said.

Jim smiled, “Never thought of it that way before.”

They all continued eating, cool and composed as if they were talking about a new restaurant, at least for a moment. Celeste became a bit uneasy, it seemed to Howard, not having decided yet whether or not Carolyn would be her rival, and now adding this into the equation, which, true or not, was certainly intriguing.

“Do you see anything else,” Celeste asked.

“A few things,” Carolyn said, sipping some coffee.

“Like what,” Celeste asked.

Carolyn sipped some more, and a little more, and one more big gulp.

“Angels,” she said.

Howard leaned back in his chair to see everyone simultaneously.

“What?” Jim said. “Did you say ‘angels?’”

“That’s what I said,” Carolyn said, looking for a drop more coffee in her cup.

Jim smiled again, this time not because the notion was unique, but because, it seemed to Howard, he was beginning to view Carolyn as an eccentric, which caused Celeste to drop her shoulders slightly and settle into her seat—and yet it seemed as if her new quietude resulted from some deep nudging, that even though her education and modernity had swept her religious feelings under the carpet, under the carpet was not as dead as she hoped, and the slight discord she felt towards Carolyn was like tugging at Superman’s cape, pissing into the wind, pulling the mask off the ol’ Lone Ranger.

“So let me get this straight,” Jim said to Carolyn. “I’ll go over to the front window and look outside, and I’ll see cars, and snowy streets, and bare trees, and...sunshine,” he said turning his head toward the window. “And you see all that, too, but there’ll be angels perched up in the trees like a flock of birds?”

“No it’s not like that at all,” Carolyn said.

Jim paused, thoughtful, pensive, tongue in his brain’s cheek. “You know what really bugs me?” he said. “Sometimes there’ll be so many angels flying around here that they bump into each other and knock off the other guy’s halo. So there’s halos all over the front yard, and angels don’t generally label their things, so no one knows whose halo is whose, and they make so much noise yelling at each other—’hey that’s my halo you stupid son of bitch oh

yeah well fuck you you prick’— you can barely get any work done. And in the fall you get leaves and halos just covering the grass and you can rake and bag the leaves but you can’t bag the halos because the trash pickup guys won’t touch the halos because it’s not in their contract, so you’re stuck with all these halos you just have to put ‘em in the backyard and hope Jesus’ trash pickup comes, and sometimes that takes months. Doesn’t that bug you too, Carolyn?”

“But they make such great Frisbees,” Carolyn said, and everyone laughed, but it was an uncomfortable laughter, the laughter of releasing suppressed *other* thoughts—not in the league with Sam Pearson showing you a booger in the middle of class in fourth grade, but it was in that ballpark.

“Are there evil angels?” Celeste asked. And Howard then knew that O Cristo Redentor isn’t just there for decoration. In a very subtle way, Rio and St. Louis are sister cities. It seems, Howard thought, that there’s rumbling under Celeste’s carpet.

“As a matter of fact, there are,” Carolyn said, her eyes turning cautious, squeezing Howard’s hand.

“Anyone want more coffee?” Howard asked. “Jim, you want to rustle up some dessert, go out a kill a few donuts or Danish?”

“Sounds like a good idea,” Jim said. “I can handle birds in the hand or a bullet in the teeth, but ‘evil angels’ is over my limit.”

“Wait, I want to know,” said Celeste. “Are there any evil angels here now?”

Jim stopped, Howard stopped, since, after all, if there *were* any, it might be a good thing to know it.

“No,” Carolyn said.

“Even though we all, last night...,” said Celeste. “Aren’t we all sinning?”

Carolyn looked at Howard—her meaning was clear, this isn’t where she wanted the conversation to go. “I can’t really explain it,” Carolyn said, “but it’s way more complicated than that, but you’re not wrong, but you’re not exactly right—it’s complicated. I don’t think I understand it myself. It’s really complicated.”

“Just tell me if I’m going to get hit by lightning before we get back with the pastry,” said Jim.

“No, you’re not,” Carolyn said.

“You’re sure?” asked Jim.

“Yes,” she said.

“Great,” Jim said.

“Mostly,” Carolyn said.

Jim and Howard started slowly towards the door. That was a powerful ‘mostly.’ And then Howard stopped.

“Have you seen any evil angels recently?” Howard asked.

“Why do you ask?” said Carolyn, using a fork to get the last bits of pancake syrup from her plate.

“Because I want to know.”

“Then you know.”

“Then tell me what I know,” Howard said.

“Yeah, tell him what he knows,” Jim said.

Carolyn paused, checked her coffee cup as if there might be some more in there.

“Your roommate Harry,” Carolyn said. “has a pack of three that are always with her.”

Howard went back to the table and sat down. Jim also went back and sat down.

“Are you saying that this person is evil?” asked Celeste.

“I’m saying that if she were to offer you all of the money in the world to trade places with her, don’t take it,” Carolyn said.

“Well I think she’s evil,” said Jim. And they all looked at Jim.

“Look, here’s the deal,” said Jim. “Howard lives in a place that was pretty run down, but it was in a safe area and rent was, what, one hundred, a hundred and fifty dollars a month cheaper than every other place on the street. Harry comes in, wants the place fixed up. Now if she were a considerate person, I should say that, real simply, if she wasn’t a first class bitch, she would’ve gone to the landlady and asked, ‘If I put some elbow grease into the place, will you reimburse me for materials and maybe get a little off the rent?’ (That’s what I do here, right Carolyn?) If the landlady agrees, great. But if she doesn’t want to do it, what’s the lease, one year? You wait the year and go somewhere else. If she just can’t stand the appearance she can stay home from going out clubbing a few nights out of the week, spend the money on paint and a scraper, and just do it herself. But what you don’t want to do is piss off the landlady and get Howard here, who she doesn’t even know, kicked out of the apartment, and having to rent the van and do a move to a place that will probably be more expensive. Her little tantrum costs you \$1,800 a year. And if that doesn’t warrant some evil angels, I don’t know what does.”

