

Music

From the time in the late sixties when we moved into the house at 171 W. Portola, I had the little room at the top of the stairs for my study. I think I had my portable phonograph there, because throughout the time we lived in the house, the one recreation I could claim for my own was playing trumpet along with jazz records. I thought, since no one was listening, or, if they were, they didn't care what I played, it was in ideal opportunity to learn to play harmony by ear, something I had never been able to do. I began with some of the Mulligan Quartet records, and then, as I acquired more of alto saxophonist Ornette Coleman's, tried playing harmony along with these (on trumpet and then later on recorder). I think I eventually developed a passable harmonic accompaniment to Don Cherry's beautiful trumpet solo on "Jayne" on Ornette's first album, *Something Else!* (Contemporary M3551), the tune itself being one of those that almost does the improvising for you.

I heard Ornette in person only twice. I can't remember even so much as the year of either time. The first was at a small club called the Both/And on Fillmore St., in the black ghetto of San Francisco. I think he had a drummer and bass player with him, but the bass player wasn't Charlie Haden or the extraordinary David Izenzon. The club was long and narrow, quiet, with brown yellow light, a bar running down the length of the left-hand side, a narrow strip of tables on the right. I sat as close as I could to the tiny bandstand, which was halfway to the back. He was late. After he had been announced, he emerged from the gloom at the back of the club, slim, with a trimmed beard, dressed nattily in a beige suit, making no eye contact with the audience. He seemed preoccupied with matters unrelated to public appearances. At that time, he had decided that his genius extended to the trumpet, and so, making no announcement as to what he was about to play, he took out his trumpet and simply started to play, with the rhythm section immediately following along. Unfortunately, he had very little of the skill he displayed on alto sax, and so we were forced to try to hear deep thoughts in what were, I am sure, simply a lot of wrong notes.

The other time was at a large club in San Francisco, where he was appearing with one of his big bands, featuring two virtuoso drummers. The music didn't do much for me: too loud, too busy, too far along in the direction he took in his later years, namely, the direction of unlimited freedom, or, as I'm sure many of the fans of his early recordings felt, mere chaos.

During these years, I may have first bought an album containing one of Thelonius Monk's performances of Monk's "Mysterioso", a tune which struck me by its power and, at the same time, by its almost imbecilic simplicity. In fact, I suspect that most of the tune has been played many times at various tempos by pianists who are just keeping their fingers busy while trying to think of what they want to do next. I heard the Beatles' "Blackbird" for the first time, a piece which to me was an example of absolute perfection in music — like Brubeck's solo on "Give a Little Whistle", Beethoven's "Für Elise", Mozart's "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik", the old song "Greensleeves", Farnaby's "A Toye", the well-known second movement of one of Boccherini's string quartets, Bix Beiderbecke's piano piece "In a Mist", and a strange tune once recorded by Groucho Marx, "Show Me a Rose" ("Show me a rose and I'll show you a stag at bay..."). Each of these seemed to me to accomplish perfectly what it tried to accomplish. There was nothing left to be said afterward. That's it. Perfection.¹

My confidence about my ability to recognize quality in music extended to popular music. I knew already in the fifties without a shadow of a doubt that Ray Charles was a great singer and pianist and musician. I knew instinctively that the Beach Boys' "I Get Around", "Surfin' USA",

1. Further examples are given in the second file of Vol. 2 under "Other Examples of Musical Perfection".

and “Wendy” were good music, as were Fats Domino’s recordings, even with (or just because!) the sax player in the latter, and even Fats both as singer and pianist, were near to sounding inept, though they weren’t. And there never was the slightest doubt in my mind about the genius of the Beatles.

I didn’t usually go to classical music concerts — too much effort when all you had to do was put on a record — but I find a journal entry for Apr. 20, 1975, describing a San Francisco Symphony performance at Flint Center, in Cupertino, that I attended with Marcella and which featured Maurice André, who at the time, and for years before, and afterward until the appearance of Wynton Marsalis, was certainly the greatest trumpet virtuoso in the world.

“First plays Haydn’s Trumpet Concerto, coming onto center stage, smiling at the audience, beautiful gold trumpet; it looks thinner somehow than a B-flat horn but I am not sure. He has a big belly; Marcella whispers to me, ‘How come he’s so fat?’ His pictures in the program show a younger man; he now has gray hair. Takes his place, before him a music stand; I can’t believe he actually needs the music, even *I* almost know this concerto by heart. Orchestra begins; he bounces a little, keeping time with erratic tapping of foot, as though impatient to start playing, a fat man eager to play his instrument. But immediately with the first tone there is no doubt that here is a master. Uses a slow vibrato (via fingers on the valves and via the lips, it seems). During the orchestra parts, he stands there, sometimes erratically tapping his toe, then before each entrance, wiping out the mouthpiece with his finger, all the while drumming the valves. After each passage, he frowns, as though expressing to himself, ‘No, that wasn’t good; it could have been much better.’

“The whole performance appears effortless, except at the end of long passages, when you can see his face redden. I am almost disappointed by how effortless, how merely like a job, the whole thing is. At the end, great applause, he smiling, shaking hands with the conductor (Wyss), then with the concertmaster, then bowing, walking off stage with Wyss, always smiling. He is like an old shoemaker, the smile saying, ‘One repairs shoes, one makes shoes, how remarkable that it pleases people so much! Completely remarkable...’

Comes back to do Telemann Concerto in D Major, a much harder piece. He has a much smaller trumpet this time, holds it like an item from an old collection he is now going to try out for the audience. In fast parts, particularly the last movement, again the belly bouncing as his foot taps, here much greater variation in the dynamics.

I cannot detect a single even near-mistake, although the movement flies by at incredible speed. The last note, after a long passage, way up there, solid as a rock, loud, shrill. The audience gives him a standing ovation, he shakes hands all around, goes off again with Wyss like a smiling shoemaker.”

Programming in the Cupertino Division

When my contract with Rick Pering was up, I decided to look for other kinds of programming work, since the modifying of existing programs, and the electrical engineering involved with integrated circuits, had become boring. I got a job a short distance away in the Cupertino Division. I no longer remember what the work was.

Ron Hoyt

At a neighboring desk, at my new job, sat Ron Hoyt, a young programmer from Miami, which he always pronounced “Miamuh”. (He also used to say, not entirely seriously, that his name was

a corruption of “White” because if you emphasize the “wh”, you get something that sounds like “Hoyt”.) One day, as we were discussing puzzles, he told me about one which, like the Goat Problem, I considered a test of whether I had any right to continue trying to be a programmer, much less a student of mathematics. The puzzle is well known now, so I will quickly describe it in words only: a rectangle composed of 65 small squares is given. The rectangle is 5 squares high and 13 squares long. A diagonal and several vertical lines are drawn on it to form a few simple geometric figures. These figures can be cut out and reassembled to form a square measuring 8 of the small squares on a side, that is, a large square composed of 64 of the smaller squares. The question is, Where did the missing square go? Anyone who has worked on this problem will recall the sense of utter bafflement that immediately sets in on contemplating the two figures. It seems impossible that one square could disappear before your very eyes like that. In keeping with my policy, I will not reveal how long I worked on the puzzle, but eventually, driven to the wall, and reduced to using some basic algebra, in particular, the algebraic equation for the diagonal, I solved it.

Not long after I joined the team, Ron announced that he was going to study for a degree in law, reasoning quite rightly that the combination of an undergraduate degree in, I believe, electrical engineering, a law degree, and experience as a programmer would be worth a lot on the job market. So for all the remaining months I knew him, and for years afterward, as I heard, he programmed by day and studied law by night and on the weekends. But he failed his first bar exam and was heartbroken. I think he made one more attempt, failed again, and then simply disappeared from sight.

Jon Selden

Jon had the cubicle next to mine. We didn’t work on the same project, but I remember he was blond, had an air of quiet competence, and seemed to regard the frenzy of daily programming life in the company with bemusement. I also remember the sayings that he had posted on the walls of his cubicle: “It is dangerous to be a far-sighted midget in a land of near-sighted giants,” and “Heisenberg may have been here.” Plus one from the inner sanctum of natural language research in the universities, “Time flies like an arrow, fruit flies like an old banana.” Finding as many parsings as possible of this gem (whose purpose was to show the difficulty of creating programs that could understand natural language) was an ongoing diversion among the chosen few in the graduate departments. The most obvious parsing was the basic one — time flies like an arrow (it passes that quickly), but fruit flies (those annoying insects) like an old banana to munch on. Probably the next most obvious was: time flies like an arrow (it passes that quickly), but fruit (when thrown) flies (through the air) in the way that an old banana does when thrown. Third most obvious probably was: a breed of flies known as “time flies” like to munch on arrows, whereas fruit flies enjoy munching on an old banana. Then, more remotely, the sentence could be read as an instruction: Time (ordinary) flies (with your stopwatch) as though they were an arrow, but time fruit flies (with your stopwatch) as though they were an old banana (how that would be done is not at all clear). And on and on. I am sure there were many ingenious parsings.

In passing, I should mention a saying you would occasionally hear from programmers: “Nothing can be made idiot-proof, but it can be made idiot-resistant.”

The following was posted on the wall of the print shop in the building : “We the unwilling, led by the unqualified, have been doing the unbelievable so long with so little we now attempt the impossible with nothing.” During these years I heard for the first time the expression “human bean”, a deliberate, and assumed humorous, distortion of the pronunciation of “human being”.

Also, “It’s not winning or losing that counts, it’s winning.”

What Programming Was Like in Those Days

It is amazing how much we forget of activities we carried out day after day over a period of years. For example, I have forgotten many of the details of our daily programming efforts. I remember that Assembly language programmers wrote, or were supposed to write, their programs on “coding sheets”, which were sheets of paper perhaps 12 by 17 inches. There were horizontal green lines, one for each program statement, and then vertical lines near the center demarking where the actual commands were to be written — “LDA X” (load contents of the A register in the memory location named X, “STB Y” (store the contents of the B register in the memory location named Y), and so forth. In the space before the command, you put the statement label if the statement would be “jumped to” from another command (for example, “JMP NEXT”) in the program. These labels could be no more than five symbols long if I remember correctly. In the space after the command, you put comments describing what the statement was supposed to do, for example, “Add the the next increment to the cumulative total.” These comments were meant to be an aid to you and to other programmers who might later have occasion to repair or expand your program. (Lazy programmers were notorious for writing comments like “Load A register with contents of X” , for “LDA X”, which, of course, added no new information at all.)

You then punched your program onto paper tape using a teletype machine. I remember the clunking sound of each keystroke: ker-chunk, ker-chunk, ker-chunk. Each keystroke punched from zero eight holes across the tape. A hole represented a binary 0; the absence of a hole a binary 1. However, I cannot remember what we did if we made a mistake, since there was no way to undo the sequence of holes that were made by each keystroke. Perhaps there was a special sequence of holes that said “Ignore the previous keystroke”. The program that read the contents of the paper tape into the computer would then always look one keystroke ahead to see if there was one of these special keystrokes. But I am not at all sure.¹

The tape was then placed in a photoreader, and, by a process I have forgotten, the contents of the tape were then read into computer memory. I have likewise forgotten what you had to do to get the program to begin executing. Tape was rewound using an electric tape winder. Often, these tapes were many yards long, and so you would see programmers standing with the tape winder in hand, a finger on the power button, starting and stopping the winder as necessary to avoid kinking or tearing the tape.

If the programming group were large enough, it had technicians or clerical workers who would type each command onto an IBM card. The deck of resulting IBM cards would be read into computer memory by a mechanical card reader so that the program could be run.

In either case, debugging the program (finding and repairing errors) was done by the programmer standing at the machine, running the part of the program believed to contain the error, then correcting the erroneous code, for example, by inserting a link to a part of memory containing code you entered by hand, then linking back to the instruction immediately following the link. (These changes in memory could be made by flipping switches on the front panel.) Most of us knew at least a few of these codes by heart: 10703, I believe, was a halt. Then a corrected tape

1. Art S. — , another programmer from that long-ago era, refreshed my memory: there was a “Rubout” key which, when pressed, backed the tape up to the previous sequence of holes and non-holes and automatically punched eight holes in its place. Thus the computer would read the sequence of eight holes as eight zeroes, which meant “no instruction” or “ignore”.

would be loaded, or corrected cards would be typed up and these inserted in the deck and the deck loaded.

There was a problem with both paper tape and cards, one that the nation became familiar with during the 2000 presidential election, namely, the presence of chad, which in the case of paper tape was the little paper disks that had been removed to make holes in the tape, and in the case of cards, little rectangles, since the holes in the cards were rectangular. Programmers would sometimes work through the day and into the evening to find an elusive error in a program, eventually finding it, repairing it, and the next day discover that the program was in worse shape than before the error had been repaired. They would tear their hair, go over the program again and again, and then find (how I don't know) that the problem was that a hole in the tape had not been properly punched through, so that the little paper disk was still in it. There was another problem, which I had forgotten until it was described to me in an email¹ by Barb G., the young woman I worked with writing integrated circuit test programs².

“I ... remember using a graphite pencil to shade and darken a grease spot ... on a paper tape. The spot had to be made opaque so the light in the tape reader machine would think it was just like the gray or blue solid paper normally on the tape. The grease spot sometimes caused a [photo] reader error because it could be translucent, like a greasy paper bag that might allow light to glow through it. Grease spots could cause the reader to think a hole was punched when it wasn't.”

Programmers' Anecdotes

The programmers had a supply of anecdotes that they brought out whenever one of their number was deemed to be suffering from an excess of over-confidence.

One of these anecdotes told about a hot-shot programmer who had been called in from another department to complete a crucially important programming task prior to the release of a product. After several weeks of day-and-night work, he announced that the job was done and returned to his own department. The next day, he got a phone call: something was grievously wrong with the programs he had written: the screen was filled with lines of incomprehensible text. He came over to see for himself, stood looking at the screen for half a minute or so, chin in hand, thinking, then confidently announced, “Ah! That can't happen.”

Another story concerned I believe a LISP programmer (more about this language later) who, feeling extremely confident about the excellence of his work, smugly inserted a message in his program: “Nothing can go wrong”. Weeks later, he was invited by several programmers who had been running his program to come over and take a look at the screen. Which he did, and there, line after line, was the repeated message, “Nothing can go wrong, Nothing can go wrong, Nothing can go wrong...”

First Major Failure as Programmer

Another job change got me the assignment of writing a sort program. In the sixties, and even into the seventies, after a means of measuring computational complexity had been established, you could get a PhD for devising a new sorting algorithm and proving that its computational com-

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2. See “First Programming Job” in third file of this volume.

plexity was less than that of any existing sorting algorithm. Researchers were also proving what the theoretical limits were for solution of certain kinds of sorting problems.

My job was to write a sorting program in Assembly language and at first I relished the opportunity. I decided to devise a modified binary sort, in which, initially, the data to be sorted is divided into two categories (for example, all data whose value is less than some “middle” value, and all data which is greater than or equal to that value). Then the same process is applied to each of the two categories, and so forth. I worked as carefully as I could, made flow charts, tried to make the program as clever, but simple, as possible. But soon I was lost in detail. Cases I hadn’t considered kept revealing themselves. I couldn’t *grasp*, in a single concept, what I had already finished, or the structure of the program as a whole. Each day I grew more desperate.

A few partitions away sat Bob Green, considered the resident genius because of his success in devising a compiler compiler, that is, a program which, in effect, took as input the description of a programming language, and produced, as output, a compiler for that language, that is, a program that converted programs written in that language into the equivalent Assembly language. At the time, compiler compilers were another one of the main items of interest in academic research. Green himself was a thin guy with brown hair and a humorless manner. He was known for his arrogance and his contempt for other people, all of which was excused because he was such a brilliant programmer. His programs were all but incomprehensible to other programmers. I remember the programmers talking about some clever trick he used with prime numbers, which turned out to save a few words of memory, but made the programs even harder to understand. He had already written a sort program, and so I thought it incumbent on me to admit my failure and, at the least, get a copy of his and modify it to fit the goals that had been given me. So I wrote him a note, saying, in so many words, that I had been assigned to write a sort program, but I saw no reason to duplicate the effort he had already made, so could he give me a copy of his source code. I would make sure he received full credit. He never replied. I tried again. No reply. I eventually confronted him in his cubicle, and, without so much as looking up from his work, he said that I should do my own work. I was utterly, completely, crushed, being absolutely convinced he was right, that if you have any business working as a programmer, then you should always do everything you are assigned to do from scratch. (It was years before I met a programmer, in his way as successful as Green, who convinced me that this is nonsense, that the best engineers and programmers always try to do *as little*, not as much, as possible.)

“A good scientist is a person with original ideas. A good engineer is a person who makes a design that works with as few original ideas as possible.” — Dyson, Freeman, *Disturbing the Universe*, Basic Books, N.Y., 1979, p. 114.

All of which drove me further into the theoretical and away from practical programming. In fact, already by this time I couldn’t deny that I hated ordinary, day-to-day programming — most of all because of the enormous amount of utterly ephemeral information you had to keep in your head, and because nothing you produced had any lasting value.

Percy Smith

From the start, programming was regarded as an esoteric skill, one that you probably had to be born with. The programmers, seeing the financial advantages of this attitude, did nothing to discourage it. One programmer I worked with, Percy Smith, an Australian, was by no means the most extreme case. I had been assigned to adapt several of his programs for our purposes. I soon found out that none of his programs contained any comments (these were explanations, or at least hints, in English, as to what the various parts of the program were actually doing, for example,

“Read input and check for errors”, “Find location in memory where ... is stored”, “Compute value of ...”, and so forth). Furthermore, the names he gave to his variables had absolutely nothing to do with the contents of the variable. Thus, for example, in a given program, he would name his variables X1, X2, X3, ..., and so forth, whereas a more compassionate programmer would have named them, for example, XIN, YIN, ZIN, XTEMP, YTEMP, ZTEMP, SUM, AVG, OUTPUT (meaning, respectively, “value of X input”, and similarly for Y and Z, “temporary storage for X value”, and similarly for Y and Z, “computed sum”, “computed average”, “final value to be output”).

