

## **Humanists**

In my endless search for companionship, I somehow heard about something called the American Humanists Association. Somehow I found out where they met. It was in a tract home near San Mateo. A curving, flagstone front walk led to the house, which was white stucco, with an arched entrance. I walked down a hall, heard voices in the basement, went down the stairs. The basement had been finished, and it had a dark green, submarine quality. Several people were sitting against one wall, some lying in the laps of others. Some were drinking wine. A woman was rubbing the back of one guy. It all seemed vaguely Roman. Low voices. No one made a point of introducing themselves to me. Eventually, the meeting, if we can call it that, got started. There were some words which I have long since forgotten, then various people spoke. One guy got up and spoke, in a serious, deep voice, about how he was reprogramming his tapes. So it went.

I was disgusted. So this is what freedom from fear and superstition came to. Everything was allowed, nothing was wrong, nothing demanded heroic effort. We are free. I thought: I'd rather have the Catholic Church. I wrote off the humanist movement — if it could be dignified with such a name — then and there.

## **Christiane**

The only person I ever met in my life who I believed lived in an emotional climate similar to mine was my cousin, Christiane. We wrote letters to each other occasionally. She too was the victim of a monster parent, her mother, the once beautiful Jeanne whom I had been enraptured by when we visited their house near Geneva in 1949. Constant, relentless, criticism had made her daughter an emotional cripple, unable to find a career or a satisfactory relationship. In the course of a lifetime of therapy, she met and became a friend of Erich Fromm, now almost a forgotten name, but once a renowned psychotherapist and the author of international best-sellers (something my mother would proudly remind me of).

She had several (not numerous) affairs, including one with an American engineer whom she met in Berne. He lived in Silicon Valley. They, or she at least, fell in love. Unfortunately, he was married, though he told her he was planning to get a divorce. They got together on his occasional trips to Europe, wrote letters in between. Then, one December evening, he called her and said he had a confession to make: he had gotten so lonely for her, that, in his frustration, he had gone out and had sex with another woman (not his wife). Apparently his message to her was, I still love you but I have this need and don't know how often I will be compelled to satisfy it.

That finished her. Sometime the following year (this was in the mid-eighties) she decided to make a trip to the Bay Area, I don't know exactly why — I think to look for a job. Perhaps to see him. She stayed with friends in a bleak, nondescript house in San Mateo. We arranged to have dinner together. There was confusion at the house in San Mateo when I arrived: she didn't come out when I got out of the car; someone said I should try the door on the side, where there was a rental unit, but she wasn't there. I went up the old wooden steps, knocked, and a cheerful young woman opened the door and called Christiane's name. I remembered her as a child in Switzerland as a precocious, nervous, soon-to-be-beautiful girl sitting Indian style on the living room floor of her house and watching me attentively. And now there she was, a woman once beautiful, wearing black, walking with a slight stoop. She extended her hand, I don't think we hugged, was effusive in her expression of how nice it was to see me again after all these years. She had a slight Swiss accent, but otherwise spoke perfect English. I remember a Chinese restaurant, her sitting against the wall on a green seat. I remember two impressions: (1) how glad she was to see me;

and (2) how utterly miserable she was in her life. Unlike my mother, however, she didn't whine about her condition; she merely tried to communicate it in restrained language, like someone whose house and possessions have been destroyed by a landslide.

Her visit took place during the time Kathy was living with me. I introduced her to Kathy, and then she and I sat at the kitchen table, talking. She said she had tried every type of therapy available. Several days later, Kathy and I took her to Berkeley. Even on a day's outing like that, she wore black. We went to Fat Apple's for lunch, then walked the tree-shaded streets on the North Side. I tried to lift her spirits by giving free play to my sense of humor, and by reminding her that this was one of the places she could live if she got a job in San Francisco.

She went back to Switzerland without having found a job. For several years, at least once each year, she had gone to Dubrovnik to try to find some relief from her anguish. Then, in her desperation, she signed up for a four-week marathon therapy session in Germany, in which she would be subjected to every major therapy of the time: talking therapy, scream therapy, group therapy, hot and cold baths... She said, or else my mother told me, that after a couple of weeks, she quit; she simply couldn't endure the punishment any longer. We continued to write back and forth. Then I received a letter which sounded even more depressing than the previous ones. I added the reply to it to my To Do list. I felt confident I could cheer her up.

Then, in December 1987, I received a phone call from my mother. Christiane had jumped off a bridge in Berne and killed herself. My mother emphasized two things: that her face had not been in any way disfigured by the impact with the water, and that Christiane had really been very inconsiderate to have taken her life, since she and my mother had been "very close", and my mother needed her. Later, from sources in the family, I learned that Christiane had climbed to the top of the *tallest* bridge in Berne, God knows how, and that she had died exactly one year to the day after the phone call from her engineer.

I blamed myself for having been partly responsible, since I had not replied to her letter. On the other hand, I had then, and continue to have, the highest respect for what she did. I only wish I had been in Berne to make it easier for her, to let her know that at least one other human being thought it was a good thing to do.

## **Visits to Berkeley**

I had always regarded Berkeley as the one city in this country that I was meant to live in, and so, after the divorce, I began making trips over there once in a while on weekends. They were invariably exercises in loneliness. I went to a few bookstores and coffee shops, took short walks in North Berkeley with my heart not in it, then came home to the townhouse I loved in the townhouse development that I hated largely because of the loud Iranian drug dealer living next door.

I think it was in the late seventies that, on one of these weekend trips, on a sunny afternoon, I saw a guy on Bancroft Ave., across the street from the UC campus, selling raffle tickets for a (round) trip to Communist China. He had a little stand set up, with pamphlets about the advantages of Communist China over the capitalist West. I stopped and talked to him. Why was he a Communist? I asked him. He replied, "Have you ever worked in metal foundry?" I said no. He said that if I had, I would understand why he is a Communist. He described the inhuman racket,

heat, dust, day after day.<sup>1</sup> His manner of speech indicated that he had spent at least a few years in the university. I didn't attempt to find out about his background.

In the ensuing discussion about the evils of capitalism, I pointed out that he is nevertheless allowed to set up a stand like his and sell raffle tickets for a trip to a country having an economic system that is the enemy of ours. I asked him if, after the revolution, Milton Friedman wanted to set up a similar stand and sell raffle tickets for trips to Western Europe, would he be allowed?

The guy didn't hesitate for a moment: "Hell no!" he said. I asked him why. He, again without a moment's hesitation: "Because he is an enemy of the people."

I always felt affectionate toward the dogs of Berkeley as they lay on the pavement outside stores and coffee shops and restaurants, patiently waiting for their owners. They seemed to possess a wisdom that humans could only envy. I decided they were all reincarnated philosophers.

On a few occasions I attended meetings of the Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association (BAHA). The only one I remember took place in a room on Shattuck Ave. You opened a street door, entered a dark hallway. On the left was a door into a small room packed with elderly persons. Later, an elderly man in a wheelchair was slowly, carefully wheeled in and a place was somehow found for him. I don't remember the lecture at all, but I so remember that it was excruciatingly boring, as were most of the lectures I attended in future years after I had moved to Berkeley. Nevertheless, the organization, which I later joined, was an important bulwark against the ravages of the developers as well as being a unique resource of historical information. Each year, it sponsored a House Tour, which allowed you to walk around the interiors and exteriors of some of Berkeley's most beautiful homes, and know that a life that didn't include living in such a home was utterly wasted.

In 1986, the organization finally was granted ample quarters, namely, the stately McCreary-Geer House, built in the Colonial Revival Style in 1904, at 2318 Durant Ave. not far from the UC Campus in South Berkeley. The House was a gift of the owner, Ruth Alice Greer, who not only gave BAHA the facilities it deserved but who thereby could be confident that the House would be preserved for future generations.

## **Jeff Goes to College**

I was relieved that Jeff showed no signs of wanting to become an intellectual. He had never showed any anxiety over his grades, had been a B student, with occasional A's, throughout primary and secondary school, thanks, I think, to our rule regarding sports. He seemed not to be worried about getting into a good college. He showed no sign of the Stanford neurosis and all that went with it. He knew how to relax and enjoy himself.

For his first year, he chose UC Santa Cruz, which was just "over the hill", as the expression went. (Actually, a good three-quarter hour drive on Route 17 if there was no traffic.) Prior to his leaving home, I went to the Public Health Dept. and told them my son was leaving for college and that I wanted to give him the information he would need regarding AIDS. For example, how easy is it to contract the disease from saliva? They said you would have to drink a gallon of saliva to get it that way, that the disease was primarily transmitted through open blood vessels, for example, in the mouth or in the rectum. They gave me several pamphlets. I put them in a brown paper bag, and the next time I saw him, I handed it to him, telling him what it contained, and that I

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1. "[A question you might have asked him:] "Have you ever worked in a metal foundry in a communist country? How would it be different?" — J.S.

would never ask if he had read the pamphlets, though I hoped he would. I concluded by telling him, several times, “Remember: AIDS is a one-way street: you don’t get a chance to say, ‘I’m sorry, I know I was careless,’ and have it go away. There’s no second chance. Get the disease and you’re a dead man.”

Neither Marcella nor I saw any virtue in his getting a part-time job while he was a student, so we never mentioned it. His total annual school fees, including room and board, as I recall, were about \$9,000, which Marcella and I split evenly.

Once he was away from home, he seemed to mature quickly. He also had his first taste of left-wing intolerance. He and his roommates had somehow gotten hold of an illuminated Coors beer sign which they hung in their window. Other students hated Coors because it was said to be anti-union and anti-minorities, so one night someone threw a stone through the window. It hit the wall just above the TV set and stuck there. (Had it hit the picture tube, causing it to implode, there could have been major injuries.) Just for fun, Jeff and his roommates left the stone there, stuck in the wall, for the rest of the semester.

Another time, at a big football weekend, he came home to find a hippie couple sitting on the stairs to his rooms — “some bunch of dirt bags there to see what they could get on a big weekend”, as he put it. The woman asked him for money, and when he said no, she grabbed his shirt as he went up the stairs. He later discovered that money had been stolen, I’m not exactly sure from where. He said he was getting sick and tired of things like this.

He went to UCSC for two years. For one semester, he was an exchange student in France, living with a family in Nîmes. The head of the family was a coach, and so one of Jeff’s jobs was to teach high school kids to play baseball. He found this something of a challenge because of the absence of the equivalent of most of the standard baseball terms in the native language. “How do you say ‘Texas leaguer’ in French?” He also met a girl who introduced him to the art of love-making at a level I am sure he had not experienced before. (She had a boyfriend in Russia, she told him, but she didn’t see him very often, so...) He said to me on the phone, “Now I know the names of all the parts in two languages!”

But toward the end of his second year, he told us he didn’t want to continue going to Santa Cruz because they didn’t give grades (the school, under UC Chancellor Clark Kerr’s influence, had initiated a system of written evaluations instead, and typically they arrived months after the course had ended) and because he considered many of the students to be losers, far too interested in smoking marijuana (which he also smoked occasionally) than in studying. So he applied to several other schools in the UC system, and was accepted at UCLA, where he earned a bachelor’s degree in International Economics in 1989.

When he came home, we invariably had dinner together at the Pacific Heights Bar and Grill on Fillmore in San Francisco, long since defunct. We always began with at least nine raw oysters each, I considering this the maximum that my high-cholesterol blood could tolerate. I can remember one evening when we were sitting at a table against the rear wall, on the second floor, when quite casually he remarked that he had tried cocaine. I managed to conceal my shock and alarm with a cough, and asked him how it was. He said the first time it was great, the second time a little less great, and the third time a little less than the second. He saw that in order to keep getting the same high, he would have to consume more and more of it, so he stopped. I praised him for the maturity of his thinking, and thought to myself, “What a great kid I’ve got!”

During one of these dinner conversations, he told me — perhaps when I had brought up the amusing way he had announced that he didn’t believe in Santa Claus any more — that at Christmas “Dad gives me what I want, mom gives me what I need, and grandma gives me what I neither

want nor need.” He gave, as an example of the last, a Christmas tree ornament.

## **The Canyon Bohemians**

Kathy introduced me to Egl as I have described under “Kathy” in the previous file in this volume. Besides the parties held in Egl’s and his wife Barb’s little cottage, there were also parties at the house of his father, Jonathan, in Canyon, a little community in the woods on the other side of the Oakland Hills. During the sixties, the community had been the home of the Canyon Cinema, an informal group of avant-garde film-makers who would stretch a bedsheet between a couple of trees and show their films on it.

## **Egl Divorces Barb**

Egl divorced Barb around 1995 and soon married an attractive young woman named Kathleen, who was an executive at the now-defunct Emporium Dept. Store in San Francisco. She was originally from Texas, then had moved to Washington state, where she had married and divorced. She had become interested in sailing, and then, after her divorce, sailed her boat all the way down the West Coast to the Berkeley Marina, where she had rented a berth. That was how she met Egl. Barb went on to get a degree in social work. I used to see her once in a while on Martin Luther King Blvd. as she drove to school in Oakland and I drove to HP in Palo Alto. We would wave, or say a few words to each other at a stop light. At first she took up with a strange guy, a true misanthrope, a painter named Thad Evans. I believe they eventually got married and moved to Pittsburgh, where they bought a house. He was anti-social, very negative about just about everything, never wanted to have people over, as Barb did. He was also politically very conservative (atypical for an artist), and would rant and rave about the welfare system and social programs. Many of Barb’s friends found this hypocritical, since they considered *him* to be on a form of welfare, he being none too ambitious and perfectly willing to let Barb support him. The marriage didn’t last. Later I heard she hung out with a heavy-set guy named George, and then dated a psychiatrist. Eventually she moved to the Peninsula and remarried.