Howard felt that twinge deep in his solar plexus. He placed his hands over the area. As soon as he did this, he knew he was suppressing quite bit of anger, which put him way out of the mood to ask Carolyn if there was anything they could do to help her. The mood will probably come back, Howard thought, but it's going to take its sweet time.



*The monster was down, passed out,
laying face flat on the rocky ground.
The young man made a break for it.
Running as fast as he could past the caves,
up the other side of the ravine.
He ran one hundred yards
along the top of a plateau.
Two hundred yards, he looked behind him,
no monster in sight.
Three hundred yards and then a burst of wind went by him.
There was the monster now in front of him,
angry and vengeful.
He unfurled his claws, he breathed heavily.
The young man was about to be very afraid.
But instead he laughed.
You never told me you were so fast.
The monster pulled his claws back in,
shook his head, and smiled.
You've got to stop thinking
in such two dimensional patterns, the monster said.
The young man turned around. They have food at the caves.*

At the tip top of the Hill, the Italian Hill, Dago Hill to the residents, with J. Viviano's store, and Giovanni's, and Ravarino and Freschi pasta, and Amighetti's bakery, and Lou Boccardi's for the pizza, there is Cunetto's. The streets are narrower here, the homes a little smaller, closer together, and in the summer, when the windows are open, there is no need for gossip since everyone will simply hear what's going on directly. In the winter though, on a clear evening, there is the smell of firewood mixed with aromas of the all of the restaurants, garlic and herbs, olives, and salamis. The moistness in the night air is olive oil and wine vinegars. And there are people walking to Rigazzi's, Ruggeri's, Charlie Gitto's, and Favazza's since the parking lots are always filled.

They walked briskly. The cold tonight was invigorating and didn't begin to approach the frigidity of the past few weeks. Howard looked at Carolyn, who was back behind the fort—whatever it was he almost saw, however he saw it, he saw it clearly.

“That's where Yogi Berra used to play as a kid,” Howard said.

Cunetto's is known for the linguine tutto mare, which in pasta circles is what Orion is for an astronomer, and it is what they both ordered. Waiting for the garlic bread, there was

an awkward silence, as if they were back on their first date. They were reluctant to make eye contact, choosing instead to view the room, the other patrons, all that beautiful pasta being served and spun on forks, the fork in spoon technique, all at a pace that would put a spinning wheel to shame.

“Did we order the toasted ravioli?” Howard asked. “You can’t get it anywhere else.”

“It’s probably not good to hold it all in,” she said. “I mean I came up here in the first place to leave that small town mentality.”

Howard decided to be quiet, to let her talk, put some doors in the fort.

“There’s closeness in small towns,” she said, “but also a fear. It’s not bad or malicious or anything. People grow up together, parents grew up together, grandparents grew up together, so many families are somehow related, cousins, second cousins, however people can be tied together, that’s the town. But they know it’s a small town, and people want to leave, the populations don’t really get any bigger. Very few people actually move there. You know, so when someone’s different, it’s like a red flag for them. They can sense the loss coming.”

The toasted ravioli and calamari arrived. “Wow,” she said, tasting a bit of each. “You can’t get this in Belton.”

“I think you’d have a hard time finding this most anywhere outside of Italy,” Howard said. “You were saying.”

“The loss. And you sense that. I’m telling you this is fantastic. That one’s mine, don’t eat that one. Anyway, so you just suppress yourself to avoid one kind of pain, and you just end up creating another kind.”

“You ever confide in anybody?” Howard asked.

She tore off a piece of bread and sopped up the remaining calamari sauce. “This isn’t good manners, is it,” she said, putting the bread into her mouth. Then she looked at Howard. “Not really, played a lot by myself.”

The water glasses were refilled, the wine was poured and the linguini tutto mare arrived. Why did Rumpelstiltskin screw around with spun gold when he could have done this? They each put a wound forkful into their mouths, leaned back as the tastes bathed their tongues, and allowed their heads to sway from side to side.

“Man o’ man,” they said in unison. And conversation stopped for while, as they twirled their piles to half, then a quarter.

She smiled and finished her wine. Howard took one big swallow and finished his.

“I think I’ll have some more wine. Waiter,” she pointed to her glass. The waiter bowed his head ever so slightly and obliged.

And then Howard had a moment, a kick-in-the-head moment. What if people respond to and are motivated by the stuff that Carolyn sees? What if people could see just a little bit more of the light spectrum—I mean we’re basically blind, Howard thought, physiologically, biologically, we see so little of what’s there—would all of his textbooks be immediately obsolete, as opposed to being obsolete in fifteen years? He asked her to talk more about the common expressions and what she sees. And she answered without hesitation. Thank goodness for wine, lots of wine, Howard thought.

“The expressions people use, if they only knew how on target they really are,” she said. “For instance, you’ve heard the phrase ‘green with envy,’ right. Well, when people feel envy they turn a subtle, and when I say subtle I mean that even I can barely see it, shade of green. For years, when I was a kid, at birthday parties and Christmas and anniversary parties I was seeing people turn this shade of green, and I wondered what in the world was going on there. Maybe holidays and celebrations are what people do when they’re about to turn green. When I was ten or eleven I heard the phrase ‘green with envy,’ and I knew what envy was by then, and it just sort of clicked in. You want some more wine? Waiter,” she was pointing to Howard’s glass.