Since, as always, time was short, I went to him and asked him why he hadn’t included comments in his programs. He replied, in words I have never forgotten, “Anyone who needs comments in a program has no business being a programmer.” In other words, if you are *really* programming material, you consider it part of your job to spend hours deciphering other people’s programs, even though a few minutes spent by the original programmers in writing comments would save you most of that time. I wanted no part of that kind of labor, but I had to respect the kind of patience and intelligence it involved. The husband of a friend of Marcella’s, a physicist, who was at our house once, said that he enjoyed taking apart discarded integrated circuits, beginning by opening their plastic containers, and then, using a microscope, figuring out the logical functions that the circuits implemented, and where the defects were, and then salvaging the still working functions for use in circuits of his own design. Amazing! Words cannot describe how little interest I had in that kind of labor. As we sat on the couch, he gave me a puzzle in which he drew the front and side views of an object and I had to figure out what the object looked like in reality. I was able to do this, and I sensed that his respect for me rose, though this was nothing to brag about, considering what he must have thought of technical writers to begin with.

Academic theoreticians, I should point out, had little use for the kind of arrogance that Percy displayed, and in fact some of the best of them, including Edsger Dijkstra, built a career out of attempts to solve the problem of writing programs that were not only readily understandable but also demonstrably correct. Yet in all my years as a programmer, and in working with programmers, I never came across a programmer who thought it worth while to spend time writing helpful comments.

A Feynman Experience

As one project in the Cupertino Division was ending, and it was not clear which one I would be working on next, the manager asked me to help a guy who was fixing bugs in a large program written in some version of Basic. The guy was from the Dutch East Indies, and had full cheeks and big lips which reminded me of one of the figures in Van Gogh’s “The Potato Eaters”.

I had no interest in this kind of work, but knew that I had to show M & I (Motivation and Interest) if I wanted to keep myself in the running for any better jobs that might come along. I knew nothing about the program, still less about the operating system it was running under. The guy had been given a list of bugs to fix and had picked the one to work on next. I tried to ask intelligent questions, knowing nothing. We were standing at the machine, looking at a page in the listing that might possibly contain the source of the bug. In the page of statements, I looked for a cluster that seemed more nearly incomprehensible than the rest and, pointing to it, asked him, in so many words, “What’s going on here?” He looked, thought for a moment, said, “Well, let’s see...” and began setting breakpoints in the program (these are instructions that cause the program to stop running, so that you can check the values of various variables at any stage of a computation). I stood there, watching him. He did further checking, suddenly smiled, said, “That’s it.

You were right.” Thereafter, he regarded me as an unusually capable and insightful programmer, even though I repeatedly told him the truth, namely, that it was only a guess.

The experience was similar to one I read about many years later in which the physicist Richard Feynman, asked to help find a problem in a piece of machinery when he was working at Los Alamos, and, knowing nothing about the machinery, had stabbed his finger at a random place on one of the drawings, asked, “What about that?” and, lo and behold, where he had pointed turned out to be the source of the problem.

Henry Hoffman

I held several different programming jobs during the seventies. I remember next to nothing of the details of the work — it had become that boring — but I remember something about the people I worked with, and for. My boss for one job was Henry Hoffman, another of those remarkable self-taught craftsmen like Cross and Mulraney. He was Swiss, and, what seemed to me for a moment surprising, spoke with the same accent as my parents. He was short, with cropped hair, had a purposeful manner, and always came to work on time. As far as I know, he had no interest or background in programming theory. He may have had some technical education at one time, but my impression was that everything he knew about computers he had picked up on his own. He had the same infinite patience with machinery as my father. He seemed to have memorized everything that anyone would need to know about not only the software but also the hardware. On hot days, for example, the air conditioning in the computer room was not powerful enough to keep the computers at their proper operating temperature, with the result that they frequently stopped running, or else began exhibiting bizarre behavior. There was Henry, with a screwdriver in his pocket, removing panels, making now this, now that adjustment, and bringing them back to life. I was quite certain he could fix anything.

Barbara Sturgeon

Henry had a technician working for him named Barbara Sturgeon, a young woman perhaps in her late twenties, with dandruffy eyelids. She seemed pleasant enough, rational enough, but as time went on Henry and the rest of us found that we had a real case on our hands. The first sign was her rather unorthodox approach to child care. She was divorced and had a five- or six-year-old daughter. In the course of conversation, she revealed that, since she couldn’t afford a babysitter, she often took her daughter with her when she went to the movies. This might have been harmless enough in itself except that, among the movies she had taken the child to were *The Exorcist*, often ranked as one of the most terrifying movies ever made. When we expressed shock at this, and asked how the girl had handled it, she shrugged, said that she comforted her as best she could, told her it was all right not to look at the scary parts, and so forth. Unfortunately, the scary parts are as much due to sound — for example, the sound of the demon’s voice in the body of the young girl — as to sight. The next sign of what we were dealing with was when Henry called me aside and said that one of the upper-level managers had been crossing the parking lot around seven one morning and had noticed a child alone in a car. He stormed in, demanding to know what employee was guilty of such child neglect, and found out it was our Barbara. He wanted an explanation. She said that, since she couldn’t afford a babysitter for the time between the time when she came to work and the time when she had to deliver the girl to the day-care center, she just left her in the car. The manager insisted she find another way to deal with the problem, which, I assume, she did.

Henry now asked me to act as her project lead, since she was having trouble carrying out her

duties. It turned out that she wanted to learn programming, and asked me to help her learn, which I was glad to do — except that I slowly realized that I was dealing with a person who, in the most basic sense of the word, *did not know how to reason*. The phrase has the softness of a cliché because no one means it literally. Yet here it was literally true. I would explain, for example, that “LDA X” meant “load the A register with the contents of the memory location named X”. But the statement “LDA Y” was, for her, an entirely different statement, with possibly an entirely different, unrelated meaning. It was not remotely clear to her that it might mean, say, “load the A register with the contents of the memory location named Y”. She was unable to understand what a *rule* was, namely, something that applied to different cases of a certain sort. The statement “JSB ADD” (jump to the subroutine named “ADD”) was, for her, an entirely different statement from “JSB MULT” (jump to the subroutine named “MULT”). But I never lost my temper with her, never mocked her in any way, because she was a living lesson in how much we take for granted when we speak of the ability to reason.

All right: so not all of us are meant to be programmers. But the full extent of her bizarre view of the world of programming had yet to reveal itself. As I have described above, at that time programmers wrote their programs on coding sheets. A technician, or the programmer himself, would then type each statement onto an IBM card, and then the deck of resulting IBM cards would be read into computer memory by a mechanical card reader so that the program could be run. Debugging the program was done by the programmer standing at the machine, running the part of the program believed to contain the error, then correcting the erroneous code, for example, by inserting a link to a part of memory containing code you entered by hand, then linking back to the instruction immediately following the link. (These changes in memory could be made by flipping switches on the front panel.) Then corrected cards would be typed up and these inserted in the deck.

Sometimes, after an afternoon and evening of strenuous debugging, the program seemed to work correctly, but the next morning, when you loaded the corrected deck, new errors would suddenly appear. It happened to several of us. Surely we couldn’t have been *that* tired the previous night! Eventually, we found out what the trouble was: Barbara had somehow gotten the idea that it would help the programmers if she judiciously reshuffled some of their decks — that that would make the program run better. We couldn’t believe it when we first heard it, because this implied no grasp of the most elementary concept of programming, namely, that a program consists of an ordered sequence of steps, each one on a separate card, any disturbance of this order for all practical purposes destroying the program. Here was a person who was truly beyond reach.

Since I was her project lead, I went to Henry and laid my cards on the table (literally and figuratively). He said her performance review was coming up and he wanted me to give him my ranking of her performance in the various work categories, so that he could take it into account. I said that my rankings weren’t going to be high, but that we had to do something to get across to her that she wasn’t doing a good job. Then he made an astute observation: if he gave her too low a performance rating, we would never be able to get rid of her (HP strongly discouraged outright firing of employees except in the most extreme cases, and so our only hope was to get her to transfer to another department). No manager would want an employee who had poor performance ratings. So we gave her a much higher performance rating than she deserved, after which Henry in the nicest possible way encouraged her to look for work elsewhere, making up some excuse which I no longer remember — perhaps that his budget had been cut, or that the technical level of the job might be a bit higher than her present knowledge could comfortably handle.

After I left the department, I heard that, yes, indeed, he had finally got her to transfer out. So

his strategy had worked. Her new manager, however, soon realized what he had on his hands, and after trying to get her to do better, had fired her.

Some weeks later, the head of Personnel happened to see her employee folder, and immediately hit the ceiling. He was quoted as saying that he would be damned if an employee with as good a previous performance record as she had (thanks to Henry and me) was going to be fired by Hewlett-Packard. He demanded she be hired back.

And she was.

Equally bizarre was what Webb told me about two engineers in his division who were told to find other jobs (in the company) because business was too slow in that division. Fortunately, they were able to, but afterward one of them asked his former boss why he and the other engineer had been chosen to move out. The answer, apparently reflecting the actual reasoning used by management, was “Because you and he are such good engineers, we felt you would have the least trouble finding other jobs.”

A Rebel Gets Fired

Which is not to say that no one ever got fired from HP. For example, in the Cupertino Division there was the case of the technical writer who had this wild idea that a program could be written that would enable technical writers to actually type in their text to the computer, then format it and print it out, instead of using a typewriter and then having a repro typist copy the text by hand in order to create camera-ready copy to be printed. In other words, he wanted to work on what we now know as a word-processor. Unfortunately, he had a reputation for being eccentric: he lived in a trailer somewhere in San Jose, one that was just barely large enough to contain his grand piano. He was stubborn with managers, this behavior arising, as he made clear in conversations at lunch, from his contempt for their stupidity. His manager gave him perfunctory praise for his creativity, then told him to get back to work. He refused, insisting that he was on to an idea that would be worth a fortune to the company. The manager turned him down, but the writer continued working on his own project. The manager met with higher managers, and they offered him a deal: work 75% of the time on writing and he could have 25% free to work on his project. He turned them down. More discussions, more negotiating. Eventually — and incredibly — they offered him just the reverse: work 75% of the on his project, and 25% on HP's. He still turned them down, arguing that his idea was so important that he should be allowed to work on it full-time. They continued to try to reach an agreement with him, but now he refused to show up for meetings on the subject. Rumor had it he just went home to his trailer and spent the time playing his piano.

And so eventually he was fired.

Now one of HP's numerous employee benefits was something called an Open Door policy, which gave every employee the right to go all the way to the top — to Hewlett and Packard themselves — if they didn't like the way the lower managers had attempted to satisfy a grievance. This writer invoked that policy and apparently made it all the way to Hewlett himself with his complaint that he had been fired unjustly.

One day, as I was walking along a corridor, one of the upper managers stopped me and asked me if I knew about the case. I said I did. The manager had a clipboard and several sheets of paper. He said Hewlett had asked the managers involved to go around and ask employees what they thought about the firing. I said (truthfully) that I thought it was completely justified, since in the last analysis a company has a right to ask an employee to do what it wants the employee to do. The manager made some notes, thanked me for my comments, and moved on to question other employees. A rare company indeed in which the president asks coworkers of a fired employee if

they thought the firing was just or not!

The HP Way

The truth was that, apart from bizarre stubbornness like that of the writer, if you proved yourself over your first couple of years with the company, for all practical purposes you got tenure. Until the late eighties, it was virtually impossible to be fired if you showed up and made some sort of effort, no matter how mediocre. This policy arose, first, from Hewlett and Packard's genuine desire to treat employees decently — unlike the way employees were treated at many other companies in burgeoning Silicon Valley. But the policy also arose from the founders' desire to keep the unions out: they would simply pay their workers more, and give them better benefits, including better job security, than they could get with any union. I recall a couple of attempts to unionize the company — guys handing out flyers in parking lots — but as far as I know the attempts never went anywhere.

The virtual tenure policy also meant no layoffs, Hewlett and Packard believing, and I think correctly, that it was far more expensive to lay employees off when business was slow, then have to hire and train new employees when things picked up. During one of these slow periods, several managers asked Hewlett why the company didn't start bidding for more defense contracts, which were known to be especially lucrative. Hewlett replied that the defense business was a notoriously feast-or-famine proposition. He would not allow more than 30% of the company's business to be in that field.

So when things were slow, as they were on several occasions, Hewlett and Packard would order a cutback in working hours (for example, every other Friday we were to stay home) and salary. (The salary cutback might have been as high as 15% once or twice, I am not sure.) This applied top to bottom — from Hewlett and Packard themselves down to the lowliest janitor. An indication of employee morale is that not only did employees accept the salary reduction without complaint, but the company had to post guards at the doors to prevent the engineers and programmers from coming to work anyway, and thus building up unwanted inventory. In 2009, at the start of the Great Recession, CEO Mark Hurd took a 20% cut in salary, his top executives 10-15%, but the rank-and-file only had to take 5% or less. There were no layoffs as far as I know.

And there was compassion for individuals, too. I recall a manufacturing engineer in the Santa Clara Division who was known to have a severe drinking problem. Yet the company kept him on, giving him work, at least so the story went, that he could perform satisfactorily despite his problem.

The Amigo Project

Around 1976, the company decided that what it needed to produce was a desktop computer, to be called "Amigo", that would be all things to all people. It would allow users to program in all the then-popular languages, including Fortran, Basic, RPG (IBM's "Report Program Generator"), and Assembly language. Furthermore, the operating system and the hardware (the "chip set", that is, the integrated circuits that would perform all the logical operations of the computer) would all be designed and built from scratch. The operating system would be written in the company's own version of Pascal, a language to be called "SPL" ("System Programming Language"). The logic circuits would *not* be constructed from commercially available chips, but instead would be designed by Amigo engineers and fabricated at HP's own fabrication site on Deer Creek Road in

Palo Alto. Amigo would have an “automatic” installation and configuration facility, making it easy for users to adjust the system precisely to their own particular requirements.

The project was to be managed by a young guy, short, blond, named Jim Cockrum, whose somewhat affected manner of speaking led some of us to wonder if he was gay. Word of the project went out throughout the company, and programmers began applying to work on it. I somehow heard that one feature they wanted to include was an online Help system, though I’m not sure that the term “online” was in use in those days. I immediately felt that this was a feature that was meant for me, since I had both the skills of both a programmer and a technical writer. The management apparently felt the same way, and so I was hired to lead the Help project, with permission to hire one other person to work with me. That person turned out to be a young woman named Amy T — .

Amy T—

We were a team from the start. She had a grace and sexiness about her, a soft, feminine manner, and seemed perfectly willing to let me be in charge. She seemed to look up to me, made me feel powerful. Because I was in charge, and she was soft and eager-to-please, I wanted to make love to her like mad, particularly from behind. She was married to a guy named Jim, a manager in a start-up trucking company. The two of them were building a house in an area called Las Cumbres, near Skyline Drive, which ran along near the top of the mountains that stood between the Peninsula and the ocean. Several HP executives had bought land there. It originally belonged to a wealthy eccentric who had offered the land for sale on condition that the average housing density would never become greater than one house per ten acres.

Amy was a good programmer. I knew from the beginning what I wanted the product to be, and she seemed willing to go along with it. The user would be able to type in any string of words describing what he or she wanted information on, and then our program would first clear out what we called the “junk” words, like “a”, “and”, “the”, then try to find the closest match it could with items in the index. If the match was sufficiently close, it would display the first page of the page referenced; otherwise, it would simply display the nearest match in the index. Functionally, the program was what you now find as part of the Help facilities in most operating systems and other programs. But at the time, it was new, or at least new to the Amigo staff. I also insisted that we record what people typed, and what the program did in response, so we could find out what the shortcomings of the program were and, in particular, add new terms to the index.

We parcelled out the work and got down to business. I enjoyed working with her, not only because we were producing something worthwhile together but also because doing so was sexually stimulating. In order to make the program that read what the user typed as efficient as possible, I had several discussions with John Walters, one of the experts at HP Labs in Palo Alto, about natural language processing.

Remarkably, we finished the project on schedule. (It was the first and only programming project I ever worked on that was ever finished.) I wrote pages of sample Help text, and did the index entries. We began inviting the other programmers to test it. (One of them entered “Rumplestiltskin” just to see what would happen. The program behaved as it should, namely, gave the most nearly matching item in the index.) On the whole, the program worked fairly well and aroused no strongly hostile criticisms.

During the project, Amy became ill, missed days of work. She called and said she had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. I don’t remember how long she was out, but when she came back, the evidence of the illness was all too apparent. She was unable even to carry the program

listings to the computer room, although they were considerably thinner than those for other projects, and instead she had to push them there on a cart. I tried to keep her workload as light as possible. She was certainly still capable of doing productive work. Then, one day, she said she had found a doctor in Los Angeles who had written several articles about a treatment for the disease involving heavy doses of vitamins and a special diet of only organically grown food, especially fruits and vegetables. She was clearly enthusiastic about it. Gradually, she seemed to overcome her halting walk. She would talk about her progress. She had started walking to the end of her block and back. Then she tried jogging a few steps. Soon she was able to run a quarter of a mile without stopping. She and her husband decided to go ahead and have a baby.

Her improved health continued for years thereafter. She eventually left HP and did free-lance work for a while. Then, in the early eighties, she had a relapse. She recovered, and had a second child. I called her once to find out how she was doing; she spoke hesitatingly; I got the impression that the disease had begun to take its toll. I do not know if she is still alive.

Howard Smith

Our boss on the Help project was a black man named Howard Smith, the first black I had ever worked for. Like Manny, he sensed that I worked best if I was left alone, and so he did. He had a friendly manner, never seemed worried or pressured. “How ya dawin’?” he would say, when we passed each other in the aisles between the cubicles, or when we sat down in his office to discuss the progress of the Help project. He had a passion for a brand of popcorn whose name he said was too difficult to pronounce. I gathered later that he meant Orville Redenbacher’s.