## **Parties At Jonathan’s**

In the first years, the parties at Jonathan’s were the best I ever attended — more precisely, they were among the very few parties I have ever felt comfortable attending. The trip to Jonathan’s house was something of an adventure in itself. From Berkeley you had to drive up Ashby Ave., onto Tunnel Road, up to Highway 13 (about 2.7 miles so far), go about 5 miles on Highway 13 and then take the Park Blvd. exit. You hung a left at the end of the exit ramp, then another left at the stop light, then turned right onto Snake Rd. and then kept going straight (because Snake Rd. veered sharply left) onto Shepherd Canyon Rd., and wound your way up this road for two miles, past odd houses, old and new, stuck into the steep sides of the hill above the road and along its edge (the homes of the poor-rich). When you reached the summit, you were on Skyline Blvd. Across it you went, onto Pinehurst Ave., and then started a descent of close to three miles down a winding road with scrub oak and other trees on both sides. No houses. At night, you would occasionally see the eyes of deer glowing in your headlights. Down, down, turning left, right, sometimes descending slowly through a turn that had you going in the opposite direction at the end of it, with not a sign of human habitation. Now you saw an occasional mailbox, the house hidden way up in the woods. Now you were in a kind of redwood gloom. Finally there came a sign, “Post Office”. You turned left and there, on the left, surrounded by tall trees, was a long dark brown

building that was the Canyon Post Office — the entire downtown of the village of Canyon.

You drove past the Post Office, up a steep cement ramp with parallel diagonal lines in it to reduce skidding in winter, then right onto a dirt road that, to this day, I don't the name of, or even if it had a name. Although the pathway to Jonathan's house was only 0.2 mile down this road, and even though you might have been there many times, it still required skill and a sharp eye to find it again. No one could find Jonathan's house unless he or she had been taken there previously by someone else.

Sometimes you simply parked, which was always difficult, since you had only a narrow strip of dirt on either side of the road, and it was always filled with neighbors' cars (some of them junkers simply left there) and those of Jonathan's guests. On the right, the land dropped off down to a school yard below; on the left there were dense woods on the side of the hill. You then began walking, searching for the start of the path to Jonathan's house. A dog would often be barking in the distance. You peered into the underbrush, until eventually you would see the first of the two shin-level lights that Jonathan had installed to illuminate the path. You crossed a little bridge, really just a plank, that ran over a ditch, then began the steep and dangerous climb through the trees to the house.

In memory, now, I make the climb at night in winter, the weather is cold and damp, following a rain. But even in the summer, because the dirt road was near the bottom of a mountain, it was at least cool. There was a galvanized pipe railing to hold onto, and lights near the ground every few yards, but one false move and you were plummeting down the muddy embankment on your right. The climb was especially difficult for those whose arms were loaded with food and wine. Up and up, through the trees, lifting your feet up the uneven steps that had been cut into the hill. And then, ahead, seemingly hanging on the very side of the steep hill, was the house.

Two flights of steep wooden steps led up the side of the house. You climbed these and found yourself at a rickety wooden door. When you opened it, you were suddenly immersed in a bath of steamy air and the sound of voices. On your left, as you stepped inside, was an ancient gas stove, usually with huge pots on top, something delicious bubbling away inside. A voice might call your name, you made your way around the corner of the stove, into the main room. The house had been mostly built by Jonathan himself, starting with a tiny mountain cottage which he bought in the forties. It had the look of something handmade by someone who wasn't particularly interested in the fine points of carpentry. The wood was rough, the floor uneven, and I doubt if the place had been cleaned — in the sense that most people, certainly most women, would use the term — in decades, certainly not since the death of Jonathan's last wife. At the time a woman named Julia was living with him, she being about half his age, blond, heavy, not particularly attractive and with no intellectual pretensions that I could ever detect, but always pleasant. She had majored in clarinet at Mills College, but then turned to painting. Jonathan had originally taken her on as a student. The main room was a bohemian den if there ever was one. Against one wall was a sagging old couch; in the middle of the floor was a big old wood-burning pot-bellied stove, and next to it a long table. At this point you might feel something rubbing against your leg. It was a scruffy, lazy, filthy, black-and-white Siamese cat named Mordechai. (Seldom seen was a little white kitten name Periwinkle.) Against the wall near the table was a large aquarium. To the left of it was the wide doorway to the dining room, the dining room table always piled high with papers. I can only recall eating at it once. Another doorway led back into the kitchen. Diagonally opposite across the main room was a stairway that led down to bedrooms and the bathroom, but actually finding the bathroom in the maze of do-it-yourself hallways (which seemed to have been put up as an afterthought, with whatever wallboard happened to be lying around, by someone who had other things

on his mind) and dead-ends and storage rooms — actually finding the bathroom was always an adventure in itself. Hanging on the walls of the main room were Jonathan's paintings — portraits, landscapes, still lifes, and on various pedestals were his sculptures, including, as I recall, one of Einstein. In a little room off the main room, next to the couch, was his painting of Lilith, from the Bible, showing her mysterious, menacing, look. His style would, I suppose, be called "19th-century representational", but his paintings were clearly the work of a craftsman. He was then in his eighties, still spry and working every day at his easel — a skinny old man, his belt too long and held in place by what seemed like an absurdly large old buckle. He had thinning hair, an old man's gruff voice, and was, I suppose, about 5 feet 7- or 8 inches tall, slightly stooped. He (and Egl) told me more than once that he had studied anatomy (like the painters of old!). He was an outstanding painter of women and of still lifes. I bought several of the latter from him. Everyone in his circle respected him, admired him as a painter. In earlier years, he had taught at the California Institute of Arts and Crafts in Oakland. Then, in the sixties or seventies, he was given his own radio program on the local left-wing station, KPFA. But since he was uncompromising in his opinion that abstract painting was rubbish, he was kicked off the air.

In the eighties, the guests at parties might include a music teacher; a classical guitarist; Steve Swan, who played bagpipes on occasion at a party, and who in the early 2000s ran a sailing business; the occasional math professor, including "Uncle" Steve Jabloner, who taught math at the College of Marin and had memorized the algorithm that allows one to compute in one's head the day of the week on which any given date occurs; he was also an opera aficionado, and had invented a board game about opera that he was trying to market.

There were various graduate students, including one rather stocky young guy studying physics at UC Berkeley whom Egl called Dale the Bale. Egl had a gift for nicknames. I wish I could remember some of the other ones: a pilot in San Francisco he gave a nickname something like Dwyer the Flyer. Dick and Akiva Northey were two other graduate students, a sweet couple whom I liked a lot; they then moved to Metford, Mass., I think for work, although they occasionally came back for a visit.

Sometimes fellow boat owners from the marina where Egl and Kathleen's boat was docked would turn up. Among these was Lucille Bradley, a nice old lady who had been a long-time sailing companion of Jonathan and Egl when she lived in Oakland but by the time I knew her had moved to Orcus Island, off Seattle.

And then once in a while a local would turn up. The reader will recall that Canyon had been a bohemian enclave since at least the sixties; the architect David Rajan lived there; so did a man I knew only by the name "Johnno"; he was thin, with long scraggly hair, and always seemed lost among all the artists and intellectuals. Egl said he lived down the road with his mother, spent most of his time smoking marijuana, but that he had an extraordinary amount of knowledge about local flora.

And finally there were Sue and Ron, old friends of Egl's, about whom more below, and, of course, Kathy and me.

Unfortunately, every party, sooner or later, resulted in a meeting of the Endymion Society, a group of Egl's friends who would sit around the table in the main room and read their own poetry. I can best describe their work as poetry written by people who never read the works of real poets. To this day I don't know what Egl's reading actually was, apart from the math textbooks he needed for his courses, and popularizations of science and mathematics, but I am very confident he never read the philosophers (for example, Nietzsche, on whose opinions he would gladly pronounce if you brought them up) and that he never read any of the poets. (A sure-fire mark of his

lack of reading was that he always pronounced “picture” as “pitcher”.) For him, and for the others in the Society, poetry was something you wrote to express your feelings in a form that gave those expressions the status they could never have if they were written in prose.

He thought his poetry was very good.

“...in hoc enim genere nescio quo pacto magis quam in aliis suum euique pulcrum est; adhuc neminem cognovi poëtam...qui sibi non optimus videretur;”

“...in this art, more than in others, it somehow happens that everyone finds his own work excellent; so far I have never known the poet... who did not think himself the best.” — Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, tr. King, J. C., Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA., 1945, Book V, XXII, p. 488.

He kept his poems in a three-ring binder, and after reading one, he would sometimes show me the page, saying something like “Eh? Hah? Ho-ho!” Out of politeness, I would try to find something good to say about it, and the only way I could figure out to do this was by finding a line or two that, in itself, I could bring myself to admire. The poetry was about love, or was dream-like reflections on nature and creation and the meaning of life. The fact that even his audience never really understood the poems didn’t bother him at all. The other members of the Society were, in fact, merely waiting their turn to read their own outpourings. Nothing that could remotely be called a critical faculty was present in any of them.

When the Society gathered with their notebooks at the table, or Egl announced they were going to, I would try to escape, retreating into the kitchen or into the dining room, trying to get into a conversation with someone.

Susan Warner was one of the charter members of the Society. She had known Egl I think from his early youth. Kathy told me later that she believed he met her through the hiking club where she met Ron. When Egl’s mother died, she moved into the house in Canyon and took over the care of Egl and Maya. Sue was about 17 at the time. She and Egl became lovers soon after. She stayed for only about six months<sup>1</sup>. Kathy met Sue when Kathy was in graduate school at San Jose State. They lived in the same apartment building (Villa Saroni<sup>2</sup> on South 6th Street). Kathy had been putting her bicycle into the storage locker in the back of the building, Sue had been doing the same with her Moped, and the two got to talking.

Sue had two things going against her: her weight — she was easily 300 pounds — and her incessant talking. She wasn’t shy about admitting the latter: she openly spoke of herself as “motor mouth”. She did word processing occasionally. This was back in the days when a word-processor was a person, not a computer program. The evolution of the word followed the same pattern as the evolution of “typewriter” (originally a person, usually a woman, who typed on one of the new machines known as “typewriters”) and the evolution of the word “computer”:

The first computers were indeed people. The word originally meant an individual who solved equations, often using a mechanical calculator. Hundreds of them were employed by big companies that needed to do a lot of number-crunching, such as aeroplane manufacturers. It was only around 1945 that the word came to describe machinery — *The Economist*, “A spe-

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1. In July, 2007 I received an email from a man named Tom Marquette who said he had been Susan’s first husband, they having been married in 1978. He said the marriage only lasted nine months:

2. Kathy said, in an August, 2007 email, that it was located at “55 S. 6th Street [and was] built about 1930. Susan affectionately called it ‘Menopause Manor’ because we had a lot of long term residents, 20 years or more. I still have very fond memories of the radiators hissing and the soft plaster walls. Susan and Tom lived... on the north side of the building, [in a] little one bedroom cottage.”



cial report on corporate IT”, October 25th-31st, 2008, p. 3.

Sue was married to Ron White, a photo technician and another long-time member of Egl’s circle. He was deeply in love with her.

Her weight prevented her from undertaking any kind of physical activity. I remember one time when she and Egl and some other members of the circle came to visit Kathy and me at our Cupertino townhouse. We were playing, I think, frisbee, but even that limited physical exertion was too much for her, and so she sat down under a tree. Her two sisters also had a weight problem. One of them had her stomach stapled, but even that didn’t completely solve the problem. Years later, in the nineties, Susan, who had always had one illness or another, died quietly while sitting in her living room.

Sometimes Jonathan would read from the voluminous journals that he had apparently kept as a younger man. He would stand in the main room, the party going on all around him, perhaps only one or two people actually listening, and read page after page of ramblings about nature and the meaning of life and the importance of being true to oneself, and other similar subjects. Egl, who would interrupt his own holding forth for brief periods to listen, made it clear to me that he had the highest respect for his father’s writings — that they were just further proof of his father’s genius.

At the parties, Egl and I would engage in long conversations on subjects like why it should be that mathematics is the language in which the description of the universe is written, and whether or not physics and mathematics reveal the nature of God, and (inevitably) the state of mathematics teaching in the schools and why so many students hated the subject, and, of course, the nature of music and who was greater than whom among the composers. I know that I raised the question to him more than once: Why should there be such a thing as music at all, in particular, music of the depth and complexity and beauty of the Western classical composers? I argued that, as far as evolutionary time scales are concerned, such music appeared overnight — in the snap of a finger — and to what purpose? Does the possession of such music increase the survivability of the human species? His reply was that classical music is simply a side-effect of having brains as well-developed as ours. To which I replied, can such extraordinary structures occur as mere side-effects?

I can’t say that we discussed politics since there was no chance of him changing his mind: he hated Reagan, hated Republicans, hated big business, thought everything would be fine if government and business simply became generous and stopped being so materialistic. He gave no sign of having read any political works.