Howard was enthralled and elated. He was grinning so much that he felt he had toddler cheeks, if it weren’t for his beard. Carolyn reached across the table and gave his face a little pinch.

“You are so cute,” she said. “Put your hands on the table, I want to see your hands. I love your hands.”

Howard put his hands on the table, she put her hands on top of his, and Howard’s hair was about to squirt out of his head. She wasn’t being effusive, just nice, kind, just wonderful—but Howard lived a life, and he didn’t ask for this, yet he took to this custom with the natural grace of a young bird to flight, where compliments and kindness come out of the mouth as insult, phrased as a negative to fend away the hovering bad fates. Her directness, her clarity—Howard could only blush.

And she continued, on and on about opening your heart, and broken hearts, and being out of joint, and being on your last legs, and being in a bind, or doing something in a flash, or having a green thumb.

Carolyn finished her glass of wine and asked for another before spumoni for dessert. Then, Carolyn suddenly seemed to go back inside the fort, and Howard sensed it was one of those if-you-have-to-ask moments, that if he asked what’s wrong, what’s wrong will get

more wrong. And so Howard took a deep breath, and listened with his almost ears to hear what's almost being said. And he almost heard her say that she was afraid of becoming some kind of novelty, a toy. And he could see from the tension in her shoulders, the sad tilt in her neck—when you hold something in for a long time, something powerful, meaningful, when you hold it in it is nailed and glued and tacked in with little insane sentences. If you tell, all of your friends will leave. If you tell, you will get kicked out of school. If you tell your family will throw you out. If you tell—and there are thousands of these.

And when you do tell, as soon as your burst of inner strength is absorbed into your bones like rain in a wheat field, the thousands of messages come at you like bats in a cave. It seemed to Howard that her bats were flying out.

The night was lovely and harsh and clear, and the sky was starry. Howard reached to put his arm around her but she twisted away and walked by herself, more than an arms length from Howard. He knew that there was nothing he could say or do at this moment—that is, whatever comforting, supporting, reassuring things he might want to say would be taken as proof that his heart was up to no good and he was trying to throw her off of the truth she knew too well. His silence, though, was proof that his heart was up to no good and she was certain of this. His soft touching would be proof that he wished to dominate and possess her for her skills, his non-touching would be proof that he is callous and unconcerned about her in her moment of distress.

When they came to a street corner, he turned away from the car, giving the thousands of messages ample time to fly out and away from them. In front of Amighetti's bakery she moved within his reach. Then she bumped into him, and he held her, and he stopped, and she stopped, and they kissed for a long time.

Dr. Wang's hands were very cold despite the four space heaters he placed around the office and treatment room. His fingertips on Howard's wrists and neck felt like steel ball bearings. There was a different aroma, different incense in the air, and it had a texture, heavy, possibly heavy enough to trap heat. The doctor was struggling to reach his trance state, where he could read the human pulse like it was a diary describing energy and history. The raised voices in the store, an argument in Chinese, could be heard in muffled tones, incomprehensible to Howard, somewhat distracting to Dr. Wang. The doctor brought his head closer to Howard's wrist, as if he was listening to the pulse speak.

“You have been feeling your ch'i, is this right?”

“I’m not sure,” Howard said. “Things have been happening in my life, but I haven’t felt anything new in my body.”

“Feeling it in your body is a much focused experience of ch’i. You are not that focused, you are not yet that strong. Perhaps you have had a new flow of creativity, perhaps you have adjusted the way you see the world. This has happened?”

“This has happened.”

“It is your choice now, whether to begin the second phase of your treatment.” Dr. Wang went to the tall bookcase that didn’t hold books, but many little things from rings and different colored stones, bracelets, small statues of the Buddha, clips, magnets, bottles of oil, boxes of needles: the tools of this unique trade. He opened a box and took out, was it a cork, a dull green block the size of a small fingernail. Then he placed it on a stone plate and lit it. Its smoke was pungent, like cumin, but aggressive cumin. It seemed to grab and pull the soft awn of growth inside his nostrils. But it also brought the clarity he had during his first treatment, the palpable feelings of the future, of free and easy breath, vibrancy of life, the thick textbook of his medical history replaced with tunes of vim.

“I don’t know the phases,” Howard said, his speech soft.

“I can explain them, but don’t be insulted. Westerners seem easily insulted sometimes,” Dr. Wang said.

“I can always insult you back,” Howard mumbled.

“That would not be wise,” Dr. Wang said.

“I’m feeling kind of, not drunk, but...it’s from that thing that’s burning,” Howard said. “Aren’t you feeling...a little off?”

“There are very few things that will affect you and I in similar fashions,” he said simply. “Now, would you like me to explain the second phase or begin the second phase?”

“Will one help me more than the other?” Howard asked.

“That is a wise question.” It didn’t feel wise to Howard. He felt it come out of his mouth quickly with absolutely no thought. “The answer,” Dr. Wang said. “is that it depends on your preparedness to integrate information. Is the field ploughed, is the season right?”

“It’s winter,” Howard said, again the words popping out without thought.

“Then I will begin, and I will see you again first thing tomorrow morning.”

“And that will be necessary, so soon?” Howard asked.

“More than that. You will be begging to come in.”

Howard simply nodded. Yeah sure, he thought, with his mind muddy, wondering if Dr. Wang could somehow hear his silent skepticism.

The drive home was normal, uneventful as a still life. He parked in his usual spot, walked up the stairs to the stoop, up the stoop to the door, in the door up the stairs. He straightened up the dining room table, and then went to straighten up his room. After that he made some tuna salad, sat down to eat and read. Normal, he thought. Harry wasn't home yet. He phoned Carolyn, but she wasn't home either.