I always had the impression he regarded me with a wry sense of humor. He seemed at ease talking to me. I, in turn, felt supremely confident as his employee, and, of course, was determined to do what I could to help him succeed, because I wanted him to be an example for other blacks. He was divorced, but from our conversations, I sensed he was not wanting for female companionship. He owned at least two homes in Sunnyvale, clearly had an eye on making wise investments. Prior to coming to HP, he had worked for H. Ross Perot’s company, Electronic Data Systems (EDS). He said the money was good, but that you had to be prepared to be awakened at three in the morning to go and fix a customer’s problems. He said that Perot had a phenomenal memory for faces, and once had recognized Howard in an airport. They chatted briefly, then H. Ross invited him to dinner the next time he was in Dallas. Howard took him up on his offer and enjoyed an outstanding meal at the Perot mansion.

Soon after I began working for Howard, I sat down with him and told him I was determined to become the best programmer I was capable of becoming, and so I asked him to grade me as hard as possible in my annual reviews. He seemed a little surprised at an employee making such a request, but he promised he would. I nevertheless received high ratings, as I recall.

With Manny Gordon at Beckman and one or two others, Howard was among the best bosses I had during my years in industry.

Tom Whitney

In my working life, I had perhaps four bosses whom I considered truly outstanding. Two we have already met, namely, John Strohmeier of the *Bethlehem Globe-Times* and Manny Gordon at Beckman. The third was Tom Whitney. He had made a name for himself as the product manager for Hewlett’s Project, that is, the HP 35 pocket calculator. As a reward, the company gave him a year off, presumably with full pay, plus generous bonuses. Later I found out that he had gone to the Sierras during that time, and meditated and played guitar.

John H—

A major presence on the project was John H — , an aggressive, superconfident, at times arrogant blond guy with a moustache. The word was that he was having an affair with with one of the woman programmers, a boyish blonde. They seemed made for each other, the electricity tangible when they were together. Both radiated an attitude that might be expressed as, “We are the best. We have no time for fools. We hope you are keeping up.” They would cast knowing glances at each other during meetings. His wife apparently new about the affair and, at least for the time being, had decided to put up with it.

He more or less elected himself to be foreman, or overseer, of daily operations. Once he came up to my desk, dumped a pile of my listings on it, and made it clear he would appreciate it if in the future I picked up my listings as soon as I printed them out.

He was also a runner, and so I occasionally suggested that we go running during lunch, perhaps even have a race. He elected to have it be a race and set a time at a nearby track. I went out there, feeling confident, and when he took his place at the starting line and asked me if I was ready, I replied, “Consider me a coiled spring.” I think the race was to be a mile. Ready, set, go! He set off in that serious, no-nonsense way of his, immediately setting a fast pace. I kept up with him for less than a quarter of a mile, then saw that I was going to lose, and so, with stomach in knots, did my best to finish not too far behind him. He was breathing hard at the end, but clearly felt he had put me in my place. No smile, no jokes. The only thing he said was, “Coiled spring, eh.”

Once he had a party at his house in Palo Alto for members of the project. The place was not lavish, but to me seemed the first house of a man on his way up. I remember thinking how nice his wife seemed: attentive, soft, caring, exactly the opposite of the hot number her husband was screwing on the side.

Wally Utz

A real character on the Amigo project was Walter Utz, whom everyone called “Wally”. He was one of the funniest men I have ever known — the kind of person you would describe as naturally, instinctively, funny. Like me, he was losing his hair, only in his case, the thinning was occurring uniformly, so that his hairline was as it had been, and he had no bald spot. It was just that there were fewer hairs per square inch of scalp as time went on. Furthermore, since he had reddish-blond hair, the thinning process was less obvious. Sometimes you thought that his hair only looked thin, but maybe wasn’t really, because the color was so near to flesh color.

He was — or at least pretended to be — the quintessential harassed family man. He would have us in stitches over lunch describing the demands of the wife, the kids running amok, the various appliances he felt obligated to keep supplying them with, and which were always breaking down. Once, he built a Hammond organ from a kit he bought. I remember seeing it in the center of his living room at an open house he held for members of the project.

His father had been a doctor in a small town. I remember Wally once telling me, in a discussion of the medical profession in which as usual I expressed my awe of doctors, that his father had said that 80% of the work he — and by implication, all general practitioners — did was routine, and could have been done by someone with far less training.

He was a low-level manager, and one summer, the son of Barney Oliver, the director of HP Labs, the company’s elite research facility, was given a job on the project. Wally was to be his

boss. The son was a tall, blond, rather distracted-seeming young guy. We would talk sometimes over lunch or at coffee breaks. He had started his college education at Stanford, majoring in physics, I think, then had retreated to something less demanding, but still technical, and continued to work his way down until he was now working on a degree in French. But he had sufficient technical acumen to recognize what was wrong with Amigo, and he didn't hesitate to tell the managers. Furthermore, he persisted in proposing improvements, and neglected the assignments that Wally gave him. Eventually, Wally told us, he had to fire him. A few weeks later, at a company party, he saw Barney. Wally gave us a description of his anxiety when he saw Barney walking toward him. "This is it. End of the career. So long to the car, the house, the wife, the kids. Bye, kids, be nice to mom. I'll try to write..." But he was amazed to find that Barney actually congratulated him for doing what was necessary.

Karen Chez

Karen was a remarkable young woman. She didn't seem to be part of the insider clique, but instead always seemed to be busy going her own way, working hard, but at the same time always embarked on some project to make things better. She was a bit on the heavy side, whereas her husband, Ron Mak, also a programmer on the project, was thin. I think she was the one who proposed the idea of our forming a self-improvement group, as described below.

As I recall, they were responsible for my winning honorable mention in a programming contest. In any case, hanging on a nail in the closet in my study is a pink award ribbon. On one side it says:

"PENINSULA CHAPTER ACM PROGRAMMING CONTEST HONORABLE MENTION"
and on the other side:

"Winner John Franklin Date 1979

Event

Age Group

Time or Dist. "

(The remainder of the information wasn't filled in.) I have no idea what program I entered in the contest.

Tom Gilbert

Tom Gilbert was a living incarnation of the true believer. When I first knew him, he was a follower of the Guru Mararishi Mahesh Yogi, a fifteen-year-old Indian fat kid who had built a large nationwide following. Tom described to me attending a huge gathering in Dallas or Houston, possibly in the Houston Astrodome, in which he had run through the streets barefoot and thereby had earned the privilege of kissing the Yogi's feet. Tom seemed to consider it important that I not see this as an act of abject submission.

We often discussed the phenomenon of enlightenment. I told him, just to get a rise out of him, that I felt that when someone became enlightened, they should throw an Enlightenment Party and proudly wear a badge announcing their new status. He couldn't help laughing at the colossal missing-the-whole-point, the colossal *unenlightenment*, that such a party would represent.

I once told him (thinking I had made it up myself), "Life is a banquet but most poor fools are starving." He looked at me somewhat askance and with a smile that he was clearly trying not to make condescending, reminded me that the line came from the film *Auntie Mame*, and that everyone knew that.

He was married to a woman doctor who worked for the Public Health Department. They had

three kids, and lived in a tract house a few blocks from my Cupertino townhouse. I met his wife once at a social function. She seemed intelligent, serious, humorless, and no wonder: two of their kids were already in trouble. I think the youngest, not yet a teenager, had been removed from the home and placed under psychiatric care. Eventually, there was a divorce.

A few years later, when I had left the Amigo project, Tom called me, or I called him, and he revealed that he had decided to have a sex change operation. He was in the preliminary stage that Stanford required before the actual operation, during which he had to dress and live as a woman to be sure that this was the life he wanted. He invited me to drop by, he now having moved to a house that was one of a row of three-bedroom houses just down the street from my townhouse. I knocked, he opened the door. I don't recall if he was wearing a dress, but he was wearing lipstick and he spoke effeminately. We shook hands, I stepped inside. He said that the woman next door was coaching him in how to behave like a woman. Throughout my visit, I felt uncomfortable, kept wanting to say to him, "Come on, Tom, act normal, let's go out and get a beer." It was definitely hard work to try to regard as a woman, a man you had worked with for several years and had always regarded as a man, if a somewhat odd one.

Later, I heard, or he told me, that he had decided not to have the operation after all, and now had a girlfriend.

Dick Somrak

Also on the team was a guy named Dick Somrak who had an amusingly profane manner of speaking. He was overweight, bald, had formerly run a gas station, then more or less learned programming as best he could on various jobs. He was one of those dedicated employees without a trace of theoretical background who nevertheless somehow got programs to work. He knew a great deal about guns. He told me a good store in San Jose to buy the first revolver I ever owned, a Ruger .38.

Marcy Rothermel

H — was a member of, perhaps informal leader of, a group of hotshot programmers on the project, a group which, inevitably, had its groupies, one of whom was a young woman named Marcy Rothermel. She wasn't a beauty, had straight red hair, a kind of trampy walk, and clearly seemed to think it important to be hanging out with the right guys. I knew nothing about her work, but something about her suggested to me she was a not-quite-getting-it programmer for whom other things were far more important.

Ted —

Ted was a programmer with the unique distinction of having recently earned a PhD in mathematics at Princeton. Yet he had none of the arrogance that always seemed to go with that degree. In fact, he always gave me the impression that he felt inadequate around all the other programmers, this despite the fact that the intellectual accomplishment of getting a PhD from one of the best mathematics departments in the country was far greater than writing programs for HP, or, indeed for any other company. He showed me his thesis, which was on topology. I knew a little about topology at that time, but the thesis was way over my head. I asked him if he could give me just an overview. He was glad to do it, and I was surprised and pleased that he had none of the haughty contempt that professional mathematicians typically have when asked to explain their work to a non-specialist. His explanation, I remember, was full of mathematics slang: "OK, so you've got this gadget that goes in and ... " the term "gadget" referring to a function. My instinct

about the thesis, on the basis of no understanding of its subject at all, was that it was another case of a mountain that had been made out of a molehill — that it was largely a demonstration of the author's ability to write in the jargon of a specialty. I say this with regret because there was nothing in his personality that encouraged such a judgement. He had done what he had to do in order to get his degree.

He later gave me a copy, which I took home and carefully filed. And yet today it is gone, despite hours of searching for it. To this day I can see it in my left hand, with its beige or gray cover, as I prepare to put it in a folder in the second drawer of the filing cabinet in my study, sun coming in through the window in my house in Berkeley, where I moved in 1988, as will be described. Today it is nowhere to be found — not among my topology texts and notes, not in my HP folders.

I have forgotten on which project we worked — I believe it was Amigo, but I am not sure. What I do remember distinctly is a meeting in which he had been asked to explain something about a program he was working on. His mathematics education had taught him that technical knowledge is an all-or-nothing proposition: you explain everything, or you explain nothing. You go through the textbook starting on p. 1, then p. 2, then p. 3, and only when you have gone through it in its entirety, or at least to the degree your professor has required, can you say you understand the subject. So he began by describing his program virtually line by line, giving far more detail than any of the programmers wanted. There was a shuffling of feet, impatient coughs, then a couple of the programmers told him flat out that he was taking too long, couldn't he please just give them the jist. I remember his embarrassed expression, his shame even, at having failed to deliver what was wanted. I felt sorry for him, later tried to console him.

I Meet Hewlett and Packard

Once a year, each division was required to make a presentation to Hewlett and Packard describing what their new products were going to be for the next year. No one complained about this: everyone understood that, after all, the two founders of the company had a right to know how their money was going to be spent. But the presentations were something of an ordeal for the management of the division, because the two founders were less interested in glowing predictions of future profits than they were in solid answers to the probing questions they inevitably asked if these questions were not answered in the presentations themselves: "Why do you believe the market will be interested in this product?" "What is the unique contribution that this product will make to our customers?" (One of the principles of the HP Way was that each product should make a contribution.) "What do you expect profit margins to be?"

The Amigo project was well known to them, since it was being billed as the start of a whole new generation of computers. So our managers were in the spotlight. After the presentations, several of the project teams, including mine, were asked to give short demonstrations of the prototypes that had been developed so far. Amy and I worked up a little script, tested it, and waited in one of the labs with members of the other teams. Hewlett and Packard went from demo to demo, talking, asking questions. Finally they came to ours. Someone introduced them, along with a third guy who was with them, and we shook hands. Packard was taller than I expected, Hewlett shorter. Then we went through our script. Afterward, they asked a few easy questions. Packard's were somewhat perfunctory; he seemed merely to be going through the motions, although I didn't hold it against him, since he had been viewing presentations for days, now. Hewlett's questions were a little more to the point. I think we did a passable job of answering. They thanked us, and

moved on. But the third guy remained and chatted with us, discussed possible future developments of our system. From his comments, and his perfectly ordinary manner, I assumed he was a technician from the next lab. So afterward, as we programmers stood around discussing the event, I remarked, “You know, some of these technicians are pretty smart.” Someone asked me who in particular I was referring to. I said the guy who was tagging along with Hewlett and Packard. Everyone laughed. “That was John Young!” This “technician” was a vice president of the company, and was being groomed to take over as Chief Executive Officer, which he eventually became.

“Too Interested in Theory”

After our Help system was running, and awaited only the addition of words to explain how to use the product, I was transferred to another group, this one under Fred Clegg. He was a Stanford PhD in, I think, electrical engineering, who already owned a nice house in the wooded hills above Palo Alto. I developed an instant dislike for him; I couldn’t stand his arrogant, Stanford elitism. On top of this, I was losing virtually all interest in the daily programming on the project, since it was so hopelessly difficult for all except the few who had memorized all the arcane information needed to get any work done. Edsger Dijkstra’s latest book, *A Discipline of Programming*, had just been published, and, telling myself that mastery of this book would enable me not only to become a better programmer, but would allow me to teach some of the concepts to the others and thus help save the project, I began to study it. Clegg recognized a misfit when he saw one, and gave me poor performance reviews, I think for the first time in my career. Being an engineer, he had no use for theoretical matters like proving the correctness of programs (or so it seemed to me). I retaliated by studying Dijkstra even more, and writing up a set of notes for others to use when they were reading the book (a few glanced at it, none that I knew of felt it was worth their time to study it). But clearly my days were numbered.

My principal problem in a nutshell was that I never wanted to do what I was supposed to; instead I wanted to think about it and figure out a better way. I was only good at asking questions, not at learning, not at developing a skill. My other problem was that, with the exception of compiler theory, none of the to-me-interesting theoretical subjects held any interest for any of the programmers or engineers in the division. Their attitude was: If it has no practical value, why waste time studying it?

I probably finished myself off in Fred’s eyes when, walking to lunch one day with him and several other programmers, the subject of annual rainfall came up. I, attempting to be witty, remarked that the annual measurements were meaningless, because if the basin collecting the rainfall were infinitely large, the water would never reach any height, and if the basin were arbitrarily small, for example, a tube with arbitrarily small diameter, the probability of a drop falling into it was zero for rainfall over a finite period of time. I was walking behind Fred, but he didn’t so much as turn his head to deliver his response: rainfall is a function of total amount of water falling per unit area, so that if the area is expanded or reduced, the total amount is expanded or reduced accordingly, and the figure remains the same. There was not the shadow of a doubt of how stupid he thought my observation was.

At my next performance review, he gave me a bad rating. “John is very organized,” he wrote in the comments section, and made it clear that this was the best he could say for me. Exasperated by my lack of contribution to the project, he suggested, with visible sarcasm, that maybe I belonged in HP Labs, the company’s research facility in Palo Alto.

“You Can Write a Program to Solve a Problem You Can’t Solve”

For Christmas 1974 Marcella gave me a puzzle. On a board measuring about four inches on a side were rows of holes. Steel balls were supplied that fit into the holes, the number of balls being one less than the number of holes. As in the game of checkers, you were allowed to jump a ball over a single ball into the empty hole immediately beyond it, in which case the jumped-over ball was removed from the board. Starting with only the center hole empty, the object of the game was to remove, by successive jumps, all the balls except one. I was unable to do this even once and it made me furious. Marcella soon became sorry she had given me this present. HP employees had a few days off around Christmas, and so I swallowed my pride and went into the office and wrote an Algol program to solve it. The program generated numerous solutions. This had a long-reaching influence on my view of the computer and on IQ tests. Who is more intelligent: a person who can solve a problem on his own, or a person who can’t, but who can write a program to find far more solutions than the person on his own — in fact, all possible solutions, at least in principle?

Divorce

Once, when the McKinneys were over and the discussion of having more children came up, I blurted out that I thought one had to consider the world population problem when thinking about having more kids. Marcella immediately became angry, said there are certain things you can’t decide on an intellectual basis, as I always tried to do. I realized on the one hand how my remark must have struck at the very essence of her womanhood, but on the other hand I realized my boundless contempt for such female thinking about such important matters.

By 1974, the marriage was breaking up. When I went upstairs to study or write, she felt I was deliberately abandoning her. “You were meant to live alone”, she said once. The roof over the laundry room needed repair and somehow it was decided I should do the job. So every Saturday and Sunday I stepped into an even deeper gloom than my usual one. I hated the thought of the work and I hated every minute of doing it. I carefully wrote out each step of the process, forced myself to read the how-to books, forced myself to try to think straight about the project. The roof was slightly uneven, not perfectly flat the way it always is in the pictures in the books, so immediately I knew I was doomed to failure again. I bought the asphalt shingles, began nailing them down with the large-headed roofing nails. Every moment an agony. Please, God, let me just go somewhere and read a book.

My mother continued to make subtle comments about the possibility that Marcella wasn’t a good mother, until one day Marcella finally lost her temper and to her face called her a spoiled, neurotic old bitch. My mother thus succeeded, at last, in obtaining what she had been after all along, namely, another person who hated her and whom she could permanently hate.

Marcella knew all too well the murderous depression in which I now lived, and she hated me for it. When I couldn’t handle things any more, I took my best revenge on her, namely, the silent treatment. (“Silence is the most perfect expression of scorn.” — Shaw, G. B., *Back to Methusalem*, Part V.) I would go for days without saying a single word to her. I knew it hurt her, but I was also hoping that it would prevent Jeffrey from noticing that we were fighting.

