

A Child's Scream

Shortly before 8:30 a.m. on Friday, Dec. 23, 2005 — the weather foggy, wet, and unseasonably warm — I was lying in bed after the early morning's work at the computer when suddenly a child began screaming in the apartment building around the corner at 2016 Blake. The building was occupied by dark-skinned people from the Third World, the cloying smell of their cooking often all too evident as you passed the place in the evening. In the nineties, it was known that several crime families lived there. They observed goings-on in the neighborhood from their second floor balconies, and then sent their relatives or friends over to burglarize apartments when they knew the residents were away.

It sounded like the child was screaming over and over again, "*I don't want ... ! I don't want*"...! Instead of doing what I should have done, namely, gone over there immediately, I lay in bed waiting for the sound to stop. It didn't. I had never heard anything like it before. It was beyond terror; the only way I can describe it is to say that it sounded like the cry of a child being burned alive. After several minutes, I got up and headed downstairs. Suddenly the screaming stopped. There was no whimpering, no choking sobs, as you might expect. I walked over to the apartments. Not a sound to be heard. No sign of anyone. None of my neighbors, needless to say, had bothered to come and investigate.

Later in the day, I talked to a neighbor about the incident. He said that those apartments were now well-known to the police as a haven for prostitutes and drug dealers. I heard no sound of children from the place after that. I am convinced the child was killed.

My Net Worth, 2007

In 2005 I began walking around with a slip of paper in my wallet that contained a tally of my net worth. I enjoyed updating it each month after I got my monthly report from Shufro, the New York City company that was managing my finances just as, for 50 years, it had managed my mother's. The numbers for early 2007 are given in the table below. "Annual Capital Equivalent" is the calculation that I thought up but that my neighbor Steve, a bookkeeper, told me had no validity because nothing can be called "capital" that can't be bought or sold, and, for example, I couldn't buy or sell the money from which my Social Security payments are derived (see "Financial Arguments" in the first file of Vol. 4). But the calculation continued to seem a useful way to convert apples to oranges, or, in this case, convert income to a single annual figure. The calculation is simple: divide annual income from some source by a conservative estimate of the average return you are making on all your investments. The result is Annual Capital Equivalent. Thus, for example, my room rental was paying \$4,500 a year, and my average return on investments was about 5%. So \$4,500 divided by 0.05 = \$90,000. I have placed capital amounts, and the value of my house, under the same heading, for ease of addition.

Table 1: Net Worth in Early 2,007

Financial Category	Monthly income	Annual income	Annual Capital Equivalent
Room rental	\$375	\$4,500	\$90,000

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Financial Category	Monthly income	Annual income	Annual Capital Equivalent
Social Security	\$1,214	\$14,568	\$291,360
House			\$725,00
IRA Acct. at Shufro, Rose & Co.			\$782,030
Living Trust Acct. at Shufro, Rose & Co.			\$501,993
Checking account, avg.			\$9,000
Total net worth			\$2,399, 383

Not bad for a man who retired at 59 after having been fired from his last five jobs, and who had spent his life at the bottom of the white-collar barrel! There are advantages to a Swiss upbringing.

Unfortunately, the greed and stupidity of lower class home buyers, and of the crooked brokers who were only too glad to cater to their ignorance as long as the risky mortgages could be passed on to other, greedy investors by corrupt Wall St. bankers (the products of our best schools), soon ended the pleasant upward climb in my net worth. In May of 2008, the value of my house was almost certainly down to \$550,000, if not lower, and my Shufro accounts had dropped also, though proportionately much less. In April, 2013, assuming the average return on my investments was about 3%, my net worth was about \$2,240,000.

Daily Life

As I said in the Preface, one of my goals in this book was to be a historian of the everyday. Many people scorned the detail which that would involve, regarding it as trivia. And yet, as Marshall McLuhan remarked, what is regarded as trivial and unimportant in an age is often what becomes most valuable in the future, because, being regarded as trivial and unimportant, it is not preserved by anyone. How much would we pay for a verbatim record of the conversations had by just about any Roman during the Augustan period? Diarists like Pepys and the Goncourt brothers had an interest in such trivia:

...[the Goncourt brothers] wanted to provide future generations with a compendium of all the minutiae that were missing from accounts of ancient Rome: “A period for which one has neither a dress sample nor a dinner menu is dead and gone, and cannot be revived.” They knew that incidental details were often the most precious and that too deliberate an attempt to enhance the diary’s historical importance would diminish its lasting value.

Without the Goncourts, we might never have known, for instance, that Paris theater audiences could be just as cruel to child actors as they were to the adult actors, that by 1867, bookshops no longer provided their customers with chairs, or that gaslight shining through *fleur-de-lys*-shaped holes in the metal walls of a urinal created beautiful effects “on the violet paper of a poster advertising a cure for venereal disease”.¹

But the results of several attempts to record the minutiae of my current daily life — including the thousand trivialities that daily life is heir to— have been insufferably smug despite the misery they describe, and these can be summarized in a few words: boundless anxiety (I will be a nervous wreck even in the grave), suicidal depression, worry over when my heart attack or stroke will come and when the inevitable major earthquake will occur and when the next economic meltdown will wipe out most of my life’s savings; frequent thoughts about the horrible death of my brother² and about my lifetime of failure and the impossible task of preparing the books that constitute my life’s work for posthumous publication and doing such a good job at writing up my posthumous wishes that my son will be willing and able to carry them out.

Activities of a typical week are quickly summarized: up at around 6:30, breakfast of oatmeal and egg whites at a local restaurant, for example La Note, then the day spent working at the computer and lying in bed reading; sometimes working at math at the kitchen table, then coffee brewed around noon, followed by a few puffs on my cigar, then BBC News at 2:30, PBS News Hour at 3, dinner of vegetable soup and raw vegetables and ice cream at Fat Apple’s at around 6. Then, starting around 8 p.m., English detective episodes³, then, around 9, on my back porch, a few more puffs on my cigar and a few sips from my cognac and ginger ale as I looked up above the neighbor’s bay tree at Orion’s Belt or the odd star and watch my cigar smoke drift up to the galaxies, I sometimes thinking that I am a success after all, that a man who can enjoy a good cigar and a glass of cognac in the evening cannot consider himself a failure. Then typically nodding off during the detective series; waking, watching Seinfeld, then sometimes Charlie Rose. Then nodding off again with the TV on until 2 or 3 a.m., waking, filthy with sleep, and dragging myself upstairs to bed. Phone call to Gaby on Wednesday and Sunday evenings.

Sunday morning breakfast with the twins, as described below, and, in subsequent years (starting around 2016), at Rick & Ann’s with what we came to call the Sunday Morning Breakfast Club: a 70-year-old rock n roll pianist, David Kaffinetti (see below), a retired, modest, very successful English entrepreneur (pharmaceuticals) and his beautiful blonde wife (former PanAm stewardess, then perfume consultant at Neiman Marcus, then realtor, then ...), both in their sixties, and me. The wife had been born and raised on a farm in Minnesota, and had some five or more siblings, who all became strong supporters of Trump.

1. Robb, Graham, “Treasures of Vanity”, review of Baldick, Robert (tr.), *Pages from the Goncourt Journals*, *The New York Review of Books*, Feb. 15, 2007, p. 32.

2. See “Death of My Brother” in the first chapter of Vol. 2 of this book

3. Good Masterpiece Theater productions became ever more rare with the years.

Since there were two Englishmen in the Club, I told them that I was eager for an audience with the Queen, and could they arrange it? We agreed that I needed to know things I shouldn't say during the audience, for example, "Your Majesty, I think I speak for many Americans when I say that the two towering achievements of the British empire are the Beatles and Monty Python. I was definitely to avoid all working-class English words and phrases, for example "Well, Your Majesty, if you can get Parliament to do" *x, y, z*, "why, then Bob's your uncle!"¹ "Cor blimey!" was out, and use "me" instead of "my", as in "I realized I had forgotten where I had parked me car". No Cockney rhyming slang, and definitely no words like "bugger all", or "bollocks". I said that I was hoping that, at the termination of the audience, the Queen would say that it had been such a pleasure that she wanted to give me a nice country house. All I had to do was tell her where I would like it to be. I discussed this with the Englishmen, and finally decided a nice place in Devon would be just fine.

Rick & Ann's Restaurant

I always preferred going to restaurants rather than eating at home. I had no skills as a cook: I could fry eggs, boil broccoli, and heat a can of stew or baked beans. That was it. But I always enjoyed watching a cooking show on TV for a few minutes — Julia Child, Jacques Pépin, Martha Stewart. Almost invariably, when the drama of cutting and stirring and mixing and putting the dish in the oven, and taking it out, was over, and the food was being ladled onto the waiting dishes, and the chef was mentioning the name of a nice wine to go with the meal, I was on the verge of tears. A happy ending! Everything had worked out the way it should! I imagined the guests oohing and ahing as they took their places, the chef obviously pleased, and the eating and good conversation starting.

I should say a few words about Rick & Ann's, because for several years, it was my favorite breakfast, and then dinner, place. It was located across the street from the Claremont Hotel tennis courts (with their never-ending *pokka, pokka* sounds — why couldn't all that effort be used for something useful, like generating electrical energy?), along a charming little street (Domingo) with the stores Ellington and French (which always smelled irresistibly of perfumed soaps), The Red Wagon (upscale children's clothing), Amphora Nueva (olive oil), Wine Thieves, Peet's Coffee and Tea, the Bread Garden Bakery...

I became fond of the restaurant because of the friendly banter I could always count on with the waitresses. Furthermore, the co-owner, Ann (an attractive middle-aged woman whom I always referred to as The One and Only to the waitresses), would sometimes pass by my table, touch my shoulder (be still my heart!), say hello, and chat for a few seconds.

By fall of 2011 I was going there three times a week: Thursday and Sunday for breakfast, and Tuesday evening for Ann's Classic Meat Loaf (prix fixe for \$20, including a glass of wine), and which I referred to as a heart-attack-on-a-plate. Most of the time, I had the salmon.

As the years passed, I tried to remember the names of all the waitresses who had worked there, however briefly, in the belief that reconnecting one's synapses is always a good idea: Mal-lory (who went to Australia to become a movie star); Lexy (a part-time rock n roll disk jockey); Kelley (a cheerful young black woman with huge breasts); Indigo; Nancy (a friendly, quiet, Mexican, who eventually left to become a courtroom translator), Ta (thin, always cheerful, with

1. The idiom was slowly being replaced by "Robert's your father's brother!".

slightly-crinkly black hair pulled tight against her scalp and fastened behind; she was from Palau, a tiny country in Micronesia (Western Pacific); spoke perfect, unaccented, American English; and was equally fluent in her native language, Palauan.

When she was growing up she had several pet parrots, two monkeys, two dogs, and a fruit-bat named Smau. I spent considerable time trying to pronounce his name properly: it was somewhere between “Smaw” and “Smoh”. Ta thought it highly amusing that I couldn’t hear the right sound. She said the name meant difficult-to-please, demanding, which was appropriate since he refused to eat anything but a certain expensive type of papaya, and bananas from a certain island. He had the run of the house and, as a result, never learned to fly. Ta used to go on walks with him hanging by his claws from the neck of her sweater. One day, Ta’s family was going to have guests, so he was put into a birdcage and brought outside. Unfortunately, he figured out how to open the cage and fell to the ground. The dogs immediately began to play with what had become one of their favorite toys. They liked to pick him up in their jaws and carry him around. But this time one of the dogs accidentally broke its neck. Ta said she heard Smau scream. She raced downstairs, and found him lying on the ground. There was no blood on his neck, but his claws showed some blood, which she assumed was left from his attempt to get out of his cage.

Fruit-bat was also a delicacy in the islands, and so I suggested to Ann that she consider putting it on the menu, but it was clear that she thought the idea so repugnant that she didn’t even wonder if I might be joking.

And then there was Addie (an actress in local drama); Jess (a tall blonde from Chicago who could always track my sense of humor; she suffered major injuries as a result of being hit by a car while she was riding her bicycle; the driver didn’t stop to help her; she was eventually fired for not showing up for work on time), Sarah (a very attractive blonde of 23, possibly lesbian, with chronic back problems, who had big breasts and liked to wear low-cut blouses, so that sometimes, after letting her see me stare at her cleavage, I would look at her and ask, with mock concern, “Aren’t you afraid of getting a chest cold?”), Caitlin (B.A. from the University of California, majoring in history and minoring in theater arts, currently acting in local theater productions); Melissa, (one of the hostesses, fond of thin skirts and blouses that showed a bit of cleavage; one day when I inquired about the nature of the regular customers, she said many of them were men who came down from the expensive neighborhoods in the Hills; she described them, with a laugh, as “a bunch of old pervs”); and Gaba, my Sunday breakfast waitress (tall, slim, beautiful, a former ballet dancer, she often wearing hoop earrings that were very sexy but so large that I was always worried that she would trip on them; in fall 2011 she transferred from Vista College in Berkeley (third-rate) to San Francisco State University; I tutored her in calculus, and then physics, as described in the section, “Calculus Tutoring” in the previous file.

They all seemed to have their lives in order, but in early 2011, a floor manager named Ellen was hired, older than any of the other waitresses, perhaps in her forties, and she stood out immediately because of her seriousness. In a few weeks she left. The waitresses told me she was an alcoholic, had been asked to leave, and had gone to a treatment center (God knows how she could afford it).

The waitresses liked me, but the main reason was that I was an unusually good tipper (always above 20%, sometimes more than 30% if the conversation had been particularly enjoyable). I told them it wouldn’t hurt to start gently introducing their customers to the idea that “33-1/3% is the new 20%”.

They enjoyed my sense of humor, as when I prefaced saying anything about myself that had happened prior to, say, 1985 (most of them were in their twenties), with “Long before you were

born and your parents were born and your *grandparents* were born ...”. Or when I made a point of referring to them in the forgotten Politically-Correct terms of the late '90s, when it was decided that “waitress” was sexist, and should be replaced by “waitperson” or “waitron” or “server”. So I would ask, for example, “Are you my waitperson for today?” or “Excuse me, I’m just trying to signal my waitron.” By 2010, “waitress” was again perfectly acceptable (although they liked “server” also).

Or, when the restaurant was crowded, but I wanted to enjoy a cup of coffee after dinner, and do a little more studying, I would ask one of the waitresses, “Excuse me, but would it be OK if I lingered over a cup of coffee, as long as I did it quickly?”

But I had to be careful not to appear to be one of Melissa’s old pervs. (I used to tell my neighbor Steve, “I’m a dirty old man, but a non-practicing dirty old man.”) I remember a conversation with a buxom hostess at the restaurant in early 2014 that got onto the subject of the drought. I remarked that it is possible, without great inconvenience, for two people, e.g., myself and a student renter, to use no more than 50 gallons of water a day. I said that my plumber had told me that the average shower consumes about two gallons of water a minute. The hostess remarked, “Oh, but I love to take twenty-minute showers!” It was all I could do not to say, “If I had a body like yours, I’d love to take twenty-minute showers, too!”

The background music was from one of those CDs that are sold to restaurants, and consisted primarily of big band music from the '50s and '60s. It was incredible that this half-century-old music apparently appealed to diners most of whom were *not* elderly. It drove me crazy — it was the kind of music that we had despised when we were young jazz musicians in the '50s. So I would sheepishly ask one of the waitresses if she could turn the music way down just while I was there. She always said she would be glad to, went over to the corner cabinet, opened one of the bottom doors, knelt and then spent many seconds, maybe as much as a minute or two, turning a knob on the stereo equipment, as though wanting to get the volume exactly down to a level that I could tolerate. On it went, the oh-so-careful adjusting, and listening, and adjusting... Finally she stood up, closed the door, asked, “How’s that?” and I had no choice but to say, “Just fine. Thanks a lot,” even though the volume level was *exactly* where it had been when she started. (She knew she shouldn’t *really* turn down the level because the boss had indicated what music was to be played and the volume at which it was to be played, but on the other hand, since I was a good tipper, she wanted to seem eager to comply with my every wish, so ...)

Breakfast With the Twins

Prior to the years at Rick & Ann’s, on Saturday and Sunday, starting around 2004, I had breakfast at the Kensington Bistro, on the curiously empty Kensington Circle in Kensington, the little residential community just north of Berkeley. If I had been giving a course in urban design, I would have had the students write a term paper on why this little Circle in the heart of an affluent community was so bereft of commercial life. I should mention in passing that Kensington had the lowest crime rate for miles around, one reason being that the police did not hesitate to stop and question drivers who looked like they didn’t belong there.

The restaurant staff had become my family. I could always count on a friendly interchange with the owner, Lynn, and with the waitresses: Angela (“Angela from Indiana”), a skinny, attractive blonde who was studying consciousness at John F. Kennedy University (I never found out just what was studied in that subject) or with Sarah, who went on to start a pre-med course in New York City, or with Kathy, a Phillipine young woman who married the boss’s son, or Alyya, who

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ran marathons. I made a point of always being friendly to the bus girl, Elizabeth, a Mexican who was trying hard to improve her English and was taking courses in business. It was a place where I could practice being interesting to young women.

The restaurant had wisely set aside a little room off the main dining area for parents with children. There was a blackboard and a collection of toys so that parents would be encouraged to bring their children for breakfast. In late 2005, I got to talking to twin girls, Alice and Naomi, aged two. They had big eyes, neck-length hair, and initially I couldn't tell them apart. That first day, one of them was talking on a plastic red, green, and blue toy phone. When I asked her whom she was talking to, she said it was grandma. I: "Well, please tell her I said hello." Later, the girls announced that when they went home they were going to look at the moon. I: "But can you see the moon during the day?" "Yes!" they both exclaimed. Their father, smiling, said they had discovered this. The following are some memories of those happy Sunday mornings.

One day when I arrived 20 minutes later than usual, Naomi piped up, "We thought you were *sick!*" She said it again, her emphasis on the last word making clear that you really had no right even to be *alive* if you got *sick*.

Another time I told them that I wouldn't be there the next weekend because my son and his wife had invited me for a weekend in the wine country. "Are you going with your lady?" asked Naomi, she having remembered, a couple of months earlier, that I had said that I was going to visit my ladyfriend in New York City. I told her no, she was still in New York City.

Later, the toy phone was replaced by a woolly elephant named Ellie, later renamed Wanda, then Ellie Wanda.

I had a hard time understanding their little piping voices but their father always translated for me. But I think it annoyed them a little that I didn't understand everything they said.

On rainy days, they arrived in shiny plastic raincoats, one girl's red, the other's green, with colorful decorations. They wore multicolored rain boots. I always told them how nice they looked and thought to myself, "Their mother could be couturier to the nation's children!"

One weekend they announced that they had had the flu. I asked if they had to take some medicine. Naomi said they had gone to the pharmacist. Her father said in a confidential voice that they were getting the pills in their orange juice.

Another weekend, one of them asked: "Why is John eating?" Her father, laughing: "Because he is hungry. Why are you eating?"

Their father, a lawyer dealing in mortgage insurance, was the most loving father you could imagine: always patient, solicitous, often smoothing the girls' hair affectionately, and the girls were blossoming as a result. He said that he took them out to breakfast each Sunday or Saturday morning to give their mother some time to herself. She came into the restaurant only once — an attractive young woman with the nervous concern of the young Jewish mother whose children are everything in life to her (along with her husband).

They lived in a house in the Berkeley Hills. Their father told me that Naomi's room had a view of San Francisco, across the Bay, and so she always referred to it as "my city".

February, 2007 : Alice came over to my table holding a little flat, cutout, plastic flower. She

put it in front of my nose. I, sniffing deeply: “Mmm, smells wonderful!” I noticed it had the price, “\$4.99”, still on it. She said they were going to a birthday party the next day.

Later, Naomi came over and pointed at the ketchup bottle in front of me. She, holding her arms around her chest: “I *hate* catsup!” As she walked away, I asked her, “Do you like mustard?” She, turning, still holding her arms around herself: “I *hate* mustard!” I asked her what she liked. She: “Butter... with pancakes!” I: “How about mayonnaise?” I had to repeat it a few times because she didn’t understand. After a little help from her father, she nodded enthusiastically.

Later: “We are a *mess*.” I: “Why are you a mess?” “Because we’ve been *eating*.”

A Sunday in March, 2007: As I stepped down into the children’s room of the restaurant, both girls exclaimed, excitedly, “We called you! We called you!”, which I assumed meant while I was standing in the front room talking to one of the waitresses. They looked at me with their crisp white teeth and big eyes. As usual, they talked at the same time: first, something about the Cat in the Hat. Then one of them asked: “Why did you take your hat off?” and another, “Why are you wearing your *jacket*?” (Another time, one of them asked me, “Why do you have short *sleeves*?” I: “Because it is warm. It’s spring. You will be wearing short sleeves too.”)

Then one of them came over to me holding a big red-and-yellow striped snake, its tail sewed to its back. I asked them what its name was. They: “Snuffy the Snake.” But then one of them, I think Naomi, said, “No, its name is Zelda!” An argument ensued, their father, in good humor, tried to break it up, commenting to me, “They’re bickering.” Both girls, immediately: “We’re *bickering!*”

Then Alice gave me half of a plastic orange and I pretended to take a bite of it.

On another occasion when they were there before me, Naomi said, as I stepped down into the little dining room: “We were here before you. We were *waiting* for you!” I explained that I had to type on my computer.

Sometimes one of them would be talking on her toy phone as I arrived. I always asked whom she was talking to. Naomi: “We’re talking to Annie. Oh, she talks and talks and talks and ...” I: “Well, you could tell her that you have to have breakfast now and that you will call her back. Does she live near you?” Her father explained that he had to drive them to visit her; he said the three of them met in nursery school.

They were now attending pre-school — a Jewish school in their neighborhood, which they attended two days a week.

On another Sunday when I arrived late, they pointed at the couple sitting at my customary table next to the wood-pellet stove: “They’re sitting at *your* table!” I: “But now it’s *their* table.” (By then I was beginning to master Alice-and-Naomi-speak.) Then Alice: “This is my hat”, shyly taking it off, showing it to me, clearly wanting me to praise it, which I did. They were wearing cloth pink jackets and little skirts. As often as not, they had some new clothing to show me: it was a fashion show each week.

I was at my table one Sunday, reading the paper, when I heard a commotion from the main floor of the restaurant. Then: “John, John, look!” They were on the top step of the three that led into the children’s dining room, carefully making their way down, one toe carefully placed on the

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next lower step, like little old ladies. Alice showed me a sheet of pink paper with various crayon letter fragments all over it. Naomi came over and silently opened her palm. It contained a large green plastic bug with extended bobbing eyes and big legs.