But once in a while our dialogues produced something original. I can remember to this day that he was standing near the couch in the main room, talking to some friends, a glass in hand as usual, and somehow the subject of Zen Buddhism came up — specifically Zen koans, those brief sayings, or questions, or responses to questions, that supposedly bring enlightenment. I interrupted the conversation, I think with something along the lines of, “Hey, Egl. I’ve got a question. What is the ultimate Zen question? Suppose you were a monk in a Zen monastery, and you were allowed to ask the Master just one question. What would it be?” He laughed: this was exactly the kind of thing he liked to tie into. We kicked it around for a few minutes, and then one of us said, “Maybe that is the ultimate Zen question!” namely, the question I had asked him. And we both laughed, and then one of us asked the inevitable next question, namely, what would the Master reply? And we knew in an instant, and laughed mightily. I later wrote up the result of our dialogue in my book, *Thoughts and Visions*<sup>1</sup>:

“In a Zen monastery, a monk was given the opportunity to ask the Master one and only question, with the promise that the Master would answer it. When the appointed day arrived, the monk was presented to the Master. ‘You may state your question,’ said the Master. The monk replied, ‘My question is this: What is the most important question I can ask you, and what is the answer?’ To which the Master replied, ‘*That* is the most important question you can ask, and *this* is the answer.’”

Despite the fact that he had a robust sense of humor, he was one of the legions who are afflicted with the inability to tell jokes well, so that long before he reached the punch line, his listeners were sending up silent prayers, “Please God, let the time go fast...” “OK, so there was this guy, see, this old guy and, you know, he was walking along in a forest, just walking along, in this forest, and — wait a minute:— oh, yeah, so he’s walking along and he hears a frog —no, wait a minute: he hears a voice coming to him from in the shrubbery, and he looks down and sees it’s this frog, and it says to him ...”

Unfortunately, Egl and Jonathan took it for granted that Kathleen, being Egl’s wife, could be expected to come home after a hard day in the office at the Emporium, and prepare a dinner for ten or twenty people, and then, in the wee hours of the morning, do all the washing up. All this while Egl carried on with a wine glass in his hand, pronouncing on math, science, poetry, politics, philosophy, music. Kathleen complained about it to me more than once, and I sympathized with her. More than once I offered to help her with the dishes, though she usually turned me down.

### **A Natural Musician**

Egl’s poetry may have been terrible, but there was no question but that he had an intuitive understanding of music, even though, as far as I know, he had never taken a lesson. (I learned later that his grandfather had played euphonium and that an uncle had played trombone.) He was so good at being able to tell which conductor was conducting a given classical piece that one of the local classical stations, KQED-FM, asked him not to continue participating in their daily identify-the-conductor contest (the prize was typically a couple of concert tickets) because he always won. I have already remarked on his compulsive conducting whenever he was listening to a piece of classical music. But in addition, at the parties, when no music was playing, he would get out an ancient baritone or euphonium (possibly his grandfather’s), stand outside the door that led to the little room where Jonathan’s painting of Lilith hung, and improvise. Now that I recall it, I can’t help realizing that his improvisation was similar to his poetry: on a note-by-note basis, or over a succession of a few notes, his playing was sometimes interesting; but beyond that it became mere random notes; there was no structure, no beginning, middle, or end; the parts were unrelated to the whole.

### **Egl and Jonathan Make Wine**

Egl was game for anything that sounded exciting. After I saw Ariane Mnouchkine’s superb film *Molière*, I contacted Edith Kramer, head of the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley, and asked her if she would show the film in the PFA theater across from the campus if I promised to bring at least ten people. She agreed. I got Egl, Kathleen, and a bunch of others from the circle to attend.

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1. First file of the chapter “Additional Thoughts”, section “Zen Buddhism”, on the web site [www.thoughtsandvisions.com](http://www.thoughtsandvisions.com)

Unfortunately, it made no impression on any of them, as far as I could tell — certainly not on Egl. One year Egl and Jonathan decided they were going to make wine. They bought some zinfandel grapes somewhere, somehow found out how you go about converting grapes into wine, and a couple of years later were pressing goblets of what they called “Spider Canyon Red” on their friends at the parties. Their friends, or at least I, dared not say no. Some, in fact, liked the wine. I would describe it, in its early years, as being not unlike Egl’s personality — rough and loud but friendly. But as the years wore on, the first two of these qualities became more pronounced, until some of the guests joked among themselves, and I think to Egl, that it just might be possible to run a car on the stuff. We might even have tried to see if it would catch fire if we held a match to the surface. But Egl kept urging it on us. Pouring the wine to the brim of your glass, he would say, “Yeah! Try this!” And as you forced it down, and nodded to indicate approval, he would say, proudly, with his big smile, holding the bottle at the ready for more pouring, “Hah? *Hah?*”

### **Jonathan’s Earlier Years**

In September 2007, I received several emails from Paul M. Miller as a result of his having come across Jonathan’s name in this book during a Google search. The following is a slightly edited reproduction of those emails.

I’m in the process of writing an autobiography, and am Googling looking for all the people who made impacts on my life. One of these people was Marjorie Batchelor -- an East Oakland librarian who was one of Jonathan's wives. I was a kid in Frick Junior High, and worked as a Page at Lockwood Library, where Miss Marjorie was the senior librarian. She was not married when I started work. But then, one day this "wild" red bearded artist showed up, and the next thing I knew she became Mrs. Batchelor.

My English teacher at Frick was Joyce Lobner, Mrs. Batchelor's good friend. Joyce was a friend of my family, and was involved in puppetry. Mrs. B. and Joyce gets me involved in KGO radio, theatre, etc. One evening I accompanied Joyce to a party at Jonathan's studio in downtown Oakland--somewhere near Paramount theatre. Jonathan took a liking to me, and hired me, a Fremont High School student, to clean his studio and brushes. I started attending/working/helping at his studio parties. By the way, this was around 1950.

I never went to their house. I doubt if they were living in Contra Costa. When I graduated from Fremont, I went off to Boston U. and totally lost track of the Batchelors. Joyce kept in touch with me. Her only remark about Jonathan and Marjorie was that she'd left him.

... Marjorie's maiden name was McNamee (I think spelling is correct.) She was a beautiful woman, looking all the world like Roslind Russell with salt and pepper hair, which she always wore up. In my teenage mind, she was very sophisticated. The marriage was a shock to her friends, because Miss McNamee was so sophisticated, and Jonathan was such a devil! otherwise.

In his studio, and later on display at the Oakland gallery, was a reclining nude sculpture. At a studio party one evening when I had clean-up duties, Erna Halby -- a Viennese dancer friend of Marjorie's and Joyce Lobner's, told me that Marjorie had posed for the work.

If the house parties [in Canyon] were swinging affairs--what were the studio versions I attended? I certainly met some fabulous celebs at The Studio: Choreographer George Balanchine and short-term wife, Prima Ballerina Maria Tallchief (Marjorie's friends); Gaetano Merola, Director of San Francisco Opera; Lily Pons and husband Andre Kostolanas (sp?); etc.

### **Egl's Childhood**

Growing up in Canyon was, in a real sense, growing up in a rural, in fact near-wilderness, area. The primary school Egl went to was located just down the steep hill on the other side of the dirt road below his house. He had pretty much gone his own way even in childhood, apparently not particularly caring about grades but pursuing what interested him. One reason may have been that he felt himself to be an outsider after polio had crippled his lower arm and hand on one side. By adulthood he had learned to conceal it, and in fact I never noticed it until someone, I think Kathy, told me about it.

Canyon had its share of cranks and eccentrics and recluses, not all of them by any means artists or intellectuals— like the family that refused to let him have any water or electricity for the little cabin that he and Kathleen bought up the hill beyond his father's house. (He had kept his entire LP record collection there, and then, one day, on coming to inspect the place and make plans for the renovation that never got done, he found that neighborhood kids had broken in and stolen all the records.)

He told me about a kid from somewhere in Canyon who had been on a radio quiz show as a child. He was capable of extraordinary mental feats, but otherwise was virtually at a loss in this world. In short, he was a prime example of what was then called an idiot-savant. But something happened in his early teens: he suffered several breakdowns, and finally was sent away to a hospital. Years later, Egl saw him sitting in a little coffee shop somewhere (it couldn't have been in Canyon, since there were no coffee shops there), busily working away at some sort of math on a paper in front of him. Egl went in, said hello, and during the conversation, managed to sneak a look at what the young man was working on. The entire page, line after line, was filled with "5, 5, 5, 5, ...". Telling this, Egl gave that laugh of his: "*Ho!*" with the tone that said, "Now that's *big* trouble!"

### **Egl Becomes a Math Teacher**

I don't know what jobs Egl worked at in his twenties, nor do I know what college or university he first studied at. But when he was already in his thirties, he decided to get his master's degree in mathematics and become a junior college teacher. He was definitely enthusiastic about the subject and would sometimes show me his solutions to problems, written in a large hand in heavy blue pen. I got the impression he worked the problems with the slowness and deliberation of the late-starter who nevertheless is determined to master his new craft. He was interested in the details of each proof, and liked to talk about them in more detail than I was usually interested in. One day, clearly somewhat shaken by the experience, he told me that one of his math professors had died during a class. The professor had been writing on the blackboard, explaining a proof, when suddenly there began to appear, between the words and phrases of his explanation, nonsense words, then garbled phrases. Then he suddenly sank to the floor. An ambulance was called but it was too late. He had apparently died of a stroke. Egl said that what rattled him as much as the actual death of a teacher was the observing first hand the complete collapse in the space of a few

seconds of a rational, and not merely rational but mathematical, mind. But he never seemed to have any original thoughts or speculations about unsolved problems in mathematics. I never heard him say, for example, “I wonder if anyone has tried to prove Goldbach’s Conjecture [or Fermat’s Last Theorem] by ...” “I wonder what would happen if...” He seemed to be indifferent to discussions about possible ways to solve these difficult problems. And he had absolutely *no* interest in what I was working on. Over the years I sent him several math and computer science papers of mine, not to mention several non-technical essays, and he never so much as acknowledged receiving them.

After he got his degree, he began working at Chabot Jr. College, and then later at Hayward State. He developed a real hatred of anyone who would presume to tell him how to teach, or even recommend additional ways for him to teach. He was vituperative about a woman, I think another math teacher at Hayward, who presumed to do this.

He loved what I have to call the *romance* of science: the big ideas in physics — general relativity, quantum mechanics — the new discoveries in cosmology, although as far as I know he never actually took time to study any of these subjects. He liked them for their spectacle, their grandeur.

His fundamentally romantic nature also expressed itself in camping trips to the Sierras. He took numerous pictures, and subjected us to long slide shows: rocks, mountain peaks, rushing streams, his and Kathleen’s tent. I doubt if the thought ever crossed his mind that the slide show may well be the world’s dullest art form.

### **A Party for Jonathan’s Illegitimate Children**

In the early nineties, Julia decided to give Jonathan a special surprise party: she would invite all his illegitimate (as well as legitimate) children, plus all his living ex-wives and mistresses. There was consternation among the other members of the family about this idea, but she went through with it. I attended, and it certainly was a festive occasion. I remember only one of the illegitimate children, a very attractive young woman with neck-length black hair who was probably in her thirties. Jonathan was clearly intrigued by her. Someone told me later (I don’t know if this was true) that at least once while kissing her, he tried to put his tongue in her mouth.

I often remarked to Egl that his was a Dostoevskian family. He laughed, completely agreeing. Jonathan had been married several times, I believe. His last wife, Egl’s mother, was called “Sigrid” in the family, though her actual name was Grace<sup>1</sup>. She had died many years before. The woman he had lived with before Sigrid came to the party. I met her, talked to her briefly. I think she lived north of the San Francisco Bay Area. She seemed a severe, uncommunicative type. Rumor had it she was just waiting for him to die so she could start legal action for at least part of the estate. All of us in his circle worried about what would happen to the paintings and sculptures after he died. Egl shrugged, saying there was nothing he could do: Jonathan, even in his eighties, refused to have anything to do with wills, because they were a reminder of death.

Many persons have a superstition on the subject of making their last will and testament, and think that when every thing is ready signed and sealed, there is nothing farther left to delay their departure. — Hazlitt, William, “On Will-Making” in *Table-Talk*, E. P. Dutton & Co., N.Y., 1911, p. 113.

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1. Grace Mathilda Stovner (I am not sure of the spelling). She is buried under this name in an Oakland cemetery.

So the vultures were always circling. No one really knew how much all his paintings were worth, but considering that I was glad to pay from \$500 to \$1800 for his still lifes, and others were too, and considering the value of the property in Canyon, it is safe to say that his estate was certainly worth well over half a million dollars, if not a million.

One of Jonathan's former mistresses was a woman in her early eighties named Sylvia (she also came to the party). She lived in Piedmont, or in one of the other better districts of Oakland. She had trouble with her legs, and so had to be helped up the steep path to the house, and spent most of the time sitting in the old couch, although at one point I saw Jonathan chasing her around the main room, she barely able to move, Jonathan cackling away with glee. She was a cheerful sort, and I spent some time talking to her. Finally, when she decided to go home, she asked me and several others to help her down the path. As it happened, there was a second path to the house that was less steep; it began just outside the door of the small room where the painting of Lilith hung. So we let her lean on us as we walked slowly out the side door and then began carefully making our way down the path. The poor thing was terrified. Jonathan thought all this was hilarious, and bounded ahead of us, repeatedly telling her, "You think this part is bad? Wait till you see what's coming!" And he laughed, and in fact rolled on his back in the tall grass by the side of the path, slapping his thigh. She kept saying, in her pitiful, frightened, voice, "Jonathan, please stop that. Jonathan, it's not funny." But he kept it up. Eventually we got her down to the dirt road below, helped her into my car, and I drove her home. She was relaxed then, told me about her family (her husband had died years ago), the paintings of Jonathan's she had in her house.