Once I threw a plate across the kitchen at her. It smashed against the wall near the sink, the pieces hitting her (good!). But that was the only time I was physically violent against her.

We tried to make up. She had several times during the marriage asked to read my journal. After one of our fights, I finally consented, hoping that it would show her how utterly miserable I

was. Afterward, when I asked her what she had thought of it, she said, without sarcasm or hostility, in fact, even with a certain quiet sympathy, “It’s what I expected”.

I don’t remember when she first mentioned our separating, but I do remember that, among the pleas I made, one was the financial one: with our two incomes, we could live well indeed, buy a house big enough so that each could have his or her privacy, and it would be better for Jeffrey if we stayed together. But she didn’t buy financial arguments. I think I might even have offered her the right to have an affair, provided I didn’t know any of the details, and provided that none of the neighbors or the people at HP knew about it. She turned down the idea immediately.

After a fight, and another reconciliation, I went into the living room and curled up on the floor. She came in and lay down next to me. I took her in my arms, kissed her. She said, through her tears, “I love you”, and it was the last time she ever said these words to me.

I had the impression that she had thought through the matter of a separation, considered, on the one hand, my poor, now nonexistent, sexual performance and my depressions, on the other hand, the fact that I was a good father and that I earned a good living, and decided that the first wasn’t worth the second. I had the impression she was determined to go through with a divorce even though she knew it would be painful for her.

Later, when the idea of divorce was out in the open, she said, once, crying, “But can we remain friends?” We got the Nolo Press book, *How to Do Your Own Divorce in California, With The Forms You Will Need To Do It*.¹ I went to the Court House in San Jose, got the forms. I think we did the whole thing for about \$45.

We agreed to split everything fifty-fifty. I asked for 50% of the net value when the house was sold, since that was the beginning of the huge increase in real estate prices in the Bay Area. She said she didn’t want to be saddled with that obligation for the indefinite future. She wanted to settle everything once and for all. I gave in and settled for cash in the amount of half of the current value of the house, which value was then about \$45,000. When she sold the place a few years later, it was for tens of thousands more. She wanted single custody on the grounds that joint custody wouldn’t be necessary since I could visit Jeffrey whenever I wanted to. I agreed. (And, in fact, we never had any problems about my seeing him.) Finally, we agreed that we should do everything we could not to make it any worse for Jeffrey: we should control our tempers, try to work out our differences, try to remain cordial toward each other. This we have done ever since.

Jeff told me, many years later, that as I was collecting my stuff in preparation for moving out, he asked me, “Where are you going?” and I replied “I’m going camping.” I realized, as I was packing, that all my science fiction magazines were missing: *Astounding Science Fiction*, *Galaxy*, and the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. I had kept them on a shelf in the living room but hadn’t looked at them in more than a year. Marcella denied knowing what happened to them but to this day I believe she threw them out, since she had a completely unsentimental attitude toward anything that was not of use at present. In early 1997, she insisted I destroy each of her letters as soon as I read them, and, of course, any old ones I might have saved. Every time I have asked her for her own recollections about our marriage, or at least about Jeff during those years, she has absolutely refused, without explanation. My initial feeling has always been, of course, that I had made the marriage such misery for her that she cannot bear to think back on it. Other people, however, have had different opinions, for example, that she can’t stand confronting the possibility that she may have been wrong about some things in her past. This side of her I have no

1. by Charles E. Sherman, Attorney at Law, Member Calif. State Bar, B.A., J.D., Fifth Edition

trouble disliking, nor her curt, no-nonsense dismissal of my afflictions, for example, my high ocular pressure.

Looking back over a distance of 40 years, I can't believe I endured the marriage as long as I did. The boundless anguish that any moment I might lose my home and my family because I wasn't measuring up — wasn't delivering the sexual goods, wasn't interested in working around the house, hated camping, spent too much time with my books and writing — the tying myself into knots trying to become the man I knew I should have been — I say to myself now: Nobody could have endured that for eight years. And yet I know equally well that a jury of our peers would unquestionably have found in Marcella's favor. She had every right to expect what she did of me. They were the expectations of a normal wife.

From the beginning, Marcella decided that I was the one who should move, since she needed a house for her and Jeff. Her firmness and self-control made it clear I had no choice. With my insides filled with death, I had to set out to find a home that would replace the one that she was taking away from me. I looked at ads in the paper. I drove around in Los Altos and Sunnyvale, looking for apartment buildings. If I saw one that I felt I could live in, I would stop and ask for the manager. One such place was Cherry Hill West in Sunnyvale. It had a lawn and trees surrounding it, which seemed appealing on that cold gray-green fall afternoon. There was an inside courtyard with a fountain and surrounding apartments, then a second tier of apartments above, with steps going up. It looked like a set for a Western, where the hero, standing in the courtyard, is shot at by the outlaws on the balcony. The manager wasn't in. I heard music coming from the second tier. I went up the stairs. One door was partially open. A faint sound of water and the warm smell of perfume came from inside. I knocked hesitantly. Knocked again. A female voice said, "Yes?"

I: "Excuse me. I'm sorry to bother you. I'm looking for an apartment."

Then at the door appeared a blonde wearing a white robe. She was wrapping her hair in a pink towel. She seemed not to mind at all that I couldn't take my eyes from the soft mounds of her breasts. Her soft eyes watched my eyes. Did she take showers all day and just lure strangers into her apartment? I asked her for the manager's phone number.

She: "Come on in."

I stepped into a soft interior, a female lair, the comfortable, perfume-smelling, languid home of a blonde, pink, lady. Had someone given me permission to say exactly what I wanted to say, I would have asked her if I could just sit on the couch and smell the air and watch her get dressed, and, in fact, just watch her live her life: watch her move that pillow from here to there; wipe the inside of the bathroom sink; go into her bedroom; come out of her bedroom; slice a vegetable in the kitchen; put a pan on the stove; tuck her hair back under the towel; turn on the radio... Had someone given me permission to say a second thing, there is no question what it would have been: *Please marry me!* Needless to say, nothing came of this brief meeting.

Eventually, through newspaper ads and wandering and the HP Rental Service, I found a place: Apt. 26, 175 E. Homestead Rd., Sunnyvale, only a mile or so from work. It was a second-floor apartment in the back: one bedroom, a small kitchen on the left as you entered, with counter opening onto the living room area, bathroom on the right of the entrance. A home for young engineers. The tenant below me, I soon found out, was learning to play the bass.

The day came when I had to move out of our place on Portola Ave. Jeffrey sensed something was going on. He followed me around as I gathered things together and put them in the car. No need to pack: it was only a 20-minute drive away.

He: "Where are you going?"

I: “I’m going to live at another place for a while. Don’t worry, I’ll still come and see you. And we can talk on the phone.”

I’m sure he asked why I was doing this, and I’m sure I made up the kindest explanation I could, but I don’t remember the words. I remember the look on his face as he followed me around. It said, “There’s something weird going on here. John’s a good guy but why is he doing this? Why would he want to leave our house?”

One thing I knew I had to do, and that was to get my sexual problems fixed once and for all, so that I could have normal sexual relations like other people. The air was full of the idea that, with enough therapy and reading of books, you could solve almost any sexual problem. I felt that, among other things, I needed to find out what women want. I picked up just about any book that promised to answer that question. I read *The Hite Report*¹ and somehow thereafter found that the author was working on a similar book about men and was sending questionnaires to men to fill out. I got one and, seated at the bank of terminals at HP one evening, with several other programmers, wrote long replies to some of her questions. I thought that none of the others would see what I was doing because no one was sitting in the chairs on either side of me and it was at least eight feet from my screen to the eyes of any programmer sitting in the row behind me, and, with my eyesight, glasses or not, that meant the words on my screen would be just a blur. Unfortunately, some people had much better eyesight than mine. A programmer sitting behind me, who was in my group during the day, suddenly said, out loud, with a kind of condescending laugh, something like, “Hey, John, I wouldn’t let anyone see what you’re working on.” My heart jumped into my throat. I made some lame reply and blushed. I immediately saved the file and cleared the screen and finished the job during the weekend. But I knew that, if he had actually read much of what I had written, I was facing another Mike Tuttle situation².

The divorce — an “Interlocutory Judgement of Dissolution of Marriage” — was official on May 13, 1975.

In December, 1977, Marcella, enjoying her new freedom, was being pursued by not one but two men. We were working on the same floor at HP, she as a marketing writer, I as a programmer. One of the guys pursuing her also worked on the same floor. I used to drop by her desk once in a while to chat, but one day she asked me not to do that any more, lest the guy think that she and I were still seeing each other.

I placed an ad in the Stanford University newspaper. I got one response from two French girls. We spoke briefly on the phone — I loved their accent, although it sounded just a trifle artificial, and I was a little curious why one of them seemed to be giggling in the background while the other spoke on the phone. We agreed to meet outside the campus bookstore. I arrived at the appointed time, waited. No one showed up. I went home, called the number several times. They never called back. It then slowly dawned on me it had been a hoax, and that in all likelihood they had been giggling in some hiding place as they watched the balding, middle-aged man pacing

1. by Shere Hite, Dell Publishing Co., N.Y., 1976.

2. when I found out he was attending Briarcliff High School at the same time I was, given what he knew about the episode with the photos at Scout camp.

back and forth in front of the book store.

I moved on to another respondent. We set a time and place for a meeting. I recall now only that it was on an outdoors patio, with lots of tables and chairs. Perhaps it was at Stanford Shopping Center, I'm not sure. I arrived and found an overweight middle-aged woman with neck-length hair, and wearing a purple blouse. She seemed all too eager to have me like her. As we talked, I noticed the loose threads hanging from the seams of the blouse and, for some reason, this bothered me. I knew this wasn't going to be a match, but at the same time I didn't want to hurt her feelings, so I allowed the conversation to drag on till it seemed I could leave without giving any obvious indication that we weren't going to do any business. I was polite, I shook hands, I could see the hope in her face. When I didn't call her back, she called me, and when I told her the truth, she broke down and cried, pleading that I not make such a peremptory decision, that I needed to get to know her. But I didn't give in, feeling at the same time sorry for her and not wanting any part of a relationship with a needy female like this.

Certainly by this time I had started saying the prayer that I have said often during the rest of my life: "Please, God, let me die."

The House on Richwood

In 1976 I somehow I found a realtor — his name was John Dozier and he was with Reality House, I think in Sunnyvale — and began looking for a house. At the time I was living in an apartment on El Camino Real in Sunnyvale. I didn't like him very much; he seemed shifty, always looking to the side, always with his mind seemingly elsewhere, always seeming to want to scare me into buying each house we looked at on the grounds that prices were rising every day. But I didn't know who else to go to, so I stuck with him. Finally, I decided to buy a tract-looking house at 10301 Richwood Drive in Cupertino, less than a mile from the HP plant. I was thankful to have bought a house, any house, since everyone knew that the was the most important investment you could make. It had a large, barren back yard with an old plastic swimming pool, the sides about three feet above the ground. There was a single old tree on the right rear of the back yard, a pine of some sort, its branches hanging over the decaying plastic. The house was one story, with a garage on the left. Coming into the house from the garage, you passed through a kitchen, from which you could go to the living room in front, or to the bedrooms. I used the one at the right-rear for my bedroom and study. The windows, for some reason, were placed high in the wall, so that in order to look out, you had to stand practically on tiptoe, as in a prison cell. I had not the slightest emotional attachment to the place. It was an investment that I lived in, nothing more. I knew that I was supposed to want to look forward to working on the back yard each weekend, fixing the pool, putting in grass, doing whatever you did to make these ugly substitutes for the real thing look appealing. But I dreaded every moment I had to spend on the place. The front lawn, which sloped down to the sidewalk, had persistent brown spots, despite my watering. Since the soil was hard as a rock, I gathered that it needed to be aerated, which meant buying a tool that you stepped on, like a shovel, and which then removed a cylinder of soil down to a depth of several inches. Each such hole required up to half a minute to remove the tube of soil. You could hire someone to do this boring work by machine, but I didn't want to spend the money. Still less did I have any desire to buy one of the machines myself. So I forced myself to dig those holes on Saturday or Sunday, hating every minute of it.

The fireplace didn't work well, usually sending smoke into the half-furnished living room. I knew that I could have someone come and inspect it, and possibly fix it, but I didn't want to spend the money, telling myself I couldn't afford it. The heating didn't work well either, so that the place was almost always cold. I spent as many evening hours as I could at my office. I considered myself to have been duped by the son-of-a-bitch realtor.

The guy next door, a Chinese, was a marksman with pistol or rifle, I forget which, and had won a number of regional and possibly state competitions. The neighbor across the street ran a little electronics assembly factory in his garage, the neighbor wives working there part-time.

I can't even remember if the house had a washer and dryer, but regardless how I washed my clothes, I certain didn't iron them. I had heard about "drip dry" or "no-press" shirts: supposedly all you had to do was hang them up after removing them from the washer, and they would dry wrinkle-free. So I bought several, tried to believe that they had no wrinkles after they were dry — tried to make the wringles go away by keeping the shirt tucked in tight to my pants, by leaning back a little when I walked¹ — and wore them to work. One day an Asian programmer in my group whom I had to talk to about something, looked at my shirt after we had finished, tried to suppress a smile, and said, half under his breath: "...wrinkled..." So thereafter, despite the cost, I took my shirts to the cleaners and had them pressed.

A Self-Improvement Group

I am not sure, but I think it was Karen Chez who got the idea of our forming a little self-improvement group, the goal being to improve our productivity and overall creativity. Each of the participants was supposed to give a talk on some topic which the others would then discuss. I saw it as an opportunity to promote the Environment idea. During the talk I used the term "behavior field" to describe all the activities that necessarily surround any piece of equipment: shopping for it, buying it, getting it to the worksite, setting it up, initializing it, using it, repairing it, eventually disposing of it. As soon as the word was uttered, I saw Clegg shake his head. But the others seemed interested. As we were gathering our papers and leaving, I heard him say, loud enough so that he knew I would hear it, "Sounds like a lot of bullshit to me."

Karen

Somehow I heard of Single Book Lovers, a group whose name immediately bothered me because I wanted to see it written as "Single Book-Lovers" to distinguish it from "Single-Book

1. A man goes to a tailor to try on a new custom-made suit. The first thing he notices is that the arms are too long.

"No problem," says the tailor. "Just bend them at the elbow and hold them in front of you. See, now it's fine."

"But the collar is up around my ears!"

"It's nothing. Just hunch your back up a little...no, a little more...that's it."

"But I'm stepping on my cuffs!" the man cries in desperation.

"No, bend your knees a little to take up the slack. There you go. Look in the mirror — the suit fits perfectly."

So, twisted like a pretzel, the man lurches out onto the street. Reba and Florence see him go by.

"Oh, look," says Reba, "that poor man!"

"Yes," says Florence, "but what a beautiful suit!" — Naiman, Arthur, *Every Goy's Guide to Common Jewish Expressions*, Ballantine Books, N.Y., 1981, pp. 64-65

Lovers”, which was quite different, the latter signifying a group of persons (if it existed) who were only interested in reading one book in a lifetime, and thus who presumably wanted to get together to talk about what book that one should be.

You sent in \$20 or so and they sent you a one-page Personal Profile to fill out. You returned that along with a brief description of yourself, which would then appear in their monthly newsletter. Each month the men got a listing of the new women members, the women a listing of the new men. You could write for the profile of anyone whose brief description aroused your interest and then, if you remained interested, you could write or call them at the address and phone number they gave in their Profile.

The first woman I met in this way was Karen U — , who lived in Berkeley. She called me after reading my Profile. She had a sexy voice that was a combination of Mari-jo’s and Janet R — ’s. She liked to use the word “silly”, as in, “A lot of contemporary poetry is just silly,” putting a special female curl on the double “l”. We arranged that I come to her apartment. She was tall, had dark hair, and nice, brave, small tits. She wore jeans and always seemed to be on the lookout for opportunities to be contemptuous of people. But this was only natural, given that she was working toward a PhD in English at UC. In her Profile, in response to the question, “What two things disturb you [she had crossed out the next word, ‘most’] about today’s society?” she had written, “1. A brand of American politeness and indifference that tolerates and fails to criticize poor performance (concerts, lectures, that is), ill-formed ideas or opinions, and leads to a deterioration of our culture. 2. Pseudo-intellectuals, especially the banting[sic] about of theories and ideas that are sadly watered down or are bastardized versions of the originals.”

She was constantly on the lookout for signs of the corruption of the English language. She forbade me to use the word “neat”. I tried to kid her by using it anyway, then immediately catching myself — “I was reading this book the other day, and the guy has this neat idea — whoops, sorry, — this very interesting idea” — but she had no sense of humor, and didn’t enjoy my lame attempt at one, especially when it concerned such a vitally important matter.

But she was not incapable of laughter. One Sunday we were going to a concert in a church in San Francisco, somewhere in the Nob Hill area, and, because we were late, we started to run. Since we were running past imposing public buildings that made me think of ancient Greece and Rome, when she asked me if I was getting tired, I told her no, all I do is imagine myself to be Pheidippides carrying the news of the Greeks’ victory back to Athens after the Battle of Marathon. She was amused by that. She liked ballet, so we went to see the film, *The Turning Point*. In the middle, I left to go to the men’s room. When I returned, by way of re-establishing our connection, I asked her what had happened. She suddenly became angry, said that asking a question like that was flippant, in fact rude. It had never occurred to me! She was so advanced!

I was constantly worried about my being impotent if things ever got that far, but I thought impotence would be impossible *if we can talk together*.

One evening, after a couple of dates, we were sitting on her living room floor, talking about some intellectual subject or other, when I, in the clumsiest possible way, suddenly asked her if she would mind if I kissed her. I told her I was nervous: this was the first time since the divorce. She said she wouldn’t mind, no. So we kissed, and my hand went to her breasts, and she didn’t mind that either, and soon we were in her huge, soft bed in the bedroom, which was really just a curtained off part of her small apartment. The mattress was so soft I wondered if it was possible to have intercourse when the woman was bent practically in a U. My stomach was tied in knots. Succeed here and you will have companionship. Fail here and you are finished. An erection was

impossible, so I slid around on her, caressing, trying to make up with the quality of my French kissing for what I wasn't delivering elsewhere.