Another day, they having come late and so having to take a table in the main room, I meanwhile sitting at my usual table next to the stove, I said goodbye to them and was walking to the front counter when I heard little footsteps. “John, John, you forgot your *jacket!*” I thanked them profusely — I think it was Naomi, the ever-alert, all-watchful, who saw it. It was my old Sybase jacket, given to me by the company long ago in the nineties, dark blue on the outside, purple on the inside, with a band of dirt around the inside of the collar.

Another Sunday, as I was leaving, having said goodbye to them, Naomi called out, waving, “Goodbye, John. Take care,” and I had to quickly turn away, lest they see that I was moved almost to tears.

May 20, 2007, they now three years old. Alice shyly held out her finger and showed me her colorfully-decorated bandage. I: “What’s that? A bandage?” She nodded. I: “What’s it for? How did you hurt yourself?” She: “It’s a pinch.” I: “I see. Does it hurt now?” She nodded. I: “It’ll get better, don’t worry.” Delighted, she ran off.

Naomi then came back with her, silently holding up one hand, fingers in an “O”. I: “That’s an ‘O’! What’s this?” I made a “C”. They were uncertain. I: “It’s a ‘C’. ‘C’ is for cat.” I then made other letters: “M”, “N”, holding fingers down. “E” by holding fingers sideways. I: “You can make a ‘P’!” I show them.” I: “But you can’t make an ‘R’, that’s too hard.” They were delighted by all this.

I then asked what they were going to do that day. Were they going to go out and look at the moon? Not sure. I: “You can go out and see it at night”. Naomi: ”At night at Hanukkah it is very dark and you have to go outside with baskets”.

Later that same month, the subject of nursery rhymes came up. Their father told me, “Naomi knows a hundred.” Then, as he cut up her food, Naomi said, “Daddy, Daddy listen to my story!” She began:

Cows are in the meadow
Eating buttercups
ah-tshoo, ah-tshoo
We all jump up

She knew “Jack Sprat”, finishing it after I said a few words; also “Hickory Dickory Dock”. Then, one Sunday in the middle of June, 2007, Naomi (who had had some tears over an orange-juice-glass incident) suddenly launched into “The Lady With the Alligator Purse”:

Miss Susie had a baby
she named him "Tiny Tim",
She put him in the bathtub
to teach him how to swim.

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He drank up all the water,
he ate up all the soap,
He tried to eat the bathtub,
but it wouldn't go down his throat.

Miss Susie called the Doctor,
Miss Susie called the nurse,
Miss Susie called the lady
with the alligator purse.

In came the Doctor,
In came the nurse,
in came the Lady
with the alligator purse.

Mumps said the Doctor,
Measles said the Nurse,
Nonsense! said the Lady
with the alligator purse.

Penicillin said the Doctor,
Castor oil said the Nurse,
Pizza said the lady
with the alligator purse.

Shot said the Doctor,
Pills said the Nurse,
Nonsense! said the lady
with the alligator purse.

She recited all the verses flawlessly, and then, rather liking the round of applause she received, recited them all again. And again. And... In response to my question, her father said they have a book of these verses, he reads them a few times aloud and Naomi has them memorized. Alice could do a few also, but she was more bashful than Naomi, so I never learned the full extent of her repertoire.

By that time, we were having real conversations because I could understand their speech a little better. They would come over to my table, which was just about at their eye-level (when I was standing, they were a little taller than my knees), look up at me with their big eyes, little white fingertips on the edge of the table, and chatter away. They said they were having ballet lessons on Saturday, and Alice proceeded to demonstrate what a pirouette is. When I asked them what other kinds of things they liked, they replied immediately, "Swinging on swings and trying on *hats*."

Alice brought over a stuffed dog from the restaurant's collection of toys. I asked her what its name was. She: "Sophia." I asked her if she had a pet dog at home, she shook her head, said no, they have two cats. "What are their names?" She: "Moo-moo and Woof." I asked her what color they were. She didn't seem to understand. Then she said, "They don't have any color. All they have is fur. The color is underneath. It's like your jacket." (She gave my collar a tug and was

obviously referring to the color of my flesh.)

I was sometimes greeted with a chorus of “It’s John!”, “It’s John!” when I arrived at the restaurant and they were already at their table. Then I was updated on their latest activities schedule. Previously we had ballet on Saturday morning, but now we had swimming, including water ballet, which included pirouettes (demonstrated skillfully, in all variations, by Naomi), following which would be SuperTots (gymnastics), following which would be pre-school (Montessori this time). Naomi gave me the names of all the teachers they had had.

I learned in July, 2007, from their father, that both girls had had crowns put on their teeth. I asked him what kind of anesthetic they had been given. He said a total, and so they had regarded the whole thing as something of a lark. More crowns will be required, he said. The reason was that the enamel didn’t form on some of their teeth — possibly a genetic problem caused by their mother having taken antibiotics when she was pregnant. The girls proudly showed me the gleaming metal in the backs of their mouths.

One Sunday they invented a game of jumping off the top of the two steps that led down to the children’s dining room. They both clambered to the top, then, holding hands, off they went, with cries of delight. No little old ladies any more. Then back to the top.

Their father, however, had to remind them that they needed to use their Inside Voices because other people were trying to talk to each other while they ate their breakfast.

As they were getting ready to leave, and their father helped Alice on with her little cloth jacket, Naomi suddenly wanted *John* to help her on with *her* jacket. Her father said that John wanted to eat his breakfast, but Naomi insisted. And so I was granted the honor of helping milady on with her street attire. In the process, I received a brief lecture on how I should *always* take my jacket *with* me whenever I left my table because otherwise I would *forget* it and drive all the way home and then have to drive all the way *back*.

No two Sundays were the same. Naomi wanted to know why there were bubbles in my drink (champagne — or, actually, just sparkling wine). I tried to tell her that they gave a nice tingly taste, just like they do in soda, but her father signalled to me that the kids had never had soda. So my explanation was useless. And then, of course, Naomi insisted that we “clink” (our glasses, she with her little orange juice glass, I with my champagne glass). I said, “Here’s to you!” and she repeated it, thinking it quite an amusing thing to say.

Alice always asked me about the bandages on my fingers. I told her that I cut myself on roses and in chopping firewood. Their real purpose, of course, was to stop my biting on particularly damaged fingernails.

But there were regular occurrences, too. Naomi would come over to me: “I have to go pee. Keep an eye on Alice.” Then her father would accompany her to the bathroom in the basement.

A Sunday at the end of July, 2007: They were there by the time I arrived. Both of them: “John! John!” Naomi: “We were here *before* you.” Their father, quietly, but laughing: “Well, It’s not a *contest*.” I said something about their mother perhaps coming one Sunday. Naomi explained that their mother never comes because she stays home *cleaning*.

Later they said they were late themselves that morning. I: “Why?” Naomi: “Because we had to go to a wedding.” I: “Who got married?” Their father then with some embarrassment

explained that Naomi wanted to marry him, so that was the wedding that morning.

They talked about their first weeks at Berkeley Montessori. Naomi: “At first we were *scared*.” I: “Well, that’s understandable, because it’s all new. But soon it will all be familiar.” They: “Now we are not scared. We are learning *the rules*.”

They told me at one point that their father had been in New Guinea and had seen pygmies. Naomi: “They don’t wear any clothes, and you know what they use for money?” I: “No.” Naomi: “Pigs! And they poop *everywhere!*”

The first Sunday in August, 2007, they were again there ahead of me, busy coloring a sheet of white paper. “We brought these from *home*,” Naomi said several times of their crayons. Their father had drawn a large heart and a small heart on each sheet of paper, so they could color them. Alice didn’t know, or had forgotten, that they were called “hearts”.

The next Sunday, when they saw me coming across the street as they were getting out of their van, they jumped up and down, “John! John!” They told me that last night, their daddy was talking in his sleep, then their mommy, then they both were laughing, then they, the two girls, started laughing. Then Naomi told me about Pompey, how people were in their beds and all this lava came down on them, because of a big bolcano.

When we had taken our tables, Naomi came over and wanted me to admire her new shoes — sandals of soft brown leather — that their father told her are called mary janes, like the shiny black shoes long ago. Then she said that she had put her shoes on all by herself, then her panties (raising her dress quickly to reveal white panties, then lowering it), then her dress.

Later she showed me that she could make an “M”. I told her that if you turn it upside down it becomes a “W”. Then I asked her to make an “O”. Which she did. Then an “I”, which she did with the dot. Then an “L” and a “V”. She told me that a “B” is too hard because you have to make those two things that go around. She then asked me to draw a heart for her on her white paper place-mat, which I did. She filled it in with the crayons the girls often brought from home.

Alice then recited (several times):

“The horse he slipped and fell on the flea
‘Whoops’, said the flea, ‘There’s a *horsey* on me.’¹

The next Sunday I was late arriving. They were already busy with their crayons. Naomi showed me her name, which she had spelled: “N A M O I”. I praised her, and then printed “A L I C E” for Alice. She wanted me to make a heart for them, so I did. Then a smaller heart, which I did. Then a big heart, which I did.

Sometimes, as I read my paper, I would sense a small presence at my elbow, and, when I turned, I would see Alice’s two big eyes looking up at me with an expression that seemed to say, “I like you”.

A Sunday in September, 2007: Alice came over with a piece of toast that had been cut on the

1. According to Google, these are the last two lines of a verse called “Boom Boom Ain’t it Great to Be Crazy”, the first lines of which are:

“A horse and a flea and three white mice
Sitting on the curbstone shooting dice...”

Retirement

diagonal, her little white index finger and thumb holding it by the apex. She: “Look! A triangle!” I: “You’re absolutely right. That’s a triangle.” She then took a bite in the middle of the hypotenuse, held up the piece of toast for me. I: “But now it’s not a triangle.” She rubbed her finger over the bite part. Thereafter just about every Sunday, one of them would hold up the pre-bite toast, announce its geometric shape, then take a bite. In December, I showed them how, if you put two of the pieces together, you get a *square*.

Another Sunday, later that same month: As soon as I arrived the girls told me about how they had been flying kites and how their kite went into the water, and even though they pulled and pulled on the string they couldn’t get it out. I asked if they had been flying kites near the ocean. Naomi: “Not the ocean! We were at the *Moreena!*” by which she meant the Berkeley Marina, a section of land fronting the Bay. I told them I could bring them a new kite the next week and meet them at the Marina. Their father nodded, with a weak smile, but said nothing. Later, Alice elaborated on their kite experience, telling me that a great white shark had come up and taken the kite down to the bottom of the ocean to try to repair it, but couldn’t.

Another Sunday: They came over to my table. Naomi: “My hair is all wet.” She repeated it. I: “That’s because it’s raining outside. You have to wear a hat.” Alice, looking up at me with big eyes: “No, it’s not raining. Its misty moisty.”

Another Sunday in the fall: Naomi shyly approached me, asked if I would like to come to their house. I: “Yes, I would like that very much, but first you need to ask your daddy and mommy if it would be OK.” Her father smiled, said “Well, we can think about it...” I told Gaby that I was sure both parents were genuinely afraid of having a possible child molester know where they lived.

Both girls, but Naomi especially, liked knock-knock jokes, including some I had never heard before: She: “Knock knock.” I: “Who’s there?” She: “Orange.” I: “Orange who?” She: “Orange you glad I didn’t say ‘banana?’” But one of them was downright spooky. She: “Knock knock.” I: “Who’s there?” She: “Nobody.” I: “Nobody who?” She: “Just...nobody.”

Naomi was not shy about commenting on my food. She would come over to my table, and announce, “That’s yuckie!. We *hate* omelettes “ Then, pointing at the ketchup on my potatoes: “That looks like *pooh!*” She was always delighted at a chance to kid me.

Early in December, 2007, I gave each of them a golf pencil, since they liked to draw. These pencils were shorter and more manageable than a normal pencil. Their father said that their upcoming birthday on Jan. 25 was a frequent subject of conversation at their house. I asked the girls how old they were. They: “Three-and-a-half!” I: “And how old will you be at your next birthday?” They: “Four-and-a-half!”

At the end of December, 2007, the owner, Lynn, sold the restaurant because it simply was no longer profitable. We all made plans to do research to find another restaurant in the area for our Sunday breakfasts. Since I knew I might not see the girls for much longer, I thought I should satisfy my curiosity regarding what kind of twins they were. I told their father that I assumed they were identical, but he said no, only fraternal. Yet at first I had been unable to tell them apart. On the other hand, the student who was then renting a room in my house was an identical twin, yet

you would hardly think that she and her sister even came from the same family, so different did they look.

The girls' father gave me his business card and at this late date I finally learned his name: Bill.

The next Sunday, when I arrived, the girls exclaimed, "We have a present for you, we have a present for you!" They gave me a little brown bag with a rope handle. Inside, wrapped in white tissue paper, was a gingerbread man, with a loop of string attached. Alice, several times: "It's a Christmas ornament!" I: "I know, and I am going to hang it on my tree" (I didn't tell them I didn't have one).

I hadn't been sure about exchanging Christmas gifts, so I hadn't bought them anything up to that point. But the next week I called their father at work and asked for his advice. He said a card would be fine — cards they receive they carry around all day. I went to several toy stores, found two similar cards, each with an angel, since I knew they loved angels. I wanted to buy something else, but found just about everything in these stores was made in China, and the recent news about dangerous Chinese products was very much on my mind. So I called Bill and told him. He said he would talk to his wife and that I should call back the next day (he never called or emailed me — I always had to call him). His wife recommended books. At Barnes & Noble in El Cerrito, I bought two similar books for kindergarteners. They were amply illustrated, and the language was simple enough that I felt the girls would understand the stories as their parents read to them.

Then, it was time to say goodbye. I told them that we adults would try hard to find another place where we could have Sunday breakfast together. I stood there, feeling very sad. Alice came over, looking up at me with shining eyes, slowly put her fingers to her lips and blew me a kiss.

A woman who had been a regular at the Sunday breakfasts developed a list of breakfast places to try. None of them could compare with the Bistro. Several weeks into January, we met at Au Cocquelet, my favorite Berkeley coffee shop, where I went for my mid-day cup of tea and donut. The food was mediocre at best, the place almost empty at that hour.

Their father told me that he and his wife had been talking about the day when the girls were born. The girls asked their parents what date that had been. The parents said January 25th. Both girls together: "That's the same day as our birthday!"

The Sunday before Valentine's day, 2008, still at Au Cocquelet, Naomi walked up to me as soon as I arrived and asked if I knew why the bib on the front of her dress was pink. I: "Well, let's see..." She: "So it matches my shoes!", and she pointed at them; they being also pink. Then she said she had a valentine for me (her father had to fish it out of his jacket pocket): it was a piece of white paper about six inches at the longest, cut into a heart shape and decorated with a heavy, red border made, it seemed, with a marker pen. In the center were two "googly eyes" I think she called them — transparent buttons in which smaller black disks moved around like pupils, as in the Sesame Street muppets. On the back, in a father's hand, "To John", and above that some squiggles that could, perhaps, be construed as a young person's attempt to write "Naomi" until she lost interest. There was a backwards "N", an "O" with a line across the center, and a quite respectable "C".

Alice was not there, she being home with a cold. Naomi demonstrated her skill with a cell phone camera, showing me pictures taken of her, Alice, their mother. Then she insisted on taking one of me and the woman who had been part of our research committee. After that we somehow got onto the subject of Naomi's visit to her grandmother in the fall. I: "She lives in Harrisburg,

right?” Naomi: “No! Pennsylvania!” I: “Or was it Pittsburgh?” She: “No! Pennsylvania!” Then, after a pause, she looked at me shyly, and asked, “Did you miss me while I was gone?” I: “I missed you a *lot*.”

That was the last time I saw them. Their father apparently didn't like the restaurant. I continued to go for breakfast at 8 a.m. each Sunday, but they weren't there. I suspect their father had decided that the closing of the Kensington Bistro and our inability to find a replacement that was equally desirable, gave him an ideal opportunity to place his daughters out of reach of the old man who so obviously delighted in their company each Sunday morning. Later, I found a restaurant — Fellini, on University Ave. in Berkeley — that seemed a good replacement for the Bistro, its only disadvantage being that it didn't open until 9:30. I called the girls' father and told him about it. He said, in that shy manner he had, “Well, we'll have to try it.” But he never did, at least, not on Sunday mornings.

I am convinced that both he and his wife were glad to have been given an opportunity to get rid of me, since I am sure they worried that this old man who so obviously delighted in their daughters, might well be a child molester — a not unreasonable concern given the news reports. The one time that the mother came into the restaurant, and shook hands with me, I had sweaty palms, and that could only have reinforced her suspicions that I was a pervert.

Without the twins, and the rest of what I had come to regard as my Sunday morning family, namely, the waitresses and the owner of the Kensington Bistro, my Sundays were once again as bleak and empty as the other days of the week.

They had been my therapy, these little ones. I missed them enormously and do to this day (see section below, “An Attempt to Reach the Twins”). It seemed a miracle that such happiness as theirs could exist in this world.

“The soul is healed by being with children.” — Dostoyevski

Other Children at the Restaurant

There were other children, of course, who came with their parents to the children's dining room. I remember two sisters, somewhere between the ages of two and four, both writing on the blackboard, that is, both making lines on the blackboard. The youngest wore a big red plastic fireman's helmet, and was clearly wanting onlookers to notice it. “I may be smaller but I have a bigger hat.”

Then there was a Chinese brother and sister. The father, who gave me the impression of being in some high tech job, sat at their table talking on a cell phone. The mother sat facing him, listening to the kids at the blackboard behind her. The boy began writing the alphabet, and after each additional few letters, he sang the alphabet song up to that point. His sister, meantime, was writing down in the corner of the blackboard. Around “r”, he got stuck. He stood there, thinking, tapping his chalk on the board, then said, “Hey, mom, what comes after ‘r’?” She turned, told him in her quiet way, and on he went. Then, when all the letters were written, he sang the song all the way through. I resumed reading my paper. When I next looked up, he had written the lines of a musical staff on the board, and was writing notes on it — all F's, true, but it was a promising start.

And then there was a little girl, perhaps three years old, who played tic-tac-toe with her father,

she clearly loving him very much. She was obviously a very bright kid. When she won, she climbed on his lap and put her arms on his chest. He was very soft-spoken and nice with her. I had no doubt that if he were to die, it would kill her.

Old Songs

The reader will recall the sudden emotion that swept over me in JFK Airport when the old song “Dance With Me” was suddenly played as background music over the loudspeakers¹. My being suddenly moved by old songs continued. In the late summer of 2008, a TV ad featured The Monkees’ “Daydream Believer”, which had first been released in 1967, and which until that summer, had never made any impression on me. But then I became obsessed with it, especially the chorus,

“Cheer up Sleepy Jean.
Oh what can it mean.
To a daydream believer
And a homecoming queen.”

which brought me to tears as I listened to it on my computer.

In passing, since the subject is old songs, I should mention several that were anything but pleasant to hear again. I am referring to Christmas carols. Certainly one of the torments of growing old is having to listen to these, over and over, for at least two months every year. In restaurants, I was often driven to ask the server to please turn the music off, just while I was there. As often as not, she said she couldn’t, because the music was for the customers’ pleasure.

How many times had I heard some Christmas carols by the time I was, say, 70? Very conservatively, I heard some of them ten times each Christmas season. So that means 700 listenings to music that was mediocre or worse. But of course I must not fail to point out that there is lots of great Christmas music, most (but not all) of it from previous centuries, and heard only rarely on the best classical music stations, like WQXR. Handel’s *Messiah* is certainly a great work, but constant repetition, year after year after year, has dulled its appeal, at least for old people like me.

I Find My High School English Teacher, Mrs. Spettel

Over the years, I kept trying to find out what had happened to my favorite high school English teacher, Mrs. Spettel, who, the reader will recall from the chapter “White Plains High School” in Vol. 1, had introduced me to précis writing and thereby changed my life. I had tried everything I could think of to find her: called the High School, talked to veteran clerks in the main office, talked to people in the alumni office, and to people they recommended I talk to; asked every former student who contacted me after reading the White Plains High School pages of the autobiography, and every former student they recommended I contact. I searched Google using her name. I found that, in 1983, someone by her name had published two articles in an education journal. “Classroom Discipline — Now?” (Clearing House, Feb. 1983): “Argues that discipline is the first step in producing learning. Sets forth techniques that have proven successful in maintaining classroom control.” and “Don’t Drop the Book!” (Exercise Exchange, Fall, 1983): “Discusses

1. See “Visiting Her” (Gaby) in the second file prior to this one.

prereading activities, citing the book ‘Too Late the Phalarope,’ by Alan Paton, to help improve student reading comprehension and enjoyment.”

And then, in the summer of 2007, I wondered what would happen if I entered “online telephone directory” in Google, having completely forgotten that I had already done this in searching for members of the Dixieland band we had in RPI (see chapter “RPI” in Vol. 1) and in searching for Wendy, the Napa woman I had a Platonic relationship with in the early eighties. I entered Mrs. Spettel’s full name and there she was, with several former addresses given, one in Brewster, N.Y. (none in White Plains or surrounding towns, but still, I thought, this must be her!). The last address was in Georgia. Could that really be my English teacher, spending her old age in the backward South? Her age was given as 88. That meant she had been in her early thirties when she was my teacher.

But her age meant I had to move fast, so I wrote her a letter telling her how much her teaching had meant to me and thanking her for introducing me to a literary form that I had worked for a lifetime to master, and the next morning sent it as an overnight letter, which meant it would arrive the next day. No reply for several days. I assumed I had the wrong person. Then a phone call in late afternoon on the weekend. It was her husband, Richard. The letter had been forwarded from Georgia to their summer vacation condo in southern Vt. He said she was very glad to receive it, but that her memory was failing, including her memory for words, and so she couldn’t talk on the phone. They had taken X-rays (or done an MRI scan, I don’t remember which he said) of her brain, and although she didn’t have Alzheimer’s, it was clear that the part of her brain having to do with memory was deteriorating. They had given her drugs to at least try to slow the process.