I took several dates to these parties after Kathy got married. I considered the experience a test to see if the women were really prospective relationship material. I also met a woman at one of the parties one winter evening. She was short, blonde, very cute, and seemed to find me interesting despite my age and baldness. We didn't waste any time, and soon were necking near the wall behind the pot-bellied stove. Unfortunately, we were both rather drunk, lost our balance, and fell against a door, which opened, so that we found ourselves on the floor of a storage closet. Loud guffaws were heard in the room outside. We ignored them, I closed the door, and we resumed our love play. But more about this under "The Jazz Singer" in the second file of Vol. 4.

Egl's sister, Maya, another attractive young woman, had something of a reputation. A series of boyfriends attended these parties with her — hunky types, not intellectual at all. (She worked at the Alameda Naval Air Station.) Then she married Peter Ratcliff, who was a descendant of Walter Ratcliff, the famous architect. I attended the wedding reception at the beautiful Ratcliff family ranch near Mendocino, north of San Francisco: rambling houses on grassy land sloping down toward the Pacific, reminding you of the paradisaical California of old. Peter was a yacht salesman. They had a child, but it was not a happy marriage, in part because of his excessive drinking. Maya's next husband was Sean White, a chiropractor, her third was Walter "Herbie" Herbert, a rock 'n' roll impresario.

### **Classical Music Parties Aboard the Sailboat**

Egl and Kathleen both loved sailing, and for a while I was willing to join them on trips out into the Bay. I found it boring. (Although it wasn't boring the time Egl and I got out beyond the Golden Gate Bridge and for a while couldn't get back. The wind was blowing against us on the return, and Egl tried tacking, but our forward progress wasn't sufficient to overcome the strong current flowing outward from the Bay. He turned on the small engine, set it to maximum speed, and this gave us just enough speed to actually move, at a snail's pace, back toward the Bridge. It

took us close to two hours, as I recall.)

I have never really suffered from seasickness, but I had read somewhere that if you lose sight of the horizon, the chances of seasickness increase. So in order to kill time on one of the Bay trips that Egl insisted his friends join him on, I made the experiment of going down into the cabin and closing my eyes. And yes, indeed, I soon began to feel queasy, and the feeling subsided as soon as I looked out of the window at the horizon.

Other times, if the swells and wind were high, so that the boat was heeled far over, I would get through the boredom by lying crosswise on the rear deck, planting my feet on a protrusion and leaning back so that I was, in effect, standing with the sea racing by below my feet.

In the summer, Egl and Kathleen sometimes took a group of Sea Scouts on a cruise down the coast, I think to outside Los Angeles. I got the impression the Scouts weren't all that much fun for Egl and Kathleen, or all that good as sailors. On one of these trips, one of Egl and Kathleen's two beloved cats, Mr. Boda ("the Yoda") was washed overboard. Egl described coming up on deck on a windy day, the distant shore just barely in sight, calling the cat, no response. They searched through the cabin, then realized what had happened. They were both heartbroken. Their other cat, Tigger, lived on for several years.

Years later, my feelings about sailing — or at least, about being a passenger when someone else was doing the actual sailing — scotched (mercifully, I think) a relationship with a woman I contacted on match.com. Not only was she a "very successful" professional who was "in love with life" (they all were), and enjoyed dining out, travel, and half a dozen other upscale activities, but she required any partner to have an income of at least \$100,000 a year, and to be excited about joining her on weekends for yachting on the Bay. I wrote back to her saying that her profile (which is what these resumé were called) was very impressive, but as far as spending weekends on the water were concerned, well, I had always felt that if you've seen one wave, you've seen them all.

Ultimately, Egl and Kathleen bought a boat that they moved into. They called it "Tenacity" (their previous boat was the "Paradox") and initially moored it in the Berkeley Marina. I would kid him about the name, sometimes pronouncing it "Tenacitih", in the guttural voice of a British sea captain. Later, they moved it to the Emeryville Marina. Egl would have little classical music parties aboard the boat, maybe six of us crammed into the cabin, with ample wine. He would invite us to bring CDs that we wanted to have the others hear. But at least in memory, this was just a gesture. He was like those for whom a conversation is where you have to wait for the other person to stop talking so that you can say what is important. But a mathematician in his circle appreciated some of the things I brought (which were probably some of Brahms' chamber works).

Egl was convinced that Bruckner was the greatest composer who ever lived — not *one* of the greatest, but *the* greatest. I suppose the thick, heavy organic atmosphere of the music appealed to his Romantic nature, bringing forth feelings of mountains and cataracts and trees. For me, the music brought up mainly feelings of the pressed-down, small, insignificant man who has found his consolation, namely, obeying and worshipping his oppressor because his oppressor has a higher reason for pressing down some of his creatures. I would sometimes cautiously argue against Egl's view, telling him that he couldn't possibly believe Bruckner was a greater composer than Bach. He would agree, reluctantly and only temporarily. So great was his obsession with Bruckner that he invited a number of us in his circle to see Herbert Blomstedt (whom a friend always called "Big Bird", because of his resemblance, at least in Doug's eyes, to the Sesame Street character) conduct I think it was Bruckner's 8th at the San Francisco Symphony. I went along, tried to get into the music, but it was too heavy, too repetitious: *dah, dah, dut-dut-dut dah,*

*dah* over and over in a thousand different ways. (However, Egl once played me a string quartet by this composer, and I thought it was outstanding.)

### **Egl's Self-Centeredness**

In the mid-nineties, Egl and Kathleen bought a condo in the Watergate Towers in Emeryville, a short walk from where their boat was moored. We had several dinners there. We would also get together sometimes at the Bateau Ivre in Berkeley, a restaurant I introduced them to. Following one dinner at their condo, in June, 1996, we were settling down to watch a Kieslowski film — either *Red* or *White* or *Blue*. There were clothes all over floor, I remember. Maya, Egl's sister, had brought her baby along, and the baby was making it clear, through loud crying, that she wasn't getting enough attention. After a while, Egl said to Maya, quite casually, "I'm going to drop-kick that kid of yours out the door..." It was clear that the remark hurt her deeply, tough lady though she was. She begged him to stop saying such things. But in that bearish, I-don't-really-mean-it way of his, he just kept it up. I felt sorry for her but said nothing.

Far worse is what I learned in a conversation with Doris, the woman from whom Egl and his then-wife Barbara rented the little cottage at which the first of his parties that I attended had been held. Apparently Barb had become pregnant with twins, she wanting very much to have children. During her first trimester, Egl decided to give a party, expecting her to do the cooking as usual, which she did. During the evening, she began to bleed. She told some of the women, including Doris. They all told her she had to go to the hospital right away. She resisted, saying she couldn't possibly, she had to cook for Egl and his guests. But eventually she went and, sadly, lost both fetuses. In the several days she was in the hospital Egl didn't so much as call, much less visit. When it was time for her to come home, Doris, and a woman named Holly, Barb's sister-in-law (though I never knew her), went into the cottage to be sure it was ready for Barb's arrival. They found it to be in exactly the same state it had been at the end of the party, except that now it was filled with smells of rotting food. Egl was nowhere to be found. They cleaned up the place, Barb came home, and a few days later, Egl returned.

### **Jonathan Continues to Paint**

Jonathan continued to work at his painting. I note that, in a letter to Heim, I remark that "he took off on a brand new direction in painting in '93." But I no longer recall what the new direction was.

On Oct. 29, 1994, I wrote to Heim:

"Went to Jonathan Batchelor's (Egl's father) first gallery exhibit in 10 or 15 years last night. Oh, man, what a magnificent painter he is. I couldn't afford most of the ones I wanted (Portrait of Gail, in particular), but I was able to buy a small still life, Pippins in a Bowl, for \$550. It will be the second still life of his I own. One of his daughters says she has decided to be his agent, so I told her I'd be glad to write David R — who, after all, heads the — , one of the nation's leading galleries. I have no idea what R —'s reaction will be. Jonathan is robustly out of touch with the fashionable art scene. Not too long ago, he would have been called hopelessly old-fashioned. But I trust my instincts. And others respond to him, too; they sense the man's talent; they love his work."

Jonathan gave me photos of many of his paintings. I sent seventeen of them to David R —, but he quickly replied that they didn't warrant showing in a major national gallery. When I told Jonathan that Levy had rejected them, it didn't seem to bother him a bit.



## The Break With Egl

As the years passed, I grew more and more weary of the long drive to the house in Canyon. I would often think of turning around and going back. But Egl's parties were the only parties I was invited to that offered even a vague hope of finding some intellectual conversation. Nevertheless, in the nineties, the parties weren't what they had been. There was too much drinking, too little good conversation. The quality of the participants was down. No more interesting teachers, graduate students, musicians, artists.

Yet Egl still seemed to want my friendship. Sometimes, glass in hand, already having drunk too much, he would grasp my shoulder, and say, "Listen...listen, man, you are...listen my friend..." and he would eventually get out words that said how much he valued my intelligence.

And yet not once, in all the years I knew him, did he ever read anything I sent him. He didn't even acknowledge having received it. And this grated on me more and more.

On June 6, 1994, I wrote to Heim:

"Have sent him short stories, excerpts from *The Book*, numerous math things: he doesn't even acknowledge receipt, much less have the decency to give a criticism, and he certainly knows that I can take negative criticism. (I gave him and his wife Kathleen \$50 in gift certificates for their birthday in January, told him several times that I left them with the Harbormaster... No acknowledgment, no thanks. Three months later, in a conversation with Kathleen, I learn he never bothered to pick them up.)"

On July 2, 1996, I wrote to Heim:

"I give Egl 425-page latest version of *Thoughts...*, ask him to read just the 'Letter to Prof. Feynman'. As always, I invite his criticism. No reply in a day. Based on past experience, I know he won't read it, or anything else in the book. (He still hasn't read my book on computer documentation.) You have to forgive such behavior in ordinary people, but in an intellectual — and, in particular, an intellectual who constantly tells you how much he values your company — it is intolerable. And yet for fifteen years, at dinners and parties, I have listened — have *had* to listen — to him read his abominable poetry."

And then, on July 7:

"Friendship with Egl ended after 15 years. I call Kathleen several days ago, tell her the reasons, promise to write a letter to him, but since then have felt he is not capable of changing all the things that are driving me away, and maybe shouldn't be put under an obligation to. So I simply do not return his phone calls. Perhaps Kathleen will leak the reason."

Kathleen eventually had enough and divorced Egl. She broke off contact with all members of Egl's circle and simply disappeared. But in 2005, a member of the circle gave me her phone number. She was living in the same apartment as she had with Egl, had recently completed a B.A. in Philosophy, and was preparing to start on a law degree. During our conversation, she confirmed that Egl had never opened a single envelope of all the ones that I had sent him over the years. Egl moved to Hayward, where he bought a little house. He was granted tenure at Hayward State, then got married for the third time, to a successful financial planner named Laura. They bought a big house in the Hayward Hills. By 2004, according to Kathy, his hair had grown so long that it reached his buttocks. He often wore it braided.

## Death of Jonathan, Loss of His House and Paintings

In 2002, Jonathan died — according to Kathy, from complications following a routine skin operation. He was in his early nineties.

And then, on Tuesday, Aug. 3, 2004, Jonathan's old house burned to the ground. The next day, the following article appeared in the *Contra Costa Times*.

### **Canyon fire destroys 2 homes**

By Nathaniel Hoffman

Canyon — Heddy Schneller yelped with joy Tuesday when firefighters, raking through the burnt rubble of her house, brought her the photo.

They found a stack of charred pictures, including one framed shot of her at 6 years old getting off the SS America with her family as they immigrated from Holland. The pictures and two collages that her husband, David Schneller, had rescued from their flaming house were all that remained of the home where they raised six children.

An early morning fire in the hilly community of Canyon also destroyed the house of the Schnellers' downhill neighbors, Julia Rosenstein and the late Jonathan Batchelor, a house dubbed "Valhalla"<sup>1</sup> that was the locus of fantastic bohemian parties in decades past, according to family members.

Firefighters credited foggy, damp weather with keeping the blaze from spreading through the hills.

"The whole canyon is just fortunate that it's been so wet," David Schneller said.

Canyon, a small community perched on the hills between Oakland and Moraga looks like Appalachia with Berkeley sensibilities. It is anchored by a colorful school and a well-used post office.

"I am so scared to death of fires," said postmaster Elena Tyrrell, whose mother was postmaster before her.

Tyrrell, 45, said the approximately 200 people who live in Canyon have been updating their emergency phone tree, but that it had not been distributed yet and the current one broke down Tuesday morning.

Residents will meet Friday at the Canyon School to go over emergency procedures and take a first aid course, Tyrrell said.

Neighbors who saw the flames about 6 a.m. came running to assist the Schnellers, Rosenstein and her two renters.

"They were running down out of the hills, literally, when we got here," said Moraga-Orinda Fire District Capt. Steve Rivers.

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1. I never heard anyone refer to the house by this name.

Firefighters were able to get only one all-terrain fire engine up the steep dirt driveway that leads to the two houses. A third house on the drive, the home of the Schnellers' adult son, was saved.

David Schneller, a printer who works in Oakland and lived in Canyon for 30 years, lost a daughter in a car crash a year ago Tuesday and a son in a drowning accident several years ago.

After evacuating his family Tuesday morning, he ran back into the house to save two collages — memories of his two children who died.

He was not able to save portraits painted by his neighbor, Batchelor.

The Batchelor family lost much of his art and irreplaceable journals of his long life in Canyon and the Bay Area, his daughter Maya Batchelor said, choking back tears.

Jonathan Batchelor was at least 92 years old when he died in 2002, his birth certificate lost in time, Maya Batchelor said.

“It was truly a historic bohemian landmark,” she said of the house she grew up in with her brother and sister.