In desperation, without an ounce of desire — what place did desire have when you were standing on the gallows? — I asked her if I could give her oral sex. She said, in a voice that made clear she was just waiting for the ordeal to be over, that no, she only allowed that with guys she really liked. I dropped through the trapdoor.

For a few weeks thereafter, I tried to rearouse her interest over the phone by ever greater demonstrations of self-abasement. She had mentioned a record she liked. I bought it, sent it to her with a card. She didn't respond. I called her. Not a word about it. I couldn't stand not finding out if she had received it, so I swallowed my pride and asked her.

"Yes," she said, petulantly, "now stop that."

I decided that I could win her back if I grew a moustache. Day after day I checked my upper lip in the mirror. If the bathroom was half dark, it was almost noticeable! Just a little more! Finally, she agreed that we could meet again. I knocked, she opened the door, gave a passing glance at my new accomplishment, said not a word about it.

I tried to bring us back together by reading together. But by now she had become the unapproachable English professor she aspired to be. Whenever I proposed reading poetry together, we always wound up reading Auden, whom she considered the only modern poet that a sophisticated student of literature should want to spend any time on.

Another Suicide Attempt

It was in the miserable house on Richwood that I came nearest to committing suicide in the several attempts I have made during my life. I know that the reason was yet another rejection by a woman, but I am not sure if the woman was Karen. All I remember was that one winter evening I decided that I could not live another day. I got out the Ruger .38, loaded six shells into the cylinder. Sitting at my desk facing the wall, with the prison windows high above, I wrote a note to Jeff, begging him to forgive me, and telling him what the reason was. I may have written another note to Marcella, asking her not to destroy all my manuscripts when she cleaned out the house after my death. It was freezing cold, raining outside. The gun was on the desk in the pool of light from the lamp. I picked it up and pulled the hammer back, cocking it. I raised the gun to my temple, thought about the fact that a fraction of an inch movement of my finger would, as far as anyone knew, at least *produce at least temporarily a major change* in my life. I thought of Jeff, of Marcella having to tell him what had happened. This on top of the divorce. Why did his father do this to him? I put the gun down, thought about him. He was then barely ten or so. An innocent child. I began to cry, saying to myself over and over again that even the rejection by the only woman with whom I could be happy wasn't going to force me to make another child as miserable as I had been. I picked up the phone and called Marcella, telling her that I had reached the end of my rope, that I would very much appreciate her coming over and sitting with me for a while. And she did. She may even have held my hand. She spoke in her usual no-nonsense way after she heard the story of the rejection, but not with the sarcasm she occasionally used on me. I tried to make sure she knew how much I appreciated her having come over right away. And so I was able to get through the night and the next day.

Sex Therapy

Book Learning, and Facing a Major Anxiety

One thing I was resolved to do was to fix the main problem that had destroyed my marriage, namely, my sexual problem: more precisely, I was determined to overcome my paralyzing sexual inhibitions whenever I was in the presence of a woman. (I was never impotent when I was alone.) Somehow I found the name and number of Helene R — , a sex therapist. She was then, I suppose, in her early forties, a cheerful, friendly, New York Jew, and she agreed to take me on. She seemed completely confident that I could be cured, though of course she never said so explicitly. Perhaps around this time, I had formulated my rule, in half-Italian, half-Latin, “Nulla confessione sine ameliorazione” (“No confession without amelioration”). I wanted no more talk sessions without a chance to put into action what I was trying to accomplish.

As I gave her the long story of my sexual failures, and the major reason for the problems, which we both knew even before I walked in the door, I asked her about her background. She said she had spent many years with the public schools in New York City, and that at first she couldn't believe some of the naiveté of the students: girls asking her if kissing could make you pregnant, or if taking a birth control pill a few days after sexual intercourse could prevent pregnancy (this was years before the development of the “morning-after” pill).

I told her I wanted once and for all to conquer my ignorance of sexual matters, regarding both physiology and love-making, and so I asked her to recommend some books. She said I might start with James L. McCary's *Human Sexuality: A Brief Edition*¹, which I immediately went out and bought and started to read. I was determined to learn the names of all the parts (so much the better if the names were in Latin, I thought, because if I knew them in Latin then that would mean I had a deeper knowledge than if I merely knew them in English), and where the parts were and how they worked. And so I set about trying to memorize Fig. 3.5 on p. 43, a task that was made a bit more difficult than necessary because, although there was a detailed illustration, the abbreviations for the parts, and the lines pointing to their location, had, by some error in the printing, been rendered almost invisible. But I squinted and held the page in bright light and learned the location of: the Mons Veneris; the Anterior Commissure; the Prepuce, Glans, and Frenulum of the Clitoris; the Urethral Orifice; Skene's Ducts; the Vestibule; the Vaginal Orifice; the Hymen (of which there are four types: Annular, Septate, Cribiform, and Parous Introitus); the Fossa Navicularis; the Labia Maiora; the Labia Minora; Bartholin's Ducts; and the Posterior Commissure. (Christ, no wonder sex was so difficult!) Since in those days men were being lectured by the women's movement on the importance of the clitoris, I realized that more often than not, the pornographers were something less than precise about the location of this organ, usually placing it somewhere inside the vagina. I learned the names and functions of the parts of the male apparatus as well, absolutely convinced that all this knowledge would in itself help make me a better lover.

I also, of course, tried to learn everything that the book said about what all these things were — not only things I had some idea about, but things like “The *Bartholin's glands* are situated on each side of the vaginal orifice. Each gland secretes a drop or so of lubricating fluid during sexual excitement. Although this fluid was once thought to aid in penile penetration, recent research has shown that the secretion is too slight to be of significant benefit in vaginal lubrication.”² I told Helene that another thing I had always wanted to do was talk to a woman about sex in a relaxed atmosphere in which I didn't have to prove myself or conceal my goals, which were simply to see the parts first-hand, and find out what a woman wanted from a man during love-making.

1. D. Van Nostrand Company, N.Y., 1973.

2. *ibid.*, p. 45.

She said there was a woman she worked with whom I could go to. The woman was called a “surrogate”, which is not a prostitute, Helene emphasized, but a woman who tries to help people overcome sexual problems. It was becoming more common for therapists to use this kind of assistant. I would be able to ask her anything I wanted. She said the woman’s name was Bérit, and gave me her phone number. That evening I called her. She seemed hesitant after I told her my problem was impotence, kept asking me questions whose purpose I didn’t quite understand. But then she decided she would see me, I asked her what her fee was, it seemed reasonable, and we made an appointment. She gave me the address of her apartment in Santa Clara. The reason for her probing questions, she later said, was that she initially thought I might be a suppressed homosexual.

Her apartment was quiet and illuminated with a soft reddish light. She said we had to lower our voices, as she had just put her daughter to bed. We sat down, it was very relaxed and I felt freedom and strength knowing that I wasn’t here to perform. I asked her about herself. She said that she had never had any inhibitions about sex, that she had had sex with men and women. Her daughter, who was then seven, had begun masturbating, and she did nothing to discourage that activity, she said. Eventually, it was time to get down to business. I asked if I could see her sexual organs, and she agreed, discretely turning her back, or leaving the room, I don’t remember, then returning. She lay on the floor on her back, parallel to the couch, and raised her dress. Now quite nervous, I asked her a few questions from my reading: “Show me where the clitoris is.” She pointed with her fingernail. “OK, and let’s see, that’s the Mons Veneris, and that’s the Vaginal Opening, and, let’s see, show me the Urethral Orifice, OK.” (I didn’t tell her how utterly bizarre it had always seemed to me that women were forced to urinate without benefit of a hose.) I then brought up the fact that I had never been able to bring myself to have oral sex with a woman, that on the one or two occasions when the opportunity had presented itself, I had been put off. (I don’t think I mentioned the problem I had with the smell, because I didn’t want her to decide not to allow me to continue, I having gotten this far.) She said words to the effect that helping me work through and overcome that kind of inhibition was what she was there for. I should go ahead. I kneeled next to her, looking at this female organ that I had never seen in the light before in my life. The hair, the puffy lips, the slit. I thought of the painting on the board near Kensico Reservoir. The reality wasn’t quite as violent-looking as the artist’s conception. I took a few breaths, couldn’t bring myself to do it. More deep breaths. I remembered the little girl playing in the gutter outside of Lachman’s when I was a kid. If you do this, you might disappear, you might lose your personality, some incredible psychological dam might burst and turn you into a completely different person! They might have to put you away! What would my mother think if she saw me now? But as on those other occasions in my life when I was confronted with an unbearable anxiety, I somehow, eventually, forced myself to go through with it.

Her vagina tasted wet and salty. There was very little smell, and what there was reminded me of seaweed. I kept up the activity for, I suppose, fifteen or twenty seconds. God knows what I did when I stopped, because on the one hand I wasn’t about to swallow, but on the other hand I didn’t want to offend her by wiping my mouth, inside and out, with a handkerchief. I am sure I experienced no sexual arousal, my heart thumping with the anxiety of simply getting through this bizarre act. Of course, in masturbation fantasies by that time, almost certainly I had graduated to this form of sexual play, but that was entirely different, in fact completely unrelated.

I don’t think I participated in any other sexual activities with her, and the main reason was that she felt I had graduated to the point that I could go on to the next stage of my therapy, namely to what was then called a swinging party. It seems these were held on a regular basis at a private

home in Oakland. She showed me a flyer. She told me how much she would charge to accompany me there (all participants had to come in couples), and how much the event was. It seemed manageable, so we picked a Saturday.

A Swinging Party

I drove. She brought a small suitcase which, when I asked her about it, she said contained a few of her sex toys and other paraphernalia that she, as a veteran of these parties, liked to bring along. The party was at a large two-story house in a pleasant residential area of Oakland. The hosts were a slim, attractive young Asian couple, David and Lucy, she a perfect example of petite Asian beauty and poise. They welcomed us into a large, softly-lit room in which the furniture had been placed along the walls to make room for people to stand and talk. On a couple of tables were silver chafing dishes.

Some people were standing around, others sitting on the couches or chairs. It was all very relaxed. David took us and several people who arrived at about the same time on a tour of the upstairs. I don't know if, at the top of the stairs, we were in a room or in a hallway, but there was a series of compartments each enclosed with translucent plastic sheeting resembling shower curtains, hanging from the ceiling, each compartment illuminated by a blue light. There were plastic-covered mattresses on the floor of each compartment. Some of these compartments were small, measuring perhaps 10 by 4 feet, others perhaps twice the size or larger.

We went back downstairs. The whole place had a clean, Asian atmosphere. Everything was quiet, civilized. It might as well have been a place devoted to meditation. I stood around, talking nervously to Bérít, who seemed perfectly at ease. Eventually, when the hosts decided that all or most of the scheduled people had arrived, David announced how the evening would go. First, they would show a pornographic film upstairs. Then people could choose partners and go to one of the compartments. There was no restriction, of course, other than space, on the number of participants within a given compartment, or the sexes of the participants, or the activities. After an hour, there would be a break for a light supper, then the action would resume for I forget how long.

There were just a few rules, David said, the most important of which was that no one could be forced to do anything he or she didn't want to do. Every participant had the right to withdraw from the current activity at any time. I don't know if he explicitly said so, but it was clear that the penalty for disobeying these rules was immediate expulsion from the house. Also, I think, he said that everyone was expected to respect the privacy of the compartments, that voyeurs were not allowed without the express permission of those inside, and that new arrivals had to ask for permission to join the current activity, and could only do so if those already there agreed.

People, including Bérít, with her suitcase, moved toward the foot of the stairs, started going up. I knew I would never be able to join them. Sex was not something I could do in public (I had major difficulty doing it even in a public of one). Natural sex, for me, continued to be a completely private matter, enhanced perhaps by pornography. Everything else was playing trumpet solos in the school auditorium. The thought of all those middle-aged bodies writhing on the mattresses, trying so hard to participate in this latest daring Right Thing, repelled me.

I stood around among the few non-participants and fell into conversation with a woman. We lay down on the carpet, not to have sex, but merely to relax. She said she was Egyptian, had two grown sons. She said her husband was upstairs. He enjoyed these parties, she said, although she didn't have much interest in them. But she went along in order to keep the marriage together. I on the one hand felt ashamed that I wasn't upstairs, but on the other hand, was thankful that I had

someone to talk to. At the break, her husband joined her, looking obviously like he had been enjoying himself. He was tall, slim, bald, with olive skin like her, and a self-confident manner. I guessed he had become quite successful selling insurance to his ethnic community.

I think Bérít and I left soon after the break. She was respectful of my non-participation, saying that some people preferred that on their first time, and so forth. Of course, I realized that nothing had been accomplished. My therapy sessions with her ended soon thereafter.

One Saturday morning, after yet another rejection by a woman the night before, I awoke with the kind of utter despair, that staring into the abyss, which I had experienced that day in Palo Alto in the early sixties when I ran to a phone book and began frantically looking in the yellow pages for a psychiatrist, any psychiatrist, who could enable me to go on living through the unbearable torment. I called Helene. She offered to come over to my house and then, with me lying on the living room floor, she went through various guided imagery exercises. The truth is that what enabled me to get through the rest of the day, and the next, was not this therapist's fantasy of an effective technique, but simply the human companionship for just those few minutes. But I was always appreciative that she had been willing to interrupt her day and come over to my house and minister to what I am sure she regarded was a rather pathetic case.

Weeks later, I asked her if she would go out with me. She said no, she made a point of never dating her clients. Months later, she remarked in the course of conversation that she had, in fact, done just that. She had been amused by the reply of a man in one of her groups to a question she had posed to the men, namely, "What would you do if you had breasts?" She had apparently asked the question in order to get the men to try to see things, briefly, from the female side. But this guy said, after listening to some of the replies, that, hell no, he would just stay home in bed feeling them and masturbating all day. She said that she and the guy were soon to be married.

Trying to Learn to Dance, Again

Perhaps I had remarked, during my therapy sessions with Helene, that I had a lifelong fear of dancing, and a corresponding ineptitude. She, with that bright therapist optimism of hers, said it's never too late to overcome these inhibitions. She was giving a weekly course and I was welcome to join.

I think she gave the classes in her apartment. I seem to recall looking out the window and seeing the aquamarine swimming pool below in the sunlight. Perhaps a dozen sheepish, middle-aged men and women stood and listened to her sparkling instruction, then, when she put on the music, attempted to do what she had said. "Step...step...turn!...listen to the music!...relax!...it's easy!" (Dear God, help me.) I can't remember what dances she tried to teach us. All I can remember is trying to carry out the rule for the steps, and the conviction that it was hopeless to try to force my wooden body to do what, I firmly believed, was something that only women and blacks were meant to do.

I soon dropped out of the classes. I had come to the conclusion that I would never be able to have sexual intercourse the way Americans did, no matter how many books on sexual technique I read, no matter how much therapy I had. It would always be an ordeal, which I could perhaps cover with skilled love play. I wanted beautiful, or at least attractive, women to love me, but I dreaded the cost.

Group Therapy

Helene suggested I join a group that she was leading and, feeling I had nothing to lose, I did so. Two memories about the group are still strong in my mind. The first was of a particularly

intense session on a gray, fall day in a room which, in memory at least, was one you stepped down into, and in which all the chairs and sofas were gray. Helene was trying to get a young woman to confront certain emotional facts she had been trying hard to avoid. (Helene's efforts reminded me of Hsain Chung's in the Marathon I attended in Menlo Park in the early seventies.) Eventually the woman broke down, tears flowed, the rest of us, or at least I, sat with eyes lowered and faces flushed. After a while, Helene addressed a middle-aged man named Wally, a gray-haired Lockheed engineer in his late fifties with rugged good looks, who was in the throes of ending a long marriage.

Helene: "What are you feeling, Wally?"

There was a pause, then he replied, "What do you mean, What am I feeling?" It soon became obvious that he literally didn't know what you do — where you go — in order to find out what your feelings are. I found this almost incomprehensible. Feelings were what you lived in, they were the sea of misery and anxiety in which you spent your life! To me, his situation was equivalent to someone who didn't know if the temperature was too warm or too cold or merely comfortable.

"...tell me what I feel and I'll tell you who I am..." — Beckett, *The Unnamable*¹

In the same group was a man who I came to view as the most pitiable human being I had ever come across in my life. His name was Elmer and I would guess he was in his forties: a big, heavy man with a bald, bullet head who, most of the time, just sat in his chair, hands folded, looking down at the floor. Eventually, Helene quietly and sympathetically informed us that he was terrified of speaking in public, "public" being in front of any number of people greater than one. She would try to get him to say a few words, which he did, but only with great difficulty. I felt so sorry for him that I began to talk to him after the sessions. He invited me to visit him at his apartment, which was on a street called "Radio" in San Jose. He said he could talk more easily there.

He told me that he had been a programmer in St. Louis, and one day decided to move to the West Coast, having made himself the promise that if he didn't find out the meaning of life in five years, he was going to jump off the Golden Gate Bridge. He was not working; he had enough money to last the five years; in addition, he was the manager of the apartment complex where he lived. His small, neat apartment on the ground floor was full of paperbacks — science fiction, various occult books, pop psychology, and every once in a while he would show me one, ask me if I was familiar with it, and when I said no, invite me to borrow it, which I always found a way to decline.

It was clear, in talking to him, how desperately he wanted to find a woman. But it was also clear that not only did he lack all self-confidence but also that he hadn't the slightest idea how to do so much as engage a woman in conversation, how to make himself appealing to a woman. The stories of some of his rejections were heartbreaking, at least to me: a woman telling him that she was involved at the moment, but perhaps later..., and he assuming that she meant he should wait until she had ended her current relationship, and then, when she didn't respond to his phone calls a few weeks later, only then realizing that she really had no interest in him.