In the course of our conversation, I learned that she and her husband had married in 1950. He was amazed when I told him I remembered that she had said once that he had been with Picker X-ray in White Plains. Yes, he had been in the International Division. He said that the rumor we students had heard had been wrong: she had never published a story in the *Saturday Evening Post*. But she had published an article in the Connecticut Journal of Business about husbands traveling for business. In 1954 — in other words, the last year she had been my teacher — she had taken a leave of absence. In succeeding years she had children and then, in 1967, had gone back to teaching, but only part time, at Briarcliff High, where I had spent my sophomore year in 1952 (see the chapter, “Briarcliff High School”, in Vol. 1). I remarked to her husband that getting a part-time teaching position in high school was rather unusual. He said, yes, but her reputation as an excellent teacher had preceded her. She had told the school authorities that she had to be allowed to bring her kids to school in the morning, and to pick them up in the afternoon, and the authorities had agreed.

Then, several years later, she taught at St. Luke’s, a private school, grades 5-12, near New Canaan, Conn., where the family had moved to be near her husband’s new job as head of International Sales with a company dealing in X-ray components. She later traveled with him all over the world.

In my mind’s ear, I can still hear the sound of her voice, a sound that I will call “pointed”, articulate, young, even girlish, and although I feel that an important goal of my life has now been satisfied, namely, that of thanking her for telling me about précis writing, I am sad that I will never hear her voice again.

In June, 2010 I managed to reach her husband again. He said that Mrs. Spettel had died in January of 2009 at the age of 89. They had been married 58 years. She had developed several illnesses near the end, including spinal problems, so that she was no longer able to walk. In the

course of our conversation, he said that if I had reached her as late as 2005, I would have been able to talk to her, as her mental deterioration was not serious then.

Father and Son: a Close Call

My son said, in 2006, when I mentioned my wanting to have my life's work printed and distributed after my death, that he didn't want to be burdened with that responsibility because he knew nothing about such matters and had no interest in them. There wasn't a grain of hostility in his saying this. He was simply expressing a fact. But I felt that I had received yet another reason to believe that nothing of my work would survive. The one last hope I had was Randall Goodall, the book designer who had designed the book I published in the mid-eighties. Since he was a respected designer for the university presses, I had no doubt he would do a good job of publishing my life's work after my death, and that he understood my drive not to let everything go into the dumpster, or a closet or storage vault.

In 2007, my son said he was running out of space and asked not to receive more than one backup copy of my life's work each year while I was alive — I had been having the contents of all my web sites printed every eight months or so, and I would then send them to my son and to Jim Swan, my high school friend and the editor of this autobiography. Furthermore, my son said he no longer had room for the few pages of math that I asked him or his wife to sign and date each year in case a question of priority of discovery should emerge in the future.

We had had no fight or disagreement. I wrote him a letter spelling out again that all I was asking him to do was to sign checks for the monthly maintenance of my online web sites and for the bills covering the posthumous publication of the five or six volumes of my life's works, and that all my papers occupied no more than 250 cu. ft, so that the storage costs would be well under \$150 a month. I included calculations to show that apart from the cost of the design and publication and distribution of the books, the yearly cost of storage and maintaining my web sites would be less than 0.1% of his inheritance. No response.

I was completely at a loss as to the reasons for his reluctance to do something that was so important to his father. People I spoke to said he might have felt intimidated by the contents of what I was leaving, but I made clear to him in my letter that he was under no obligation to read, much less understand, still less *like* any of it.

I began looking for a literary executor, and possibly an heir, with the one rule that the person must be from a family in which one or both parents had been academics. My then housemate and Zoe, who had been my housemate in 2000 (see second file of Vol. 4), and Michelle (see third file of Vol. 3) each offered to take on the task.

I called my lawyer and we began discussing disinheritance.

I grew more and more depressed over the thought that neither Jeff nor his wife wanted any of my books, CDs, paintings. Gaby's son and daughter-in-law were the same. The paintings by her sister that she gave them, and the books, all wound up in the attic or in the garage.

I mentioned this to Zoe, my former housemate (see second file in Vol. 4). She immediately said she would be glad to take at least my art and photography books, and the poetry, and she would probably be able to find other people, including my former housemate Y — (see "Y —, the Quietest Person in the World" in this file), who wrote poetry, to take other books. I felt a little better. But I couldn't help thinking back to the years when I imagined that everything would find a new home in my son's house after I died. And then I remembered an independent scholar I had contacted years before, who said, "Oh, God, I want everything burned after I die!" I heard about

another independent scholar who was slowly, systematically, getting rid of her library while she was still in good health, being determined to save her daughter having to find space for “even one book”.

I thought: I hate the modern age.

Each day, I looked at the shelf in my bedroom containing the carefully arranged mss. and papers and binders and letters that constituted a lifetime of intellectual effort, and tried to face the fact that the hope of at least family immortality had been a false one, like all the other hopes by which I had kept myself going through the years.

I did a little research, and found out that setting up a trust to take care of my books and papers would cost \$400,000. I mentioned this to Jeff. I then wrote him a second letter, this one setting down a list of the main possibilities, with sub categories. No response. I wrote him an email emphasizing how important this matter was to me.

Finally, he set a time when he would call me. The phone rang and I applied all my management skills of yore, all that I had learned in countless hours of individual and group therapy, all I had learned in numerous failed relationships: I said, “Well, I think we ought to begin with your telling me what you are feeling.”

Within an hour, he said he would be willing to store, in the basement of his house, the floor-to-ceiling shelf containing paper versions of my lifework, and another shelf containing the drafts of the new type of math textbook I had developed¹. He would write the checks to cover the continued on-line publication of my books, and their publication in paper form.

After the conversation, I felt like a man who had just risen from his death bed to live at least one more day. I wrote him an email expressing how thankful I was that we had been able to work out a compromise. He wrote back:

I too am happy with how we sorted out the storage matter. I know of people who dread their parents or their in laws, and I am very thankful that I feel *extremely* comfortable and happy with the parents and inlaws that I have been dealt, in life. I am delighted to have parents on both sides who I enjoy and respect. So, it is very important to clear these kind of things up, when they come. I will confess that there are times, that phone communciation is not my best forte. I'm sorry about that.

I Become a Grandfather

In the summer of 2006, while on my annual trip East to see Gaby and go with her to Tanglewood and also enjoy New York City for a few days, I went to Westport, Conn., to visit Jeff and Karlin. They suggested we have dinner at a new restaurant called “The Dressing Room”, which had been opened by actor Paul Newman and his wife Joanne Woodward, on the property occupied by the Westport Playhouse, which they were reviving. (The Newmans had lived in Westport for many years, and were dedicated to preserving its small-town atmosphere, for example, by keeping the big-box stores out.) During dinner, there was a pause in the conversation, and then, a little

1. It had an encyclopedic format and was designed for rapid look-up of virtually everything a student might need to solve problems in the subject. It also provided a template for each entity in the subject, the template containing headings for Definition of entity, Forms of representation of the entity, Common operations on the entity, which might include Arithmetic operations on the entity, Determining if two of the entity were equivalent or not, Making new entities out one or more given ones, Breaking down a given entity. Finally there was a reference to sections on Types of the entity and to Related entities.

sheepishly, Jeff and Karlin announced that she was three months pregnant. They hadn't wanted to tell the family before they were sure that everything seemed OK. I was, of course, delighted, and congratulated them heartily.

But in October, there was a phone call: Karlin had lost the baby. She was in the hospital. Doctors were trying to figure out what had gone wrong. During the conversations afterward, I was surprised at my son's maturity about such a sad event — he remarked that sometimes Nature causes a miscarriage because there is something seriously wrong with the fetus.

Then, in summer of 2007, the announcement came that Karlin was pregnant again and that the baby was due in January.

My son's 40th birthday was on March 20, and what he referred to as "the big four oh" was on his mind also. As in the past, I told him not to worry about his age. In base 16 he was only about to be 28 and in base 20 he was only about to be 20!¹

He and Karlin went for regular visits to the doctor, but they did not want to know the baby's sex. They reported the fetus's size in terms of nuts and fruits calling it, for example, Peanut, then Walnut, then Pomegranate, ... etc. Everything went well, but the baby seemed reluctant to enter this world (who could blame it?). And so eventually the delivery was induced and a boy was born on Feb. 5, 2008. They named him Gabriel.

There soon followed an avalanche of pictures over the Internet, most of which I couldn't view on my wretched CompuServe email facility. But Marcella and her husband created a web site to display them. A few weeks later, Jeff and Karlin published a hard-cover book, thanks to some of Apple's software, filled with pictures of the baby and his new parents. They sent copies to the grandparents.

In July, 2009, I went East for my annual visit with Gaby. On our way to Tanglewood, we stopped to see the new arrival. They let me hold him, and he looked up at me with big eyes and began scratching at my beard, which was the first one he had seen. That evening, Jeff let me give him his bottle. He looked up at me with adoring, blue eyes (Gaby commented several times on the fact that he had "my eyes") as he consumed what seemed to me an enormous amount of milk, his little belly growing bigger and bigger.

Unfortunately, he had an eczema, and frequently scratched his head. They put a little baseball cap on him, then mittens, but these didn't help. He woke up crying at 4 a.m. By breakfast time, Karlin was exhausted, and Gaby didn't help matters by saying several times how exhausted she looked. We left far later than Karlin would have preferred. We found out from Jeff that she was also a little angry that we had not offered to hold the baby more often. (I assumed that giving the baby to strangers, even members of the family, was the one one thing a new mother dreaded the most.)

The question naturally came up of what the young man should call me when he started to talk: "Gramps?", "Grampa?". But after some thought I told them I would prefer "John", since I felt that, at 72, I was still too young to be called "Gramps".

My son was a warm, loving father and husband. I thought: If a father always says to his son, as Webb²'s mother said to him, throughout his childhood (his father having been killed in a bombing raid over Germany in World War II when Webb was an infant) "I have the utmost confidence that you will always do the right thing", then the son grows up taking it for granted that that is what he

1. In our familiar decimal system, 40 means 4 tens plus 0 ones. In base 16, 40 is written as 28 because this means 2 sixteens plus 8 ones. In base 20, 40 is written as 20 because this means 2 twenties plus 0 ones.

2. Webb was a neighbor and fellow Hewlett-Packard employee in the early '70s. See first file in Vol. 3.

will do. The family spent Christmas of 2008 at Karlin's parents' townhouse in Del Mar, near San Diego. My son, ever mindful of his father's neurotic phobia about travel, took care of all the arrangements: airline tickets, a nice motel room, and chauffeuring me back and forth between the motel and the house. He also made a point of giving me several hours each day to be by myself so I could read and study.

One evening we all went to a restaurant. As we sat talking and waiting to be served, an attractive blonde came in with two young girls probably between five and seven years old. They took the next table. My grandson, elbow casually resting on one arm of his high chair, turned to look at them. They looked at him. And then, with the other hand he gave them a slow, confident, side-to-side wave, as cool as you please. They broke into broad smiles. I thought: my grandson is a one-year-old lounge lizard!

By that time, Gabe was also being called "the Gabester". It took several hours for all his presents to be opened. The times with the family that I was worried about turned out to be almost pleasant. I discovered (again) that people who seldom say much at family gatherings, e.g., Karlin's aunt and her husband, can become quite talkative, even animated, if you manage to find subjects they are interested in, for example, *The Simpsons* TV cartoon series, and TV comedy sitcoms of old.

Whenever I went back East, I always spent a day or two visiting the family, which now lived in Westport, Conn. (In September, 2006 they had bought a nice house overlooking the Saugatuck River — it was on a cul-de-sac, definitely not a mansion, but substantial, with four bedrooms, and two fireplaces, one in the "Bunker" in the basement, where Jeff watched sports on a large wall TV.) I remember arriving on Christmas Eve, 2010. As Jeff and I walked up the front walk, then up the steps to the front door, we saw a little face peeking out from behind the living room window curtain. When Karlin opened the door, and we adults embraced, it was impossible to ignore a certain small boy who was jumping up and down with excitement. He squealed so that you worried he might do himself damage. I picked him up, gave him kisses on his forehead, told him how nice it was to see him again. Then, after Jeff had showed me to my room, which was the guest room on the first floor, and I was standing in the hall while Jeff and Karlin prepared dinner, I suddenly felt a small hand in mine. I looked down, and there was a little face looking up with an expression that said, "You have to come with me". The next thing I knew I was being led to the door to the basement, then downstairs, then to the right to his playroom. Somewhat shyly, and already leaping down to get one of his trucks, I got the distinct impression he was very much wanting to say proudly to me, "Look at some of my wealth!"

I expressed my astonishment at all those cars and trucks and whatnot, but I didn't really know what to do, so after a car back and forth on the floor a few times, I began parking the cars and trucks against the wall, all the while making engine noises. He evidently thought that bringing some order into the chaos was kind of a neat thing to do, so he began bringing more of his cars and trucks out of a closet and placing them in front of me.

I can't remember what I brought him for Christmas but I do remember some of the gifts he received from others. One was the inevitable set of wooden building blocks, these of particularly fine hardwood it seemed to me, made in Germany. We built a few towers together. But without question, his favorite toys were a plastic robot tank that shot little colored plastic rings about an inch in diameter when you pressed the right button on the remote control. Then came the scramble to find all the rings after they had been launched — the looking under chairs, in the firewood holder, among the gifts under the tree. His other favorite was a wooden track around which little

cars could roll. You placed the car on a high point, pressed a button, and it was launched down the track by a mechanical lever, went around, and eventually reached the end of the track, whereupon it flew into the air for a few feet. He, after each time, handing me the car: “Again!” God only knows how many times I pressed the lever down, positioned the car and watched his inexhaustible delight at seeing the car go around.

Jeff and Karlin had bought him a miniature stuffed chair, upholstered in blue. When he wanted to watch TV, they sometimes placed it in the middle of the expanse of living room carpet. There he sat, absorbed in the show, the young bourgeois. We watched *Up* (2009) together. I was amazed at how far computer animation had progressed.

Although he went at top-speed, non-stop, from the moment he woke up between 7 and 8, and the moment he went to bed, at around the same time at evening, they sometimes got him to help to cook something in the kitchen — cookies, for example.

The two things he loved the most were trains and space ships. Jeff and Karlin took him to the train museum in Westport every once in a while (I accompanied them once). Sometimes, when he shouted with excitement, Karlin would say, “Gabriel, use words!”

He wanted to be an astronaut. Jeff told me that one day, as he and Gabe were out on a walk, Gabe exclaimed, “Daddy, look at the moon!”, which happened to be visible. And then, because he knew that you could get just about anything if you said, “Please”, he said, “Daddy, please can I go to outer space?”

Knowing that Marcella’s 70th birthday (which was on May 4, 2011) was a major hurdle for her, Jeff invited her, and Bill, her husband, to spend a month in Paris, at Jeff’s expense, with himself, Karlin, and Gabriel. He rented a three-bedroom apartment for them all in the Marais district in the 4th arrondissement.

One day, as they were discussing the cutbacks in NASA funding (the last shuttle to the International Space Station flew in July), Marcella happened to remark, unintentionally within Gabriel’s hearing, that now there would be no more money for astronauts. I don’t know if the young man actually understood what she had said, but in any case Jeff or Karlin remarked, with mock seriousness, “Gee, thanks a lot for wrecking a kid’s dreams!”

In a vain attempt to make up for my hardly ever seeing him (Karlin’s parents came and stayed for weeks at a time, Marcella for days at a time, though less frequently), I tried talking to him on the phone. But a disembodied voice that said things like, “Hi, Gabriel. How are you? It’s Grampa John!” didn’t hold much interest for him. So a typical conversation on his end went, “Hi, John!... Bye, John!”

Words of Appreciation to Marcella

On May 29, 2009 I sent an email to Marcella containing the following words:

“Dear Marcella,

...

“As I have said several times before, I think I spend far more time in the past than you do. Although my physical health seems good, and my intellectual faculties are not showing any obvious deterioration, my lifelong depressions seem to be growing worse, one reason being

the lack of anyone to talk to, other than Gaby and, once in a while, an ESL teacher in Berkeley.

And so I think a lot about previous years, and that includes our marriage. Before it's too late, I want to say this: you were the best wife any man could hope for, and a great mother. I have some idea of what kind of a husband I was, and I can only tell you how much I have always hated what my indescribable depressions and neurosis did to make you unhappy. I have also never forgotten your kindness after the divorce, including that one time when you came and sat with me when I came very close to ending it all.

We raised a wonderful son, and now it is clear that he is a wonderful father to his little boy. So that is something we should always be thankful for.

Anyhow, that's all I wanted to say. If, for any reason, any of this is off-putting, then I ask that you not respond to it.

...

-- John"

Marcella Terminates All Communication

Our relationship continued, though it was certainly not a close one: a few phone calls each year, some emails that I sent and that she responded to, mostly about our son and about my narcissism, which she said was a major cause of the breakup of our marriage. I didn't recall her saying anything during, and for many years after, our marriage about this failing of mine, but I naturally wanted to know exactly what had made her feel that way.

She said that a few months after our son was born, we had gone to a small party given by some of her friends, and had brought Jeff with us. But during one conversation, I had mentioned an intellectual idea, and Marcella felt this was a slap in the face to her and our son, since all of my talk and attention should have been directed toward him.

However, she had the occasion wrong: I clearly remembered the party, and was quite sure our infant son was not with us. I told her so, but she dismissed my recollection.

Another sign of my narcissism was my often going upstairs after dinner to work on my writing. She felt the only reason I did this was to get away from her. I told her that was simply not so. I don't think I mentioned what I should have, namely, that when I was a child, my father almost always went down to the basement after dinner to work on his inventions. No one in the family, not even my mother, considered that he did this to get away from us.

Around 2012, she went on a tour of galleries and museums in the Bay Area. She was scheduled to stay one night at the Claremont Hotel in Berkeley. She called and invited me for dinner at Chez Panisse, the famous Berkeley restaurant. I was delighted that she would do this and told her so. When I picked her up at the hotel, I noticed that she seemed to walk with a stoop, as though determined to show the world that she was growing old and ugly. And during dinner, or around that time on the phone, she said that was how she felt. I told her she was still an attractive woman, but it did no good.

Around 2013, she resumed painting, and put images of many of her paintings on a web site that she had set up so that she could sell a few. She also exhibited occasionally at galleries in and near Austin, Tex., where she lived (and had lived with her husband, Bill, for many years). I

thought some of the paintings were quite good and told her so. I told Gaby about the web site, and she agreed with my opinion about the paintings. I passed on this praise to Marcella.

In late 2014 I called her. No answer, so I left a message. She didn't reply. I called again a few days later, left another message. Again no reply. I wrote her an email. No reply. In March, 2015, I sent her an email with Subject field, "Are you OK?" Again no reply.

I wrote an email to Jeff asking if anything was wrong with her. He said no, "she has grown tired of questions regarding the past (ie for your autobiography¹) and she feels questions seeking advice aren't really adhered to. She is weary of going in circles with the same conversations. I think one has to accept that people can choose to move on, especially separated partners."

I wrote him a long email in my defense, but it clearly only made him angry.

I was, and am, very sad about her decision to curtail all communications. I recalled how ashamed I was of having acne in my youth, and how I often wanted to be alone. I assumed something like this, only far worse, had taken place in Marcella. Considering herself old and ugly, she wanted no more contact with people who had known her when she was young and very attractive.

If anything, her silence made me think more and more about our marriage. I knew that my wooden love-making was a major reason for her wanting a divorce, and I hated myself for not having done something about it when I had the chance. Many visual images of our life together kept going through my mind. Then, around 2018, when I was 82, I realized something I had never thought of before, namely, that when we are young, it never occurs to us that we are living in what will one day (if we survive) be our distant past. "Take heed for the future" is an incomplete admonition. It should be, "Take heed of the time when you will look back on these days and wish you had treasured them, wish you had experienced them as the days of your never-to-be-recovered past-to-be."

Death of Big Al

The reader may recall that the manager of my band, the Christmas City Six, at Lehigh University (last file of Vol. 1) was a student named Al Waldron, whom we called Big Al because of his wheeler-dealer personality. One afternoon in late January 2005, I was amazed to receive a call from him. He had tracked me down through one of the online phone books. We talked at length, and not only about the old days, although he did tell me that our piano player and occasional bassist, Gerry Romig, had died of a brain tumor in 2006. Big Al had become a successful businessman in Texas, was married to a woman he first met during his Lehigh days, but was now in the process of getting a divorce, since he and his wife had grown apart, and he had fallen in love with a Mexican waitress. We both said we would have to get together soon. He closed with a reminder that, at our age, we had to be sure to make the best of each day.

In early January 2009, I suddenly had an impulse to talk to him again. I sent him an email. No reply. I seemed to have lost his phone number, but, with the help of the online phone books, I was able to call his home. His ex-wife answered. I gave my name, explained who I was, and after a pause she said, "I'm afraid I have some bad news. Al died on Dec. 24." I could hardly believe

1. She had made clear years before that she wanted to mention of our marriage, and I had tried to adhere to this firm request, although I was unable to understand how she would not want ever to talk about our life together, which wasn't that bad, as the reader can judge from the pages devoted to it earlier in this autobiography, I couldn't understand her not even wanting to share memories of Jeff during those years.

it, especially since he had said, during our conversation, that he was in good health. I asked her what he had died of. She said no one knew. He just seemed to waste away. She said she would send me any flyers or newspaper clippings or letters about the band that she came across in the process of going through his papers. I thanked her, thinking to myself: the band is disappearing. When we have all died, it will never have existed.

Blacks

I must begin this section by stating that I voted for Obama in the 2008 election, and that as of this writing (Oct., 2009) I am convinced he will be one of our greatest presidents. I state this in order to ward off at least some of the accusations that I am a racist — accusations from liberals who believe that that can be the only possible reason for unfavorable reports of black behavior, even if the reports are true, as they are here.

There was no escaping the black presence in Berkeley. In the early 2000s, the couple that owned AAAAA-storage in North Berkeley, where I had a vault full of things from my mother's house, sold the business and moved to southern California. They were John and Berta Teafatiller, and they had done an excellent job: John looked like an ex-Marine, heavy-set, with thick arms, and an alert manner that made you confident that no one would dare break in and steal your possessions. He was always friendly, with a warm sense of humor. I think he told me that he and his wife had an apartment in the upper story of a nearby apartment building so he could keep an eye on the facility even when they were at home.

The business was taken over by several blacks: a sullen, fat middle-aged male who clearly felt put-upon to be forced to do such low-level work, an equally-unpleasant middle-aged fat woman, and an attractive young, slim woman who was the only one who seemed to have any desire to be nice to customers.

So I walked on eggshells with the male, always apologizing for bothering him.