Jonathan Batchelor's partner, Rosenstein, also an artist, moved to the house in the 1980s and was living there with two renters.

Fire investigators had not determined the cause of the blaze but believed it started near the roof of the lower house, Moraga-Orinda Fire District Fire Marshal Tanya Hoover said.

Seventeen engine companies from Moraga-Orinda and the Contra Costa Fire District helped fight the fire along with a 17-person hand crew from the California Department of Forestry. Fire officials from the East Bay Regional Park District also responded.

In true Canyon spirit, neighbors offered shelter to the two households. Tyrrell predicted a barn-raising in the near future.

Kathy said that Julia had no fire insurance, since (Julia had said) she couldn't afford to pay for it. Kathy said that some of Jonathan's paintings had been put in storage, but that many, perhaps most of those he hadn't sold over the years, not to mention his sculptures, had all been in the house. Both Egl and Maya had married into wealth (she had married a rock 'n' roll impresario) so there was certainly no lack of money in the family to pay for fire insurance. Both Egl and Maya knew of the fire risk in the Canyon area. The fact that apparently no one in the family had taken any steps to make sure that Jonathan's art legacy would be safely preserved was to me appalling but not surprising.

Kathy also said that Ron White, the member of the Endymion Society described above, had been living in the house and lost everything. Kathleen told me, in late 2005, that for the last ten years of his life Jonathan had been working on an autobiography. It, and all his journals, were lost in the fire.

## **Yolanda and Stephanie**

In early January, 1988, I answered the following ad in the Dec. 23, 1987-Jan. 6, 1988 *San Francisco Bay Guardian*:

“Slow genuine friendship leading to a monogamous commitment, sharing thoughts, feelings, laughter and un/usual adventures. Loving, energetic, attractive, 5’7”, WF scientist (Ph.D) with partime[sic] daughter seeks similar slightly imperfect, altruistic, WM scientist, 30’s-50’s for mutual nurturing growth and happiness. No smoke, STDs. POBox 7742, Berkeley 94707.”

The misspelling and the odd phrasing, punctuation, and grammar I attributed to some special quality she had, some special, sophisticated circle she belonged to. Maybe this was how scientists had agreed to communicate in *Guardian* ads. I immediately began writing a reply. It took several hours, since I carefully weighed every word and phrase.

She replied to the reply, and that led to a long phone conversation. I imagined her as being rather tall with short blond hair and pale skin and a serious expression which told you that she was checking you out to see if you were of the caliber she was seeking. This was a no-nonsense person who knew what she was looking for.

We met at Le Bateau Ivre on Saturday, Jan. 9, 1988, at 4 p.m. The Bateau is a restaurant and coffee shop in South Berkeley at the end of the student/bohemian part of Telegraph Ave. It is in a cream-colored building that looks like a house. There is a little patio on one side, with grass and small trees, where you can have a drink in the summer. But this was January, and so the arrangement was that we meet inside.

I climbed the front steps, opened the door, turned to the left into the little dark-wood, 18th-century room with round tables reserved for people who merely want to have a cup of coffee or a drink. I sensed bright, sparkling eyes looking at me. A woman with an inviting smile sat at a table next to the wall, obviously checking me out as I entered.

I: “Are you ...?”

She, practically glistening. “Yolanda. And you’re John?”

The traditional beginning. We talked for 2½ hours, and we would have talked longer if it weren’t that she had to meet a woman who, like her, was working toward a PhD at the University of California at San Francisco (UCSF).

We made a date to meet at her house in Albany, a small town just north of Berkeley, on Monday evening at 6:30. I arrived on time, knocked at the door. No answer. I knocked again several times, then went and sat in my car for half an hour. Then, fed up, I left a note, controlling my temper (on paper): “Yolanda: I waited till 7. Sorry I missed you. John”

Next day, around five in the afternoon, she called me at home. I made it clear how angry I was, and she immediately made it clear how angry she was that I was angry. But after a while, we decided to try to continue.

She wasn’t a woman who let just any man make love to her. First I had to be subjected to a series of long quizzes contained in little books put out by popular psychologists. “What quality do you consider most important in a woman?” “Suppose you were granted three wishes: what would they be?” “Rank the following qualities in order of importance to you in a woman: beauty;

intelligence; independence; kindness; likelihood of being a good mother.” “What subjects do you find the greatest pleasure in talking about?”

She sat at one end of the couch, I on the other, as she turned the pages and asked the questions. I introduced as much humor, or at least as much laughter, as I could into the process. I tried to come up with clever answers that would impress her.

Eventually, having passed the first hurdle, I was advanced to the second stage of testing, namely, having myself tested for HIV. There would be absolutely no intercourse until that had been taken care of. So I had the test done. The results were negative.

The third stage of testing was aimed at determining my ability to enjoy the sensual pleasures of taking a shower with the intended love object. This was a ritual in which she placed candles at various places in the bathroom to help create an atmosphere. She turned on the shower, we both undressed, I usually getting in first to adjust the temperature. She made me wash her back and buttocks, my ability at doing this properly all adding or subtracting from my score. I must be frank here and admit that I was turned off by how fat her thighs were. “How am I going to make love to a woman with thighs that big?” I wondered. Yet, from the upper part of her stomach up, she wasn’t half bad. By this time, we had reached the point where, as long as I showed discretion and respect, I was allowed to run the washcloth over her breasts, and even to caress them without benefit of washcloth. She gave me the nickname “Rock” because of my lean, runner’s body.

I don’t remember the first time we made love.

She was in the final months of obtaining her PhD in Pathology at UCSF. She had left her husband several years before because she wanted to go back to school and he had refused to let her. (He came from a Portuguese family.) She was about ten years younger than me.

We ran up large phone bills talking to each other — an hour or more at a time. In addition I wrote her long letters. By the weekend of Feb. 14, she decided it was time I met her daughter Stephanie, who was ten years old. She would be with friends, some kind of occasion being celebrated, so that I would be only one of many objects of interest to her there. Did we first meet in the kitchen or the living room? I rack my brain and can’t remember. But I remember the flashing eyes and flushed cheeks and eagerness and curiosity of a beautiful black-haired young girl who has been allowed to meet a man her mother has talked about. I extended my hand. We shook hands. Her talk was self-conscious. At the time she had decided that she didn’t like the name Stephanie, and decided she wanted to be called Melanie instead. Her teachers were at a loss what to do. They refused to call her by anything but her real name. There was a specialness about her, about her girlish exaggeration of exclamations. She had hurt her thumb, and I looked at it, commiserated with her. Before the weekend was out she asked me to brush her hair.

The three of us watched *Back to the Future* one evening, all lying on the day-bed in the living room, a fire in the fireplace. Then, after it was over, she shyly asked me if I would stay over. I of course agreed. I slept in the lower bunk in her room, she in the upper. As soon as I was under the covers, she asked me if there were enough. Then she asked me what kind of music I liked to go to sleep to. I: “Oh, whatever you like, Steph — Melanie.” She adjusted the little portable radio strapped to a post at the head of her bed, selecting some sort of bland rock ’n’ roll.

The next morning, we went to breakfast at the Inn Kensington. I thought up a game, a wish-list game which used a little modular arithmetic to determine which of your wishes would come true. Then we played a game of hers (actually, a well-known game as I found out years later from watching *Frasier* on TV) in which the person who’s It secretly picks an object in the room and says, “What I spy with my little eye is ...” and then names the colors of the object. The others then have to guess what the object is. I introduced her to Hangman. Then she gave us riddles:

“What do you call a cow without legs?” (Ground beef.) “What do you call a cow with only two legs?” (Lean beef.) And so on.

Even though I was able to achieve erection with Yolanda, I wasn't able to have an orgasm. This bothered her, and we proceeded to play the non-game game of mentioning how important it was that we not make an issue of it. She: “So what? You have a mouth and hands, don't you?” But in her determination to attain this proof of the worth of our relationship and of her sexual appeal, she bought sexy underwear at my request. By this time, I had become aware of her habit of half-closing her left eyelid when she was expressing a feeling of closeness to me.

One day, while there were a lot of people in her living room, Stephanie, who had been lying on the floor, being flirtatious as usual, kicking her legs, wagging them back and forth, once, just once, let her legs stay apart, just for a moment, just long enough for me to imprint on my brain the sight of gleaming white underpants (I'm not sure if it's correct to call them “panties” when the girl is only ten). For a fraction of a second, I even saw the crotch seam. At that age, she probably had little or no hair, but I could see how tight and smooth the panties were against her young body. I would have given my house to have been allowed to watch her put them on that morning, or before the guests arrived. I think Yolanda saw her daughter's little revelation, and my reaction to it, because there was a motherly admonishment, and a half muttered, “Stephanie, be more modest”, followed by Stephanie's giggle. She knew and at the same time didn't know that she had given me a special treat, and the delicious image has remained in my mind ever since.

So here I was again: getting close to the mother so I could get close to the daughter.

Frigid gentlewomen of the jury! Let the record show that at no time did I ever do anything to this girl that could in any way be called improper. I may be a dirty old man, but I am a non-practicing dirty old man.

Meantime, of course, I was doing my best to deliver the goods to Yolanda. One rainy evening we parked in the parking lot next to Pastime Hardware in Berkeley and did some heavy petting for several hours. No intercourse but lots of tongue work and breast caressing and attempts on my part to probe farther down. Also lots of giggling, since the one thing we were really good at was laughing together. She said once that, sometimes when she was talking on the phone to me, she would be lying on the floor, convulsed with laughter and Stephanie, on entering the room, would immediately say, “I know who you're talking to!”

Stephanie was always performing when I was over there. There was a long mirror on the kitchen wall next to the door to the living room. When I was sitting at the table at the other end of the kitchen, she would sometimes come in, engage me in chatter, and then begin assuming various poses in front of the mirror — turning to view herself in profile, pressing her lips together, I assume to get her recently applied lipstick set properly, touching her hair. She was having trouble with math in school, and sometimes I helped her. One day, as soon as I arrived, she began talking excitedly about how she was going to redo her room and that included getting a new bed. She asked me if I would help her take measurements for it. Her mother instead wanted her to do her homework. The mini battle went on, I not knowing quite what to say. Then, striking her totally female, totally sexy young girl pose, she put a finger thoughtfully to her lips and said, “John, look at it this way: your job is to put life into mathematics, right?” I: “Well, yes...” She, suddenly assuming a pose with ankles crossed, hand on one hip: “Well: what better way to do that than to put mathematics into life? Let's go measure my room.”

I don't think I am being unfair to her if I say that she regarded math as a nuisance. But her mother wanted her to get good grades, and so she wanted me to tutor her. Stephanie rapidly developed a technique for doing as little as possible and getting as much credit as possible. The

more unsure she was about what she was doing, the fainter her handwriting became, and at the same time the more flourishes it acquired. If I asked her a question about her answer, she had a way of brushing the question aside with a wave of her hand and impatient words that said, “Please, John, if you don’t get my solution, I’d really prefer not to spend time explaining it right now. Couldn’t we go on to the next problem? (I’ve got to go to meet Heather.)” And I have to admit, so skilled was she at this ploy that I felt embarrassed to even *think* about asking her if that was an  $x$  or a  $y$  in the third line, or if the answer she had written was 54 or 34 or 59 or 39 or ... If she had said, “John, I don’t always have time to *write down* the answer. That’s not the way I work,” I would (at least for a few moments) have been ashamed of my slowness in recognizing the genius I had before me.

A teacher who asks a question is tuned to the right answer, ready to hear it, eager to hear it, since it will tell him that his teaching is good and that he can go on to the next topic. He will assume that anything that sounds close to the right answer is meant to be the right answer. So, for a student who is not sure of the answer, a mumble may be his best bet. If he’s not sure whether something is spelled with an *a* or an *o*, he writes a letter that could be either one of them...

Game theorists have a name for the strategy which maximizes your chances of winning and minimizes your losses if you should lose. They call it “minimax”. Kids are expert at finding such strategies. They can always find ways to hedge, to cover their bets. — Holt, John, *How Children Fail*, Dell Publishing Co., Inc., N.Y., 1964, pp. 34-35.

Although it would turn out that Stephanie had a natural gift for writing, she never concerned herself with trivial matters like spelling. She and Yolanda gave me a nickname and began calling me “Peetie Sweetie”, but in a birthday card or Christmas card, as likely as not, Stephanie would write, “Dear Petty Sweaty”. I kidded her about it, and so, thereafter, that became another nickname.

## **Sex**

I have neglected to mention that at this time Yolanda was having sex with three men: Greg, a guy she had met several years ago, and who was, apparently, the ideal lover for her; M — , a physicist-turned-biologist whom she had met at a jazz appreciation course and who was a nationally known researcher on the human genome project, and me. It is a tribute to her skills at managing men that none of us three was jealous of the others. I got to know M — , who lived in the Mark Twain Apartments on College Ave., and discussed science with him. I never met Greg, however.

I don’t know if it was in spite of, or because of, the fact she had multiple lovers, but the slightest sign of uncleanness filled her with revulsion. I remember one morning when my face was above hers as she lay on the pillow, she suddenly screamed and turned aside and in a voice of utter disgust informed me that there were dandruff flakes in my beard, and didn’t I ever wash it? She said there were rubber disks you could buy that had short rubber bristles that were meant for scrubbing beards. I had better get one. I did, being utterly ashamed and filled with even more self-contempt and self-hatred than usual.