The most bizarre story he told me was about a surrogate in Oakland that his therapist (not Helene) had suggested he see in order to start to overcome his morbid inhibitions concerning love-making. He said he climbed the stairs of this tenement in a bad part of the City, knocked on

1. Beckett, Samuel, *Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnamable*, Grove Press, Inc., N.Y., p. 382.

the door, was told to come in, and there was a bizarrely dressed woman sitting in a chair and feeding white mice to a python she had in a cage. She apparently thought that he should have no difficulty working on his problems in that environment. He left, defeated yet again.

Years later, I heard from other people to whom I told this story that the woman was a well-known prostitute, and that she eventually committed suicide.

Jeff After the Divorce

Although we could detect no signs of psychological damage in him as a result of the divorce, starting I think in primary school, at around age 10, he developed a nervous habit of absent-mindedly writing numbers in the air. He wasn't counting on his fingers but actually writing the numerals in the air. I didn't know if he was doing calculations pertaining to homework problems he had on his mind, and I thought it too intrusive to ask him. His nervous habit continued through high school and college.

His love of sports made it easy for us to make sure he got good grades in school. Our rule was simply: if he got A's and B's he could play all his sports. Otherwise, he would have to give up one or more them depending on how bad his grades were. We would always be glad to help him with his school work, and we would gladly hire a tutor if he needed it. It worked. He got A's and B's throughout school. As a result of my own dreadful experience at my mother's hands, I put no other pressure on him regarding grades because I was determined not to subject him to my own dreadful experience, namely, that of feeling that anything less than all A's rendered you unfit to go on living. There would be no repeat of that in my house.

God knows how many hours I pitched to him and hit balls out to him in the field on the days we were together. At first I was no good at all at the latter. Swung and missed, swung and missed. He didn't hesitate to conceal his exasperation. But slowly I got better and better until, by the time he was around twelve, I could hit a fly ball so it would come down any distance from him he requested. In fact, the opposite problem developed: I couldn't *not* hit them so they would *not* plop down into his mitt. "Not right *to* me!" he would shout in exasperation. "Make me run for it!"

I was worse at pitching, always being afraid of hitting him and of being hit. I hit him only once, but in the testicles. He doubled over holding his groin, half crying. I ran up to him convinced that I had just deprived my son of all hope of ever having children. As soon as the pain subsided he was back standing at the plate, but I hated the fucking game now more than ever.

Even so, I kept trying to be a good father and to cater to his love of sports. In a phone conversation in April, 2009, he remarked that he remembered the first professional baseball game I took him to. He said he was around eight years old, and that the game was at the Oakland Coliseum. Afterward, I forgot the teams he had mentioned, so in an email I asked him for more details. He replied, in an email::

"detroit tigers vs. oakland A's. weekend day game. not sure who won. I remember after the move to sunnyvale by mom and I, whenever we went to game we bought the tickets at ticketmaster in the sears at the mall there in cupertino. but that game might have been before the move to sunnyvale so the tickets would have bought differently."

Starting around age eight or nine, he began asking me why he had to go to school. I explained that the main reason was that it would give him more choices, once he graduated from high

school, than were available to kids who didn't graduate. If he has a diploma, he has a choice whether to work at a day job or go on to college, but without a diploma he doesn't: he must work for a living. That is why Marcella and I want him to complete high school. I emphasized that it was perfectly all right if he just wanted to work in a store after that. "After you graduate from high school, you owe me nothing. You're a free man. The contract is completed." Then, if he wanted to go to college, Marcella and I would support him. If he didn't, he would have to support himself. But he could go to college later if he wanted and the deal would still hold. But college support would eventually stop, say, around age 35. And I repeated that he would have completed the contract when he graduated from high school.

He seemed to accept this, although he often raised the question why he had to go to school. It was as though he wanted to be sure that what I was saying made sense (and that all his effort was really worth it).

I took him up in the sailplane at least once. Years later, he remembered more of the details than I did. In an e-mail in mid-February, 2002, he wrote:

"i do remember the sailplane experience. you let me push the button or pull the trigger that released the cable from the towing plane. i do remember going up at least once with you. i was sitting in the back seat and there was something in front of me (or on the back of your seat that i could pull to release from the pull-plane). i remember not at all being afraid or anything but was probably a bit louder in the plane than i would have thot (i may be attributing this thot to when i have flown with grant and needed headsets to communicate to someone three feet away). I don't remember wearing any headset. Mom was not with us."

Around 1970, when he was twelve or so, I kept a promise I had made to him and took him back East to see the house I had been raised in, and to show him some of my boyhood haunts. (The house was empty because my mother was getting it ready for the next tenants.) All I can remember of the trip is how low all the doorknobs in our house seemed, and how small the rooms and hallways seemed. There was the bathroom door where the Bitch and I had had so many battles. There were the steep stairs up to the attic where I had had my ham station. We drove across the Dam; I told him about the kids who threw the manhole covers off. We parked the car and looked down at the Plaza and the Bronx River Parkway below. I didn't want him to know what growing up in Valhalla had really been like, so I became a tourist guide. Chances were good that many of those who had been mothers and fathers to the kids in the neighborhood were already dead. But Mr. Stein, the good German carpenter who lived a few houses down from ours on Shelley Ave., and who looked like Eric Hoffer, was still alive. Florence Centi, my old babysitter, was still alive. I may have taken Jeff to see her. In any case I remember standing in front of her house with Bill, her husband, standing quietly by her side, and she still having those admiring eyes when she looked at me (why couldn't she have been my mother?). I took Jeff out to the little peninsula jutting into the Reservoir where I had made the deep dive when I was 19, and told him that this was one my old fishing spots. (In back of us, the traffic raced past on Route 22 as it had on that other day. It was a weekday afternoon, I think.) He had his fishing rod, and did a little skeptical casting. Not so much as a bite. It wasn't the same Lake any more. New generations were racing down Route 22. The sun had grown tired and yellow brown. The fish had moved on to better locations. I looked at the yellow sand bottom through the waves and as before thought, "What fish would want to live in a place like this?" I want to believe I took him on a walk through The Pines and told him about my trapping adventures and about catching rock bass and sunnies, but I can't remember a thing.

I Buy a Townhouse

After two years in the house on Richwood, I decided that the place I really wanted to live — the place where I would be happy — was the Regency Park Town House Development, behind Safeway, near the corner of Wolfe Rd. and Bollinger: go south on Bollinger to Hyde, turn right, turn right again, then left, and there you were. Although it was just over the border in San Jose (not a city you wanted to boast you lived in), it was very near Cupertino, and that compensated.

This time, though, I would use Helen Henderson as my realtor, whom Marcella had used and recommended. Second, I would wait as long as necessary for a place to become available. (There was some vague idea in the back of my mind about never buying in haste.) So I waited, and Helen, let it be said, was perfectly willing to wait with me, and not apply any pressure to buy elsewhere. During this time, I lived in a made-for-engineers apartment complex on El Camino in Sunnyvale. A painted cinder-block paradise as anonymous as a dorm. That I, already past 40, was reduced to this! But then, in spring of 1978, a place became available in Regency. The owner was being transferred to Oregon or Washington by her company. She had a daughter or son living with her. It was a corner house, which was good, since that meant sharing only one wall with a neighbor. But immediately beyond the patio in back was a large sand-filled play area with swings and slides. I was worried about the noise. I knocked on doors of townhouses which backed up to the same area, asked how bad the noise was, the reply was consistently “Not bad!” So I bought the place, for \$77,000. My new phone number was (408) 255-5143. My new address: 1070 Queensbrook Dr., San Jose, Calif. 95129

The townhouse development was built by a firm named something like Blackwell, I think. As I recall, some cases — none serious — of shoddy workmanship had been discovered by residents, and a lawsuit was pending. In the course of talking about the problem with various people, I heard from one man who may have been a carpenter, about one way that the builders were getting around the tightening of Building Codes that was taking place in response to the shoddy practices. Normally, each stud (vertical beam) was fastened by two nails to the horizontal beam that supported it below: one nail was driven down, at an angle, through one side of the stud, then a second nail was driven similarly on the other side of the stud (carpenters call these “toe nails”). But some builders, in an effort to cut to a minimum the time it took to frame a house, told their carpenters to use only one nail at the bottom of each stud. Officials in charge of maintaining the Building Code heard about this and soon wrote into the Code that each stud had to be fastened, top and bottom, with at least *two* nails. The officials were congratulating themselves on their having stopped a fraudulent and potentially unsafe practice until they learned that, in response to the revised Code, the builders had instructed their carpenters to simply drive the two nails simultaneously into *one side* of each stud. The pair of nails were clutched in one hand and then driven into the wood together by successive blows of the hammer. The result, as far as the strength of the frame was concerned, was no different from a single nail.

Laura

On a sunny day soon after I moved into my new home, I needed to make a phone call. The phone hadn't been connected yet — in fact, I think the call I wanted to make concerned the connecting of the phone — so I decided to ask a neighbor if I could use theirs. As I turned past the

garage to walk up Queensbrook, there was a woman holding a child by the hand. She had dark, flashing eyes, short black hair. She was a little overweight but still attractive.

“Hi!” I said. “Do you live in the neighborhood? I need to use a phone.”

“I live right here!” she said, nodding at the house right next door to mine. Oh, that voice! There was laughter and interest in me in her eyes.

The house was larger than mine, amply furnished. She led me to the kitchen in back so I could use the phone on the counter. She seemed eager to make my acquaintance. I told her I had just moved in, asked her how long had she lived there. Well, her husband, Ken, worked for NASA on the Space Telescope, and had just been assigned to spend some time at Moffet Field. As she talked, her kids were running around, but she seemed more interested in showing me those beautiful eyes. I loved her voice, which had the musical, tinkling quality of Elizabeth Taylor’s.

Over the next few days I saw her a few times, waved. She smiled back, each time apparently glad to see me.

Saturday. I am in the house. A knock on the door. I open it.

“Hi!” she says, with an up-tilting tone that could melt any man’s heart. She is holding the hand of one kid who is straining to come inside. Two others are running around behind her.

“I just came by to see how you are doing in your new house!”

“Fine, come on in,” I say.

She is wearing a baggy sweat shirt that wasn’t quite baggy enough to conceal the contour of her breasts. The kids scamper into the house. One runs upstairs, two run to the back of the kitchen, checking out the place (Is his place like ours? No. No furniture!). She apologizes for her sloppy clothing. I say it looks fine to me. “Oh, yes?” she says. “Sure,” I say. “I know you get told this every day, but you’re a very attractive woman.” She seems to like that. “Oh! Do you like attractive women?”

Those flashing eyes. Seize the moment. The kids are out of eye-shot at the moment. I bend down and kiss her on the lips. She looks at me with that electricity in her eyes.

I: “Come here a minute.” I take her arm, guide her the step or two into the laundry room, close the door. Then I bend down and give her a good long French kiss. Her arms go around me. I don’t waste any time. I reach up under that magnificently loose sweat-shirt and find her breasts, soft inside the rough material of her bra. I explore the left one with my left hand, then the right one with my right hand. Her lips are ideally suited for kissing. Finally she steps back, says something like, “Wow! If you keep on like this, you’re going to get me excited!”

“That’s my goal!”

The kids are clamoring outside the door, knocking. She gives me a quick hug, says she’ll come back later.

I hear her melodious call later in the afternoon. The kids have been told to play outside in the playyard at the back of her and my and the other townhouses, which has swings on a sand area. She is going to help John decorate his house, she has told them, and is not to be disturbed. And so with the shouts of the kids coming up from the back, I lead her upstairs to the bedroom.

Perhaps it is significant that I can remember nothing except a few bizarre details about our love-making during the entire time I knew her. (Because she had a sense of humor, I sometimes used the term “poking” for sexual intercourse.) I assume I was impotent the first few times. I assume I got by with my skill at kissing, which, for me, if you have to make love at all, is far more interesting and pleasureable and creative than sexual intercourse.

The problem, of course, was how to be together when (a) the kids weren’t around, or were preoccupied, and (b) her husband Bill wasn’t around. Obviously, the second problem was solved

by the venerable institution of the lunchtime tryst. So, around 11:45 a.m., I would deftly slip out of the office, drive to Route 280, then down 280 to Cupertino, a fifteen-minute trip. I would go inside and wait for her knock or phone. No sooner was she inside the door, when we would be in each other's arms. Usually we made love upstairs, normally in my bed, but I remember at least once being on the floor of my study, I with my face between her legs, eating her like mad, and she crying out in that voice of hers that was made for such cries, and then her saying, with her hand on my head, "You make me come, darling!"

I don't think I ever had an orgasm with her. Once, in bed, I was so desperate trying to will my cock to full erection and then to orgasm, that, after we were done, and lying in each other's arms, I suddenly felt a cramp in my right toe that was so excruciating that it was all I could do not to cry out. It lasted many seconds. The only thing I could think of doing, all the while feeding her the postcoital platitudes that the experienced male soon can deliver without thinking, was to repeat constantly to myself, *Relax, let it loose, it's made of jelly, relax, let it loose, it wants to be free...* I have since had these cramps occasionally when alone, and am amazed at how disjointed the toe bone looks, how dislocated.

"That night the wind stirred in the forsythia bushes,
but it was a wrong one, blowing in the wrong direction.
'That's silly. How can there be a wrong direction?
It bloweth where it listeth, as you know, just as we do
when we make love or do something else there are no rules for.'"

— Ashbery, John, "Crossroads in the Past," *The New York Review*,
June 29, 2000, p. 16.

Then, and before, and forever after in my life, making love was nothing but rules. And if you broke them, the penalties were severe.

I don't know if her story was typical, but it was this: she had been the secretary in the electrical engineering department when Bill was finishing up his PhD. She had typed some drafts of his thesis. Then they started dating, got married, and had three kids. He was not a good lover, despite the fact that he had an enormous cock, she said. It was so big that it often hurt her to have intercourse, particularly in the middle of the night, when he would just want her to roll over so he could stick it in from the rear. No foreplay, no tenderness. Yet the man was a loving husband and father, cared for nothing as much as his family; she doubted he would ever cheat on her.

For all my ineptitude as a lover, or, at least, my ineptitude at delivering product (because, for me, being potent and shooting sperm into her was not much different from the problem that any company faced, namely, that of being accepted in the marketplace: delivering what was expected, when it was expected. Who ever heard of a company surviving that couldn't deliver products to its customers?.) And, as in business, the process of manufacturing and delivering the product was not "pleasurable": it was something you did because you wanted the end result, namely, for customers to like you and to want to have you stay around.

We talked on the phone a lot, she only a few feet away on the other side of the wall, I lying in my bed. What are you doing now? Tell me exactly where you are. I'm lying in my bed and Oh God! I wish you were here. Are you touching yourself? Yes. She talked about divorcing him and the two of us getting married. I told her I wasn't sure it would work because I needed time for reading and study and listening to classical music (I remember I mentioned Vivaldi). She replied,

“A few weeks with me and you’ll forget all about that!” That was the death knell of our future as far as I was concerned, although, of course I didn’t tell her.

Looking back now at the journal of those years, I am amazed at the letters and poems she wrote me. (At the time, of course, I assumed this was all an idle female amusing herself with the fantasy that she was in love. I didn’t believe any of it, though, of course, at the same time I could claim credit for having bedded a woman as attractive as this one.) But I had to find a woman I could live with.

She liked danger: once, as we were talking on the phone late one midweek afternoon, she invited me to come over and make love to her. I: “He’ll be home in half an hour!” She: “I know.” The message was clear: If I were a real man, I would be able to make love to her on the living room floor in fifteen minutes, knowing full well that the husband might walk in the door at any moment. I may have gone next door, but I didn’t have the courage to accept the rest of her challenge. She issued a similar challenge later in their new house, a few blocks away, this one at noon, when, again, there was a chance he might come home for lunch. That time I went all the way, but was unable to come, and, in fact, I doubt if I kept an erection very long.

She decided to have a dinner party at their new house. I was invited. Would Bill be there? Yes, but I want you to come anyway. The dining room table blazed — white tablecloth, expensive silverware, shining dishes. She gave me that deep look when she handed me my drink, and allowed her hand to caress mine softly as she withdrew it. Friends of theirs were there. We all sat down for dinner: I in the center on one side, she directly opposite me, Bill on my left. I was working full-time on not blushing. The conversation was polite, not witty. I probably asked about the Space Telescope. Then, suddenly, something touched my foot. I withdrew my foot instantly. In the next sweep of my eyes down the other side of the table, I saw hers wide-open, sparkling. Soon, another touch on my ankle. No doubt what was going on. I worked at my plate, drank more wine. The game was to see if I could take the teasing, to see if I could carry on the game with her husband a couple of feet away. I wasn’t blushing completely, the sweat droplets were not yet breaking out on my balding head, but this was no fun. Now her slippered, soft-shoed foot was exploring, probing my shin. I made a deep-voiced reply to whatever was being discussed. I may have raised my foot and kissed hers with the tip of the shoe. Time for dessert. Dishes were exchanged, coffee poured. Back she came, with her Elizabeth Taylor sparkle for all the guests.

Afterward, as we were standing in the living room, the others talking, getting ready to sit or to leave, can’t remember which, I said to her, under my breath, “You’re crazy!” She: “I know.” I: “Do you have any idea how near I was to suddenly looking extremely embarrassed?” She, looking me right in the eye: “Yes.”

After she had moved on to other men, she still enjoyed teasing me. She would invite me to the pool, where I found her with various men friends. With the utmost subtle skill, she would make it clear whom she was having sex with.

Once, in my despair, I asked her how she could find me attractive when I, a balding man, sat in a room with men who had hair. And she made some appropriate reply.

Then she decided it was time to transfer her husband to another woman, in particular, to ... who owned a house 100 yards from ours. The transfer took place at a party she arranged. The four of us sat in the living room, I with my arm around Laura, Bill arranged to sit next to ... I felt extremely awkward and uncomfortable, hated myself for having to go to these lengths to have an attractive woman be willing to have sex with me. I don’t remember much about the evening except that she had that sparkle in her eye which she had when she was up to mischief.

The transfer took effect. Bill and ... lived together for several years in a house a few blocks away. He was one of those engineers who simply needed a woman in his life — it didn't matter which woman as long as she met certain basic requirements.