Then, in Sept. 2007, I went out to my vault and found that the key didn't work. The office staff didn't know why. They sold me a new padlock, cut off the old one. When I opened the storage door, I found the old lock, which my key fit, cut and lying on the floor. I saw immediately that a number of garden tools were gone and that all of the paintings that I had inherited from my mother and had not moved to my house, had been torn out of their boxes and were also gone.

I was furious, ran back to the office. The male shrugged, said he knew nothing about it. I somehow found that the regional office for AAAAA was in Sacramento. I called, spoke to a manager. He said that several years ago, they had replaced some of the doors. To do so, they had had to cut the padlocks. The local staff had been instructed to take a picture of the contents of each vault before doing any work. I should ask the office for it.

I did so. The male was clearly annoyed that I had reported the theft, and glared at me in his sullen manner as though to say, "You have a problem with your unit being robbed? What are you, a racist?" He then made a pretense of looking through the folders in a filing cabinet, then said there was no picture. I called the police.

The officer went through his procedure, took notes, said this was the first theft that had been reported at the facility. In the course of conversation, I asked him if it was true that thieves and burglars were usually released the same day they were caught. He said unfortunately, yes. In fact they were usually back on the street before the arresting officer had finished writing up the paperwork. He also said that Berkeley doesn't allow the use of helicopters and dogs because it is too reminiscent of the sixties; so the police have to call in helicopters from Oakland Police Dept. and

other cities. He said that a number of murderers had escaped for want of the dogs. He onfirmed that the Alameda County District Attorney hardly prosecuted property crimes. He said he was for legalizing drugs, at least marijuana, and I, of course, agreed with him.

Later I thought: this goes on while the professors in the Citadel build careers impressing each other with their profound analyses of crime in America.

In June, 2008, a woman neighbor who had been active for many years in our fight against the hardball field, told me that her husband, a progressive who had dedicated his life to helping the poor, had come home recently and told her, in shock and dismay, that he had just witnessed a black woman in a car trying to run over a white woman. The incident had occurred just a few blocks away. The black woman was shrieking obscenities at the white woman, and when the white woman ran up the sidewalk to try to escape, the black woman drove her car onto the sidewalk and pursued her. My neighbor's husband called the police, they came, and asked the white woman if she wanted to press charges. She said no, apparently fearful of retaliation.

Then, in early 2009, there were reports of blacks breaking down doors in broad daylight when residents were home, and stealing laptop computers, TVs, and other appliances, a type of burglary soon called "Smash and Grab". (This occurred in the Halcyon Neighborhood, on the Oakland border. Several murders were reported elsewhere in South Berkeley.)

In the spring, throughout the weekdays, groups of black students began hanging out in the private property across the street from my house. (The property belonged to the small apartment complex there.) The students sat on the low walls, laughing and talking, occasionally playing dice. I called the police, but perhaps understandably, the police never responded, having more important matters to attend to. I then began calling Alejandro Ramos, Dean of Students at Berkeley High School. He seemed nervous, overworked, but at least wanting to give the appearance of trying to be accomodating. The trouble was, all his staff was occupied in patrolling within a block or two of the High School itself. But he asked me to call him whenever I saw the students. I reminded him that a Special Election was coming up, that several of the initiatives on the ballot were for funding of education, and that a lot of the neighbors were now saying they'd be damned if they'd vote for more money for the schools when the students who most needed to be in school, were instead cutting classes without penalty. That seemed to make an impression on him, although nothing was done.

Meantime, during a conversation with Chet , the piano teacher across the street, about the problem he told me had seen a number of the students "using the place [which was next to his house] as a toilet".

I then hit on a brilliant idea: find something with a repulsively bad odor (but biodegradable) and spread it on the tops of the walls and the sidewalk where the students played craps! Limburger cheese in water in a pail that had been left out in the hot sun for a few days seemed promising. The neighbors thought this a great idea. But the semester ended before I had a chance to try it out, so I put the idea on hold until the fall semester (this is written in July).

That same spring, a member of the School Board whom I knew from our days of fighting the hardball field told me that a new of calculating the dropout rate at Berkeley High had been discovered, and, lo and behold, it reduced the dropout rate from 60% to 38% — the High School could therefore claim a major reduction in the dropout rate even though I strongly doubted that there

had been any change for the better at all.

One day, as I was about to leave the house, I realized I had forgotten something, so I left the front door halfway open and raced upstairs to get the item. When I came down, the face of a black girl was poking through the opening, her eyes taking in as much of the layout of the interior of the house as possible. She: "You got a cigarette?"

Another morning as I was leaving the house, two teenage black girls, probably around 16, and thus probably juniors or seniors in Berkeley High, were passing on the sidewalk. One said to the other, "That's how swine-flu started: a white man fucked a pig. Just like AIDS started 'cause a white man fucked a monkey."

Some South Berkeley residents had seen years of their lives consumed in the battle against the black underclass. One was Laura Menard, a woman who had been fighting for close to 20 years to get the notorious Moore drug house at 1610 Oregon St shut down. Some people said that the wear and tear of the battle, year after year, had driven her close to madness. She had become an obsessive non-stop talker whose calls even sympathetic organizations like the Berkeley Daily Planet newspaper were reluctant to receive. Her efforts had intensified in the early 2000s when one of her teenage sons had been beaten up by blacks. She had called the police, but they seemed unwilling to investigate, much less arrest, those who had committed the crime. She went to her (our) City Councilman, Max Anderson, a black, and was told in so many words that to pursue the kids would be racism.

Her fury increased, and in 2004 she ran against Anderson for City Council. She told me that Anderson's campaign was racist. She lost. By then she was the chairwoman of the Russell-Oregon-California Street Neighborhood Association, which sued to get the Moore house shut down as a public nuisance. She said Anderson's wife campaigned against the lawsuit, calling it motivated by racism and by a desire to gentrify the area. She told me, in so many words, that blacks in her part of town were against any kind of improvement of neighborhoods.

Over the years, there were shootings and murders in the vicinity of the Moore house. For example:

Man found shot in south Berkeley drug den

Oakland Tribune , Oct 18, 2006 by Kristin Bender

BERKELEY -- A 19-year-old man was found shot Tuesday morning in the backyard of a notorious south Berkeley drug den whose owner has been sued twice for drug activity in the last two decades.

Police did not identify the man, but said he has non-life threatening injuries and should be released from the hospital by today.

Police were called to the house at 1610 Oregon St. at 10:29 a.m. after a neighbor reported gunfire, said Officer Ed Galvan, the police department's spokesman.

Police found the man in the backyard suffering from a gunshot to the upper body, Galvan said.

Retirement

Police do not have a motive or a suspect in the shooting, Galvan said. They also do not know whether the man was shot in the backyard, or walked there after being shot.

Last year, the owner of the house, Lenora Moore, 76, was sued by 14 neighbors in small claims court who contended there were constant shootings, late-night fights and vandalism at the house.

In his ruling, Alameda County Superior Court Commissioner Jon Rantzman called the Moore home “a hub for the sale and distribution of illegal drugs.”

Moore appealed but lost, and in April she was ordered to pay more than \$70,000.

Grace Neufeld, executive director of Neighborhood Solutions, which has helped groups in Berkeley and Oakland work out neighborhood problems, said Moore has paid about half of the judgment.

Neufeld said neighbors want the house shut down and are pressuring the city to deem it a nuisance. City officials are reviewing the city's options and say they hope to have some answers later this week or early next week.

Earlier this year, Moore's attorney said she was considering all of her options relating to the house.

The small claims suit was the second time a group of residents sued Moore and won. In 1992, Moore was ordered to pay \$155,000, but she later filed for bankruptcy and never paid.

Laura stopped me on the street one day in 2009 and said that it seemed that, finally, the court was about to reach a verdict that would permanently shut down the house. More than a year later, on Nov. 20, 2010, the following article appeared in *Berkeleyside*, a news web site for Berkeley residents.

Notorious Berkeley drug house sold

For more than 20 years, the house at 1610 Oregon Street was an epicenter of Berkeley's drug wars, a place where dealers dealt crack openly, people were shot, and crowds and cars congregated.

Now the shingled house, once owned by Lenora Moore, is shuttered behind a chain link fence. The glass in the front windows is broken and two “No Trespassing” signs and a red “Keep Out” sign are nailed by the front door.

For decades, Lenora Moore and her extended clan of Perrys and Robinsons lived in the modest, two-bedroom home near California Street. But they left in early 2010 after four court battles, a grand jury investigation, and finally, an injunction won by the city of Berkeley declaring the house a public nuisance.

Retirement

Now the house has been sold to a new, unidentified buyer. A offer was accepted on the property Oct 29, just 10 days after the house went on the market for the low price of \$199,000, according to a spokesman for Security Pacific realtors, which listed the property. The house had been in foreclosure.

For next-door neighbor Paul Rauber, who was the lead plaintiff in a 2005 suit brought by 14 neighbors against Lenora Moore, the exodus of the family has meant an end to gun battles, late-night partying, the discovery of used hypodermic needles and condoms on the street, and a fear of going outside.

“It’s been delightful,” said Rauber. “It’s been like a normal neighborhood. People aren’t afraid anymore to walk past our house in the evening with their kids. It is like night and day.”

I need hardly mention that, throughout the 20 long years, neighbors who tried to get Moore and her clan out of the house were routinely called racists and fascists, not only by blacks but also by many white liberals.

I felt that, because I was so resentful of the bad behavior of blacks, I should always be on the lookout for their good behavior. The search wasn’t easy. Most of the City bureaucracy, for example, was staffed by overweight, black, female clerks whose sullen manner made it all too clear how much they resented their jobs and the white people they had to serve. In order to deal with these unpleasant souls, I had long ago adopted a rule: “Be kind to bureaucrats”. I made a point of opening our interchange by apologizing for having to bother them, and then showing how eager I was to comply with their demands. My tax man, Will S., agreed with my rule, especially when I told him that, if I were ever audited, I would *not* go into the IRS office and say, in so many words, “Well, I see you sons-of-bitches are out to destroy yet another hard-working, tax-paying American. But there’s nothing we can do about it. So what do you want?” Instead, I would enter hat in hand, apologize for causing them to have to spend time on my returns, and emphasize how eager I was to pay all the back taxes and fines I might owe.

But once, in the City Traffic Dept., I was served by a black woman who was so cheerful and courteous and so obviously eager to help me with my problem (a fine that the Dept. claimed I had not paid), that I asked her for her name and that of her supervisor so I could write a letter praising her. The next day I mailed the following

April 12, 2008

Ms. Sheri S. H..., Finance Customer Service Supervisor
City of Berkeley
1st Floor
1947 Center St.
Berkeley, CA 94704

Dear Ms. H...,

I am writing to praise one of your employees, Samella, who last Friday, April 11, 2008, did an outstanding job of resolving a traffic ticket problem I had. She was courteous, effi-

cient, and came up with a solution that I consider very fair.

She is a credit to your department.

Sincerely,

John Franklin

Meantime, it was business-as-usual at Berkeley High, with the blacks continuing to believe that studying and doing homework was a waste of time. In late afternoons in late August, and throughout the fall, the football players, mostly black, in their white jerseys and clacking shoes and absurdly huge shoulders (because of their shoulder pads), passed along the sidewalk in front of my house. In the early evening, you could hear the endless pounding of drums from the open second-floor windows of the gym. Had I said to any administrator, “Since these are the worst students, shouldn’t they be studying instead of playing football and banging on drums?”, I would have been regarded as naive, if not actually racist.

The Apartments from Hell Strike Again, and Again

The reader may recall from the first file of Vol. 4 that behind our houses was an apartment building that my immediate neighbors Steve and Leda and I referred to as the Apartment from Hell. By rights, we should have called it the Apartments from Hell, or the Apartment Building from Hell, but we stuck with the singular because originally it was only one apartment that we gave that name to — one on the third floor overlooking our yards that had been occupied by a woman who would stand on her balcony for hours on end, talking on her cell phone at the top of her voice, which was loud enough to prevent us from concentrating on anything.

The building, located at 1936 Blake St., was the usual four-story white concrete box and was inhabited largely by the young working poor. In the early 2000s, things quieted down: the woman had left (the manager said that if she had not, he would have asked her to, since she drove the other tenants crazy also). I seem to remember that I and a number of the tenants were standing on the sidewalk clapping as she drove her car up out of the basement garage. There was seldom any more loud rock and roll or Arab music.

But these annoyances were replaced by a real menace, namely, apartment tenants who watched the back yards of our houses and then, when they decided that no one was home, sent their cronies to break in. This happened several times at Steve’s, the burglars always entering through a window above his back porch, which was clearly visible from the apartments. The alarm would go off, I would gather the folder containing Steve’s front door key and the instructions on turning the alarm off and on calling the alarm company, and trudge over to his front door. Invariably, the thieves would bolt for the back door as soon as the alarm went off, leaving the door open as they made their escape. When I reached Steve on the phone, he would tell me what to check for in the house. It turned out that nothing was stolen. (We used to wonder aloud why the thieves kept breaking in once they knew that there were motion detectors in the house.)

It soon became apparent that we had not one but two Apartments from Hell to deal with, because one day a former waitress at Steve’s restaurant who was staying at Steve and Jane’s, drove off on an errand at 12 noon, and within fifteen minutes yet another attempted break-in took

place, again via the window above the back porch. But the watchers at 1936 couldn't have seen her leave, since she left by the front door, so we concluded that tenants at 2016 Blake, who were already known to watch the apartments on the other side of Milvia as I described above in the section, "A Child's Scream", had now taken to watching houses, or at least Steve's, on our side of Milvia as well. This was easy for them, since they had a direct line-of-sight from their balcony to Steve and Jane's front door.

In late 2010, Steve's alarm went off again. I gathered my instructions, dragged myself over to his front door, turned off the alarm, and found that, once again, the back door was open. I reached Steve on his cell phone. He had me look in various rooms and chests of drawers in the house to see what had been stolen. Apparently nothing. He then had me look at the back window, and, incredibly, he seemed to have left it unlocked, so that all the thieves had to do was put a wooden box against the house, stand on it, open the window, and climb in. He told me to immediately call a contractor he knew to come and secure the windows. The man came and did something I never thought of, namely, put pieces of wood vertically between the top of the lower window frame and the top of the window frame, making it impossible to open the lower window.

I went to Steve's burglar alarm company, Reed Bros., and bought three of their signs. I put one in their back yard in full view of the Apartment from Hell at 1936, another one on the back porch, and the third in Steve and Jane's front yard in full view of the Apartment from Hell at 2016. Steve seemed pleased when he got back, but a few days later I noticed that the sign in the front yard had been moved under some bushes near the house, so that it was much less visible from 2016. I commented on this to Steve, he said that Jane decided that the sign, where I had put it, detracted from the appearance of the front yard, so she had moved it.

I wasn't burglarized as often as Steve, but just to show how closely we were watched at times, in early July, I had bought a power saw from the contractor who was working on Steve and Jane's remodelling. On July 4, 2006 I used it to cut up some oversized fire wood. At 3 p.m. I put the saw in the laundry room, leaving the outer door open, and went upstairs to watch the Lehrer Newshour. When I came back perhaps half an hour later, the saw was gone. Clearly the sound of the saw had attracted attention at 1936, heads had peered from behind windows, the signal was given, and one of the thugs came down my driveway, opened the back gate, went up the back steps into the laundry room and helped himself.

We were not the only ones who were victims of burglars who kept houses under surveillance. The following is from the Halcyon Neighborhood Association (HNA) Newsletter for Jan. 11, 2011. (The members of the HNA lived on the Berkeley/Oakland border, in charming houses close to one another on narrow streets. The ghetto was only a few blocks south of their neighborhood.)

"When my neighbor and all his guests were at the park for about fifteen minutes, someone entered his house and methodically went through all their backpacks, stealing money. My neighbor had, during that time, not locked the front door in case someone needed to go back. He figured an absence of such a short time did not warrant careful locking. But apparently this thief was closely watching, and precisely chose those fifteen minutes to enter."

Despite occasional robberies like this, the HNA was one of the two or three best Associations of its kind in Berkeley (along with the Le Conte Neighborhood Association), with an ongoing Neighborhood Watch, various picnics and pot-luck dinners to maintain neighbors's interest, neighborhood cleanup days, an ongoing earthquake preparedness program, etc.

More Housemates

Y — , the Quietest Person in the World

Because I needed the money, and because I liked having a young woman living in my house, I continued to rent an upstairs bedroom to a female student at the University of California. There was Y. —, a lesbian friend of Zoe's, whom Zoe agreed was the Quietest Person in the World. She was majoring in comparative literature or history, I can't remember. I read a term paper of hers on the bad treatment of the poor in India by the British, and thought it a thoroughly competent job. She was also a good poet. Eventually, several years after graduating, she became a chef and caterer.

One morning, when I came down to the kitchen, I found her sitting at the kitchen table talking to what seemed to me a burly young man. During the course of conversation, it was revealed that he worked on one of the tug boats in San Francisco Bay. I thought: So Y — has converted! But later, I found out from Zoe that the burly young man was a woman. Thereafter, I saw that all of Y —'s lovers were almost indistinguishable from men.

Ellen, the Asian-American

Then there was an Asian student from Southern California who stayed for only a semester so she could take a course in Women's Studies, and who was easily the Second Quietest Person in the World.

B — , Saving the World by Not Draining Dishwater

Then there was B. —, a beautiful young woman who was studying anthropology and hoped to get a PhD with a thesis on the Inuit (Eskimos). She believed that the mythology of any primitive people was "just as valid" as Einstein's theories. I suspect she developed this idea out of her own need to feel that her interests were important *too*. Some academics were able to build successful careers out of such nonsense:

"The rise of modern science coincides with the suppression of non-Western tribes by Western invaders. The tribes are not only physically suppressed, they also lose their intellectual independence and are forced to adopt the bloodthirsty religion of brotherly love — Christianity . . . Today this development is gradually reversed . . . But science still reigns supreme . . . Thus, while an American can now choose the religion he likes, he is still not permitted to demand that his children learn magic rather than science at school . . . And yet science has no greater authority than any other form of life." — Paul Feyerabend, quoted in "Paul Feyerabend", Wikipedia, Nov. 9, 2009.

(It is absolutely incredible that parents allow their children to take courses from such dangerous know-nothings.)

She believed that one way to help save the planet was by re-using dish water, and so her sink was filled with greasy gray water for days on end. I left little verses next to the sink about how her plan to save the world might be unsanitary, but they made no impression. So I asked her to drain the water, which she did, but then, a few days later, she started not draining it again.

At the time she took the room, her boyfriend was the famous nature photographer, Subhankar Banerjee, whose photos appear in *seasons of life and land*¹, about the Arctic National Wildlife

Refuge. Her ne'er-do-well father lived a nomadic life between Japan, Australia (I think) and Southern California.

She played guitar and had a pleasant singing voice; on one occasion she sang me a song she had written. Not bad.

But then, one morning, as I was going downstairs, a short guy with black hair tied in back and hanging down to his waist, was coming up the stairs. He said not a word. His face immediately reminded me of the face on one of the shrunken heads that I had seen in the Rosicrucian Museum in San Jose. B. — explained that she had met him on a protest march in Southern California. He was a pure-blooded Aztec, he had told her. He had no education and was unemployed. In succeeding days, he kept reappearing. It was clear he had moved in. I feared for my life if I asked him to leave, so I made up a story that an old friend living in Germany had run into hard times and was returning, with his wife, to Berkeley and had asked me to help him out and I felt I had to agree. So very reluctantly I would have to ask her and her boyfriend to leave within 30 days. Which she did, apparently with no hard feelings. Eventually she moved to northern Canada to pursue her degree.

Debbie

I had had enough of housemates. But in March of 2005, the phone rang and a cheerful voice said it was Debbie. She had been Zoe's lover for several months when Zoe was living here in 2000-2001. I remembered her smiling up at me as she reclined with Zoe in front of the fireplace. She was wondering if the room was free. I said it was and that I was asking \$450 a month. Too much. More phone calls. Then she asked if I would give her the room for \$375 a month if she promised to pay me year-round. The amount was at least \$200 less than I could have gotten, but I said yes because it would save the annual ordeal of finding a new housemate. I promised not to raise her rent for at least two years. And so I had a housemate again. She turned out to be the most perplexing, most exasperating, and the most tormenting (through no fault of her own) of all my housemates. At the same time, by the time she left, seven years later, we had become good friends.

She was strikingly attractive, a little below average height, with long, auburn hair and a perfect body: slim, with full breasts you had to work hard not to keep looking at, and a beautiful bottom. She practiced yoga, and in fact was occasionally an instructor. When she was looking for something on the bottom shelf of the refrigerator, she did so with straight legs, bending from the waist, and made me forget what we were talking about.

A Bad Beginning

She moved in early in September, 2005, after returning from Burning Man¹, which she attended each year. With her were her brother Ian and her South African boyfriend, John. When I went downstairs the morning after she moved in, I found that the rose bushes and parts of the lawn were covered with sleeping bags and blankets. I asked her what the hell was going on, and she

1. The Mountaineers Books, Seattle, WA, 2003

1. "Burning Man is an annual event held in the Black Rock Desert, in Northern Nevada. It takes its name from the ritual burning of a large wooden effigy on Saturday evening. The event is described by many participants as an experiment in community, radical self-expression, and radical self-reliance.

"The event is open from the last Monday in August until Labor Day (the first Monday in September). The event is organized by Black Rock City, LLC. In 2008, 49,599 people participated in Burning Man." — "Burning Man", *Wikipedia*, Nov. 9, 2009

explained, apologetically, that her brother had put all the stuff there, and that of course he should have asked me first. She said she would tell him to leave. I said no, he could stay.¹ It was clear that he was troubled by my anger and so I felt he was not likely to make any more blunders.

A few days later, she asked if she could have a dinner party. I said yes. Early the morning after the party, there was a timid knock on my bedroom door. It was Debbie, and she was clearly embarrassed about something. It turned out that during the party, one of the guests had knocked my mother's lamp off the kitchen table, apparently by not noticing the cord to the electrical outlet. The lamp had always been in my mother's kitchen at her house in San Francisco. It had a molded, metal support, dark green/brown, that was made to look like a piece of thick leather that had been rolled up. There were little rivets on the side. I had always liked it. But now it was broken into many pieces. As I came marching downstairs, Debbie said, "I'll pay you for the repairs..." (As it turned out, it couldn't be repaired, at least not in the East Bay, and so to this day, the pieces lie in a cardboard box in my bedroom.)

But that wasn't all. When I went out to the back porch, I found that one of the floor planks had been damaged. I asked Debbie if she knew anything about it. Well, yes, she did. Her boyfriend had attempted to fix the plank, but had damaged it instead.