He finished dinner and finished his reading. He washed the dishes, put his book on the shelf, and went into his room, closed the door, and began to practice. At the end of his first page of finger exercises he heard Harry come up the stairs. He heard her go into her room. He continued with his exercises. Very normal, he thought.

"Hi," Harry said through his door, polite and perfunctory.

"Hello," he replied.

Eight pages of exercises and figuring out two chord-melodies, "Here's That Rainy Day" and "Waltz for Debby" will eat up two and half hours in a blink. He decided to read some more, psychoanalytic techniques, family therapy, un-common therapy. Same stuff he'd been reading for the past several years. That's two more hours. 9:30. Time for a short walk, then he would call Carolyn, and then maybe he'd start writing a few papers.

Harry had stepped out, so he took his keys. He wrapped his scarf tightly from his collarbone to his nose, put on his coat and gloves, and stepped outside into the wind. This would be a very short walk. He moved briskly down Pennsylvania to Vernon. He could have walked the other way, to the university part of University City, with streets named Harvard and Yale, Dartmouth and Princeton, Tulane, Stanford, Cornell, and Amherst, this little enclave within St. Louis. But he chose to head toward Heman Park, the Mason-Dixon Line demarcating smooth streets from potholed streets, twice a week trash pickup from once a week, homes painted from homes needing paint, and shutters nailed tight to the brick from shutters hanging on for dear life.

There were rocks, broken bits of street on Vernon. He picked up a rock, looked both ways, no cars, and threw it towards a telephone poll. Way short, way wide. But he was bundled, the coat, the gloves restricting his movement. He picked up another rock, moved closer to the target, and threw again. Long enough, but wide. He gathered several rocks, either baseball size or baseball weight, crossed Vernon and went into the park, to the ballfield right across the street. There was something about throwing that, for a short while, could transcend the elements. For up to twenty minutes, if Howard was throwing strikes,

rain wasn't wet, wind didn't blow, freezing felt as warm as 50 degrees and St. Louis' heat never went above 68. If he wasn't throwing strikes, nature wouldn't budge.

Behind home plate, against the tall chain-link backstop, there was a trashcan. He stepped off sixty feet, faced the can, focused, and threw. Short, wide, enough. He took off his coat, whirled his arm from his shoulder like a propeller clockwise, counterclockwise. Loose enough. He took a full windup and threw—on the money. There was a loud clang. He took a deep breath that filled his lungs with cold, and—that's odd, he thought, it feels like power, like his lungs were filling with strength. He wanted to throw harder; he wanted to dent that tough industrial steel. He was breathing hard, not constricted, but hard. He focused on the can, the streetlight above cutting the can in two, into sheets of light and shadow. The rock was rough, baseball size, and he held it like a two-seam fastball, a little bit loose for more velocity. He threw, again right down center. And there may have been a dent in it, he didn't stop to see, he just wanted to throw harder and then harder after that. Suddenly it felt like two blowtorches were fired up behind his eyes. Smoke may have been coming out of his nostrils. This was rage, no, more than rage. This was wrath. Every cell was vibrating, shaking with fury. He couldn't keep his head still, shaking slowly, steadily back and forth like the pendulum of a time bomb.

He was beyond throwing, now he needed to break something, feel the crush and crackle in his hands, or the pulling and tearing of something whole in his arms. He felt like he had the strength, but he knew himself, knew that when it came right down to it he rarely had the physical strength. And the last thing he needed was more frustration—trying to destroy some simple object, but the simple object resisting, defeating this feeling of strength, turning him back like a moth bumping against a window.

There was always baseball. He stood, shoulders heaving, brow low, looking for a fallen branch, a piece of wood, something to be his bat, his club, to beat the shit out of something. His rage was building, and he believed, it certainly felt as if real physical power was within him—was it myth or reality, the grandma lifting the Buick off of the grandchild, is there hidden power within us, and if so, is this it? His hands were open, his fingers like claws looking for something to rip apart. He could feel his clothes become damp from sweat, he swiped his coat sleeve across his brow. His teeth were grinding.

Behind him, way in the distance, someone was walking across the fields. He didn't bother to look closely—how easy it would be for that person to become only a pile of flesh and bone, it was only a matter of stepping over a line, taking three maybe four steps towards him, her, and in his eyes they wouldn't be a person anymore. But he ran the opposite way, across Vernon, skidding down the steep wall of a concrete drainage ditch, his feet slipping and scuffing up the other side. He ran into a woods, a dark woods, and found a space, hard

frozen ground, no grass or underbrush. It was there that he broke off tree branches and swung at the small bushes, knocking them over, cracking their thin branches, swinging hard like the angel of death in spring training. He picked up the large rocks and heaved them into the concrete ditch. He threw anything he could as hard as he could into the black brush. As he was bending down, on his knees, trying to dig up a large rock, sweat running into his eyes, his eyes were stinging, he just stopped. Out of juice, almost. Physically, there was nothing left, and his rational self walked into the saloon of his heart and mind after the bar fight and began to clean up. He picked up a rock and threw it high into the air, toward Vernon. There was nothing in his peripheral vision when he let it fly. And it would not have fallen on the windshield of the police car if the police car even made a feeble attempt to acknowledge the stop sign.

As soon as it ran the stop sign, Howard turned towards the woods. On the one hand it would be foolish to see it hit, and he should immediately run. On the other hand, it's not every day you get to see a rock fall out of the sky and hit a police car with the precision timing of Jim Hart hitting Mel Gray on a post pattern. And besides, it might miss. But it didn't. He did not know from where this energy came, but with the burst of an Olympic sprinter after the bang of the starter's pistol, Howard went further into the woods at the crack of the glass. The rock fell almost straight down, and bounced from the windshield, to the hood, and landed in front of the car. It would take them a few seconds to determine its origination. Howard did not see them checking the field first.