Valerie, who lived behind me, invited me to attend the bar mitzvah for her son, Jordan (or maybe it was the bat mitzvah for her daughter, I can't remember). She mentioned that Bill would be there. I made up my mind to apologize to him, since he had known what was going on with his wife. I made a promise to him that I would never again have an affair with a married woman. So far, I have kept that promise.

Later I heard that Laura and Bill had decided to get back together again. Rumor had it they moved back to New Jersey, to the same town they had started from.

Valerie

Valerie lived in the townhouse directly opposite the rear of mine, right across the rectangular sand area where the swings were. She was a living counterargument to the belief that all Jews are smart. She had been married to a doctor, and they had three kids. He had moved in with another woman in Foster City somewhere, but she was allowed to see the kids a few days a week. One or two of them were having trouble in school. Her answering machine message was longer than most telephone conversations. Worse, she spoke way too slowly, with a variation of tone that made it sound as though she were reading the words out of a *How To Be Nice* book — the sickeningly sweet, eager-to-please voice of a middle-aged woman who hasn't got much on the ball, and is growing desperate.

“Hi: This is Valerie at 254-7110. I'm really glad you called, but I'm afraid I'm not available to answer the phone right now. But your call means a lot to me, and I'm very sorry that I missed it. I really want to talk to you, so, when you hear the beep, please leave your name, your phone number, the time of day when you called, a brief message, and the best time when I can get back to you. Your call means a lot to me. Oh: and have a nice day. Bye!”

We talked occasionally. Once in a while she would invite me over and tell me the latest developments in the hopeless battle to get her kids to do well at school, and in her feeble attempts to find a relationship. It was only a low-order compliment that she wanted me to make love to her, and, more than that, to have a relationship with her.

Wendy

Then there was Wendy in Napa. Her place was hidden behind trees. It was one of those well-built old family houses from the early 1900s. She said she had bought it for \$17,000. The place was dark and crammed full of ancient furniture and paperbacks. It smelled of old paper and damp wood. The furniture looked like it had been original with the house. Over the toilet was a sign requesting that, to save water, you please not flush unless you have performed a bowel movement. Her bedroom was as eccentric as the rest of the house. It seemed to be a hallway between another hallway and the bathroom. She slept in the top bunk, the top of her bed almost out of sight in the gloom near the ceiling.

She had been born in Canada. Her father, one gathered, was an invalid with money who lived in a decrepit, grand house up there. She had been a chorus girl in Las Vegas; then some money had come from her father and she had decided to settle in an out-of-the-way town in California.

She was insufferably enthusiastic about everything. “And this lump of dirt — you could keep it on your desk and look at it and arrange pebbles around it and maybe put a little straw in the top

to show it off — Ripping!” If I mentioned being depressed, which I did once or twice in the most gingerly fashion, testing the waters, she immediately had a dozen reasons for not being depressed, for taking control of your life, for being creative and positive. I’ll say this for her: the ideas didn’t just come from one author; at least she wasn’t just a follower of one of the then-popular medicine men. “But there’s no need to be depressed! There’s so many things to do. You could start a business, selling books of your thoughts to people!”

She was trying to live without money. So, she explained, if she needed to have her teeth cleaned, she would call the local dentist and ask if he would clean them in return for, say, her catering a weekend party for him. Or if she wanted to go to San Francisco, she would call some local agency and offer to drive a bunch of old people to the city. She biked around the city, having no car.

She swept me through her local haunts, most of which seemed to be owned or occupied by gay guys.

The time came to see how far I could go with her. As usual, my heart wasn’t in it, but it was my duty, so I did it. The only place to do this was the lower bed of her bunk. So, somehow I maneuvered her into sitting there with me, did it casually, as though, well, here’s a place to sit, let’s sit here. But because of the upper bunk, I had to sit half slouched, bent, which had to be done with neck bent forward lest it hit the bottom of the overhead bunk. Furthermore even the lower bed was so high that your feet could barely touch the floor. On that particular afternoon, sunlight had somehow managed to find a way to stream in to the room and even reach the bed where we were sitting. There was her shapely chorus girl leg under rough pants. I tried to lead to intimate matters. Her mind was on self-improvement. “Oh, I just love books. There’s so much to read! Have you ever read ... Marvelous!” We sat on the too high bed, I trying to feel her leg. She kept on talking, moved her leg away a little. I kissed her, from the side. She didn’t seem to mind but it was in the way that some people don’t mind a fly that happens to want to spend a few seconds around their their face. I can’t remember what she said, something like “Now is a little too early in our relationship”, something like that. I was relieved, even though I did want to see her legs.

For a while I commuted from Cupertino to Napa every weekend, some 60 miles each way. Driving in the rain, wondering why I was doing this, adding up the expense in gas in my head. She was always glad to see me, always optimistic, completely uninterested in any kind of intimacy.

I went back to visit her once or twice in the years since. She seemed remarkably loneliness-proof and need-for-relationship-proof. She mentioned once being involved with a local guy, but it all seemed terribly friendship-like.

Once, when we were having lunch in a local diner, I got the impression that the hellos from some young women who passed our table had an extra meaning to them. Maybe she was a lesbian, I don’t know.

Eve

Amidst the welter of impossible females, I came upon a profile of a woman named Eve, who was a piano student. She had a genteel apartment on Greene St. in San Francisco. Our first dinner was at Maud’s Oyster House, and it wasn’t a success: bad service, and the food made us both a little sick. But still she seemed interested in me. I remember her softness, gentleness, which contrasted so strongly with the qualities of the viragos I had been meeting so far. It was easy to talk to her. But after a few meetings I wrote her a letter saying I didn’t think our relationship could work because of her strong interest in having children. The truth was that I rejected her because it

was no challenge at all to win her. She wanted me, so, because there was almost no reason why we couldn't have had a nice relationship together, I had to get out of there. Later, I worked with or somehow knew a woman friend of hers who said she had gotten married. I wrote her, she replied, it was all very cordial.

The Albany Bitch

Then there was a woman who in memory is always *the bitch in Albany*. She lived in a house at the bottom of a hill. Up and down a whole string of hills I went on the way to our first date, trying to find the address. I took her to Le Cyrano, the French restaurant in San Francisco. We sat in the window alcove but unfortunately the waiter seated her against the wall, which had a mirror, so that, throughout the dinner, I had to speak to her with lowered eyes because I couldn't bear to look at myself in the mirror, and especially not when I was with a woman. I may have appeared a little sinister as I looked at her through my eyebrows. When we got back to her house, we talked briefly to the babysitter, whom she then sent home. Then we talked for a few minutes, but I was too nervous to put off getting down to business, so I attempted to kiss her. She tolerated it, but when I moved to touch other parts of her body, she said she couldn't do this now, her kid was asleep in the other room. I wasn't sure what she was really saying. A few nights later, I called her. There was the sound of a kid screaming in the background, plus the sound of pot lids. "No, no, I can't talk to you!" she screamed into the phone and the sound of her voice made clear that the message was: *Didn't you get the message last time?*

The San Francisco Blonde

In January, 1979, I had just gotten new glasses, and for some reason the optometrist — or maybe it was Dr. Roloff himself — had decided that this time I shouldn't have the thin, light-weight lenses, but instead should have lenses of real glass, which were much thicker.

On January 25, an ad I had written appeared in the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*.

If You Are

an attractive intellectual woman age 35-45 who wants a long-term, one-one relationship with a male intellectual, 42, read on: I am a computer programmer by trade, a born student and self-teacher, a former jazz musician, lover of math, music, literature, reasonably attractive, a good lover, and I want to share my life with a woman of similar interests. Palo Alto-San Jose area preferred. Guardian Box 13-22-A.

One of the replies was from a San Francisco woman, 26: "...I'd like to meet a man about your age with a good sense of humor, who likes brainy women (I'm also very attractive)...".

I called her, we made a date. As I drove through the Richmond district in San Francisco, I kept looking in the mirror trying to convince myself that I didn't look as ugly as I knew I did with those bottle-bottom lenses. The woman was a very attractive blonde with short hair. I saw the disappointed look in her eyes as soon as she opened the apartment door. (She lived on an upper floor in an apartment in the rear.) We had dinner, things seemed to go well. She told me about her work as a paralegal. Then, as we were parked in front of her apartment at the end of the date, I summoned my courage and asked her "Would you mind if I gave you a kiss?". She hesitantly

agreed, allowed me a quick, closed-mouth kiss, and then began groping for the door handle. In my desperation, I managed to get myself to half believe that she was uneasy about what she might do if she let herself go any further, so I was standing there when she emerged from the car. I tried to get another kiss, she said words to the effect, “No, I don’t think so,” and tripped away into the building.

I think I called her once or twice afterward, but got the message. I thought of Van Gogh, and wanted to call her and ask if she would just talk to me, let me look at her, as long as I could hold my hand in a candle flame.

Music To Meet My Fate

Certain pieces of music have become permanently associated in my mind with the the anxiety of those dates, the exhilarating depression of going forth to meet an unknown woman who would bring me happiness if I looked right and if I said and did exactly the right thing. These pieces include certain movements of Corelli’s Concerto Grosso No. 5, No. 8 (the Christmas Concerto) and then, later, several Tilman Susato Renaissance dances, full of horns and the beat of a primitive drum (which I imagined to be a thick animal skin drawn taught over a wood cylinder perhaps six inches in diameter), which were on a tape of brass music which a programmer I worked with gave me. Although I have not listened to that tape in years, I can still hear in perfect clarity the one dance: *dum-dum-dahh, da-dum-dum-dahh; dum-dum-dahh, da-dum-dum-dahh; dum-dum-dahh, da-dum-dum-dahh dah-dah-dahdle-ah, dahdle-ah, dah...* I marching off to meet my fate.

Desperation

In the evenings, to temporarily ward off my arid loneliness, I usually went to Bob’s Big Boy Restaurant, near the intersection of Stevens Creek Blvd. and Saratoga-Sunnyvale Rd., about a half-mile or so from my townhouse on Queensbrook — a little too far to walk, given my evening mood, and so I usually drove the few blocks. I sat at the counter with my books, had a cup of coffee and exchanged a few words with the very attractive young woman who waited on me. I thought of these brief exchanges as drops of water I was managing to extract from the stones that I lived among. Since she didn’t seem to mind talking to me, I began getting the idea that perhaps she might like older men. (I was then approaching 50; she was in her early twenties.) So one evening, after a particularly pleasant conversation, I wrote my phone number on a paper napkin, folded the napkin in half and placed it neatly on the edge of the counter on her side. Maybe I added a short message, I can no longer remember. For days I didn’t go to the restaurant. But she never called. When I went back she was the same as before, and the thought occurred to me that maybe she hadn’t opened the napkin. But maybe she had. In any case, I stopped talking to her.

Getting Contact Lenses

After the failure with the San Francisco blonde, I decided that my problem was that I wore glasses, so I went to Dr. Roloff about getting contact lenses. In his usual efficient manner, he made measurements, wrote out the prescription, recommended an optometrist. The lenses were thick, clumsy, and soon turned my eyes a steady, pink color. I had great difficulty in keeping my eye open as I brought the lens to it and attempted to stick it onto the eyeball. I frequently dropped the lens. Making things worse was the daily need to clean the lenses, soak them in one or another

liquid which came in plastic vials. When everything was working perfectly, the process took 15 minutes a day, and I didn't have that kind of time! Driving in the rain in the evening I had to try to see not only through the streaks of water on the windshield that were left by my worn-out wipers, and the splashes of light which oncoming headlights made in these streaks, but also through the tears that filled my red eyes under the lenses. I had had much better visibility swimming underwater in my snorkeling days.

One Saturday evening — this was while I was living in the apartment in Sunnyvale, waiting for a townhouse in Regency Park to come on the market — I dropped a lens on the floor, or so I thought, and couldn't find it. At the same time, one eye seemed to grow more and more irritated. Eventually I called Dr. Roloff. He wasn't available, so I was referred to his alternate, a guy who sounded like he didn't really appreciate being on duty on Saturday night, and apparently felt that patients' concerns are usually exaggerated. He told me to go to sleep, see if the problem was gone by morning; if not, then give him a call. I spent hours crawling over the carpet, pulling the tufts aside, trying to find a tiny piece of glass through tear-filled eyes. Next morning, the one eye was almost swollen shut. In feeling around in it, trying to find out what was hurting in one corner, I suddenly felt something round. The lost lens had been in the eye all along. Then and there I decided that there were certain types of suffering that not even the possibility of success with women could justify. I brought the lenses back, got a partial refund.

Corinne

Another reply to my *Bay Guardian* ad was the following:

“Dear fellow-intellectual,

“It is most rewarding to know that there is at least one man around for whom a woman's being an intellectual is a positive rather than a negative thing.

“I am nearly 35 (and clearly oriented towards the mature 35-45 life of the adult rather than wistfully holding on to the post-adolescent 20's life style). I am by profession a professor (sorry for the alliteration) — at Berkeley rather than Stanford, I'm sorry to say (though I hope a Peninsula-type such as yourself would not hold that against me!). My field is literature (the literature of India), and I naturally warm up to anyone who likes to read and appreciates good writing. I am fond of many kinds of music, and have for some time wanted to know more about jazz than I do. My only connection with the world of jazz was when once, in Chicago, I was asked to join a jazz group with my sitar for an experimental session and concert — one of my more pleasant memories... In brief, I am delighted to know that you are a musician too.

“Since your notice was in a fairly serious vein, I shall refrain from the usual banter with which I reply to *Bay Guardian* notices. Like you, I am interested in a long-term one-to-one relationship with someone whom I can respect and conceive of building a life with. I am tired of all the fleeting kinds of entirely private relationships which prevail among the 30's-early 40's set around here, and am looking for someone whom I might want to spend much more than the time of day (or night) with. If you can take this unwonted expression of sincerity for what it is, and not be afraid that you are dealing with someone likely to be clinging and possessive, please get in touch with me. I have become quite an expert reader of *Bay Guardian* notices, and come to recognize certain 'types'. You strike me as clearly outside of the various 'types' and their games, and I am convinced that talking with you, and hopefully meeting you, would be a pleasure.

“You can reach me on Tuesday afternoons, between 2 and 4 at 642-4577.

“Corinne”

I called her, we talked, I liked the conversation, we arranged to meet. She lived in the downstairs apartment at 2457 Virginia Ave. in a part of the charming North Berkeley neighborhood with tree-shaded streets which, I later learned, is sometimes referred to as “Professorville”. She shared the apartment with another woman, Ann Machung, who was in the final stages of earning a PhD (I no longer remember the subject). As I learned later, she was actually earning the degree from the University of Wisconsin, which had allowed her to finish writing the dissertation while she lived in Berkeley. Her obtaining the degree would be a double accomplishment, because she had fought a lifelong battle against a grave inferiority complex, in large part caused by her psychiatrist father’s relentless mockery of her intellectual aspirations.

Certainly I had now arrived — here was a woman, not unattractive, on a tenure track in the Southeast Asian Studies Department. at UC Berkeley, who was willing to date a programmer from Silicon Valley who didn’t even have a PhD. I felt comfortable with her, and relished the opportunity to talk to someone who lived in the world of books. After I had met her apartment-mate, she suggested we go have dinner, she knew a nice place, and, having learned that I was also a runner, seemingly in her joy at having found someone compatible, she suggested we run part of the way, and so we ran to a restaurant that is still in existence, Giovanni’s, in South Berkeley, a good 20 blocks (most of it downhill) from her place.

She had done her thesis on Mahadevi Varma, “the first woman to have become a major figure in modern Hindi letters”, and when I met Corinne it had already been published in book form. I thought it an impressive work and told her so. But she was embroiled in a battle over tenure, the head of the Department having told her, in so many words, that he was worried about whether her approach to her field of study was “sufficiently theoretical”. She told me that the truth was she didn’t like having to be theoretical about literature, and sensed her alienation from the other professors in her department. On the other hand, she had a genuine gift for obtaining grant money, and apparently had already brought in an impressive amount to the Department. So, sufficiently theoretical or not, there was still a real chance she would be granted tenure.

Several years of her childhood had been spent in France, and so she spoke French fluently. When I remarked that one of my favorite authors was Montaigne, she responded with approval, pronouncing his name with the correct accent: “Mohntahnya”.

Her father was a church diplomat, and held a high-ranking office in one of the Protestant synods. He had been a conscientious objector during World War II. I met him and her mother only once, when they came out to visit their daughter on the occasion of some university function. He had the polite, excessively articulate manner of a man who likes to travel in elite circles but who has no power.

She was clearly attracted to me sexually, and therefore I knew that something must be wrong. (I wanted the women who didn’t want me, and didn’t want the women who did.) We went to bed on our second date I think. She was eager and uncomplaining, even after I failed to deliver the goods. Maybe I tried one or two more times, but I knew that even if by some miracle I could learn to please her once in a while, her hunger was greater than I could satisfy in the long term. One way or the other, with great sadness and guilt, I let her gather that we didn’t a future sexually. But we remained friends, and I admired her putting a brave face on what I sensed was a major disappointment to her. We would get together for coffee once in a while. On one of these occasions, when I told her about a book I had come across, she remarked, “How lucky you are! You are not in the University: you have time to read!”

Her next boyfriend was a handsome guy with a full head of black hair whose name was Ray.

He liked to call himself an entrepreneur, and made it clear that he expected to be a multimillionaire any day now. At the moment he was one of the principals of a company that designed and built windmills for generating electric power. They had hired a Dutch or German engineer to do the actual design — an engineer who had a strange qualification, namely, that he knew how to design windmills that didn't work. What made this a virtue was that, at the time (early eighties), the U.S. government was funding windmill development on a cost-plus basis. Ray and his partners had done a few calculations and found out that it was far more profitable to sell windmills that didn't work to the government, because then they could be paid (generously) for further research aimed at fixing the problem.

One of the principals was Donald Nixon, the brother of the former President. On a trip to Los Angeles I was invited by Ray to visit the company's office — large, impressive, rather bare, with walls that were primarily windows, overlooking a sterile industrial park. There I met and shook hands with Nixon frère, and with some of the other partners — slippery characters with loud ties, impressive suits, and excessive deodorant.