After only a few minutes of talking to him (during which time I made it clear that I would appreciate his not doing any more home improvements in my house), I thoroughly disliked him. Debbie said he made training films for industrial firms in South Africa, but was also working on the making and selling of some kind of paste-on sticker. I went through the motions of expressing interest in South Africa, asked him a few questions about crime in the cities, then found a reason to leave. Some months later, after Debbie returned from a trip to Africa and Europe, she told me she had broken up with him. She said he had wept when they said their final goodbyes at the airport.

Her brother Ian, who was younger than she, had a goofy smile and bushy eyebrows, and was something of a ne'er-do-well. He had attended the University of California at Santa Cruz, where, he told me later, Tom Lehrer, the well-known writer and singer of satirical songs, had once tried to seduce him. (Lehrer taught courses in mathematics and musical theater at the University.) Ian was fluent in Mandarin, and when I first knew him, was working as a tour guide in China. Debbie told me that his main ambition in life was to marry a rich woman.

Her Interests

In the first few weeks living in my house, she seemed to enjoy a little conversation each day. But it soon became clear that she had no interests apart from her studies (law), her dysfunctional family and her love life. True, a few days after she moved in, when I went downstairs, I found that she had turned on the classical music station (I always had the selector set to that station on Zoe's old portable black stereo next to the TV, which she had left with me because the CD player didn't work). I was delighted: "You like classical!" She: "Of course! I like all music!" But as far as I know, not once in the years she shared my house did she ever again turn on the classical station, much less listen to a classical CD. She certainly never commented on the music she heard me playing in my study. So when she first moved in, she must have heard me listening to classical, or Zoe may have told her that this was the music I liked, and she wanted to make a good impression.

1. I suppose this is as good a place as any to say that, up to the time of this writing, some 17 years after I began renting a room, no housemate's guest who spent one or more nights in the front room, has ever thanked me.

That was all. Once, as the sun came out after several days of rain, I told her that this always reminded me of the last movement of Beethoven's *Pastorale Symphony*, which describes the sun coming out after a thunderstorm. I sang a few notes of the theme. She turned away, genuinely uncomfortable (but perhaps only because of the poor quality of my singing).

My opinion of her diminished as a result, because no matter how hard I try to suppress it, my conviction remains: a person who does not love good music is only half human.

She also had no interest in, and very little knowledge of, the great popular music of the past. I once offered her \$10 to listen to the Beatles classic, "Lady Madonna", which for me is an example of musical perfection, like their "Blackbird". I told her it was less than four minutes long. She gave me her quick smile and said maybe later. Eventually, years later, she let me play "Lady Madonna" for her. She listened, said "Nice!", and that was that.

If she looked into the living room when she came home in the evening, and I happened to be watching Masterpiece Theater, I would invite her to stay and watch it with me. She always declined, saying a couple of times that she didn't like to watch English films because they were about rich people. (She had been raised in one of the wealthiest towns in California, namely, Pacific Palisades).

She apparently had no acquaintance with any of the great films of the past either, although once, in response to my question, she said that she had seen *Silkwood* (which starred the greatest American actress of the time, namely, Meryl Streep). Sometimes I would offer to pay her to see a film I liked, but she always declined. But then, in September of 2009, she consented to watch the Russian film *Burnt by the Sun*. I built a nice fire, repeated the house rules regarding the shared watching of films, namely, you have nodding-off privileges (no one will nudge you with an elbow to get you to wake up and pay attention), you can leave at any time but you can't say things like, "This film is dog puke!" She watched it with rapt attention, leaning forward in her chair by the fire. At the end, there were a few moments of silence, then she got up, said, "Wow. I have to let it settle!", left the room and never said another word about the film.

She had no interest in the arts or literature or any of the humanities except what related to her field. Once, in 2009 or 2010 I managed to get her to read Chekhov's great short story, "Heart-break". After several days I asked her what she had thought of it. She replied, "I can see why you liked it." Not another word.

But she loved to go dancing, especially to this or that brand of South American music. Sometimes, while she studied in the kitchen, she listened to the junk popular music of her generation on the radio. In the morning, she listened to KPFA, Berkeley's radical left station.

Zoe had said that one reason their relationship had broken up was that they never had anything to talk about. Debbie's next lover after Zoe, the (male) rhythm and blues guitarist who lived across the street, said, after breaking up with her, that he couldn't have a relationship with an airhead. But it is of crucial importance that I here report something that Zoe said in early April, 2010. Somehow the subject of my conversations (or the lack of them) with housemates had come up, and I had remarked that Debbie had essentially no interests outside her studies, her dysfunctional family, and her love life. Zoe disagreed. She said that Debbie was also interested in several varieties of dancing, she was an accomplished practitioner and teacher of yoga, she was strongly interested in spirituality, and she was a devoted traveler. I ask the reader to keep Zoe's words in mind whenever I comment on her lack of interests.

Her Personal Habits

What first struck me after she moved in was her dropping of the toilet seat. This was no let-

ting it fall the last inches while putting it down. It seemed to be as though she deliberately slammed it down as loudly as possible, as a kind of proclamation. I wondered if this is what the rich do in their homes, to show their scorn for the need to tend to basic bodily functions. For some reason that I never found out she never (until January 2009) put toilet paper in the wall holder in the bathroom, which was essentially her bathroom, since I only used it to clean my teeth and take showers. The holder always held only the empty cardboard roll.

The second thing was her loud clearing of her throat each morning: deep, sputum-churning, repeated hawkings that made you wonder afterward if she had a throat left at all. And then came the elephant-blast nose blowing. Never has a woman blown her nose louder, with more violent self-assertion, than my housemate. I couldn't help but think of my neighbor Steve's sneezes that were penetrating shouts that you could hear through the wall of his garage-office. I wondered if perhaps loud nasal expression was a lesser-known trait of the Jews (Debbie was Jewish).

And then there was her loud, penetrating laughter when she was talking on her cell phone, and her exclamations, like "Oh, my *Gawd!*". This was particularly annoying when I was watching a DVD and she came downstairs to cook something. She would talk on the phone at the top of her voice, with that laugh that made you clench your teeth, so that it was all but impossible to concentrate on what was on the screen. You could hear the laugh throughout the house, even when she was in her room talking with the door closed. I am sure it was clearly audible in the yard and probably in the garage. This wasn't merely a laugh, it was an announcement, a proclamation: "See how I can laugh? See how I have friends with whom I can laugh so joyously? See how happy I am?" She was, in the words of Dr. Johnson, a person "whose laugh is loud and whose voice is strong; who is ready to echo every jest with obstreperous approbation."

"How little it takes to make life unbearable...A pebble in the shoe, a cockroach in the spaghetti, a woman's laugh." — Mencken.

It seemed essential to her that if something she did made any sound at all, then the sound should be loud. You could hear her chewing her raw carrots in the next room.

I don't know if it would be fair to say that she was *obsessed* with health, since I never got the impression that she ate her carrots and yoga and frying pans full of vegetables and tofu out of any burdensome sense of duty. She certainly never gave me a healthier-than-thou look. I joked with her about my always falling behind in fruits and vegetables, and when I did manage to force myself to eat an apple, I would announce to her, "Let the record show that ..."

If someone had asked me if she had any hobbies, I would have replied, "Yes. Taking showers. (and occasionally baths)." I got the impression that these were her solace, her refuge from an anxiety-producing world. She showered at least once a day, sometimes more. Almost invariably, she never turned the water fully off afterward. I had to go into the bathroom and do it. And she never removed the hairs from the shower drain. This was clearly a job that the maid had always done.

Her Personality

If there was a single word that described her personality, it was *aloofness*. I now think this was a reaction to her father's attempts to control her: anything that had the slightest suggestion of an older man telling her what to do, she ignored.

For example, after I finally got cable TV, she sometimes liked to watch the political talk shows(MSNBC) and the Comedy Channel in the evening. I liked to watch British mysteries or Nova or Masterpiece Theater. So early in the morning, I would leave a post-it note on the upstairs hall table: "Debbie — I would like the TV room at 9 this evening. — John". But since some of my evenings tended to be the same as hers, I proposed that we reserve the days in advance, or that

we agree on watching times: she until, say, 10, I thereafter. She: “I don’t believe in rules.” I: “Isn’t that a bit strange for someone who is studying law?” She smiled and shrugged as though to say, “Maybe so but that’s the way it is.”

She had an aversion to following instructions for accomplishing technical tasks (but this was true for all the women I have known). In early 2009, after a Comcast technician had installed a digital box on the downstairs TV as part of the nationwide conversion to digital reception, I was unsure about how to make the TV work. Not having the slightest inclination or patience to try to figure out these things on my own, I called Comcast and asked them to send over a technician to explain things. The guy did a good job: I took careful notes, then typed them up, put a copy on the coffee table and a copy on the upstairs hall table for Debbie. She just left the upstairs copy on the table, just as she left the Post-it notes containing messages and questions from me. Every housemate in the past always removed the note to indicate that she had read it, but for Debbie this would have been ceding control to the older male she lived with.

In any case, I asked if she had been able to follow the notes. She said, no, she preferred to “intuit” how to turn the TV on and off. On her first try, she got it wrong, although I was able to correct it afterward. In succeeding days and weeks, I sometimes had to spend 15 minutes or more trying to undo the damage she had done through incorrect use of the remote control. On the other hand, I must say that sometimes her intuition turned out to be correct. Several times I asked her for instructions on washing clothes in the washing machine, because sometimes what I did made the machine vibrate dangerously. So, as we stood at the machine, my laundry already inside, I picked up the soap box and started to read aloud. She dismissed my effort, saying, “I never read instructions.” But what she told me to do worked.

Another example: in 2009, when a leak developed in the bathtub, causing water to drip through to the kitchen below, I had a carpenter in the neighborhood try to caulk some of the seams around the tub. I put a sign on the shower door: “Do not move this door. Point shower water away from this side of tub.” She didn’t read it, or at least didn’t think about it the second or third time she used the shower. More water in the kitchen.

She paid scant attention to what was supposed to go into the various recycling containers in the kitchen: after almost five years, cardboard boxes still went into the plastics bag, bottles usually wound up in the bin for cans.

Another example: she knew that each evening I turned on the front porch light and left it on all night. (In the days of frequent burglaries, this, for some reason, was deemed a signal to potential burglars that the house was occupied and that we had a Neighborhood Watch.) Yet in more than five years, she never once turned on the light in the evening if I forgot to do so — or asked if she should turn it on.

Regardless how full the garbage can in the kitchen was, she almost never emptied it. When I left for my annual trip back East in July, 2010, I had put a vase-full of roses on the Newell post in the front hall. When I returned, two weeks later, the flowers had, of course, all wilted. The petals and dead leaves littered the floor below the vase. She had made no effort to move the vase to the kitchen or to sweep up the petals and leaves. I was appalled. To what lengths did she have to go to prove that she simply did not do cleaning on her own? (It was a task for hired help.)

She sometimes couldn’t even be bothered to pick up things she had dropped on the floor, such as several DVDs that had been on the coffee table, or a section of the *New York Times* that had been with the rest of the paper on the upstairs hall table. In early January, 2011, I noticed that she had left an empty paper cup on the top of the bookshelf near the door in the front parlor. I decided to see how long it would take her to throw it in the garbage can in the kitchen, or (miracle of mir-

acles) in the cardboard recycling bag. Days passed and it stayed there. Then, one morning, I noticed that, in her rush to get her bike from its place near the shelf so she could ride to school, she had knocked the cup onto the floor. I waited to see how long it would take her to pick it up. (Let me emphasize that she could have no doubt in her mind that it might have been *my* cup, although even if it had been, one could reasonably expect...) Days passed, and the cup remained on the floor. At the time of this writing, after nearly two weeks, it is still there.

The only explanation I could come up with for this behavior was that at home, the maid always took care of such things, and so she never gave these things a second thought.

Her aloofness was also evident in the way she inquired about my well-being. Sometimes, if I came down into the kitchen and she was sitting at the kitchen table, typing away at her computer, and if I didn't say anything because I was preoccupied, she would ask, not looking up from the keyboard, "You OK?" It wasn't an inquiry into my well-being, it was a flippant gesture.

When I left a note on the upstairs hall table asking to talk to her for a few minutes (saying clearly on the note, "Nothing is wrong") she would say, as we headed for the kitchen, "What's up?" in the cheeriest, most uninvolved manner. Only once was there an exception to this, and that was when my note said, "We need to talk. It will take about half an hour. You haven't done anything wrong. Let me know when will be convenient. — J." She didn't respond for a day or so, then casually asked me when I'd like to talk. I said now was OK. We went into the living room. I said introductory words that she must have interpreted as meaning that the possibility existed that she was about to be asked to leave. She suddenly turned pale, said she felt nauseous, excused herself, and ran upstairs to the bathroom. I wondered if the reason was her fear that I was going to ask her to leave, say, because I had decided to sell the house. I was touched, and assumed that, if it was such an anxiety, the cause was probably a reflection of her life with her father. But in fact the only reason for my calling the meeting was that I felt I had to raise her rent from the rock-bottom low of \$375, to \$425¹. (I could have gotten \$600 a month.) When she returned, and I apologetically told her that I had certainly kept my promise not to raise the rent in two years from when she moved in, but that expenses were always increasing, she made no protest, in fact, seemed glad to pay the increased amount. It occurred to me that one reason she stayed with me as long as she did was that I was the first older adult she had ever lived with who was predictable and kind, and so the imagined prospect of being asked to leave was a shock to her.

It was no doubt also due to her experience with her father that she was uncomfortable if I showed any signs of stress, no matter what the reason, and she became quite angry if I caused any stress in her. So, for example, when I remarked casually in Sept., 2009, that my birthday had been a day or two before, she was clearly angry that I didn't tell her in advance so that she could buy me a card or small gift. She said, in so many words, "You've caused me to fail in an important social obligation!"

I couldn't help thinking of the Queen of Hearts in *Alice in Wonderland* ("Off with their heads!"): "NO. STRESS! You there, in the corner, are you feeling any stress?" "N-n, no ma'am." "Good. Because I WILL NOT have any stress around here. You, why are you fidgeting?" "I-I-I just have a slight itch. But it doesn't bother me at all. It doesn't cause me any stress." "Good. You there. Why are you biting your nails? ARE. YOU. FEELING. ANY. STRESS?" "N-n, no ma'am. I was just t-t-trimming them a little so that they would indicate that I am not feeling any

1. I must mention, to her credit, that she always paid her rent within two or three days of the first of the month.

stress at all.” “Good...”

One day, after several years as my housemate, she began leaving stamped, addressed envelopes on the bannister post upstairs, or else on the floor near the front door. She said nothing to me, but I assumed she wanted me to mail them for her, even though there was a Post Office box a mere block-and-a-half from our house. I mailed them and once again was amazed at her feeling that not a word in the way of request or thanks was required from her.

In the summer of 2010, prior to my going through the annual ordeal of traveling back East, we were discussing the depression I always experienced at such times. She said in yoga they teach you that if you have a pain in your leg, you should be thankful that you have a leg! She said she simply doesn't allow things to bother her. (I previously had asked her, what if, when she is traveling, she suddenly realizes she has forgotten something. She, with a laugh: buy another one!)

I argued that, if you are trying to accomplish something difficult, and you are failing, it is only natural that you feel depressed. I said I had no use for the New Age line that there is no good and bad in writing and painting and the other arts. She said that when her writing is not going well, she simply doesn't stress over it. Just as, when a relationship fails, she simply moves on, unlike her sister, who is always very distressed “I don't let it bother me.” She said that depression is simply a lack of will-power. I cautiously brought up the fact that there are many people, including many therapists, who would strongly disagree with her. She shrugged in a way that said: they are wrong, I am right.

Then she remarked, quite casually, that her mother told her more than once that Debbie was “deeply superficial”. I thought to myself, hooray for your mother! (the reader will recall that her mother was a psychotherapist.) I found out later, while browsing in Google, that the phrase had been used by Andy Warhol to describe himself. She had the gift of not knowing herself, and so she never had any doubts — perhaps I should say any self-awareness — or at least none that I could detect — about her behavior.

Our Relationship

And yet we got along, provided I remembered the rule about no stress and provided I resigned myself to no more than five minutes a day of conversation unless it was about school, her family or her love life, and provided above all that I kept my sense of humor. Since I recognized the importance, in all human relations, of applying a little Machiavelli lite when necessary, I made a point of praising her every once in a while for being such a great housemate.

The truth is that we were fond of each other, and I worry that this portrait of her will give the reader the impression that this was not the case. Once in a while she would leave a cookie or a muffin or some challah bread from Nabolom, her favorite bakery. And I was always surprised at her willingness to comply with requests I made regarding minor financial matters. For example, in early 2011, I had not charged her anything for utilities because most nights she stayed at her boyfriend's. But then, considering that she did spend some nights at my house, I asked her if she would be willing to pay 1/8 of utility bills. She replied that she felt 1/4 would be more fair to me. I couldn't get over the feeling that she respected me.

Her Love of the House and the Fireplace

She loved the house more than any other housemate had — or at least she said that she did

more than any other housemate had said. Each time my son asked to be released from another responsibility in connection with my life's work, I would joke with her about leaving the house to her. But she always said that if I did, the first thing she would do is knock out most of the western wall of the kitchen to get more light. Then she would put a hot tub outside it. (She didn't like the leafy morning glory vines that grew over both windows — she said they made the kitchen dark. I loved them because they gave the house an English cottage look.) It was clear she had no awareness of the importance of preserving the historical integrity of a building.

She also loved the fireplace more than any other housemate had, and would often sit on the floor in front of it, working at her computer. When she returned from a trip, I would say, "The fireplace missed you! Just yesterday, it said [I adopting a deep, gruff voice] 'Hey. Where's that girl?' Then I would say [in normal voice], "Of course I had to explain to it that we don't say 'that girl', we say 'that young woman, preparing to take her place in the exciting and rewarding professional world of the modern age, ready and eager to demonstrate her remarkable intelligence and abilities to a welcoming world that has at last recognized the extraordinary contribution that women can make to modern life.'"

After she first moved in, I offered her my brief seminar (with written instructions) on building a fire, but she said that wasn't necessary because she had learned how to do that when she was living in Alaska. It turned out that she was usually able to get a fire started, but like every woman who ever rented a room in my house, she had difficulty keeping one going. She seemed not to understand that after you start the fire with kindling, you have to gradually add thicker and thicker pieces, then a Presto Log if desired. She said at one point that the problem was that some of the wood was redwood, which "doesn't burn". But of course it does burn, and very nicely, as I proved to myself several times a week. However, on one occasion, she amazed me by building a perfect fire while at the same time talking to a guest we had over. More details below under "Wine and Cheese".

Her Financial Resources

She occasionally remarked that she was putting herself through school, but I came to doubt that — first because the only work she talked about was volunteer work for a legal service that helped immigrants, and second because once in a while she paid her rent in brand new \$100 bills, which I couldn't help believing came from her father. But she certainly kept a watchful eye on her expenditures: when she traveled, she made a point of asking to be only charged for utilities for the precise percentage of a given month that she was actually here.

Her Family

Her parents had divorced when she was only a child. She spent much of her childhood in Alaska, where her stepfather was a gynecologist. But her mother eventually built a successful psychology practice in Pacific Palisades, Calif. I am not clear on when her mother moved from Alaska and when Debbie followed her. At the time I knew Debbie, her mother and stepfather were living in Pacific Palisades and were a happy couple.

Her father was a medical doctor who had gone into Alternative Medicine. By her own testimony, he was crazy, and I agreed as I heard more about him, and then met him, the first time having been when he came to help her move some of her things out of my garage. He said not a word to me. He was a slim, good-looking man in his fifties, with a full head of hair and the same bushy eyebrows as his son Ian. The second time was when he attended a dinner party that Debbie gave in our house. I talked to him for over an hour, mainly about Alternative Medicine. He was a

friend of Andrew Weil, the well-known Alternative-Medicine guru who often lectured during the fund-raising drives of local PBS stations. I was not inclined to dismiss Weil's lectures in the way I automatically dismissed the nonsense of the other slick-talking, hope-pushing members of the medical profession that the pledge-drive programmers found. But I couldn't stand his ridiculously long white beard. Why was such an affectation necessary?

In any case, in my conversation with Debbie's father, I offered my usual opinion about alternative medicine: that it didn't matter if the source of a drug or medical treatment was a primitive tribe or an ancient Far Eastern culture, all that mattered was that those who administered the drug or treatment *kept track of the failures as well as the successes*. I asked him if he did this. He nodded hesitantly, said yes, he had started to, but needed to do more. (In other words, no.)

Although he was Jewish, he had formed a partnership with a fundamentalist Christian and the two of them wrote and published a small book arguing that unless we went back to the gold standard, Satan would punish us. Debbie's relationship with him was difficult, since he frequently criticized her. (She was delighted that, after hearing about more of her father's eccentricities, I once asked her, "How come you're so normal?")

I regarded his unscientific mind as harmless until it did real damage to something I treasured. The story is this: in the fall of 2010, I noticed that the leaves of the Eureka lemon tree in the back yard seemed to be yellower than usual. I called my arborist, who had always done excellent work on the trees in my yard, and who seemed unusually knowledgeable. He said that I should put ferrous-sulfate¹ on the lawn beneath the tree and water it in. By the next spring, I had applied some 80 lbs. of the fertilizer, plus others. The leaves continued to yellow. Debbie's father was present at a lawn party that she gave to celebrate her graduation (though she still had not completed her PhD). I told her father about the tree. He said, without a moment's hesitation, that the problem was the lemons: they absorbed energy from the tree, and that kept the leaves yellow. Since Debbie had told me that he had several fruit trees on his property in Sebastopol, I assumed he knew what he was talking about. So I called the arborist, and a few days later he and his assistant came and removed all the lemons — armfuls, bushelsful, some the size of small grapefruits.

Nothing changed. Later experts told me that the lemons had nothing to do with the yellowing of the leaves, which was caused by the bark dying. Saddest of all, the lemons never came back in anything like their former abundance. Fifteen months later, there were only half a dozen small ones on the tree at any given time.

I never forgave her father, even though I continued to be pleasant to him, and even though I am aware that it is possible that the lemons might not have replenished themselves after they died, even if they been left on the tree. As far as I am concerned, the man's stupidity cost me a year-round treasure² that I was always proud to show to visitors and to share with housemates and neighbors.