It may be that Yolanda’s uninhibited attitude toward sex came from her parents. Her father was at the time in his early seventies, the mother, very overweight, in her late sixties. Yolanda spoke quite casually of how her parents would routinely make love in the middle of the day, the

old man indicating when he was ready. According to Yolanda, although they had been married ever since they met at the end of WW II, he was still crazy about her. Yet, for some reason, he normally slept in the basement, underneath the front of their house, and would emerge at the pre-arranged time for sex. There was no secret in the family about this. Yolanda would joke about it, saying, when I was at her parents' house, and we heard sounds in another part of the house, "They're going to screw." I was repelled by such a brazen, casual attitude toward sex among old people.

### **We Go to a Therapist**

March arrived, and despite superhuman attempts and all my ability at fantasy, after two months I still couldn't have an orgasm, and it was bothering her more and more. She wanted sex (from me) at least three times a week. But she wouldn't grant me the consideration the women's movement was demanding that men grant to women with sexual inhibitions. She began insisting that I go to a therapist. I told her I would, but I had had enough of therapists, and dragged my feet. One reason was that I had bought a house in Berkeley, and was in the process of moving. She let me stay at her house in the interim, but she charged me \$350 a month rent. In May she left a note:

"I interpret our current situation as a demonstration that you cannot be trusted to stand by your word in as important an area as personal commitment. (I refer to your proclamation[sic] that you would get a counselor or do whatever was necessary to save this relationship.) Therefore, I do not feel I can trust you in other areas of verbal commitment[sic].

"Please bring the \$350 rent money in cash or move out by tomorrow evening."

After I had moved into my new house, I gave in and we began going to therapists. One of them was Joanne — who lived only a few blocks from my house, in a beautiful Victorian near the corner of Milvia and Channing Way that her husband, a contractor, had restored. She was considerably overweight, but resigned to her condition, and in fact had a warm sense of humor. She said that she and her husband had had an open marriage for a number of years. At one point, Yolanda said that, despite my problem, I could nevertheless give her orgasms again and again until she was exhausted. Joanne replied that it's like getting a new car: you want to try all the buttons and knobs, keep turning on the windshield wipers, and so forth. I went back to Joanne several times after later breaking up with Yolanda to get her opinion on romantic matters. She was certainly not well-read — she didn't know, for example, who Kafka was — but she had an earthy, practical view of relationship problems, and I valued her advice. Once I saw her in a coffee shop. It seemed that, over the years, her head was growing smaller in comparison with her body. But individual therapy didn't solve the Problem, and so Yolanda decided that we needed to join Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous (SLAA), one of numerous groups that had been spun off from Alcoholics Anonymous. More about this below.

### **A Little Family**

And yet it wasn't war all the time. The three of us would still climb into the big day-bed in her living room and watch a video, sometimes with a little fire in the fireplace. I introduced them to People Piles, and every once in a while we would have one on their living room floor, the three of us laughing just as Marcella, Jeff, and I had laughed when we had a People Pile on the living floor in the house on W. Portola.

I had given Yolanda a key to my house, and she and Stephanie told me that one hot summer afternoon they had come over to visit me unannounced. Stephanie had opened the front door and



quietly come up the stairs. There I was, she said, sitting at the computer, typing away, stark naked, and completely unaware of her presence. She had watched me, then gone quietly back downstairs. She thought it quite amusing.

### **Yolanda Fails to Get Her PhD**

Yolanda was having trouble with her advisor, a woman named Carol —. Her thesis involved analyzing sharks' something-or-others as part of an attempt to find out something about mucous membranes that might apply to the treatment of cystic fibrosis. She made clear (*a*) what a tyrant Carol was, and (*b*) that she, Yolanda, could not respect her because she tended to publish prematurely. In fact, she had said to Carol on at least one occasion, "Have you no *principles*?" In the gentlest possible way I tried to discourage her from saying any more things like that to her thesis advisor, the PhD process and, in particular, the power of PhD advisors, being what they were. Yolanda's thesis work was exhausting, she having to get up early several mornings a week to meet the fishermen who would supply her with the shark tissue she required.

Then, one day, a week before her orals, she called me at work and said she had been all but terminated from the PhD program, this after seven years of work. They hadn't actually terminated her, but they had set up various hoops for her to jump through, mainly to discourage lawsuits, but the decision had clearly been made. She was destroyed, knowing that there was little chance, even if she spent every remaining ounce of her energy, of meeting the department requirements and getting herself reinstated. (All this, of course, only increased my contempt for academics.) I drove over to her place, we lay on the floor of her living room, I holding her, trying to console her. When we got into her bed, I don't know whose idea it was, but one of us said, "We'll fix them: we'll sleep upside down!" To which the other responded, "Yeah, that'll fix 'em," and so that night we slept with our heads at the foot of the bed, and the bed clothes more or less wrapped around us. At the time it seemed a wonderful revenge against cruel, academic bureaucrats.

Around this time she began talking about her father. He had been an executive with Standard Oil, and she repeatedly told how he would come home after a hard day's work and beat her. Her mother was Polish, she having met her father during World War II, when she was a refugee. She was obese and if that affliction has a genetic component, she had passed on the genes to her daughter, who fought a lifelong battle against it.

And yet I felt that, despite all her education, "Yolanda was no scientist. This was evident in the way she thought about problems she confronted in everyday life. Later, a scientist who became her lover, and whom I got to know, agreed with my opinion. Years after that, I met a young woman (Eva) who, though she only had a bachelor's degree in biology, impressed me immediately as having a first-rate scientific mind.

### **Yolanda After Losing the PhD**

She tried several jobs, one of them as an assistant in an optometrist's office in nearby Albany. But she kept quitting as soon as she found out that her co-workers and boss didn't live up to her high ideals. "I need to work with people who are honest and who have principles and who are into spiritual growth." Almost ashamed of myself for my long years of endurance on the job at HP, I tried to explain to her that the world of work wasn't like that, and that, in the last analysis, if you wanted a steady paycheck, you did what you are asked to do, period. But that only proved to her how much spiritual growth *I* needed.

Seeing how much I worried about money, she said that if only I could learn to *spend* money, my depression would go away. So I went out and bought a Stuart bed for \$1700. Nothing

changed. It was a superbly designed queen-sized bed, with a bookshelf behind the head, and drawers on rollers underneath. But it was immovable because of its weight, and so required all sorts of skillful fishing with coat hangers and yard sticks if you dropped a book down behind the shelf.

As our sexual relationship waned she put more and more conditions on my being allowed to continue to enjoy her favors. One of them was that I had to accompany her to two-, sometimes three-times a week meetings of Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous (SLAA). This was one of numerous spin-offs from Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), called “Twelve-Step Programs” after the twelve steps that AA members had to go through to overcome their addiction. Each organization hoped to capitalize on the success of AA in curing alcoholics. (As far as I know, it still is the most effective of all treatment programs.) There were groups for compulsive gamblers, overeaters, kleptomaniacs, you name it. Each SLAA meeting was run according to the standard AA formula, which I have now forgotten in detail. But I think it started with a statement of the Twelve Steps, then was followed by a series of 15-minute confessions by members as to what had led to their addiction. These were dreadful tales of child-abuse, alcoholic parents, failure in school, often life on the streets, wife abuse, addictions to other drugs. When the confessor stated his or her recent progress along the way to recovery, everyone clapped.

Yolanda herself became addicted to these programs. She insisted that Stephanie start attending meetings of Al-Ateen, which was a group dedicated to helping the teenage sons and daughters of alcoholic parents. Yolanda certainly didn’t think herself an alcoholic, nor had her husband been, but in one of her Twelve-Step Programs she had picked up the term, “non-drinking alcoholic”. Apparently it was originally intended to describe abusive behavior of non-alcoholics that closely resembled that of alcoholics. She became convinced that her father was in this category. Later, she decided that, because I told her I often had a bottle of Guinness Stout and a glass of wine in the same day, that I was an alcoholic (of the drinking variety). I said I didn’t think so. She said the first sign of an alcoholic is denial as to his condition. So I made her an offer: let me talk to any member of AA and describe, honestly, my drinking habits, and if that person says I am an alcoholic, then I will join AA. She shook her head. “It can’t come from someone else. It has to come from *you*.”

And I thought: here was another argument like that of the sixties that I described earlier — If you are strongly attracted to women, it is because you are trying to hide your homosexuality; if you are not, or are asexual, it is because you are trying to hide your homosexuality — and like Freud’s “He who denies my teaching only confirms it” .

I worried about all this training in being a victim would do to Stephanie, but the robust health, mental and physical, of this girl soon calmed my fears. She went along with what her mother demanded, privately regarding it all with contempt, as she told me later.

When she was in her early teens, Yolanda suddenly got it into her head that her ex-husband, Stephanie’s father, had abused her when she was a child. She made the accusation public and he, a coach at an Albany or El Cerrito high school, was brought up before the School Board. Stephanie testified on his behalf and helped to convince the School Board that Yolanda was crazy

## **Stephanie**

Yolanda and I remained on speaking terms, but it was Stephanie I grew closer to. For one thing, she was a genuinely talented actress. When she was around 13, she played Juliet’s mother in *Romeo and Juliet* at a little summer playhouse in Alameda. Years later, when she was an undergraduate at Solano State University, she played four roles in *Angels in America*, and she was so

good in each of them that I whispered to Yolanda sitting next to me, “Stephanie must have gotten sick because she’s not in the play!” Then in another play she had the role of Amelia Earhart’s flight trainer.

Even after my sexual relationship with Yolanda was over, I still spent time with her and Stephanie. I remember the three of us flying a couple of kites in a school yard one afternoon in Albany, and that Stephanie became so angry when hers wouldn’t go up after repeated tries that she simply sat down in the middle of the field and pounded her fists into the grass. I told her a few things that could be done to keep a kite up in the air on days when there wasn’t much wind, but I sensed that she would never be a lover of kite flying.

I made the most of the opportunity she provided of my finding out something about contemporary teenage culture. So, as unobtrusively as I could, I asked her about current slang terms. I could see that this intrusion into a realm that all her peers considered safely off-limits to adults make her a little uncomfortable. Some of the terms were Valley-Girl-Speak, but a few were not, for example, “icy”, meaning very cool. “Oh, he is *icy*!”

Her father was found to have cancer, and the prolongation of dying that the medical profession liked to call an attempt at a cure, then followed. Eventually he died, not of the disease, Yolanda told me, but of chemotherapy. And so, as Stephanie acknowledged on several occasions in subsequent years, I became an alternate father to her, just as I had been to Lisa when I was living in Cupertino in the early eighties. Yolanda decided that she would become a cytology technician, checking biopsies through the microscope for signs of cancer cells. She worked for a while at a local hospital, possibly Kaiser, found a lack of idealism in her supervisors, and somehow got a job in San Diego, where she moved with Stephanie. They had a nice apartment in a large complex, Stephanie went to school there, and then Yolanda got into a disagreement with her landlord about air conditioning or something concerning the apartment. They moved again, this time to Dallas. Stephanie got in with bad company, had several boyfriends, started taking drugs, her mother couldn’t handle the pressure of her job, and so the two of them eventually returned to Albany. Here, Stephanie had, among her successive boyfriends a poet, a composer, and a journalist. There were two Scotts in her collection.

After high school, she found her way to Sonoma State College, in the wine country, and I saw her much less frequently. But sometimes she would call me when she was in Berkeley, say, in her breathless way, “Lets go have coffee!” and fill me in on all the details of her life. Her beauty only increased as she blossomed into young womanhood, with her big, dark eyes, ample breasts, black hair. She was very slightly overweight, but in a way that only made you more aware of her abundant charms. She had inherited a trace of the Portuguese features of her father’s ancestors. We would go to Britt Marie’s, a restaurant with a vaguely Hungarian flavor, on Solano Ave., on the border of North Berkeley and Albany, just a few blocks from the house on Stannage that her mother had lived in when I first met her, and which her father owned. And so there we sat, in a table near the front, in the yellow and brown light of late evening, she with an elbow on the table. Conversation as always came around to her mother. Once she said, sitting up, “I was talking to Yolanda the other day [she called her mother by her first name] and I found that you and she *did it*.” She shook her head. “That’s *disgusting*.” Yolanda, and certainly not I, had never told her that we were having a sexual relationship, Yolanda assuming that she would make up her own mind about it. To this day I am not quite sure what Stephanie found disgusting.<sup>1</sup> Her feelings toward

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1. But over dinner one evening in Jan., 2011, she told me that, around 1990, when Yolanda and I were still together, Yolanda would often walk around the house naked, and masturbate in front of Stephanie.

me certainly didn't seem to change. And she certainly had no reluctance to talk to me about sex — as, for example, one time around Thanksgiving. She called me, invited me out for a cup of coffee at Berkeley Espresso in North Berkeley, and sat, again with her elbow on the table, hand on side of her head, talking about her boyfriend, and how she was unsure about how to please him. She then asked me what men like in the way of oral sex, and as she calmly outlined the techniques she knew, I noticed some middle-aged ladies at neighboring tables looking utterly shocked as they listened to this beautiful young woman calmly discussing sex techniques with an old man (I was around sixty). Then when she was done with that subject, she jumped up, said “Let's take a walk!”, and headed for the Body Shop a block away on the corner, where she selected, with wagging fingers and all the expertise of a true connoisseur, a few soaps and perfumes.

Yolanda, it is sad to report, went steadily downhill. In the early 2000s, her father became sick and tired of having to support a daughter who made a point of telling him what a monster he was. So around 2005, he stopped her monthly payments. She was reduced to living on welfare in a seedy hotel room in a dangerous part of Oakland. Her weight now was over 300 pounds and she could only get around in an electric wheelchair. She spent her days sending inspirational emails — “Let go and let God!” — to a long mailing list, sometimes four or five a day. I eventually called her, told her honestly that I wasn't reading these because I wasn't interested and didn't have the time. She was hurt and angry, but promised to remove my name from her list. The result was that thereafter I received only half a dozen or so a week. Eventually, her father paid for her monthly fees at a retirement home in Oakland that was owned by a religious organization.