He assumed that it wouldn't be long for them to be right on his trail. He made his way through the woods, quickly and silently, trained by years of being out with his friends on Halloween and making getaway after getaway after toilet papering houses. And then he nearly had a heart attack, because at night, dogs, even very big dogs, can be as quiet as a sniper. They can glide like electricity through a wire, and they can be patient enough to hold their most formidable bark until their nose is right next to your ass. And then they let loose like it's going to be their last bark on this earth. As if thunder started sneaking up right next to us. As soon as Howard placed his hands on the Spiegelman's chain link fence, Ogden the black lab told Howard that he has never been gladder to see anyone than he was to see Howard right now. Ever. Nothing even close.

He climbed over the fence and ran to the street, Dartmouth in University Heights, the Beacon Hill of University City. He looked behind him several times. No flashlights. He headed up Radcliffe, to Yale to Delmar, where he would blend in as someone out for a night walk. He checked his pockets and clothing, everything he started with he still had, and his clothing wasn't torn. It looked as though he was going to get away with this, except for his conscience and the possible truth that what goes around comes around. But there was

nothing else he could do. He had fallen into one of society's good deed traps, the Good Samaritan paradox. Walking into the police and offering the bald truth could land him in a Psych ward, on the other end of the treatment process, which could mean the abrupt end to his graduate studies, and...well, it's just not a door he could prudently open. But it wasn't a door he could just walk away from, either. There were other traps, some he'd only heard about, like leaving a phone number on another car that you ding in a parking lot—only to get hammered from a crooked body shop. And he learned in high school, never to come to the aid of a woman who is being bullied by her boyfriend—she turned on him, not her boyfriend, she slapped his face, not her boyfriend's. How dare he interfere.

He stood shivering a bit, tired, sweating, shocked by his rage, shocked by the dog, shocked by the not-entirely-an-accident-but-pretty-close-wasn't-it? The hair on his arms and the back of his neck bristled like a scrub brush, and he could hear too well. The cars going by, the leaves rustling in the trees, the wind itself, were all at full volume. He was breathing hard, the hot exhale was fogging his glasses. And his heart was pounding like Buddy Rich playing 'Sing Sing Sing.' Inside his skin, his adrenal glands were squirting in multiple orgasms, and his sympathetic nervous system was playing his alpha and beta receptors like Sonny Stitt soloing on 'Now's the Time,' although it felt like Eric Dolphy.

He didn't move. He thought about when, years ago, he would have been thoroughly pleased to have gotten away with something like this—to be able to tell the story of getting away with it, to—and here's the key phrase—fit in, to be accepted by the group. Years passed, and he realized that he would not be fitting in, it didn't seem to be in the cards. He was a Jew in Catholic St. Louis, a white guy in a Black music world, a jazz musician in the Psychology department, and he was trying to be heart centered in graduate school, where the brain centered cement their nasty cognitive habit—not to mention that he was an atheist, more or less, less now, among the Jews—he was all of this. Slowly, reluctantly, he became his own peer group, and as his own peer group, he was frequently surprised by his own peer pressure, a visceral response to situations that overwhelmed his mind, that vetoed his first person pronoun—in his own self, sentences starting with "I want" or "I think," even the politically correct "I feel" were met with derision. It was as if he developed, walking this footpath of solitude, another nervous system. The sympathetic and parasympathetic were joined by the shut-the-fuck-up-and-do-the-right-thing nervous system.

This was one of those veto situations. If you asked him before all of this happened if he could live with vandalizing a police car, he would have said that he could, after a fashion. Eventually, he would have said, he would have to resolve it. He may have to think about it for a few days or months, but he would eventually do something. The reality, he was finding out, was much different. It would have to be resolved immediately. Deep down, way deep

within, the decision was that this event would not have even one moment of comfort. His first person pronoun, his “I,” was saying clearly—“I want to go home.” And the normal machinery of nerves, muscles, and organs began the microscopic adjustments that lead to major movements like the turning of hips and head and stepping in the desired direction. And then he felt the tingle, the rising smoke of the veto, and he stopped.

And so there he stood, the police station, not an option. Home, not an option. He looked across the street, at the old synagogue mall—the grand and ornate Temple Share Emeth (Reform), now an arts center, the slightly smaller and much less ornate B’nai Amoona (Conservative), now adult education classrooms, and the small and beaten Beis Avraham (Orthodox), which was still a small and beaten congregation. His parents were married there. He ran across the street to the small synagogue, took out his wallet, took out the bills, and shoved the small roll into the mail slot. Then he started to walk home.

He turned right and headed down Midland.

Then the blowtorches lit again, but this time even more intense than on the ballfield, acetylene torches. His ribs and sternum hurt, so much rage, as if it were pushing itself out, caged by his own bones. Jailbreak, he thought. But this time he wasn’t caught by surprise, and this time he wasn’t giving in, not one inch. Even though running at top speed right into that tree would feel good, nothing doing. Or going over to that bush and pulling it out of the ground by its roots, not happening. He held himself tightly and breathed deeply, inhaled and exhaled a low groan, he would let it drip out in groans. He walked quickly, but not quickly enough that a gentle push of momentum would break him into a run. Not one inch. Then his hands changed from clawed to a tight grip, as if he were pulling the reins as far back they would go. A Jewish cowboy breaking this bronco, he thought. He smiled a mere smile.

And with that he knew he had it, no matter how long it would take, no matter how much fight his fury could muster, he had it using humor’s leverage, thin though it may be, like the filament of a light bulb. He would sprinkle photons on the wrath, he would season it into submission, transform it into irony. With three blocks behind him and three to go the waves of resentment built and battered him with the force mustered under a full moon. Vague memories of huff and miff shot through his mind like arrows. He walked faster and turned down Amherst, stumbling slightly, holding his balance outwardly, but inwardly running straight into a contradiction. The strength he had now—what happened to the strength that was holding this in in the first place?