Even though the profits had not begun rolling in, Ray decided that he should begin indulging some of the hobbies that only rich men can afford, and so he began buying classic cars — not shiny, immaculately-restored classic cars but junkers that, with sufficient expenditure of time and money, could eventually be made into classics. He parked them at one end of the house that he and Corinne had rented on the other side of Grizzly Peak, the ridge at the top of the Berkeley Hills, with the address 1 My Way. (Corinne and I discussed starting a publishing company named after her street, with an ad showing a young, aspiring author saying, "You do it your way, but I am going to do it My Way.")

Once in a while Corinne and I would get together. I remember one time we met at the Bateau Ivre, sat outside on the tables on the lawn, had a drink, and I made some observation about something and she took out a piece of paper and wrote it down, asking me to repeat it to be sure she had gotten it right. I didn't quite know what to make of this eagerness to record my ideas, since not another soul in the world had any interest in them.

After Ray came Hyman, a short, portly, bald Jew with a warm sense of humor and also the Jewish habit of dropping names. He also liked to boast about his sexual conquests, and on a walk in the Berkeley Hills with Corinne and me one time, when Corinne was more or less out of earshot, he pointed out the various houses of his former lovers. By profession he was a realtor, a job he hated. But he was a truly outstanding photographer, and obviously wanted to spend his life taking pictures.

He was not a handsome man, but apparently things went right in bed (and out of it), because the two of them became a couple, and remained together for many years, at one time living in an apartment a couple of blocks from the corner of Solano Ave. and San Pablo Ave. in Albany¹, where I went to visit them several times. He was, and looked, considerably older than she was, and at some occasion on campus, an old friend of hers came up and greeted her and, having seen her with Hyman, asked if he was her father.

She didn't get tenure, but she went on to become Dean of Students at Golden Gate University in San Francisco.

In early 1988, as described later in this book, I set out to buy a house in Berkeley. What more natural and appropriate than that I ask Hyman to be my realtor? I told him I was looking for a

1. A city just north of Berkeley that has the same name as other Albanys throughout the country, including the one in New York state.

brown-shingle Berkeley craftsman style and he kept showing me white stucco bungalows, which, as I gathered from various conversations, were the kind of house he would have bought had he been able to afford one. Eventually I wrote him a letter, or called him, saying that if he couldn't start showing me what I was looking for, I would have to find another realtor.

And then he had a heart attack. Corinne called me, and I went to visit him in the hospital. She told me that he was in such bad financial straits that they couldn't pay the next month's rent. Could I possibly make him a loan? I said I could, and wrote him a check for at least \$1,000, as I recall.

He came home from the hospital, but by this time I had found another realtor, Realty Advocates, in South Berkeley. It was through them that I eventually found the house I bought at 2538 Milvia St. in South Berkeley.

But Hyman never forgave me for dropping him. His retaliation was simply not to repay my loan. The battle went on for several months, until Corinne agreed to pay me out of her own pocket, on the condition that I never tell him that she had done so.

Thereafter, I had no contact with either one of them, except that once, years later, in North Berkeley, she waved and called hello as she drove past.

Her former apartment-mate Ann, whom I would see once or twice a year on the street or in a coffee shop, told me that Corinne quit her job as Dean in order to go into the training of business executives and that Hyman was no longer doing photography.

Jane and Michelle

There was a singles' group called "Trellis". It published a newsletter and sponsored events where singles could meet. One of these featured Helene R — as a therapist. I remember the first meeting I attended was held in a building in Los Gatos with a big fireplace (no fire, however). An attractive blonde with long hair seemed self-confident in responding to whatever Helene put forth for us to discuss. In one of her comments, she revealed that she had something or other to do with ecology, so, when the meeting was over, I maneuvered myself next to her and said, "Hi, are you the ecology lady?" She seemed to enjoy that opening, and we got to talking. She said she worked for Emcon, a solid waste management firm in San Jose. She gave me her phone number, and we began going out. She revealed that she was in a not-entirely-satisfying dominant/submissive relationship (she the dominant one) with an Israeli programmer, and hence had decided to allow herself to meet new people (as the euphemism was in those days).

Her name was Jane and she lived in Sunnyvale. When I would pick her up, the door would sometimes be answered by her teenage daughter, Michelle, who was then, I think, about sixteen.

Michelle was the beginning of my career as a dirty old man — though always a non-practicing one. She called her mother "Merow" or "Meroe" for reasons that apparently went back to her childhood, but which neither she nor her mother could remember. Even though I wanted to have sex with Jane, I was far more interested in Michelle. I used the traditional dirty old man's ploy, practiced with such consummate skill by Humbert Humbert: get close to the mother so you can get close to the daughter.

I became the father she wished she had had. Her father, a Pole, was a survivor of a concentration camp, though he was not a Jew. Her mother had been attracted to him because he was a handsome ski instructor when they met. Later he went into various low-level jobs in industry — technician, and so forth. Then he tried to go into business on his own, didn't do well. From all reports, he was always criticizing Michelle: her clothes, her grades. If she got all A's, he asked her why they weren't all A+'s. As a result, the girl was beside herself with self-doubt and, in fact,

self-hate. Her mother told me once that when she had only gotten a B+ in a Chemistry exam, she went out in the street that evening and screamed at the top of her lungs, over and over, “*I’m no good, I’m worthless, I’m no good!...*”

Michelle and I would go running together. We usually ran side by side, but I much preferred to let her run a little ahead, so I could watch her bottom. She had big thighs and was, I am sure, innocent of the maddening treat she was giving to the kind old friend of her mother’s. I watched the cheeks of her ass moving under the silky material of her shorts as her thighs went forward, back, forward, back. It did far more for my sense of masculinity that this girl wanted to be with me, wanted to go running with me, than that once in a while an adult woman was willing to let me make love to her.

We ran in her neighborhood in Sunnyvale, sometimes up in a rural area, past the fences, along the dirt roads. I kept thinking how beautiful it would be to run with her on 17-Mile Drive in Carmel, so one weekend we drove down there, and I had a chance to watch her take off at least some of her street clothes (she discreetly changed in the car, of course). Then we ran with the glory of the Pacific spread out on one side of us. It was effortless. As long as I could watch those straining thighs, that bottom, I could have run all day. Another time, we ran in Tilden Park in Berkeley, up the rutted dirt road of Wildcat Canyon.

Throughout these runs, she chattered away as usual about her problems. “...have to stop putting myself down, I know, it’s not my father’s fault, I’m the one who has a choice, when I went to see him last week the first thing he said was... but I’ve got to get over it, it’s up to me, why can’t he be nice like you? let’s go up this way, how fast do you think we’re going? then he said he couldn’t see me for a couple of weeks and I know it shouldn’t have hurt me but it did, he’s with his new girlfriend, they may get married, I don’t know how I feel about that, what do I care, he and mom have been divorced for years, I know I’ve got to start thinking better of myself, who cares if you get a B in Chemistry, if the colleges are that uptight then maybe college isn’t worth it, you don’t have to go to college to be happy, but I want to be a scientist though, what did you want to be when you were in high school? there’s this girl in my class who gets good grades without working, God she never studies [laughs], she’s so smart, you should see their house, oh, I love her parents, but I’m working on myself, I know it’s up to me, I have to stop feeling bad about myself, let’s turn down there, I love talking to you...”

But in all this chatter there sometimes appeared questions about physics. Anything that struck her fancy: How far away is the sun? What does *mass* really mean? What makes the sun shine? And when I answered with my rudimentary knowledge, she would ask the next question: If the previous one had been about atoms, she would ask how they know that atoms are that small? And I’m sure that not the least reason for the stream of questions was that she sensed how proud I was to be running with a girl who was that smart.

One winter she invited me to go to the Sing-Along Messiah with her. We sat in the rear of the balcony of DeAnza Center in Cupertino, with borrowed scores, not doing all that well musically, but laughing to each other over our ineptitude and how wonderful it was to be with all these people, singing, and watching the orchestra far below.

After an afternoon of running, or an evening together, Michelle would always give me a hug: a long, tight hug with her head pressed against my chest. I discovered (I don’t know if this is universally true) that girls tremble when they hug like this.

Meantime, I kept working on her mother. In the journal I started in the early seventies, a few years after I had thrown out the first one, I find the entry:

“Sunday, Dec. 3, 1978: We take an afternoon walk at Montalvo, then have soup, cheese, and wine at the Wine Cellar in Oldtown. She talks about a project at work that she feels overwhelmed by. I am all confident advice, because this is one thing I know how to deal with. We walk in the woods at Montalvo. I hold her hand over the steep places, but it’s all gesture: half the time I am lower on the hill than she is. Her knowledge of French, her hustle to see this, do that, put me off.

“Before the date, I had resolved to be like the monk in the Zen parable of the strawberry, so I decide to be honest with her and tell her that the reason I haven’t tried to get her in bed yet is that, after Laura, I don’t like the idea of having to share a woman with another man, and because, with her, I feel I can take my time.

“On Route 17, going back, she says for the second or third time how much she enjoys talking to me. And I at one point, in the delicious verbal yes-but-no fumbling that was going on between us, say, ‘But look, you should have no doubt in your mind: ‘ — (I looking at her now across the darkness in the car) — ‘I would love to make love to you.’

“She smiles, seems glad to hear it, but says nothing in reply.

“Back at my place, I invite her in for a glass of wine. We sit on my couch. I kiss her again. This time, almost immediately, her mouth opens, I can get my tongue in, caress her tongue with mine. She makes no other movement, just lets me continue to kiss her like this. More talk. She says she wants me to go out with other women, as she knows I have needs which at present ... I am warming to the task at hand. Again I kiss her gently and gently touch the side of her cheek (to show my feelings for her are not just physical). Then I let my hand touch her breast. She doesn’t mind that either. But when I look into her eyes and say, ‘God, how I’d love to get you in bed’, she seems to pull back a little, and asks me if I’m sure it’s not just the conquest that I’m after. I say, no, of course not. In fact, for her to ask that hurts me a little. We talk, kiss. Then she says, ‘I think I would like to make love to you, too.’ She touches the hair at the side of my head. She says she feels that I am a person she could call on the spur of the moment to go someplace, see something, without any planning.

“At her car, after she opens the door, she leans forward and gives me a final kiss.

“After another of these almost sessions, she said, as she was preparing to go, ‘We’re going to end up in bed.’”

Once, she sent me a card. It had a picture of sunlight streaming through trees.

“Dear John — Thank you for calling on Sunday — you made my day! I do hope we can see each other and do wonderful things like listening to jazz and attending concerts and taking hikes. I spent 14 years with a man I don’t feel 1/1000 as close to as I do to you (and that was a ‘total’ relationship!) Let the good times roll! (scrawl representing a heart with an arrow through it) Jane”

But the relationship never became sexual. I saw less and less of the two of them, heard years later that Michelle had gone to the University of Santa Clara to study something in the environmental field. I met her once in Santa Cruz for a run. Later I heard that she did not have much interest in working at a steady job, and had joined a Buddhist commune.

Another Prostitute

I let no opportunity go by in my search for a solution to my sexual problem. After a party in Berkeley at Corinne’s, a guy whom I was giving a lift home, and I, saw a young woman hitchhiking, this in the dead of night in Oakland. We picked her up. She said she needed a lift to a bus.

When I let the guy off, she got into the front seat, and after we had gone a way she asked, as though the thought had just occurred to her: “You like head?”

After a brief mental scramble to comprehend what she had just said, I replied: “How much?”

She: “Fifteen.”

I: “Too much.”

She: “Twelve, and don’t say ten.”

She said she had been in the sun all day, was sunburned on her thighs. Her voice was hoarse. She invited me up to her place. I asked if she had any roommates. Yes, two girls. I: “Nothing doing.” She directed me to a parking lot. I only had fives and tens so we went to the bar next door to get some ones. I was completely calm, and reflected how clean and empty the streets are at that hour (1 a.m.). We sat at the bar and had a drink; the place was almost empty. She casually put her hand on my thigh, then rubbed my cock through my pants. Back in the car, I pushed my seat back and opened my fly.

She: “You have to take your pants off.”

I pulled down my pants and briefs. I was half erect. She played with it a little, then her head plunged down and she started sucking, head bobbing up and down. As always, it felt good but brought me nowhere near to orgasm. I asked her to sit up so I could feel her breasts, which were beautiful, though red and hot with sunburn. The nipples begin to poke out as I caressed them. She was determined to do her job, though, and back down went her head, bobbing faster and faster. I kept thinking that I have only a few minutes left, and tried to will an orgasm. Soon I had lost what erection I had. I ask her to let me look at her cunt. She lowered her pants, pointed out the sunburn on her thighs. I ask her to let me watch her masturbate. She stuck a finger between the lips, stroked and rubbed, then took it out and licked it.

She: “Mmmm... You want a taste?”

I: “No.”

She stroked herself some more, licked her finger again. “Go on, it tastes good. I don’t smell.”

Several times she urged me to go to a hotel with her. “Only eight dollars more and we can make love.”

I: “No. I don’t know what kind of guys you’ve been with.”

She: “I don’t have the clap! No discharge! I’m not sick.”

She said she was not a hooker; she worked as a bartender.

With my pants zipped up again, I caressed and licked and sucked her breasts, feeling proud that the nipples were protruding. Once, as I was moving my tongue over a nipple, she tenderly kissed my ear.

I drove her home. She was apparently not afraid to show me where her apartment building was. I asked her if I could call her. She said she had no phone. Instead she asked for my number, which I gave her. I never heard from her again.

End of Amigo

The project continued to fall behind schedule. As more and more features were added, the programs became more and more difficult to understand and hence to debug and modify. It took three programmers just to start the system in the morning, and the “automatic” configuration was automatic only as long as it was done by someone with the knowledge of these three. Some program listings were five or six inches thick, so heavy that some of the programmers began wheeling them to the computer room on little carts. I considered this an alarm bell, and I conceived a

new rule for the profession: “If you can no longer carry your listing to the machine, your program is too complex.”

Amigo, in the minds of many of the overworked programmers, was becoming an elephant-in-a-shoe-box. I once asked the project manager, Jim Cockrum, what the intended set of users was. He replied without a moment’s hesitation: “John, *anyone* will be able to use Amigo.” I thought: you mean any high school student? Any ten-year-old? His reply seemed to me to represent a major reason — a major naiveté — underlying the project’s impending failure. Not a thought had been given to usability. I tried to get others to worry about the complexity of use of the product, but I got nowhere. Nevertheless, I was convinced I was onto something important in the slowly dawning idea of designing software from the outside in — first decide what tasks it is to perform, then write the outline of the manual, then write the software to match.

A measure of how Cockrum thought about computers and software was his reply, in a meeting of all the project members, to someone who mentioned some recent academic research: “What have those guys in the universities ever done for computers?”

Cockrum had a slightly effeminate manner of speaking, but he also had two little girls, both blondes, possibly twins, whom I would see shepherding him around on Saturdays.

Nevertheless, the manager in charge of hardware development, which meant primarily chip development, along with the software development manager, continued to insist that everything be done from scratch. Millions of dollars were spent on the chip design alone. But still the prototypes ran much too slowly. Then, after a couple of years, a few engineers, working clandestinely on evenings and weekends, put together circuitry that outperformed the prototypes by far, and they did it all with off-the-shelf, commercially available chips. The manager in charge of chip design replied that, with only a little more work, his team would come up with a chip that outperformed this circuitry, and be much more compact. But his credibility had been severely damaged among the members of the project.

The delays led to higher management stepping in. But since this was Hewlett-Packard, where no one was fired except in the most extreme cases, the higher managers didn’t want to hurt any of the Amigo managers’ feelings, so they replaced the project manager with the other two contenders for the position, and formed a troika, a committee of three who from then on would manage the project.

The programmers had an expression for a management shuffle like this: it was called a “lateral arabesque with an upward (or downward or lateral) twist”. In the first case, it meant the manager wound up at a position with more money and/or more prestige and/or more power. A “downward twist” meant the opposite. A “lateral twist” meant that nothing had changed for him — he had simply been moved into a position where he could do less harm.

The project remained behind schedule. At one point, a group of programmers, perhaps inspired by the success of the hardware engineers, went to the troika and made the following offer: let us work on our own for six months and if we don’t deliver better software by then, you can fire or transfer us all. The troika declined the offer.

The project fell further behind schedule, the software proved ever more difficult to debug and improve, and so eventually the project was killed. Rumor had it that HP had invested \$35 million in it.

I suggested to one of the members of the troika that they write up a history of Amigo so that other HP managers could benefit from the mistakes that were made. The manager replied that they couldn’t possibly do that, since it would cause the management to lose face.

To HP Labs

With the failure of Amigo, I decided to take Fred Clegg's advice and apply to HP Labs, the company's prestigious research facility in Palo Alto. I was interviewed by, among others, Jim Duley, whose last name I originally spelled, in memos to his secretary, "Dooley", after the character in the folk song made famous by the Kingston Trio: ... "Lay down your head, Tom Dooley, lay down your head and cry...", until she politely corrected me. I would later learn that rumor had it Duley was one of the HP Labs managers who had interviewed Jobs and Wozniak in the mid seventies when they applied to the Labs for an opportunity to build the desk-top computer they had invented. Unfortunately, neither one of them had even a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering, and so, in the nicest possible terms, these managers — all of them PhDs — told the two to go back to school and get that degree and then the Labs would be more than happy to listen to their ideas. They declined this advice and went out and founded the Apple Computer Company instead.

Years later, I happened to talk to a woman in Personnel at the Cupertino or Sunnyvale Division who had been secretary in the department where Jobs and Wozniak had worked. She said they were "nice boys" but obviously mavericks. She said neither of them ever finished any of their HP projects — they were always on to something new.

Wozniak had a reputation for being a superb circuit designer. I heard this again and again from engineers. Nevertheless, long after Apple had become a major corporation and Wozniak was worth several hundred million dollars, he took it upon himself to enroll in the electrical engineer program at UC Berkeley, and went on to earn a bachelor's degree in the subject.