Her mother, whom I met at a party celebrating Debbie's passing her Bar exam, seemed a pleasant, outgoing person, and her stepfather likewise. When I asked him if he missed being a doctor (gynecologist), now that he had retired, he made it clear that he didn't. Her mother, who was certainly wealthy, had told Debbie that she intended to spend all her money by the time she died, and so there would be no inheritance for her children. When Debbie announced, as she neared the final year of her PhD work, that she was looking for a job in academia, her mother replied, very

1. I am not sure if this is the correct name of the fertilizer he recommended.

2. Even though I never picked any lemons for myself

surprisingly for a Jewish mother, “Why do you want to become a professor? There’s no money in it.”

Debbie said that she and her sister were identical twins, but her sister didn’t look much like her, being rather heavy, with fuller cheeks, and not as attractive. She had a prickly personality. Debbie said that already at her young age (mid twenties), her sister was a reformed alcoholic. The two of them were often at odds; periods would go by when they weren’t speaking to one another. I suspect that her sister was jealous of Debbie’s better looks.

Her sister was getting her degree in obstetrics/gynecology. She sometimes came to the house to do her laundry. (I never found out why she couldn’t do it in the apartment building where she lived in San Francisco.) I didn’t disapprove, even though it was while her laundry was in the machine that it broke and had to be replaced.

I sensed, correctly, I think, that I had better resign myself to walking on eggshells when I talked to her. I had mentioned to Debbie that I was going to watch Steven Spielberg’s film, *Munich*. She said she wanted to watch it too. As it turned out, her sister was visiting that evening, and so all three of us watched it together. Neither one of them said anything about the film afterward. Later, as we were all in the kitchen, I said, “Well, the Jews have a right to defend themselves.” Her sister launched into a diatribe against Israel, and I came to the tentative conclusion that she was a Jew-hating Jew. This seemed to be confirmed when, another time, I remarked on the continuing failure of the blacks to make something of themselves in this country, whereas other minorities, especially the Jews, had become successful. She said, in so many words, that the comparison was unfair, since the Jews had a scholarly tradition. Thereafter, the only subject I talked to her about, gingerly, was her medical studies.

Her Attitude Toward House Cleaning

I required all housemates to sign a contract (after reading it and requesting any changes) before they moved in. The contract always emphasized that they were sharing a house, not just renting a room, and that therefore the cleaning of public spaces — upstairs bathroom, hall, stairs, downstairs hall, and kitchen — was to be shared. I emphasized this in the pre-signing discussion. It was understood and accepted by most of my housemates, but Debbie had trouble with it. I can’t recall her sweeping the kitchen more than once or twice in five years, and those occasions were prior to her having a dinner party. Normally, I tried to do the sweeping on those occasions, by way of a nice gesture and a contribution to the party. I don’t recall her ever sweeping any of the other public spaces. But let me hasten to add that her cleanup after one of her parties was nothing short of extraordinary. Every piece of furniture, every dish and glass and cup restored to exactly its original position, or, if she used paper plates, as she occasionally did, all of them placed in the garbage pail, tables cleared of every crumb, the floor swept. Amazing.

It was clear how much she missed a monthly professional cleaning, and it was clear that she half-expected me to provide one. (She revealed in June 2010 that her mother had always had the cleaning woman come in three times a *week*. This woman, she said, eventually became part of the family, which Debbie wasn’t too keen on, since her three children ran all over the house.) I offered one professional cleaning a year, namely, in the fall, when school started. I told her she was always welcome to pay for others, but she never wanted to.

On several occasions, I cleaned her toilet, leaving Comet suds in the water to show that the job had been done. There was never a word of thanks until I said that I had done it.

(I should mention in passing the young woman whom someone recommended as being an

exceptionally-good house cleaner. She turned out to be in her thirties, obviously a no-nonsense person, full of energy, and giving the impression of being on the cutting edge of the housecleaning trade. After one look inside my house, she said it needed “a deep cleaning”. I don’t recall if I asked her what a deep cleaning was, but she set to work with her two assistants, both of whom said not a word, but brought in all sorts of cleaning fluids and apparatus from her truck. One assistant, as I recall, was a young woman probably in her early twenties, the other a tall, muscular black guy, whom I found it hard not to believe was having a sexual relationship with the boss. But the house got cleaned, I paid her, she and her crew piled into her truck and off they went to bring the technological breakthrough of deep cleaning to other households.)

On one occasion, she asked if I could have the Kilim rugs in the front parlor and the living room cleaned. I went to a store in downtown Berkeley that specialized in oriental rugs, was told that it was not possible to completely clean them, but that the store would do the best it could — for \$250 per rug. That was more than I could afford, so I told Debbie. She said that maybe we should consider removing them, since the hardwood floors were nice and shiny. I, looking nervously from side to side for comic effect: “Is having bare floors ... intellectual?” She laughed, said yes, I needn’t worry. I then seemed to remember that the flat of the writer/professor in *The Squid and the Whale* had bare hardwood floors, so I felt much better. I removed both rugs.

Her Study Habits

She may have had no interests outside the subject of her PhD (sociology in law) plus dancing and yoga, but she had that instinctive Jewish reverence for academic studies. She could study or work on a paper for hours on end. In spring of 2009, she studied night and day, week-in, week-out, for the bar exam. (She passed the first time.) She published two papers while only in the second or third year of graduate school. (I am not sure but I think one of the journals was devoted to publishing the work of students.) I read one of the papers. The subject was the question whether a legal system should be imposed externally on a war-ravaged country, or whether a new legal system should be created from scratch, incorporating as many aspects of the culture as possible. I thought the paper competently written. She certainly had mastered the essential academic skill of taking an idea that could be expressed in a page or two, and stretching it to 20. Later, she had an opinion piece published in the San Francisco Chronicle. But although there was no denying her academic skill, I never felt she was particularly intelligent or creative. She certainly never exhibited the slightest curiosity about subjects outside her thesis topic. And, at least in conversations with her peers, she often used American student barbarisms (“So I go...and then she goes..., so I’m like...”¹). I must assume that she did not use these in conversations with her professors.

By 2008, she had three places to study: her own room, the kitchen and the living room. She often sat in front of the fire typing on her computer. But then in early 2008 she said it was a shame that it wasn’t possible to use the parlor at the front of the house to study in, since the leather recliner (a relic of my marriage) was her favorite chair. All she would need would be a small desk. I was a little taken aback at the request, since she would then have four places to study, but I immediately began calling neighbors, beginning with Steve, next door. It turned out he and Jane had a small desk in their basement which they sold me for a few dollars. I put it in the parlor in front of a window, where Debbie had asked I put it. She never used it.

1. Trans.: “So I said...and then she said...and so I said...”

Her Political Views

She was a staunch member of the left, and often listened to the radical left-wing Berkeley FM station KPFA in the morning. As with my previous housemates, who had all been liberals, I was wary about voicing my views on matters like the treatment of criminals. But one day we happened to get into this subject, and I remarked that people who murder little children, or people like the tyrant then heading the government of Darfur, at the least ought to be taken off the streets. (That was the most restrained language I could think of.) She was reluctant to agree with me. She said that nothing should be done unless an absolutely fair trial could be guaranteed. I immediately thought of my former friend Georgia's response to my question what she would want done if the terrorists set off an atomic bomb in New York City that killed hundreds of thousands, including her daughter. The reader will recall (second file in Vol. 4) that she replied that there should be absolutely no retaliation unless there could be a guarantee that no civilians would be killed.

In Sept. 2010, Debbie asked if we could have an old friend of hers, Erica, over for wine and cheese. Of course I said yes. I must remark in passing that, as we settled down in the living room, I having already become engrossed in conversation with Erica, whom I liked immediately, Debbie had built not merely a fire, but a superb fire. I was amazed, though, of course I didn't say that, instead merely thanking her for having done such a good job.

Somehow we got onto the subject of Obama's health care plan. Debbie declared it a failure (even before it had come into effect). I asked her why, but didn't understand her answer, though later I became convinced she was parroting her father's line on the subject. Back-pedaling, as I invariably had to do in political discussions with her if I wanted to avoid making her angry, I asked her what she would do if she had the power to implement a new health plan. Her hand came up immediately: she refused to "play that game". I was at a loss what to say next. She said that one thing wrong with our existing medical system is that costs are too high: there are far too many tests and operations. I asked her what she would do to lower these costs, and didn't understand her answer.

I then told her what is often said, namely, that millions of Americans are only one serious illness away from bankruptcy, and that all other developed nations have national health care plans that work reasonably well. In her reply, she said that if the person across the street needs a \$350,000 operation, it is all right to be concerned and want to help. But it is not all right to be concerned about Americans as a whole who need operations. This, of course, was precisely a libertarian argument, and I am sure she got it from her father. She apparently did not realize that it was directly opposed to the views of the KPFA-lefties whose word she took as gospel.

I was amazed — not only that this woman, who was months away from getting a PhD at one of the nation's leading universities, couldn't even tell when another political view differed from her own, but in addition was inept at carrying on a rational discussion. (I should rather say: couldn't even tell when another political view differed from one of her father's, since she seemed to regard what he said on the subject as somehow always right, even when it was diametrically opposed to her other political views.)

In passing I should mention that, like every upper-class, educated, left-wing young woman I had ever known, she made a point of pronouncing Latin American names in the original Spanish. So, for example she pronounced "Colombia" *Cohlohmbia* instead of the usual *Cuhlumbia*. I am sure the reason was that she believed that this showed how sympathetic you were to the down-trodden, to the victims of American oppression in Latin America. It showed how *authentic* you

were. I had heard other women, for example, on KPFA, indulging in the same affectation.

Sex

One of my difficulties with her was that I never knew if she was trying to be seductive. I was more than three times her age when she moved in, and it seemed that sometimes she made an effort to wear loose clothing that did not draw attention to her breasts. But at other times only a gay man could not stare at her cleavage. One day her sister arrived for a visit. When I didn't immediately answer the doorbell she bounded out of her room wearing only tight panties and bra, (the panties blue-gray with a little emblem below the hip). When I emerged from her room, and she was bounding toward the head of the stairs, she gave no sign of any embarrassment.

She routinely left her underthings in plain view for several days when she was in the process of washing her clothes.

Often, at night, she left the door to her room invitingly half-way open. I racked my brain trying to figure out the reason. Since she did this on nights that were not cold, and since the heat was not turned on in the night, it couldn't have been to warm her room. (She also had an electric heater.) It couldn't have been for ventilation, since her room had a large window that could be easily opened.

I have said that she was Zoe's girlfriend for several months in 2000-2001. But while she was at my house, as far as I know she was almost exclusively heterosexual, though I did hear her remark on a couple of occasions how attracted she was to this or that female friend.

There were boyfriends, but most of them lived in other countries. I kidded her about how many she had, and then started numbering them: there was John 1 (South Africa), Dave 1 (Lebanon), Dave 2 (New York), Dave 3 (Morocco), Martin 1 (France, Germany), Martin 2 (Berkeley, then Berlin). A local guy, Lenny, stopped by once in a while. He was a programmer who had started his own business involving data bases for building contractors. Debbie said he was in love with her, but that they could only be friends. Nevertheless, he several times invited her to his house at Lake Tahoe, where he had his office. She had no problem accepting.

In a discussion about relationships one time, she said she was "polyamorous", explaining that she always reserved the right to have several lovers at a time, of either sex.

None of her relationships lasted. She always had some complaint about the men. With her looks, she could afford to be as choosy as she wanted.

Heartbreak (for Me)

I was kept happy by the fantasy that she would find me such a kind, understanding, intelligent landlord that she would wind up simply living in my house for years, and not have any serious love affairs. But then, in February 2009, as she neared the end of work on her interim degree, she began inviting various handsome men to the house to talk and sit in front of the fire — a psychiatrist, a lawyer, an elementary school teacher, an entrepreneur, among others. I would say hello, spend a few minutes in a three-way conversation, and the next day she would ask my opinion of the guy. We pretty much agreed about most of them. But then I heard her telling her sister on the phone how much she liked the psychiatrist. I met him in early March, the two of them sitting on the couch. He was strikingly handsome. I was immediately in a panic. I shook hands with him, said a few words, then left.

I felt the cuckold's knife plunge into my heart. When would she move in with him? I was back to the same kind of shame and self-revulsion as when I was being rejected by the women I knew held my happiness in their hands. I lay in bed, counting the days until I would blow my

brains out.

But nothing came of him. She said that although he was in his thirties, he had never been married. He hadn't had a relationship for several years. I was restored to my normal state of depression.

Then, in June of 2009, she remarked that she had met a guy on Craigslist whom she liked. She didn't come home some evenings. One evening about a month later, I went downstairs and found her lying in front of the fireplace with a Hollywood-handsome guy lying next to her, head near her feet, so they could both look at each other. She had the bright-eyed glow of a woman who knows she is going to experience the love-making of her life. She introduced me, he got up (he was tall), I shook his hand, said a few perfunctory words, then left. When I went downstairs early next morning, on the living room floor were her bra and a plastic bottle of a lubricant that is used for, among other things, easing anal intercourse. (I didn't blame him for wanting her that way.) Then, as I was leaving for breakfast, I heard, from the shower, her passionate cries: "Oh!, Oh!, Oh!, " The image of the two of them flashed into my mind, never to be forgotten: he standing, she with her legs wrapped around his waist, arms around his neck, he pumping her from below. Among the last sounds I will hear in my mind's ear as I lay on my deathbed will be her cries that morning in the shower.

She later told me that she had met the guy, whose name was Eric, through couch-surfing. I asked her what that was. She said it was an online program containing informational profiles of people who wanted to visit other people. You could add your own profile if you wanted. In any case, you could search the program's list of people by various characteristics, and, if you found someone interesting, contact them. This is what she had done. She had no information about the man except what was in his profile and what he chose to tell her.

I told her that I was very uneasy about her inviting strangers into my house. She said she understood, but that in fact couch-surfing works because "you have to trust people". Maybe so, I told her (thinking again how extraordinarily naive she was¹), but I would have to ask her not to have any more couch-surfing guests.

A week or so later she said that Eric was an emergency room surgeon back East who was visiting here. He said that he had fallen madly in love with her, and was in the process of giving up his practice so he could move to the Bay Area and marry her. But she said that all he wanted to do was "talk about himself 24/7", and so she was in the process of ending the brief relationship.

And then there was the guy who told her he was a spy for, I think, the Air Force. The relationship only lasted a month or two. When they were breaking up, he said that making love to her (in the living room on the first floor) made him uncomfortable, because it was like making love "while your grandfather's upstairs" (i.e., me).

In winter of 2009 and spring of the following year, she went to Colombia and Bosnia to gather material for her thesis. In keeping with our agreement, she had to pay me for the months she was gone, but she was allowed to find a student to sublet her room, which she did — a skinny bundle-of-energy named B. who was majoring in media studies. She proved to be a bit unusual, so Debbie and I began affectionately referring to her as The Extraterrestrial.

She had a boyish figure, vaguely Asian looks (she said that in the census, she was listed as Fil-

1. In October, 2010, seeing her bike parked in the downstairs hall, I casually asked if she had a good lock for it. She: "Why do you ask?" I: "Because I don't want it to be stolen." She: "It won't be stolen if you trust people."

ipino), and neck length black hair. She was not unattractive, and had quick, ferret-like manner. She paid her rent promptly, and was a dedicated student, able to stay in her room for hours on end. In the spring semester of 2010, she took 18 units of courses, an unusually large number.

She was enthusiastic about the books of mine that she noticed on the shelves. “Foucault! Yeah!” She had no interest in sitting in front of the fire.

She had a part-time job at Top Dog on Center St., a little hole-in-the-wall restaurant that sold only hot dogs of various types, all of them of highest quality. One of her co-workers had recently earned a BA with a philosophy major. I went to visit her on the job, she introduced me to the student, and said, “That’s my housemate. He’s awesome!” But in talking to him, I was again struck by the superficiality, the lack of mental sharpness, that I had noticed in other philosophy students and recent graduates.

The Russian

In October, 2010, Debbie met a man, M., through match.com. He was an economist who had been on a tenure track at Harvard, but now worked as an economist for one of the Internet search engine firms. After her third date, she introduced him to her father, who approved, the initial conversation between the two men having apparently consisted of her father showing him various gold coins and talking about the importance of going back to the gold standard.

When M. first came to our house, she introduced him. He reminded me immediately of a character in a European film, a Russian idealist on the run from the KGB, say: thin rimmed glasses, beginning of a bald spot at the back of his head, a smile, warm handshake, strong Russian accent. He was in his early forties. Debbie said that he had a beautiful house near the Rose Garden, one of the most elegant neighborhoods in the Berkeley Hills. I thought: and this is the young woman who refused to watch English films on TV because “they are about rich people”. I thought: your new lover may be brilliant, but he is not *completely* brilliant, because he has bought an expensive house half a mile from the Hayward Fault, which is predicted to be the site of the next major earthquake.

While he was here, sitting side-by-side with Debbie on the living room couch, the subject arose of local Measures in the upcoming election. I mentioned that I had written two flyers urging people to vote no on Measures H and I, two wasteful and ill-defined Measures that would give the School District more than a quarter of a billion dollars, most of which would be used for sports facilities, including \$3.5 million to install a hardball field that would destroy our neighborhood. He agreed to take one of the flyers, and seemed sympathetic to my arguments. At one point I mentioned that I had given a speech before a hostile audience, and had brought up the subject of graduation rates. A member of the School Board argued that graduation rates had no meaning, because a student who left Berkeley High School might have gone on to graduate from another high school, or dropped out, and no records were kept. The next day I found out the member had lied, or, at best, told only a one-quarter truth, in that educators had come up with several different metrics, and a way to combine them that made graduation rate a perfectly meaningful term within a certain band of uncertainty.

As M. and I talked, he sensed that Debbie was lost in the discussion and so he lovingly took her hand in his as he spoke by way of letting her know that she had not been forgotten. Her only utterance during the whole discussion was a question: why did I bring up graduation rates in my speech? I thought: Christ, hadn’t I said, or shouldn’t she have understood, that the reason might have been to show that the money the District was asking for could better have been used on matters pertaining directly at education rather than sports?

During the evening, I thought I would take advantage of the presence of a former Harvard economist and ask him what he thought about the current financial situation. He held up a hand and said he couldn't answer that question: he was a micro-economist, not a macro-economist. The reader can well imagine my thoughts on hearing that.

Debbie said that both his parents were academic mathematicians. Later she sent me the address of his father's web site, asking me to explain what all those papers were about. In fact they were topological (and other) explorations of quantum mechanics and string theory. I wrote her the clearest, layman's-terms-only description I could of some of his work, received no response from her.

Debbie and M. were sexually active from the beginning, and I couldn't blame M. for taking full advantage of the beautiful body that Fate, and match.com, and Debbie's strong attraction to wealthy, successful, academic Jewish men, had placed at his disposal. He showed her pictures of his two children, aged two and three, by his previous relationship (or introduced them to her, I'm not sure) and when she exclaimed over how cute they were, he told her that in addition to her other charms, it was clear that she would be a wonderful step-mother.

I thought: here is a woman who never once swept a floor in my house except on the eve of one of her parties, who never once removed the hair from the drain after she had taken a shower, who never once bothered to turn on the front porch light when I had forgotten to, and now she is going to become a wonderful step-mother to two young children?

I thought: here is a woman, naive to the point of idiocy about human reality, who is now entertaining the thought of becoming the wife of a man from an academic family that had experienced life in Soviet Russia and therefore had known the meaning of real human suffering. How would he receive her opinion that depression is just a matter of lack of will-power?

I thought: here is a woman with no culture who is thinking about marrying a man who almost certainly had read at least some of the great Russian novels and probably could quote Pushkin, who probably had more than a passing interest in classical music¹, not to mention at least some of the other arts.

Several days later, as she was preparing, with her sister and her boyfriend, for a birthday party to be held at our house, she remarked, "He's very intelligent. That's why he loves me." (I thought: wouldn't a woman normally say the reverse "That's why I love him?") She announced that he wanted to make love to her twice a day and that he wanted to know all about her past lovers. She also announced that, after she had told him a little about her family (which I am sure was the main subject of her conversations with him), and especially her father, he had asked, as I had, "How come you are so normal?", which delighted her.

The relationship with Misha ended in summer 2012, after they had lived together for about nine months. The main reason was, as she told me, his unending depressions, and the implication that she would accept them, and indeed take care of him up to a point. He was reluctant to seek therapy — he went a few times, but obviously with no interest in trying to make a major change in himself. That summer, she got pregnant, and had an abortion, which didn't seem to deeply trouble her, saying that she did not want to raise a child with such a man. They parted expressing their continuing love for each other, but by October, she said she had decided that it was better she no longer spoke to him.

1. One day I heard her listening to classical for a few minutes — the first time in five years. No doubt she was trying to catch up.

Her PhD Thesis

In late spring or early summer of 2012 her advisor told her that her thesis would be accepted if she made a few further revisions. The deadline was November. Around the same time, she got a one-year post-doc appointment at Northwestern, during which she would be allowed to conduct any research she wanted. She moved to Chicago in September — at first into a small, moldy apartment, but then into a large, 44th-floor apartment that she said she could hardly afford, but that she felt she deserved “something nice for right now”. It was in a “gorgeous building”, and had a view of Lake Erie.

In mid-October, she turned in her thesis, but said she was not particularly proud of it. “I have been struggling to figure out my point, and this is causing me some trouble on the job market.” (She had gone to Washington for interviews for work after her post-doc appointment.) I didn’t quite understand what she meant, but I wrote her the following:

“Are you sure that you are having trouble figuring out the point of your thesis? Never forget that it is in the interest of the academic world to make the PhD process as long-drawn-out and difficult as possible. Are you sure that it isn’t that some of your advisers have been saying, in so many words, ‘Well, it’s good of course, but it’s not...perfect, is it? Perhaps you could make clearer precisely what your main point is.’ There is no end to this kind of thing. I’ll bet you could tell me, in, say, a couple of pages, what your thesis is about and what the point is.”

I felt sorry for her, and hated that the wretched academic machine showed no mercy for her even after the years of labor she had already put in.

A Happy Ending

But after Northwestern, she got a job at the University of Toronto. While there, she met, and fell in love with, C., a fallen Mormon without a college degree, and no steady job or trade. I met him at a party at the home of her sister and her husband in North Berkeley, and was struck by his level-headedness and natural intelligence. In late 2014 or early 2015 they decided to get married. I could only imagine what her parents thought about this college-professor daughter of theirs not marrying a nice Jewish doctor or lawyer or professor or financier, and instead marrying a gentile whom she would have to support for the foreseeable future. But there was no doubt, from her emails, and from her conversation when I invited her to dinner during her occasional visits to Berkeley, that she loved him.