By the time he reached his home, Harry’s car wasn’t there thank goodness, he could feel his heart splinter into committees—or feel that his heart already was splintered into committees: the Committee for Designing and Erecting Defense Mechanisms, the Committee for Taking Down Defense Mechanisms, the Committee for Getting a Good

Grade in Class, the Committee for Seeking the Truth Despite What They Tell You in Class, the Committee for Massaging the Ego, the Committee for Self Deprecation, the Music Creation and General Self-Expression Committee, and the Committee for Trying to Fit In by Anticipating What They Will Think and Keeping Your Damn Mouth Shut For Once, and the Bullshit Detection Committee which is presided over by the Incurable Smartass. He ran up the stairs, through the living room, peeling off his coat and scarf, going straight to his room and using every bit of resolve to scream into a pillow instead of punching a hole through his window.

Time wasn't moving. It wasn't even eleven o'clock, and his appointment the next morning wasn't until nine—eleven plus hours. He brought the phone into his room and called Carolyn.

“You have to tell me something,” he said. “What do you see with me in me about me that thing you do?”

“I was wondering when you were going to ask me that.”

“There's something really wrong with me, isn't there?” he said. “Tell me now, I need to hear it.”

“The truth?”

“The truth.”

“You'll handle it?”

“I'll handle it.”

“Even though it could be really terrible?”

“Yes.”

“Even though you could be some sort of monster?”

He took a deep breath. Yes, he thought, I will handle even that.

“Yes,” he said.

“Then the answer is no, I'm not going to tell you,” she said.

“What?”

“I said ‘No.’”

“This is really important. I'm having a rough time right now.”

“I can hear that, but I'm not going to tell you.”

“You have to.”

“I don’t.”

“Yes you do, this is really important.”

“I don’t because you’re not being logical.”

“Of course I’m being logical. How am I not being logical?”

“If you were some sort of monster, do you think I would be dating you?”

Like parachutes popping out of drag racers, he took a deep breath and held it, then slowly let it out. He went on to describe the events of the evening in detail, and then he said ‘please.’

He could almost hear Carolyn gathering her thoughts, measuring her words before she speaks.

“You know, you know, that you’re...a bit of a mess? Right?” she asked. “That wouldn’t be a revelation, would it?”

“No,” Howard said. He had the urge to interrupt, to mention this monstrous rage again, in case she didn’t hear it the previous nine times he mentioned it five minutes ago. But he held the impulse and listened.

“There’s an irony here,” she said. “Others, the healthier others, are walking and running in their lives, but they’re chasing things they really don’t want. They’ll find this out as soon as they get them. You may be limping and crawling, but I think it’s in the right direction, at least in my opinion. And there’s a lot to say for that.”

“Did I mention the anger, that it’s intense?” he asked. “There’s something horrible within me.”

“But nothing happened,” she said. “That’s the difference. And if the police car stopped at the stop sign, absolutely nothing would have happened. That’s everything, right there.”

“So I don’t have any horrid, monstrous, evil things floating around me?”

“No,” she said. “Do you need anything tonight? Do you want me to come over, just for company?”

“No,” Howard said. “Whatever’s started I hope finishes. I don’t need this stuff whirling around inside of me. It would be nice if I could just pull the cork and it drains out of me like bad bathwater. But so far, it hasn’t been that nice.”

“Then let me drive you to acupuncture tomorrow morning,” she said.

Howard nodded.

“Answer me, say something,” she said.

“You didn’t hear me nod?”

He felt tingles in his legs as soon as he hung up, low voltage pain. He did every kind of stretch he knew. It didn’t help. Near midnight he had an idea. He went into the bathroom to get some Sominex, hoping it might calm him out of this self-imposed cyclotron. As he swallowed the pills he heard the front door open, Harry was home. She quickly came up the stairs without stopping to take off her coat.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“I’m having a real rough time right now,” Howard said. “I needed some Sominex.”

“That’s my Sominex.”

“I know,” he said. “Like I said, I’m having a rough time...”

“I don’t care what time you’re having. That’s mine. You should ask permission before you use it,” she said.

“Like I said, and you weren’t home...”

“Well I’m home now.” She stood with her hands on her hips, her head tilted to one side, her chin out, as if she wanted a fight, implying the words with just body language—you weak, skinny, stupid fuck. And damned if Howard didn’t want to hit her. Some women, with different body language, can coax a man’s dick right out of his pants. But this is the polar opposite. She was trying to coax his fists to her face.

But like those big chess computers, in less than a second, Howard calculated every response and her counter-response. He had never been in a physical fight, and he wasn’t going to start with her over bullshit, even though the thought of him knocking her and her chin back into the wall gave this little episode a nice, happy ending. She put her hands in her coat pockets, and as much as Howard felt like a constipated pressure-cooker, he could still think clearly enough to reason this through. Why didn’t she stop to take off her coat, unless she has something in the pockets she can’t wait to try out?

“What’d you buy?” Howard asked. “Pepper spray? Mace?”

“Both,” she said.

He turned his back to her, and backed out of the bathroom, shielding his eyes, nose, and mouth.

“And you think this is funny?” he asked.

“If you talk to me you better look at me,” she said.

He went into his room and locked the door. Only four months to go on the lease.

Around two o'clock the Sominex was working. He was still wide-awake, but comparatively calm, as if it were a normal sleepless night. He lay in his bed staring up at the ceiling, still feeling the anger, but in the way he would feel it in a psychologist's office. And he was able to ask himself the kind of questions that a psychologist would, looking for events, repressed memories, dream clues, Freudian slips, anything that could possibly uncover the hidden.