## **Moving to Berkeley**

I had decided that Berkeley was the only city in the country where I could be happy, and so, as I said in the previous section, Yolanda helped me in my search for a house in Berkeley, which began in January, 1988. The realtor had been recommended by Bruce Nordman, the Bright High School Student at HP Labs when I first started working there, he by then having earned his degree in Environmental Engineering from UC Berkeley and working for Lawrence Berkeley Labs doing research on ways of improving energy conservation in residences. The realtor showed me anything and everything, including a tiny house that had been owned by an elderly black woman who had recently died, and a little two-bedroom cottage on Marin in North Berkeley that, like a fool, I turned down because it didn't have three bedrooms (realtor: “No problem! You can just build a second-story...!”) The market was hot, prices were increasing by the day, it seemed, and I was in a state of growing anxiety that everything would be out of reach if I waited much longer. I finally found a house that I couldn't think of a reason to turn down — an A-frame on Milvia St., near Parker St., in South Berkeley (the working class half of the city). The price was \$222,000. When the papers were signed, Yolanda demanded a commission for helping me in my search — \$800, I think it was.

I thought I had moved into a town in which blacks would recognize the extraordinary advantages they enjoyed from living in the most liberal town in the country, so I hardly bothered to lock my house when I left it. One night I went to the Albatross, an old-time pub in northwest Berkeley on the edge of the black ghetto. I left my knapsack in the car, door unlocked. When I came back it was gone. In it had been the two thick volumes of my treasured *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Mathematics*, and Yasuhara's *Recursive Function Theory & Logic*. I called the police, asked them, in all innocence, what kind of thief is interested in mathematics books. The police said the thieves grabbed any knapsack they could, looked for calculators, then threw the knapsack in the

nearest garbage can. So I walked along the nearby streets, looking in each garbage can. No luck. I was utterly depressed, not only by the theft of treasured books, but by the loss of my illusion about Berkeley. Several days later, I noticed that the metal under the lock on the trunk of my car was bent, and that it was difficult to open the trunk with the key. Someone later told me that it was routine for thieves to stick a screwdriver into car locks, force them open, see if anything worth stealing was inside.

And yet, this too must be recorded. I had stored a large suitcase containing all my mss. — my life's work — in a local storage facility during the move. As I was finishing moving into my new house, I retrieved the suitcase, brought it home, set it down on the front porch, opened the door with my key, and went inside. Something distracted me, and I forgot to bring the suitcase in from the porch. The next morning, as I was leaving the house, I saw it there. I couldn't even bring myself to think about the extraordinary, the miraculous good luck I had just had, because thieves would not have bothered to look inside before they ran off with the suitcase.

The realtor had somehow neglected to tell me that my house was on one of the two streets (the other was Martin Luther King, Jr., Way) used by the worst of Berkeley High School students in their daily treks back and forth to the East Campus, where they attended remedial classes. (In the early nineties, a student was murdered there by another student.) And so, several times a day, I had to listen to the shouting, laughter, and mock threats of black students as they passed in front of my house, sounds that included one of the most unpleasant of all human sounds, that of chattering, shrieking teenage black girls. At first I tried to make sure I was away during the morning and afternoon hours when they came by, but eventually I simply resigned myself to the daily sound of jungle voices beneath my window.

## **I Am Almost Killed in the '89 Earthquake**

When traffic wasn't particularly bad, I spent 1½ hours each way in the commute to HP. An alternative was a commute bus that ran along Fulton St. in Berkeley, through certain stops in residential communities along Route 580, then up Route 880, across the Hayward Bridge, up University Ave. in Palo Alto to the Stanford campus, then to Stanford Industrial Park. It was about a nine-block walk to where the bus stopped on Fulton, and the trip was longer than if I drove, but the seats were comfortable and at least you could read.

On Tuesday, Oct. 17, 1989, I debated whether to drive or to take the bus. If I dragged out my deliberations long enough, I would miss the bus and be forced to drive. Eventually, I wound up taking the bus.

At the end of a routine day, I got on the bus on Hanover St., behind the HP offices, and settled down to read. It was a sunny afternoon, as usual, the bus was crowded, people were talking. Hanover made a sharp left to connect with Page Mill Rd. As we made that turn, I sensed, with my nose in my book, that the bus had stopped. Then I became aware of a side-to-side rocking of the bus. I thought, Oh Christ, some bunch of pranksters outside has decided to see if they can rock the bus and annoy the passengers. I kept reading. Then I thought, No, it must be a truck that is pushing against the bus, why I didn't know or care. The rocking continued and grew more intense. Then I heard a woman's voice call out, "...earthquake!..." I put down my book, looked out the window and didn't see anyone shaking the bus, or any truck pushing against it, and gradually accepted the fact that we were having an earthquake.

Someone had a portable radio and began relaying the news. Eventually, the bus began to move, and all the way home, there was excited talk about what was being reported. Amazingly,

throughout the trip home, I didn't even think about damage to my house.

That night, amid the flood of TV news reports, we learned that the Cypress Expressway in Oakland had collapsed, crushing a number of cars and killing their occupants. I realized that, had I taken the car that day, I would have snuck out of the plant as usual by 4:15, and would have almost certainly have been driving home on the Expressway when the earthquake struck at 5:04. At first I thought: the car could have been badly damaged! Then, in succeeding days, I felt not: thankfulness that my offhand decision to take the bus that morning had probably saved my life, but depression over the fact that such a decision was the reason I was still alive. If life continues as a result of such random events, is it really worth it?

## Stanford Park Division

And this must be *the prime* of life ... I blink,  
As if at pain; for it is pain, to think  
    This pantomime  
Of compensating act and counter act,  
Defeat and counterfeit, makes up, in fact,  
    My ablest time.

— Philip Larkin, “Maturity”

By the late eighties, I was working no more than two months a year for the company. Someone, a female academic I think, maybe Corinne, maybe Georgia, said, when I told her this, “You have a sinecure!” Vacation and holidays amounted to close to 52 days a year, so that I was able to work a four-day week and be paid for five. During the ten months, I came in each day with a few books and my notebooks, and spent as much of the day as I could studying in my cubicle: mainly number theory, group theory, and Goethe's *Faust* in German, and working on my three problems: Fermat's Last Theorem, a proof of the validity of Occam's Razor in a computer programming context, and the Syracuse Problem (the  $3x + 1$  Problem). Ideal as it may sound, it was slowly killing me, because I couldn't escape the feeling that the others, in particular Eric T —, had little more than contempt for me, even though no one ever said a word, and employees and managers were all friendly enough.

The agony of doing nothing, month after month, on the job, led to violence against Kathy, as I have described earlier, and eventually ended our relationship. I thought about starting a technical writing business offering my new method of documentation. But I felt, and I think rightly, that the risk was too great at that late age, since no matter how dreadful my days might be, the pension was growing with each one I endured.

I applied for other jobs in the company, and got an interview with Don Chambers, a mid-level engineering manager in the Stanford Park Division. I felt nothing but emptiness and hopelessness as I walked between cubicles on the way to the interview, asking myself again and again: How much more of this misery must I endure? Chambers arranged for an interview with Julio R —, who was the head of the technical writing department. I had seen him occasionally in the past — I think he had worked in one of the divisions: he was short, bald, with a strong South American accent (Brazilian, as it turned out). He hired me to write manuals for signal processors that were used in military aircraft to confuse enemy radar. I shouldn't say “write” but rather “maintain” because much of my job consisted in going to the engineers and modifying existing manuals to keep up with changes in the hardware and software.

Julio R — may well have been the worst of all the managers I worked for in my entire industrial career. After some twenty years in this country, he still spoke only broken English, with frequent insertions of the phrase “and all that kind o’ good stuff” when he grew tired of spelling out details on some subject. In his cubicle, he had a blackboard which was covered with partial differential equations. I never bothered trying to figure out what they were about, but I am very confident he had no idea either. He never referred to them, certainly never worked on them or changed them. But he insisted that they never be erased. (It is not surprising, therefore, that he named his department “Learning Products”, which, of course, was much more impressive than “Technical Writing” or “Documentation” or the traditional “Pubs”.) The writers regarded him with scathing contempt, and usually, when he wasn’t around, referred to him as “Pancho”.

He made us take a course titled “Applied RF/Microwave Circuit Measurements” that was taught, at HP, by Bob Kellejian of the College of San Mateo. I took notes in accordance with my Environment idea — alphabetical by topic — and added them to my Electronics Environment. But I couldn’t stand going through the subject tediously in standard school format — lecture, then homework exercises, then lecture... so I went to Julio and asked him if I could prepare an Environment for the course which could then be used by others, present and future, and save them having to sit through all the lectures. He said no. So I stopped going to classes, and received an Incomplete in it from Kellejian.

I think it was around this time that, as a result of reading an article in *Scientific American* having to do with flows of liquids or gases through systems of pipes, I remarked to one of the engineers that some of the concepts and equations seemed to be similar to those involved in electronics, and that I found it helpful to think about wires as pipes and current as liquids under pressure. I remember his quick, automatic response: you should be able to understand electronics without needing crutches like that. Once again, as so often in the past, I was utterly ashamed — filled with self-revulsion over yet another proof of my lack of ability in anything technical. Some 15 years later, I came across the following in Feynman’s *Lectures on Physics*:

“...there is a most remarkable coincidence: *The equations for many different physical situations have exactly the same appearance.* Of course, the symbols may be different — one letter is substituted for another — but the mathematical form of the equations is the same. This means that having studied one subject, we immediately have a great deal of direct and precise knowledge about the solutions of the equations in another.”<sup>1</sup>

I also attempted to implement the Environment idea in some of the manuals I had to work on, gradually trying to list the topics alphabetically, improving the index. But I had no expertise in Windows, and when the engineers saw that I was attempting to add some of the most fundamental Windows operations to the manual — for example, opening a window, accessing a menu item — they became alarmed, and convinced that I really had no business on the project. The truth was, I had failed to carry out the very first step in my Environment method, and that was to determine what skills were expected of every user. Certainly knowledge of Windows operations was among these; my ignorance of them was irrelevant.

So I turned my attention to the Human Factors problem, which (in my mind at least) was intimately related to the documentation problem. The division had a Human Factors engineer, Dick Nyquist, who was in charge of designing cabinets and front panels. Since he was a pleasant

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1. Feynman, Richard, Leighton, Robert F., Sands, Matthew, *Lectures on Physics*, Vol. II, Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., Reading, Mass., 1977, p.12-1. Italics Feynman’s.

enough guy, I tried to convince him to think in terms of user tasks, not in terms of operations on the hardware and software. I told him that, before even setting pen to paper, he should have a clear list of the top-level tasks that a user could perform with the equipment, and then try to design the panel so that it made as clear as possible what these tasks were, and which buttons and knobs were related to each one. He wasn't buying any of it. For him, Human Factors design was the making of cabinets and front panels that were esthetically pleasing: he wanted to design front panels from the point of view of an artist. The focal point of his interest — what he showed to his managers, and to engineers — was the excellence of his drawings. A method such as mine had no place when one was dealing with such lofty esthetic and psychological matters as the look and feel of a piece of equipment. Fifteen years later, it is sad to report, the level of insight in the Human Factors community had not advanced one iota, as I found out during a brief interchange with an online forum of Human Factors professionals. The only thing that had changed was that the number of terms with capital letters had increased, and the soaring technical abstractions with which the profession attempted to impress the computer industry with its depth of insight had multiplied. The writers in our department were the usual collection of failed technicians and engineers and drifters in the high-tech world. Roger Seaman seemed a cut above the average: I see him standing at his desk as he told, with an incredulous shake of his head, and quiet laugh, of the latest ineptitude on the part of our boss. Unlike me, he at least knew the rudiments of operating the products he wrote about, and knew the style in which manuals were to be written, and did not trouble himself about possible better ways of doing documentation. Dawn Moore, a very cute blonde, had a degree in, I think, electrical engineering, but spent most of her time talking about her problems with her boy friend. She and I were assigned to work on one particular manual, and had several discussions as to how we would divide up the work. I was soon lost in the torrent of words she issued on the subject, so, knowing I was already not in good standing with the boss, I simply went along with what she wanted to do. I doubt if we ever wound up producing anything. I do remember one discussion we had, however, because it related directly to the Environment idea. She was having trouble writing up a procedure, and so she asked the writers for their recommendations. After listening to her description of the problem at length, I realized that her task was to write a procedure for performing a calibration of some sort. The Environment method argues that the procedures that users have to follow in getting a piece of software to do what they want have exact parallels in the basic control structures used in programming languages — if statements, while-loops, for-loops<sup>1</sup>. I told her that the procedure she was trying to write was equivalent to a while-loop in a program: while certain parameters were not what they should be, the user had to make appropriate adjustments, then test the results, and keep repeating this while-loop until the parameters were what they should be; then he could stop. I encouraged her just to write the procedure as a while-loop to be executed by a human being. But this sounded entirely too weird, too abstract, too remote from the writing of prose, which she felt her job to be, and so she went on thrashing.