In early 2015, she was hired by a leading college¹ in New England, and started teaching there in fall of that year.

Regrets About This Portrait

I am painfully aware that this has not been a flattering portrait of the young woman student who shared my house, off and on, for seven years, and who, by the standards of any university authority that was concerned with the behavior of student renters, would have been given the highest marks. But an autobiography is not (or should not be) a public relations document, either for its author or for the other people described in it. An autobiography should be as near to an honest portrait of himself and the people in his life as the author is capable of.

Obviously sexual jealousy was the main source of my resentment. But other housemates had had lovers without producing the same degree of this resentment. I think that what also bothered

1. I omit the name in order to protect her privacy.

me was her inability to talk to me about any subject except her dysfunctional family and her love life. And yet, this portrait would be woefully unfair if I did not also state, at its conclusion, that she always seemed respectful of me, and was always deeply concerned and apologetic when one of the sub-lets she found, turned out to be a bit more eccentric than either of us had guessed she would be during the initial interview. (When she moved in with the Russian, she still wanted to keep the room as a back-up in case the living-together failed.)

I always praised her for being such a good housemate, and, strange as it may sound to the reader, there is no denying that we had a real affection for each other.

A Burn Victim

Starting in the '90s, I would occasionally see, in downtown Berkeley, usually near the old City Hall on Martin Luther King Way, a young man with a full head of black curly hair and the white cane of the blind walking along with a jaunty step. He used the cane quite casually, as though he knew where he was going and only had to check the pavement once in a while. Viewed from the side, he seemed perfectly normal physically and I felt sorry that such a young man should be afflicted with this to me worst of all afflictions. But then one day I saw his face, or what had been his face: it looked as though all the skin, which was unusually white, had melted. One great blue glass eye, unblinking, was permanently open, the other eye closed. It occurred to me then that the hair might have been a wig. His jaunty walk made me think that he had decided to make the best of the tragedy that had occurred to him. I thought: one moment he had been happy doing what he was doing, perhaps taking drugs with his friends, then the next moment the lights went out forever and he, probably a handsome man up till then, became a freak. I thought of the comedian Richard Pryor, who had set himself on fire while free-basing cocaine, although in his case his face did not suffer any noticeable damage. I assumed that the burns of this young man had not covered his entire body or he wouldn't have been as limber as he was. I thought: the only good thing is that he has no way of knowing what he looks like. I never asked anyone what had happened to him.

Around 2009, I began seeing him crossing the street with two or three young children, sometimes holding one in his arms. He seemed to be taking good care of them, and to be proud of his new responsibility. They in turn danced and laughed while staying close to him, and seemed not to give his blindness or his face a second thought.

(On the basis of an article in *The New York Times* (Mar. 2, 2013) I believe that he was Joshua A. Miele. On Oct. 5, 1973, when he was four years old,

“he was playing in the backyard of his family’s house on President Street [in the Park Slope section of Brooklyn, N.Y.] while his mother, Isabella, cooked in the kitchen. The doorbell rang, and Josh sprinted to get it.

“Standing on the other side of the heavy iron gate beneath the stoop was Basilio Bousa, 24, who lived next door. Josh unlocked it. Then he slipped his two feet into the gate’s lowest rung and grabbed hold with his hands so his weight would pull it open. But Basilio just stood there. So Josh stepped out, into the open.

“And then, he couldn’t see. He didn’t know why. He felt around with his hands, grasping for the walls. With great effort he forced his eyes open and glimpsed the wood paneling in the vestibule. It was the last thing he ever saw.”

Bousa, a next-door neighbor with a history of mental problems, had thrown sulfuric acid into his face.

Miele endured years of painful operations. At the time of the article he was 44, had a degree in physics and a Ph.D in psychoacoustics. He lived, with his wife, Liz, and two children, Ben, age 10 and Vivien, age 7, in Berkeley. He was a research scientist at the Smith-Kettlewell Eye Research Institute.)

We Lose the Battle Against the Hardball Field

In May, 2011, the last phase of the CEQA process began for the hardball field. (“CEQA” stood for the “California Environmental Quality Act”). It was a statute that required state and local agencies to identify the significant environmental impacts of their planned projects and to avoid or mitigate those impacts, if feasible.) In the last phase, neighbors and concerned citizens were allowed to write letters setting forth objections and questions about the plan. I hired a lawyer to draft our letter. She agreed to do the job for \$1,000. But after it was done, she said there must have been a mistake: the fee was \$1,500. I had failed to get a written contract before she began, and she apparently forgot to suggest that I do. Since there was a possibility I would have to use her again — although I disliked the fact that she never seemed to be able to answer my questions clearly and succinctly — I suppressed my anger and paid her the full \$1,500.

By this time, there were only three of us left opposing the field. But John S., a member of the School Board who had been on our side for several years, overnight changed his mind. The Board offered his wife, Pam W., a trivial job with an important-sounding name, and she likewise changed her mind. Two architects, Susi M. and Peter W., who lived on Carleton St., right across the street from the future site of the field, also changed their minds, having apparently believed the promises of the Board that no overhead speakers or lights would be installed. (I was at a meeting at which School Supt. William Huyett made this promise.) But my lawyer said these promises were worthless unless they were in the conditions of approval of the Project or within the resolution adopting the Project, and the Board had no intention of allowing itself to be legally bound in that way.

The Board hired a company, LSA Associates, Inc., of Berkeley, to go over the letters and write up responses. The company dismissed most of the neighbors’ concerns.

At the final public meeting, before the Board rubber-stamped its approval of the field, members of the audience were allowed one last chance to speak. I handed in a speaker’s card, so did one or two others who opposed the field. But the “random selection” of speakers somehow wound up selecting only people who were enthusiastic about the field. My lawyer said that deliberate exclusion of dissenting speakers at a public meeting like that was in violation of the Brown Act. On her advice, I wrote a letter to the President of the Board, Karen Hemphill, stating that, under the Public Records Act, I had a right to request a copy of all speakers’ cards, and a description of the “random” process by which speakers had been chosen. I personally delivered the letter to the School Board office. She never replied.

In the fall of 2011, the Board put two measures on the November ballot, Measures H and I. The Measures would provide a total of more than \$250 million for school “maintenance” and for new projects, most of them for sports facilities. There were very few details about the projects, but the ballot language explicitly stated that the projects would not be subject to external scrutiny and oversight. The prospect of a feeding frenzy motivated contractors and architects and building trades members to put \$135,000 into the campaign coffers of those who were for the Measures. Our side had only \$3,000. But we made our signs and posted them in public spaces. The opposition promptly stole them. We then stole theirs. We approached residents, asking them if we could

put a sign in their front yards. The answer was usually no: the residents did not want to be seen as being “against education”. It was clear they had not read the ballot information booklet, because if they had, they would have learned that most of the money would be used for sports.

Despite my paralyzing fear of public speaking, I gave several talks at public meetings. At one of them, Supt. Huyett said — I was standing right next to him — that if the Measures passed, there would be no cost to taxpayers. I couldn’t believe my ears, so afterward I asked a knowledgeable activist on our side, Gale G., how a total of more than \$600 million dollars, including interest on the bonds, could not cost the taxpayers any money. She explained that it was an old trick of city agencies: make the payback period be so long — 50 years or more — that the annual increase in each homeowner’s taxes would be negligible. But of course the total cost to the city was huge.

At another meeting, I quoted what School Board member John S. had told me several years earlier about the drop-out rate at Berkeley High. I was immediately taken to task by Shirley Issel, another Board member, who, clearly bored that she had to waste her time explaining such things to ignorant troublemakers, told me that graduation rates and drop-out rates were meaningless terms: if a student left Berkeley High, no record was kept of where he or she went; it might be to another school, or it might be that the student had simply given up going to school. I was ashamed of myself, but the next morning I went onto Google to see what I could learn. What I learned was that indeed the record-keeping problem that Issel had described existed, but that school administrators had come up with at least four different means of measuring drop-out rates and graduation rates, and had developed a way to average the figures. The terms were used routinely throughout the country, as I soon realized from listening for them in news reports and in PBS discussion programs. So Issel either was phenomenally ignorant of a central datum of her job, or else, which I believe, she simply lied.

During the campaign, I wrote and made copies of several flyers. Gale G. and I distributed 1,500 of them, going door to door in South and North Berkeley.

But both Measures passed easily.

One of the activists on our side, Marie B., who had the responsibility for making most of the lawn signs, and had several of them on the front lawn of her house, received a number of death threats. She was so unnerved by the campaign that soon after the election she and her husband sold their house and moved out of Berkeley.

I resigned myself to a future in which I would have to close the curtains and windows and sleep in the evening until the wretched night games were over. I could then get up to read and study and watch my nightly DVD in front of the fire.

An Attempt to Reach the Twins

In early March, 2011, I found, in the narrow space between an old computer and monitor in my study, a small, brown, paper bag containing a gingerbread man and a valentine.. I immediately remembered they had been given to me by the twin girls who had been my Sunday breakfast companions for two years. (See the section above, “Breakfast With the Twins”.) I couldn’t resist trying to get in touch with them again. I remembered that their father had told me that they were slated to go to a Montessori School, and so I got out the phone book and called the one remaining Montessori school in North Berkeley. I was told the twins had never been students there, but that I should try a former Montessori school. Which I did. The young woman answering the phone said she remembered them, but that they were no longer students there. I asked her if she could

Retirement

look up their parents' address in the school records, and forward a letter that I would send her. She agreed. I sent the following letter.

Mar. 6, 2011

Dear parents of Naomi and Alice:

I am the guy who, every Sunday morning for about two years, enjoyed breakfast at the Kensington Bistro with the twins and their father. Their father gave me his business card once — I believe he was a lawyer working for a mortgage firm in Walnut Creek — but I no longer can find it. I believe his name was Dan, but I am not sure. So in this letter I will have to refer to him, somewhat awkwardly, as “their father”. If this letter reaches you, it is because I remember him mentioning that they were going to go to a Montessori school, and so I called one in North Berkeley, which recommended that I call The Berkeley School, which had formerly been a Montessori school. The woman on the phone said she vaguely remembered the girls, and would forward my letter if she could find their records.

What prompts this letter is that last week, as I was cleaning up some things in my study, I came across a little brown bag containing a gingerbread man and a carefully-drawn Valentine's Day card. The first was a Christmas gift from the twins in 2006, the second their card to me from Feb., 2007. (The restaurant was sold soon after and we went our separate ways.)

But those gifts brought back fond memories of those Sunday breakfasts. I can still remember some of the things the girls said. Once, when I asked one of them what her favorite breakfast was, she replied, “Butter with pancakes!” Naomi, I remember, could recite verse after verse of poetry, including the entire, “The Lady With the Alligator Purse”. And I remember that their father told me that one day he had been talking to his wife about the day the twins were born, and the twins, overhearing the conversation, asked what day that was. Their father replied, “January 25th,” at which both girls exclaimed, “That's the same day as our birthday!”

I would welcome hearing how they are doing. By now they must be eight years old (my grandson just turned three). If you think it appropriate, you can tell them I said hello.

Hoping all is going well for the whole family,

John Franklin

Phone: ...

Email: ...

The letter was not returned, so we can assume it was delivered. But the parents never contacted me, even though they could have via surface mail with no return address. That would have eliminated the possibility of my seeing their number on my phone screen, had I had that advanced a phone. At the time of my writing the letter, the girls would have been about eight, and I still

missed them.

A Father's Worries

In early April, 2010, the Dow-Jones Average was up to more than \$10,500, so I emailed my son and asked him if I should continue having only 20% of my portfolio in stock, which was the percentage that he had. (I asked him about my stock percentage about three or four times a year, and his reply was usually to tell me what he was doing.) But this time he sent me an email that began:

“Stop. Im not a stock mkt advisor...You're looking for an answer here I wont provide you. We can't continue to have dialogues revolving around stock market allocations-it's not fair to me...”

I was shocked and furious. I wrote Gaby and said that I was going to start disinheritance proceedings the next day. She urged caution. The following Sunday, I called my ex-wife, Marcella. She told me that he was under considerable pressure, since after a typical day at the office, he had to do grocery shopping and often cook dinner. And of course manage the family's finances, be responsible for maintenance of two houses (his home and the house in Vermont), and be a good father and husband.

I called Shufro, the New York City company that managed my portfolio, and they said they would be happy to resume full discretionary powers concerning the percentage of stock in my portfolio.

Then, after I told him about the deteriorating performance and strange behavior¹ of the company that was managing my investment portfolio, he said he would be glad to take over the task if I agreed to let him put all my money into a variety of Vanguard funds, which is where he had his money. I knew, from previous conversations with him, that his performance since the start of the Great Recession in 2008 had been much better than that of the company I had been using, and so of course I agreed. The transfer took more than four months, from January through April, 2013, not the least reason being that Shufro kept dragging its feet.

Cruelty to Rats

In June of 2010, as I was standing on the sidewalk in front of my house, I saw a small black furry animal scurrying into the ivy. In the next day or two I saw several more. I notified my neighbors. Jane said they were roof rats though they live in ivy. My computer consultant, Art, said they were Norway rats.

There seemed to be no way to kill them quickly. Someone said I should trap them in a cage, then plunge the cage into a bucket of water and drown them. I had no stomach for that. I thought: why not take the cage to Tilden Park, the large, wooded area behind Berkeley. But someone informed me that it was against the law to release vermin in the Park.

1. For example, they changed my investment category without asking me, then sent me a form so that I could indicate the category I wanted, but the form contained only one category; they required, for the first time that I send them an email after each phone conversation stating that they had satisfied all my concerns. I suspected that they had been sued.

Meantime, they had dug two holes by the side of the driveway.

Finally, I decided on rat poison, which I thought would kill them quickly. I bought a box of d-Con pellets, placed them outside their holes, and at a few locations in the ivy.

I told Leda, my neighbor in the rear, about this. She said she had seen one of the rats dragging itself along on its belly, obviously dying in great agony, . She said the poison melts their insides but it takes hours for them to die. She asked me to stop using it because it can poison the animals who eat the rats, and because the rats can die in the walls of her house.

Anti-coagulant poisons, known as “second-generation” or “single-feed” rodenticides, are sold under various product names, and contain the active ingredients *brodifacoum*, *bromadiolone*, and *difethialone*, among others. They are strong enough to kill a rodent “after a single feeding.” A rodent dies slowly of internal hemorrhage after ingesting the bait, but may take up to seven days to die after that “single feed.”¹

Tracy, my neighbor on the south side, also asked me to stop using the poison, since there was a real danger that her infant son could get some of it into his mouth while playing in the grass along the driveway.

I wondered what kind of people make their living designing such cruel deaths for animals — any animals, even rats. Are we to believe that there are no poisons that will cause the animals to die quickly? How is it possible that hundreds, possibly thousands, of people with families and pets can go to work each day, knowing the kind of agony for living things their work produces? I thought: may you all die in agony.

My Grandson, Aged 4-3/4, Decides to Get Married

During our regular Thanksgiving phone call in November, 2012, Jeff remarked that Gabe, my grandson, had decided to get married. He was then about 4-3/4 years old. The lucky girl was Natalia, in his pre-school class. Soon after she accepted his proposal, she apparently said, in no uncertain terms, “But Gabe, we can’t get married until you get a *job* and a *house*.” (A good, feet-on-the-ground, level-headed young lady.) Gabe accepted the need for those things but apparently assumed they just more or less take care of themselves.

Later, Jeff said that they were going to postpone the wedding as they wanted to become a husband-and-wife spy team, and so wanted to complete their training before they got married. A couple of months later, Natalia announced that she also wanted to be a doctor.

The young man seemed to consider marriage as a fundamentally important part of life. Almost invariably, when I visited the family, there would come a point during dinner when he would turn to me and ask, “How come you’re not married?” I felt it would be better if I didn’t go into all the complicated details about Grammy and me, so I always replied, “Gabe, I’m working on it,” and he seemed to accept that.

My Grandson, the Young Scientist

When Gabe was nine years old, he used some of his savings (and a little help from his parents) to buy a computer. Some time later, he sent me an email, “4D?”. I didn’t understand so I asked

1. “what laboratory reports reveal”, *wildcare news*, WildCare, San Rafael, CA, Spring/Summer 2013, p. 5.

his father, who told me he was referring to the fourth dimension.

I wrote him back with the following explanation: suppose he lived in an apartment on the corner of a street and an avenue in the city, and wanted to have a friend come over to play. Then he would have to tell the friend the street name and the avenue name. That is two dimensions. But he would also have to tell him what floor he lived on. That's three. And finally he would have to tell him when to come over. So that's a total of four dimensions. We live in a four-dimensional world.

A few days later I got another email from him: "Does the solar system as a whole move?" A real scientific question. I wrote him back, saying yes, because it is revolving, in a spiral, around the center of the Milky Way. Since he had previously been interested in black holes, I told him that the center of the Milky Way was a black hole.

He then asked if black holes move? I said yes, because they are at the center of galaxies, and galaxies move.

It's always nice to learn that one's grandson likes to ask questions.

"I Want to Be Your Friend"

One day in April, 2013, I was walking home after dinner at Au Cocquelet, when two little Asian Indian girls ran by, followed by their mother, or at least the mother of one of them. The older girl was probably four, the younger maybe three. Both wore colorful dresses and light, sparkly shoes that were more like slippers. The older one walked ahead of the younger and seemed indifferent to her. The younger one tried to keep up, and then, at one point, just stopped and began crying. Then she resumed running after the older one again, finally catching up with her. But the older one ignored her. Finally they arrived at their car, and stood by the back door, waiting for the mother.

Then the younger one, crying as if her heart would break, said to the older one, "I want to be your friend!" And she repeated it: "I want to be your friend!"

I was so touched by her plaintive cry that I had to turn away, because tears were coming into my eyes. I resumed walking home, then stopped and wanted to go back and try to comfort the younger one and tell the older one that she shouldn't treat her friend or sister like that. But I didn't. For days after, I kept hearing the younger one's voice: "I want to be your friend!" And even later. I am sure my brother would have uttered the same words on many occasions when I bullied him. Gaby said that her sister had also always wanted to be her friend, and that she had sometimes turned away from her, and refused her, and regretted it profoundly after her death.

The World's Busiest Woman

First Meeting

One late afternoon in the early '90s, while on a walk, I stopped to observe some work being done on a telephone pole a couple of blocks from my house, at the corner of Fulton and Blake. A youngish-looking middle-aged woman was standing there, also observing, and so I initiated a conversation on the subject of what was being done and why. At one point in the conversation, I said, "Well, listen, perhaps we could have a cup of coffee sometime." She abruptly turned and ran away. I thought: even with a hat to hide my baldness, women aren't interested in me.

Years later, I would occasionally see her at political meetings. Once, at an evening party sponsored by the Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association (BAHA), I said hello, and asked,

“What are you doing here?” She laughed and said she was on the board of directors of the organization! As I recall, she wasn’t active in our long fight to stop the School Board from putting a hardball field in our neighborhood, but she was very active in fighting our corrupt city government, in particular, its handing over much of downtown Berkeley and the neighborhoods in the south and west, to the developers.

In the early 2000s, mayor Bates (about whom she always said, “He’s *evil!*”) came up with a ballot proposition that would weaken the Landmarks Preservation Ordinance that had been in place since the mid-’70s, and as a result would give developers freer rein in the neighborhoods. She and I wrote up flyers and distributed more than 500 of them, door-to-door, in south and north Berkeley. The proposition was just barely defeated.

Personal Characteristics

During these activities she told me a little about herself. Her father had been born in this country of Portuguese parents (I think from the Azores). He had been a scientist in one of the biological disciplines, but had such a fear of public speaking that he never wanted to be a professor, so he spent his career at Lawrence Livermore Labs. Her mother, who was American, she always spoke of as having been very cruel to her father, apparently because of some disagreement they had over a house he owned in San Jose.

When she was about nine, the family moved to England for two years. Because her skin was very slightly olive, she was mercilessly taunted by her schoolmates. Eventually, she stopped speaking. After the family returned she remained silent. (They took up residence in a nearby city, returning to Berkeley when she was 18.) When she began talking a couple of years after the return, it was in a language that she and her brother had invented. I don’t remember how long she said it was before she resumed speaking English.

In 2014, she was in her early sixties. She was about 5’5” tall, slim, with thick, long, graying hair, and modest breasts. She usually wore dark slacks and a dark top. I don’t know if she was considered attractive by other men her age and older, but to me she was maddeningly desirable, not the least reason being her aloofness. I had many sexual fantasies about her. When we talked about our ages (I was more than ten years older than she was), and I mentioned that if my son could keep my portfolio, which he began managing around 2013, up with inflation, I had enough to live on for 24.8 more years, she always said she didn’t want to live beyond eighty.

She had never married, but had had two passionate love affairs, and two abortions. I once got her to watch the film *Pennies from Heaven*. She said she had had a crush on Christopher Walken for many years, and watched and rewatched the scene in which he does a strip tease. But the actor whom it is fair to say she was obsessed with, was Bjorn Andresen, who plays the beautiful teenage boy whom the composer Gustav von Aschenbach falls hopelessly in love with in the film, *Death in Venice*. She was spellbound by his beauty, and always expressed sadness that after the film he had had to fight suspicions that he was gay, which he apparently was not.

Over the years, I often invited her out for dinner, but she always declined. Around 2013, she revealed that she suffered from Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS), and that this made restaurant dinners impossible, and, in fact, was a major reason why she had never married. I often invited her out to coffee. She never actually declined, but said that as soon as some pressing political matter had been settled, she would like that. I began to offer her \$50 towards her lawsuits for each time she had coffee with me. She laughed, but said she would only accept the money if a lawsuit was actually in process at the time. In all the years I knew her, we had coffee exactly twice.

Despite the fact that the only subjects we could talk about were city politics, and our families, and our former sex lives¹ (she always seemed to be interested in my past sex life) I always looked forward to talking to her. Sometimes I would see how many days I would have to wait for her to call me. Sometimes it was more than a week. But then the phone rang, I picked it up, and there was her chirpy “Hi!”