At 3:30 he was in a trance state, between sleep and wake. And then it came to him, another one of his intuition respirations. It was nothing hidden, nothing profoundly deep, it was—so cliché. He turned over, face into the pillow, saying quietly, 'cliché cliché.' A purloined letter in his body and soul. Cliché cliché. His mother. Cliché. Pavlov's dog. Cliché cliché.

She had led him into illness surely, conditioned him with the skill of a great scientist. Whenever he was sick, she would be there, attentive and interested, with foods and soups and TLC. But when he was well, practically speaking, she was in Iceland, always pleasant, but distant, sad, horribly sad, fearful, disconnected. Cliché cliché. His illnesses gave her life meaning, awakened her natural love and compassion, feelings that she quickly banished to solitary confinement after the antibiotics did their work.

Cliché cliché. More Sominex. He went into the bathroom and took one more. If he—talk about structural problems—if he were his body, being led all of these years away from health and strength, his most basic instincts locked in a cage, engaged in a Texas Death Match with the most basic drives of his soul—where are the words for this?

Searching for the words, he fell asleep.

And he dreamt. He dreamt he was running, he was running from something but he wasn't frantic. Whatever was chasing him, it was quite dangerous, it was deadly, but he wasn't frantic. He ran through fields, through a cow pasture, no cows but smell, definitely a cow pasture. Up ahead was a neighborhood, and he ran there. The houses were on tall stilts, no. Some houses were on tall stilts. He ran under one house with a fireplace on the left side and stood there.

The phone rang and he woke up. It was 8 am.

Carolyn would be over soon. He cleaned himself a bit, had a glass of milk, folded a package of loose clothes, and went to the front window to watch for her, passing the dining room table, on top of which were two keychain aerosols. He thought about the dream. He was so good at interpreting other people's dreams, but he couldn't do his own. If he could just step away, sit across from himself and listen, it would be simple, to hear himself tell the

dream, and at a dog wavelength, tell the interpretation too. And he could say to himself, just like he says to everyone else, you wrote it, you must know the meaning. But he couldn't sit across from himself, and he was stumped.

The yellow Chevy pulled up in front of the flat and honked twice.

He got in the car, they good morning pecked, and Carolyn asked how the rest of his night went. And he told her, even told her the dream—nothing, she didn't know how to do dreams, she said.

“Too bad,” Howard said. “I'd like to know.”

“It's within you,” she said.

“Thanks loads,” Howard said. “Turn here.

Carolyn turned into the parking lot. Howard gave her a quick kiss, told her it would be about an hour.

Always smoke, there must have been a pack or two in the air. Dr. Wang put down the Chinese newspaper as soon as Howard walked in the door.

“I trust your night has been somewhat eventful,” the Dr. said.

“Yes,” Howard said. “Eventful.”

“You are no longer so skeptical?” he asked.

“Less so,” Howard replied, smiling. “I might always be a little skeptical.” Although as soon as he said that he immediately thought of how trusting he was of Carolyn.

“Ah yes,” said Dr. Wang. “The healthy Western Skepticism, the foundation of your science.” With a slow sweep of an open hand he motioned Howard into the treatment room. Howard changed his clothes, the Dr. came in, checked his pulses, nodded several different times, and inserted needles into his arms and legs. Then Dr. Wang took out a particularly long needle, at least twice as long as the others.

“Is it my imagination,” Howard asked, “or is that needle really as long as it looks?”

“Judging from the angle and perspective of your eyes,” the Dr. said, “it's probably longer.”

“And what are you going to do with that?”

“I'm going to put it right here.” And with that he slid the needle into Howard's solar plexus, of course his solar plexus, all the way down, like a medical oilrig, until only the needle handle, the one inch on top that was wound like a guitar string, sat upright on his stomach.

Dr. Wang held the needle handle and slowly, carefully, twisted it between his thumb and forefinger, like a ball of lint. Howard felt a surge of electricity, a shock that raised his torso a half-inch from the table.

“There’s your ch’i,” Dr. Wang said. “Enjoy.” And then he turned out the light and walked out of the room.

For the first few minutes Howard could only think of that needle sitting inside of him like a meat thermometer. And then, on cue, as he began to focus on his anger, his skin, no it wasn’t his skin, he tried to raise his head to see what was happening but stopped as soon as his stomach muscles tightened. He placed his head back on the pillow. He thought of Dr. Wang taking out the needle only to see it bent like a radio antenna that went through a car wash. It was a feeling, like foam, like shaving cream, like every pore of his body was dispensing shaving cream—Carolyn might enjoy this—mounds of spiritual shaving cream, inches, feet, like he was being encased in a coffin made of shaving cream. And then he fell asleep.

Quickly he began to dream. It was the same dream. But this time he was aware that it was a dream as he was running. Perhaps he could find the meaning, being both in the dream and observing the dream. But again, nothing. He stood underneath the house with a fireplace on the left side, and just said out loud, I need wisdom.

Dr. Wang turned on the light and Howard woke up. He took the needles out of his arms and legs, and he took the dipstick out of Howard’s stomach. “Remember now, ten deep breaths.”