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1. An if statement is a statement of the form “if such-and-such is true, then do the following things...”. A while-loop is a statement of the form, “while such-and-such conditions hold, do the following things...”. A for-statement is a statement of the form, “for  $n$  taking the successive values 1 through  $k$  do the following things...” In other words, “Assign  $n$  the value 1, then do the following things; next, assign  $n$  the value 2 and do the following things again; next, assign  $n$  the value 3 and do the following things again, etc., up to  $k$ .” Such a statement can be used, for example, to implement a multiplication algorithm, since multiplication is simply repeated addition. To compute  $b$  times  $a$ , the for-loop computes, in succession,  $a$ ,  $a + a$ ,  $a + a + a$ , ...,  $a + a + a + \dots + a$  [ $b$   $a$ 's]. The last sum is the value of  $b$  times  $a$ .



A writer from another department in the division would occasionally come down and sit at one of our desks. The main reason was that he was having a hot affair with a blonde secretary, and this gave them a chance to be together out of sight of their co-workers. Both were married, both apparently were unconcerned about their spouses finding out. The blonde would crouch adoringly at his side as he typed and they talked. When they weren't together, the guy and a member of our department would get through the boredom of the daily work by devising ways to torture cats.

Across the aisle from me sat Jeff Hornick, a genial fat guy who I sensed felt inferior to the other writers, and attempted to compensate for it by maintaining a consistently warm, friendly, demeanor.

The engineering and programming done in the Division was, I believe, of high quality. In any case, I had great respect for the engineering manager, Ray Shannon, a seasoned, friendly, thoroughly competent manager whom I will always remember for his once saying in a meeting, by way of attempting to rein in the engineers' compulsive tinkering with products ("tweaking"): "Good enough is perfect." To me it was a remarkable utterance to come from anyone in engineering.

### **Making the Most of the HP Labs Research Library**

To get away from my co-workers and the engineers and the intolerable boredom of my work, I developed the technique of going to the HP Labs Library. I would pointedly and very dutifully announce, "If anyone wants me, I'm in the Library." Then I would go and talk to the librarians, Lorraine Hall, in particular, whom I was hot for, though she was happily married. We occasionally went out for lunch together, but when she invited me to her townhouse after lunch one day, I think to show me some paintings she had acquired, or just to show off what was in fact a very pleasant home just a few minutes' drive from the plant, she made a point of leaving the outside door open the entire time we were there. She had a daughter named Caitlin from a previous marriage, the daughter then in primary school, and a smart student. Lorraine was the only person I ever knew who had been significantly helped by taking Prozac. She said, and I believed her, that the drug completely changed her life — made her into a human being, as she put it — because, among other things, it turned off the endless chatter that had been going on in her brain since her youth.

Lorraine and another librarian I was hot for were, in fact, outstanding research librarians, and were able to obtain copies of many papers I needed in the course of my work on the three math problems I was attempting to solve. I also owe to the HP Library the discovery of a mathematics book that meant more to me in succeeding years than most of the textbooks I acquired, namely, the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Mathematics*. It was two thick volumes, with all subjects in alphabetical order, and, in addition, an extraordinarily detailed index. So what was not a title in the body of the volumes, you could look up in the index and find where it was explained. Entire undergraduate semester courses were summarized in a few pages, yet no graduate student or professional mathematician I spoke to about the book had ever heard of it, much less reported that copies of the relevant sections were handed out at the start of courses, which to me was unforgivable. (The Dictionary was first published in 1954 in Japan; the first English translation was published in 1977.) Most of the sections were hard going because the definitions and lemmas and theorems were simply stated one after another. No proofs. No kindly guidance and encouragement and help in understanding. But you could almost always look up in the index terms you didn't know the meaning of. Most important, you could get the Big Picture in a few pages on sub-

jects in which the Big Picture seemed to be the one thing that textbook authors wanted to keep hidden from the student. So the pleasure that I got in reading — in browsing — my father’s 1942 *Encyclopedia Britannica*, I now got in doing the same — and often entering items in my Environment for the subject — with the *Encyclopedic Dictionary*. The layman as well as the mathematics student and the professional mathematician will tell me that no one can learn mathematics in this way — you have to work through a textbook, do at least some of the exercises, preferably take a course. To which my reply is that my no. 1 goal was not to “learn” subjects, it was to *find out where the ideas are*. What subjects deal with relative “nearness”? (topology, for one); what are some of the techniques for solving differential equations? (there are many: asymptotic series is one<sup>1</sup>); what are some subjects in which a “number” is equivalent to an infinite set of numbers? (elementary congruence theory, ideal theory, to name just two). And so on. I felt that if, in trying to solve a hard problem, I decided that an idea I needed was contained in a certain subject, I could always find a graduate student to explain what I couldn’t understand, and if necessary do the proofs I needed.

I should not fail to mention that in 1988, a black woman, Eugenie Prime, was made head of the Library. All the librarians spoke well of her. She had been born and raised in the Carribean, and thus was another example of the remarkable difference in motivation and possibly intelligence between blacks from those islands, and blacks from the U.S. mainland.

### Fighting Boredom on the Commute

By this time, I had moved to Berkeley, and so each day I faced a commute, in my 1978 Toyota Celica, of 1½ hours each way. That was three hours of boredom on top of the eight hours (or less, if I could manage it) of boredom on the job. At first, I tried to study math during the long minutes when the traffic was at a standstill or just moving at a crawl. I would position the book in my lap, look down to read a theorem, then return my eyes to the road as I thought about the theorem and tried to memorize it. I would do this even as the car was moving slowly forward. However, on one occasion, I became so absorbed in what I was reading that I looked up just a fraction of a second before I would have run into the car in front of me. I decided that maybe it wasn’t a good idea to study math while driving on California freeways. I had heard about Books-on-Tape, and so I went to the Public Library to see what was available. It turned out that quite a lot was available, with the result that, in the ensuing months, I read, or rather listened to, Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons*, *The Great Gatsby*, part of *Alice in Wonderland*<sup>2</sup>, and the entire *Don Quixote* — twice. This last was the superb reading by David Case in which he used a variety of English regional working-class accents to represent the voices of the characters. Don Quixote he rendered in a shaky, old man’s voice, Sancho Panza in a strong rural English accent. His voices were so good and so individual that you didn’t even have to wait for the “...said Pancho”, “...said the inn-keeper”, “...said the curate”, “...said the barber”. You knew immediately who was speaking. Case read all the footnotes, too, in a special footnote voice (lower pitch, quiet, more rapid speech, confidential-sounding).

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1. As far as I know, to this day there is not a published table or flow-chart that allows a person wishing to solve a differential equation to start at the top and work his or her way down to a list of the names of methods that can be used to solve that particular equation. Instead, the student is expected to take sufficiently many courses so that he can create the equivalent of such a table in his mind. Yet another example of the shocking backwardness and professor-serving nature of the mathematics culture.

2. The reading was by a woman graduate student in Stanford’s Drama Dept. Her voice was so unbearably pretentious, with its affected East-coast upper-class accent, that I couldn’t listen to the entire recording.

I must mention in passing an interesting puzzle, or, rather, set of puzzles, that helped ease the boredom of the day. The engineers were passing them around. They were 8½ x 11-in. sheets of white paper on which were printed what appeared to be random clusters of small marks. Apparently, if you looked at the sheets in the right way, you could see images in the marks. It took me several days to figure out how to do this. I tried blurring my vision, and crossing my eyes, and trying to see “inside” and “behind” the flat sheet before me. Finally, there suddenly appeared in the sheet several holes in the shape of letters or a fish or other animals. Below was another sheet, the two making an unquestionable three-dimensional image. You could move your head around and see parts of the sheet below that were partially hidden by the top sheet. I thought: I don’t have much use for engineers, at least not the ones who work for big corporations, but I had the highest respect and admiration for whoever had discovered how to make these images. I found out years later that they are called “autostereograms”. The reader can find examples on Google.

### **I Attempt a Palace Coup**

There was open talk of the desirability — the possibility — the *necessity* — of a palace coup in our department, and I decided to be the leader. I let it be known to others in the division how incompetent Julio R — was: how, for the sake of the company, we needed to get rid of him. Meantime, I was battling with him about the format of our manuals and he was getting reports from the engineers about my ignorance of the operation of the products I was supposed to be writing about. But everyone agreed he needed to go. I thought: management will look at my background, the fact that I was a manager of technical publications departments for some nine years at two different companies, they will let me take over, and I will have a chance to implement the Environments idea at last. Instead, Don Chambers called me into his office one day, said that I had failed to perform satisfactorily, that Julio R — had warned me, and now he and Chambers wanted me out. Among the examples that Julio gave of my failing to perform satisfactorily was my attempt to subvert the electronics course by proposing to take notes in an unorthodox manner and then making them available to other employees. Chambers said he had the right to fire me on the spot, but that, considering my long service with the company, he was going to allow me to stay until the company-wide offer of early-retirement for long-term employees was made a month or so from then. “If I were you,” he said, “I’d take it.” The offer, when it was announced, included a year’s salary, tax free, plus whatever pension the employee had accumulated. And so, at age 55, after 21 years in the company, most of them having been entirely unproductive, I left in disgrace.

### **Egon Loebner**

I don’t want to conclude my HP narrative without saying a few words about an amusing scientist at HP Labs during those years, a man who was an object lesson in the perils of having too high an opinion of oneself. His name was Egon Loebner, and he was in charge of a small group that was doing research on natural language processing, that is, on the development of computer programs that could understand ordinary spoken or written English. Steve G— was in the group. Egon had made his name at HP by being the head of a lab that had developed a type of light-emitting diode (LED) that was afterward used to display the data on various HP measuring instruments. He also had acquired a certain amount of fame, at least in the federal government, as a result of his work during a two-year stint as Chief of the Science and Technology Section of the American Embassy in Moscow. (I seem to remember people at HP saying that he worked on

microwave devices — possibly, he worked on finding listening devices planted in the Embassy by the Soviets, but I am not sure of this.)

But his glory days were behind him. According to Steve, he understood next to nothing about computer science. In particular, he did not understand computational complexity — the fact that problems had associated with them a number that specified the minimum number of iterations (the number was a function of the size of the input) that *any* program would have to make in order to solve the problem. In the case of many problems, this minimum number was so large that the problem was regarded as “intractable”, meaning, unable to be solved except for a limited set of inputs. Still less did he understand that a whole class of problems were “semi-decidable”, or even “undecidable”, that is, that no program could be written to solve these problems for all inputs because no such program existed even in theory. Egon believed that the computer could solve just about any problem you wanted it to solve, and do so in a reasonable time if you were only clever enough. In conversations with him over lunch in the cafeteria he would tell us that the computer could be used to eliminate bureaucracy throughout the world<sup>1</sup>. He also claimed to have developed a method to show that all multiple meanings of a word are really the same meaning. This method, he was confident, would vastly simplify the solution of the natural language processing problem.

Of course, because of his past contributions the company wasn't about to fire him. I suspect they felt that letting him putter in natural language processing was a good way to keep him out of trouble.

He was short, a little stocky, with short wavy gray hair. Despite his wacky ideas, it was impossible not to like him. He always had an impish smile, and he liked nothing better than to talk to doubters over lunch in the cafeteria. He would listen in a preoccupied, distracted way — or rather, he would allow you to talk for a minute or two about why you thought one of his ideas was wrong — then he would suddenly seem to come back from whatever distant abstract realm he had been visiting, and say, “What?” apparently not having heard anything you said, and then for the rest of the meal he would explain, always with the smile of one who understands and forgives those who do not recognize his brilliance, why your objection was the result of your not understanding him.

In the course of these lunchtime conversations we also learned that he was a concentration camp survivor. He showed us the number tattooed on his arm, and described how, at one camp, the Germans needed to rebuild the water supply system, and so he announced that he was a hydraulics engineer, which he wasn't, but he figured out how to do the job as he went along, thus giving the Germans a reason for not sending him to the gas chambers.

Already in the late eighties he was fighting cancer. I wondered if the skin flakes on his eyelids had anything to do with the disease. True to his nature, he told the doctors he was going to take over his own treatment. So he read up on oncology and came up with a list of drugs that he believed would cure him. His doctors reluctantly went along with him. But his treatment didn't work, and eventually he could come in to work only a couple of days a week, then not at all. The company gave us periodic reports of how he was doing. He died in 1990. Afterward, as a memorial, the company published a collection of his papers, *The Selected Papers of Egon Loebner*<sup>2</sup>, and

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1. In fairness, I should point out that around this time, corporations were taking a hard look at the work of middle managers, and finding that a great deal of this work consisted in simply reformatting and editing information from higher management so that it could be distributed to lower management and workers. The corporations began to develop computer programs to do at least some of this, and a general reduction in the size of middle management staffs resulted.

2. Hewlett-Packard Company, 1991

an impressive collection it is, covering various topics in opto-electronics including solid-state image transducers and retina synthesis, plus topics concerning neural networks, and, I was amazed to find, natural language processing, although these papers appeared in a lower-rank journal, namely, the bulletin of a special interest group of the Association for Computing Machinery<sup>1</sup>. At the front of the collection is a 1948 letter from Albert Einstein to Egon, apparently in reply to Egon's request for advice as to which he should choose, a career in science or in engineering. I found the last paragraph encouraging:

“As I said, no one can tell you what you should do. It is similar to the situation when a person is faced with the decision whether he should marry. I myself have always held the opinion that it is better to be paid for a job which one can with certainty perform well. I myself, for instance, worked at the Patent Office in Switzerland in my younger years and felt it to be particularly useful for me not to have to please other people in my [scientific] work. On the other hand, it was easier in those days than it is today to earn one's living in a practical job such as that one, and at the same time still to have enough energy to carry out one's scientific work.”

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1. ACM SIGSOC Bulletin, 1981