Dr. Wang barely pricked the side of Howard’s calf, but it was as if his right leg was a big braid of gun cotton. His leg exploded in the sensation of fire. Howard was breathing a countdown from ten, but he was watching his leg carefully, surely expecting smoke to rise up from his pores. And then it was over. The small needle had been removed, the fire was out, and Howard, checking and rechecking, was at peace with the world. He was looking for his anger, not the big stuff, which was gone—Mom, fine, Mom, cool—he just had to be vigilant, careful and aware of his decisions, to make sure that he never, ever, makes a decision based on fear or anxiety, to never let his life be ruled by sadness—the big stuff was gone. But so was the little stuff. For this he looked hard. The kid who used to torment him in fourth grade, who cares? The kids who used to blame him every time one of their toys broke, whether he was there when it happened or not, now he was groovin’ on the indifference. It was gone, all of the anger, gone.

“When you are dressed,” Dr. Wang said, “come up the stairs into the store. There’s something I want you to do.”

So Howard sat on the side of the table. He needed to get up and get changed, but he really didn't have the energy right now. He rested his chin in the cup of both hands and rested his elbows on his thighs. He took one long and deep breath, and he said to himself that he just went through about six or seven years of psychotherapy in one night. He may just as well have been sitting on a solitary island in the South Pacific. How do I go back to class after this? All of his textbooks and notes, not that he was in love with them in the first place, seemed like variations on Dick and Jane. See Dick. See Jane. They have feelings. Feel Dick. Feel Jane. Dick is sad. Frown Dick, frown. Jane is anxious. Fret Jane, fret. Oh look. There is Carl Rogers. Carl will listen to Dick and Jane talk. Carl likes to nod. Nod Carl, nod. Carl is practicing unqualified acceptance. Carl's nodding makes Dick and Jane feel better. Everybody nod like Carl. Nod everybody, nod.

Howard dressed and followed the smoke rings up the stairs into the store. Dr. Wang stood at the cash register putting the last few items in a brown paper bag. The woman thanked Dr. Wang and left. It was still early in the morning and the store was now empty.

"Am I cured?" Howard asked.

"Not close," said Dr. Wang. "I want you to meet my son. He will take you somewhere this morning. I want you to begin discipline. You must address your ch'i and look it in the eye." Dr. Wang spoke Chinese, and a young man, looking to be in his mid-twenties, yet with a teenager's scowl and a teenager's hunch, came by. The young Chinese man did not look his father in the eye, in fact did everything he could to avoid eye contact. Dr. Wang became stern, speaking in short sentences. His son stood up straight and bowed gracefully, first to Dr. Wang and then to Howard. Then he muttered under his breath, and immediately winced in pain.

"I must apologize for the behavior of my son," said Dr. Wang. "It is a difficult task to become part of America and yet retain our traditions. Introduce yourself."

"I am Wei Ping," he said. "But call me Paul. It fits in better."

He didn't speak with any trace of an accent. Nor did he smile.

"I'm Howard."

"Wei Ping will take you to meet Meng He."

"But you told me to catch up on the shipping, I have to stock shelves," Paul said, and then winced in pain. Dr. Wang was again stern, speaking tersely in Chinese.

"Can you be ready in five minutes?" Dr. Wang asked Howard.

"Someone might be outside waiting for me," Howard said. "I just need to let her know what's going on."

Dr. Wang raised an open hand towards the front door. "Go."

Howard quickly went outside to look for Carolyn's car. She was parked around back behind the building across the driveway. And something was wrong. He could see how upset she was.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

She just shook her head, unable to speak. She held up her hand, as in give me a moment. And then she held up her index finger, as in very shortly. "That man in the store," she said.

"Did anything happen?" Howard insisted.

"No, no. Nothing happened. But that man in the store..."

"In the dry cleaners?"

"No, the health food store."

"A man."

"Yes. Yes. Evil. That man is evil. I've said I haven't seen those bad angels indicating an evil person. Well, I just saw it. It was clear, it was obvious. I must have turned the whitest shade of white when I saw him. I couldn't even go in. I ran out here as quickly as I could and just waited."

"Someone in that store." Howard pointed to Wang's Special Foods Store.

"Yes," she said emphatically.

"A customer?"

"No, he was behind the cash register."

"Behind the cash register?" Howard exclaimed, but not too loudly.

"Shhh. He might hear you!" she whispered.

"Behind the cash register, are you sure?"

"Blowing smoke rings."

"Blowing smoke rings?" he whispered.

"Why are you repeating everything I say?"

"Because you're describing Dr. Wang."

"That's Dr. Wang?" she exclaimed in a whisper.

“I’m supposed to go with his son right now, to meet some other guy. Are you sure you’re right? Can you be mistaken? You said that evil angels don’t necessarily mean evil person.”

“So now I can’t recognize a red apple from a Granny Smith?”

“It’s that clear?” he asked.

“It’s that clear.”

They were quiet for several moments; their minds were moving faster than their power of speech.

“I have to go back in,” Howard said.

“I think you should get in the car and get the hell out of here and never come back,” she said.

Again his mind, and this time his guts too, he could feel it, accelerated beyond speech. “I’ll call you later,” Howard said. “But I’ve got to go back in.”

End of Part I

Praise for 'A Brief History of Howard'

"A BRIEF HISTORY OF HOWARD is brilliant, astonishing, soulful—it reads like a jazz improvisation would play: surprising, moving, virtuosic and ultimately satisfying. The only comparisons I can come up with seem impossibly boastful and whimsical: JK Rowling meets Albert Einstein meets Gabriel García Márquez.

"It's the classic story of the grand fight between good and evil, with a solution provided by Stephen Hawking via Fritjof Capra and Isaac Bashevis Singer (now how is that for a hybrid?). Howard finds himself in a battle not only for his life but for his soul, his ch'i, and has to reach down to mysteries of physics, religion and the Judaism of his ancestors to find the weapons to prevail.

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Robert M. Levin, a St. Louis native, earned his B.A. and M.S.W. from Washington University. While a post-grad at Washington University, he came perilously close to earning an M.F.A. in Creative Writing.

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