She was, on the one hand, very skilled at political writing: letters to editors, speeches for meetings, articles in her newsletter, flyers, and she knew more than anyone I had ever met about the goings-on in the city government, and about anything that threatened Berkeley’s neighborhoods, for example proposed bus routes through previously quiet streets. On the other hand, she had virtually no knowledge of anything else — nothing of the humanities, or music, or the other arts, or science or current events. I once asked her if she would watch a film that I thought was outstanding if I gave her \$50 to help pay for one of her lawsuits against the developers. She said she would if she could watch it alone². So I got the DVD of *Dr. Strangelove* from Netflix. Afterward, I asked her if she liked it, she said she did. But it soon became clear that she had no idea that the right wing in the ’50s actually believed that fluoride in the water was a Communist plot. In fact she was convinced that the present U.S. government was using fluoride to wipe out the middle class. I asked her why the government would want to do that, since consumer spending constituted about two-thirds of GDP. I don’t remember her answer. She hated all authority. She believed that vaccination was another government plot. She said she had not been to a doctor in 20 years. Instead, she kept herself physically fit (she said the reason that she had run away after our first meeting was simply that she went running every evening, and wanted to resume as soon as possible). She went to the dentist, however, and amazed me by saying she never took any anesthetic during drilling. She didn’t believe in global warming. But she did believe in angels, saying with complete confidence that she had two of them who watched over her. She encouraged me to acknowledge the existence of the two who were always watching over me even though I didn’t pay any attention to them (or acknowledge their existence).

I asked her once if she liked poetry. She said only if it was depressing. So I sent her an English translation of Paul Verlaine’s most famous poem, “Falling Tears”, which begins,

Falling tears in my heart
Falling rain on the town.
Why this long ache,
A knife in my heart?

She said she liked it.

She had earned a B.A. from U.C. Berkeley, majoring in linguistics. Noam Chomsky’s theories had put her off the subject completely. She worked for a few years as an usher in movie theaters, then finally took a job as an administrative assistant in one of the biology-related departments at the University, and remained in the job until her retirement. Every minute of her spare time while she was working, and then all of her waking time after her retirement, was

1. She said she no longer had any interest in sex. “I’m an It,” she said.

2. Eventually, we did watch one film together, at my house, before a nice crackling fire, with wine and Bailey’s Irish Cream, which she especially liked, after ten — she didn’t allow herself to drink alcohol any earlier. The film was *Inside Job*, about the causes of the 2008 Recession.

devoted to politics, usually meetings. I remember once trying to set up an appointment for a brief phone conversation on a Saturday morning. I said, “How about ten?” She: “Make it five of ten.” I: “Why not ten?” She: “Because I have a meeting at five after.”

Even though she never read books or magazines or newspapers, she loved big words. She said that, when she was in her twenties, she and a male co-worker at the University had begun exchanging them. Among the many she liked were “defenestration” (the throwing of someone out of a window), “ailurophilia” (love of cats), “neologize” (create new words), and two that I gave her, “shambolic” (chaotic), and “esurient” (hungry).

She lived in a house just three blocks from mine. An old water tower in back had been converted to a one-room apartment that she rented to visiting scholars at the University. She liked gardening and had three cats (she told me that the term for a group of cats is “clowder”): Oliver, who was feral, and seldom at home, preferring to roam the neighborhood and no doubt spend time with bad company and in pursuit of female cats; Sammy (laid-back, sleeping most of the day) and Harleigh (Harlequin), who made it clear that she wanted nothing to do with strangers, especially strangers who were clearly not of her aristocratic class. Her mistress’s only recreation, as far as I could determine, was watching cat videos on YouTube.

Her Newsletter

Around 2013, she began asking me if I would be willing to proofread her newsletter, which was aimed at informing the various neighborhood associations in Berkeley of the mischief that the city was up to. I said I would be glad to. At first I would read what she brought on Sunday around 10, but I was too nervous reading in her presence, and so she sent the newsletter to me via email the night before, and I made notes, which we then went through when she came over on Sunday.

Although she welcomed my suggestions for improving a phrase here and there, she made clear that she didn’t want to hear any suggestions or advice about the newsletter. I was allowed to raise questions, for example, “How about an article on ... ?” but that was it. For example, I was curious if any studies had been done on ways that towns like ours had been successful in fighting city hall. I tentatively offered to write an article on the subject, but it was clear that she was not interested.

Sometimes, I wrote the first draft of an article, which we then edited. She clearly valued my willingness to do this.

Her Battle Against Berkeley’s Corrupt Politicians

Her life was devoted to one and only thing: combating Berkeley’s corrupt politicians, who were almost 100% in the pockets of the developers.

She and a woman in her neighborhood, Patti Dacey, pooled their savings and sued the developers of a proposed large apartment building in our neighborhood. But even though she and Patti had one of the best lawyers in the business, Richard Drury, they never won complete victories. The best they could hope for were delaying actions. She alone spent tens of thousands of her savings on the lawsuits. None of the millionaires in the Berkeley Hills, who knew the developers wouldn’t dare to invade their neighborhoods, lifted a finger to stop the degradation of the neighborhoods in the flatlands. Probably as little as \$250,000 would have been enough to win the few lawsuits that would have caused the developers to have second thoughts about their destructive plans. We never knew exactly how much the Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association (BAHA) could have done within the limits of its by-laws, but in any case the organization did

nothing.

Whenever an important meeting was coming up, she would begin her campaign to get me to attend. If I would be willing to give a short speech, that she was perfectly willing to write, so much the better. Her campaign was really a seduction. Never had a woman spoken to me with more admiration, more sparkling eyes (though the conversations were almost all by phone, or email), more warmth and praise.

Initially, I did a lot of bitching and moaning about the intolerable boredom of the meetings, and about the standard practice of some of the leaders, e.g., the mayor, of postponing controversial subjects that residents felt strongly about, until late — sometimes until past midnight — in order to reduce the ranks of the protesters. But I became concerned about talking too much to such a busy person, so I told her that there was now going to be a New John, namely, one who had embarked upon the New Taciturnity. I usually failed miserably at that. But, feeling bad about my constant complaining about meetings, I told her there was now a New New John, namely, one who would no longer complain. Later, there was a New New New John, this time one who would no longer make suggestions she considered bizarre to people who were trying to find ways to fight the city — for example, suggesting to a woman trying to get the foreman of a crew that was going to cut down an English chestnut¹ tree in her block, that she should tell the foreman that she would make a generous contribution to the school that his children attended if he found a way not to cut down the tree.

In the days preceding the meeting, the frequency of her phone calls increased, her concern obvious if I happened to be away. On rare occasions, she drove to meetings. I called her car the “Gulpmobile”, because her passengers usually gulped at the way she took corners. She drove at top speed, leaning forward with relentless determination, as though on the way to witness the hanging of all of Berkeley’s corrupt politicians.

But then, at the actual meetings, she often said not a word to me apart from a cursory greeting. She preferred to sit with a lawyer who often helped her with her various causes. I was hurt and humiliated by this, and naturally assumed they were lovers. Later she said that she didn’t want to be seen as knowing me because then our letters to the various agencies whose meetings we attended might seem to be written by the two of us in collaboration (which was true) rather than by each of us individually. In January 2015 I learned that my initial suspicion had been valid. She told me that a gay activist often asked her, at meetings, if she and the lawyer were a couple. She merely said no each time, but eventually told him they had been but “it didn’t work out”. He replied that he was quite attracted to her: too bad she was the wrong gender.

Sitting in the audience, nervously waiting my turn to give the little speech that I hadn’t written, at the request of a woman who didn’t want to talk to me, all the while trying to endure the intolerable boredom of the politicians discussing matters of utter indifference to me, I always felt dirty.

But after the meeting, she always sent me a thank you email. For example,

(Subject field): Thank you, you were excellent

(Text):

As always, you spoke beautifully. They held it over for another meeting (bad, but better than passing the project, which 6/9ths of them clearly wanted to do).

1. or walnut, I am not sure

Retirement

Thank you for being such a good friend

But then the phone calls stopped, at least for several days or a week or more. Now that the consummation had occurred, I no longer needed to be wooed.

Like Gaba, the Rick & Ann's waitress whom I had tutored in math and physics, she was an innocent user of people. Her appreciation of my willingness to do what she needed done, became a liking for me, and so, when I talked about suicide, she always seemed genuinely concerned that I not do it, or that, at the least, I call her first. Because she wanted to keep me willing to attend meetings and work on the newsletter, she would patiently listen when I talked about my depression, or about a (non-mathematical) book I was reading (it was clear she had no interest in the book itself). She was never hesitant about complimenting me. She once said, "You are human!" I wrote her back:

Dear —:

No one has ever said, "You are human" to me before. They have said "You are a narcissist" (my ex wife), and "You are hopelessly neurotic" (lots of people) and "You are too sensitive" (lots of people) but never "You are human". So, thank you!

Her response:

Hi John,

Oh my, of those three claims, the only one I could remotely use is neurotic, but only a little bit. The others are ridiculous, in my opinion.

And whenever you want advice about some interpersonal (I think that's the word) problem, not only are the problems interesting because they are reasonable and human, but your reaction is a delight because it's always perfectly reasonable and thoughtful, NEVER hypersensitive, which is very annoying. And you really want my opinion, which is nice. Many people don't want to hear what I think at all, they just want a sounding board. So I'm delighted to have given you a nice compliment!

Sometimes I had to go to her house to pick up a document, or draft of a speech, or join her in a walk to a meeting. But for years I was never allowed to enter. I had to knock and then turn around so that I would not see the interior when she opened the door, the reason being that she was ashamed at how messy she felt the place was. In 2014, however, she finally allowed me inside, as she wanted me to see the video tape of a Zoning Adjustments Board (ZAB) meeting at which I had given a short speech. She had previously sent me an email about the meeting. We had attended in order to urge the ZAB to refuse permission to a developer who wanted to gut the interior of a beautiful old Berkeley house in her neighborhood and convert it into what was called a "mini-dorm". She had written:

John,

I'm sorry I didn't tell you. WE WON!

You DID receive the most clapping. Your hearing is not great. And yes, I think it was the

Chair who said you were articulate.

THANK YOU, John. You were definitely a part of our victory.

It was a very rare victory for her. But another one eventually followed, when the ZAB turned down the developer's appeal — a very rare occurrence. After the ZAB meeting, while she and several of her fellow activists were congratulating themselves, the developer walked up to her, shook his finger in her face, and said, "*You will regret this!*" She was so unnerved that she reported the threat to the police, emphasizing that there were several witnesses.

End of the Friendship

Around mid-September, 2015, she came over to my house so that I could give her the results of my proof-reading of the latest issue of her newsletter. Toward the end of our session, the subject of statins somehow came up. She shook her head over the fact that I took one pill every evening to combat high cholesterol, making clear that they were a well-known menace. I told her I had read on the subject on Wikipedia, she replied that Wikipedia is "completely corrupt". I later sent her the following email:

Dear — ,

I have never heard, from any source, that Wikipedia is "completely corrupt". I have seen, at the start of some articles, their own statement that the article might be biased, and that they are in the process of correcting it. But, given your sweeping condemnation, I think it would be best that we not discuss Wikipedia. (I am not even sure what "completely corrupt" means. How can they be completely corrupt about an article in math, or science, or literature, or painting, or music (e.g., a composer's biography) or geography or ...?)

As far as statins are concerned: as I said before, there most certainly are side effects, e.g., there seems to be a slight increase in the chances for diabetes in people who take them. Just as there are a few people who die each year from taking aspirins, and others who cannot take them because of the sensitivity of their stomachs.

But in medicine, at least as it is practiced by institutions like Kaiser, the advantages are weighed against the disadvantages.

I don't know what your opinion is of vaccination, but I do know that the current movement against it arose from a British study that was soon known to have been bogus (the scientist in charge lost his medical license as a result). I'm afraid I don't have a lot of patience with the vaccination-deniers, because I was alive before there was a polio vaccine, and I can tell you of the terror that mothers lived in each summer, since polio was transmitted via pool water and kids loved to go swimming in the summer. My mother had a friend with a beautiful teen-age daughter who one day was healthy and thriving, and two weeks later was in an iron-lung for life.

Re statins: I think you should not send me anything until I talk to my Kaiser physician. I have

an appointment with her next Fri.

-- John

She replied with the following email:

Hi John,

If I shouldn't send you anything until you talk to your doctor, the conversation is over before it's begun. You clearly aren't interested in hearing anything new. Of course your doctor is going to preach the party line.

I don't think you've ever tried to get me to consider that I might be wrong about certain things by providing evidence. You generally try to convince me by asserting, for example, that institutions like Kaiser weigh advantages against disadvantages. I actually study things in depth. Please ask next time you're at Kaiser for the name of their Department that studies the drugs they administer.

I find it interesting that you can see that mathematicians are stuck in their conventions and not open to any new ways to look at things, but you just assume that I'm wrong and that the medical system, which is entirely stuck in its conventions, is right. It's actually rather insulting, which I know is not your intention.

—

In reply to which I sent her the following email:

Subject: Holy fucking Jesus Christ!

Dear —,

Now I am angry¹. What brought on that email? My position has always been that, when it comes to matters pertaining to the effectiveness of drugs, the best we can do is make our decisions on the basis of extensive statistical studies, recognizing that there are trade-offs, and that we must weigh the disadvantages (side effects) against the advantages. If someone says, e.g., that a few people die from aspirins each year, and that therefore aspirins should be banned, I dismiss that person as a nut-case with no knowledge or understanding of science.

Give me some evidence that you study things in depth. Do you know the difference between anecdotal evidence and statistical evidence?

Tell me how you believe that medicine should operate in this country. Most importantly, tell me what criteria the medical profession should use in resolving questions about the effectiveness of drugs.

1. She had earlier said that the one thing she couldn't bear was for me to be angry at her.

-- John

She never replied. Nor did I attempt to contact her. As of this writing, a week after the above email exchange, I do not intend to attempt to renew the friendship, if that is what it was. But every time the phone rings, I hope it is her.

(Note added in December, 2017: I heard that her step-father had died, so I wrote to ask her how she was doing; she said a neighbor forged a will and claimed that half of her step-father's estate was his; she sued him, and, since the neighbor didn't have the original of the hand-written will, and since the hand-writing was obviously not her step-father's, she won. Thereafter I wrote her once in a while, occasionally sending her a big word. Most of them she liked.)

Death of the Lemon Tree

In the back yard of my house was a beautiful old Eureka lemon tree. It was there when I bought the house in 1988, and had probably been 25 years old even then. It is described in the section "My House" in the first file of Vol. 4. In the fall of 2011, I noticed that the leaves seemed to be a bit yellow. I contacted Jeff B., my arborist. He recommended I apply 70 lbs. of iron sulfate fertilizer under the tree. I did, but the leaves continued to yellow. There then followed a series of frantic consultations with presumed experts. No two of them said the same thing. One asked how much I had been watering underneath the tree. I said as often as I water the lawn. Too much! Cut way back. So I did. The next expert asked how much I was watering. I told her. Too little!

In spring of 2012, the father of Debbie, my housemate, came to help move some of her things. I told him about the tree. He took one look at it, said with complete assurance that the problem was there were too many lemons. They exhaust the energy of the tree. I should have them all removed. I called Jeff the arborist, he and a couple of men came and removed bushels of huge lemons. No change whatsoever. In fall 2012, I contacted Bartlett Tree Experts. The technician came, showed me that the bark was dying; it could easily be peeled off in places. He performed several tests, sent me a report a few weeks later. It said the problem was *Phytophthora*, a root fungus. For a couple of hundred dollars, he could come and treat the roots. I gave him the go-ahead. Absolutely no change in the leaves.

An expert at a nursery told me that what I really needed was to inject liquid fertilizer directly on the roots, using a thin rod that was pushed into the soil while the water from a hose dissolved the fertilizer in a plastic holder at the upper end. I did this several times. No change.

Jeff said I needed to cut off the dead limbs, which he was glad to do, for a hefty charge. I had him cut the limbs into lengths of 14 inches so that they could spend their final moments in the comfort and companionship of my fireplace.

A young expert recommended by a clerk at Berkeley Horticulture Nursery, said that I should put two cubic feet of compost under the tree. Which I did. The grass flourished, the tree continued to die.

More cutting of dead branches in April, 2013. And then, after a year of producing no lemons at all, the tree suddenly burst forth with lots of small ones, as though in its death throes making a frantic to me to save it "See all the lemons I can produce for you? We have been friends all these years! Please don't let me die."

As this is written, in May, 2013, it is clear that by the end of the year, the tree will be dead. I have called several citrus nurseries about planting a fast growing new tree, but as usual, no two of

them said the same thing. Meantime, out of the part of the trunk at soil level, below the point that the graft had been made for the Eureka tree, sturdy new green shoots were emerging. But experts told me that if they grew into a tree, the fruit would be bitter.

(Note added in August, 2014. The tree survived into 2014. In June of that year I found an arborist who said that he had saved fruit trees in worse shape. All that was needed was to remove the grass under the tree, since the grass had become an impenetrable mat over the soil, apply several fertilizers, then a covering of rich compost, then a covering of mulch. (His charge: about \$400.) My only task would be to water the mulch for 10-15 minutes ever two weeks. I can say that now, in August, there appear to be a few new leaves, with several new shoots growing out of the trunk. The arborist said that, in his experience, after two years, the trees are in more robust shape than they were before their decline first settled in.)

Neighbors of 25 Years Leave Without a Word

In spring of 2013, my next-door neighbors, Steve and Jane, put their house on the market for \$949,000. Within a few weeks (Apr. 11), it sold for \$997,000. (Three bedrooms, plus several other small rooms that could be used for guestrooms, offices; 2.5 baths; fireplace, basement, for a total of 2,084 sq. ft.; separate garage suitable for an office or guest house.) My house at the time was probably worth \$550,000.

I would estimate they spent more than \$50,000 for what the realtors call “staging”. The hardwood floors on the first and second story were completely redone, even though they were in perfect condition to begin with. The back porch was rebuilt. Several old trees in the tiny back yard (but not the huge Monterey Pine) were removed. I have no idea what else was done. But I wasn’t surprised, since I don’t think it is any exaggeration to say that Steve and Janet’s main domestic activity over the years had been remodelling the house. They did the kitchen at least once, and I seem to recall that it, plus other work, cost in the vicinity of \$100,000 in the early 2000s. During the preparation for sale, I discussed with Steve the trade-offs between the cost of staging and not staging: in the former case, it is true that you will be able to sell the house for more, but you have also spent more to achieve that. In the latter case, if you do little or nothing, then you sell the house for less but you have also spent less. Why not just make up your mind to sell only to contractors? I asked him what chance I would have of guessing what a wife would want in the way of a kitchen. Far better, it seemed to me, to, in effect, give her and her husband the money and let them put in the kitchen they wanted. But he was not to be dissuaded. The house had to be in perfect condition when it went on the market.

As the day of the first Open House approached, I pleaded with Steve, and with the realtor, Jeff Rosenbloom, not to sell to a developer, explaining that I knew of several large homes in South Berkeley that had been sold to these scoundrels, who then carved up the interiors into as many as 15 small bedrooms and rented them to students. The students were loud and boisterous and cared nothing about littering the yard and the street. Neighbors were forced to sue. The responsible city agencies — for example, the Zoning Adjustment Board (ZAB) — were all in the pockets of the developers, and even though it was against a zoning ordinance to put that many bedrooms into a house, it was only after long legal battles that even a few of the neighbors were able to put a stop to the nuisance.

Rosenbloom seemed to understand and, as it turned out, the house was sold to a very nice family — husband, wife, three teenagers — who soon proved to be the best of neighbors. The husband was a manager in the Public Health Dept., very intelligent, always enjoying a conversa-

tion. It was a major improvement over Steve and Jane.

In 2012, they had bought a top-floor condominium in Watergate Towers, in Emeryville. It had large sundecks on two sides, a view of the Bay. Unfortunately it was built on jello, namely, landfill just a few yards from the Bay, and so could very well collapse in a major earthquake. But Steve stuck by his plan for dealing with the Big One, namely, die before it happened. They rented the place out while they waited to sell their house, and then, after their house was sold they moved into a duplex only a couple of blocks away, since their tenants' lease would not be up until July 31, and they wanted to devote August to remodelling their new home before they moved in.

Neither during or after their move did either one of them say goodbye — not in person or via phone call or email. We had been neighbors for 25 years. We had watched each others' houses to protect against burglaries, had taken in newspapers when the other was traveling, had cooperated in dealing with minor problems, such as the roots of the magnolia tree on the property line starting to damage my foundation. Despite Steve's ignorance of literature and philosophy and all technical fields, and despite his wacko political views (he was a devout Marxist), I had been able to get along with him (thanks to our both having a good sense of humor). And yet they left without a word. I lost all respect for them.

Stephanie As Actress

As the years passed, I continued to have a warm friendship with Stephanie, daughter of Yolanda, with whom I had a brief relationship in the late 1980s (see the section, "Yolanda and Stephanie" in the last file of Vol. 3).

As I pointed out in the section "Stephanie" in the above file, she was a natural actress, and always invited me to come to see her in one of the many plays she performed in. I attended her performances because my doing so meant so much to her, but I was never comfortable with performances by amateur theatric groups. Contemporary plays were no great problem for me (for example, Lisa Loomer's *Distracted*, about a mother wrestling with the question of whether to allow her son to be given drugs to combat his attention-deficit disorder in school) but Shakespeare definitely was a problem, as was any classic, for example Sophocles *Electra*, which was performed outdoors around 2016 with Stephanie in a leading role.

A Shakespeare play, for me, was a colossal bore — two and a half hours of shouting in complicated language. The Emperor's words to Mozart should have been uttered to the Bard: "Too many words, my dear Shakespeare".

I couldn't bring myself to look at the actors' faces. I was too embarrassed at these young men and women pronouncing the lines they had so dutifully memorize. I sat and tried to think of other things. I made notes in the little notebook I always carried in my shirt pocket. (I should mention that I do not have this reaction when I watch scenes from Laurence Olivier's Shakespeare films. There are still too many words, but the quality of their delivery makes you willing to listen.

Whenever I meet a high-school English teacher, or college English professor, I always asked if they showed at least one of Olivier's performances to their students. The answer was always no.

I could not imagine how he thought about writing his plays. I wanted to reverse-engineer them, reduce each speech to its essence, remove the poetry. Certainly the lines that at least some educated people know, deserve the immortality they have achieved. But they are a tiny fraction of the number of words in his plays.

How many successful verse plays have there been in English? Apart from Shakespeare's,

English majors might mention one or two of Ben Jonson's, and perhaps half a dozen other plays from Elizabethan playwrights. Perhaps W. B. Yeats' plays based on Irish folklore, although as far as I know these are never performed outside of Ireland. T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) was probably the only widely-known successful verse play in the 20th century, despite Eliot's other attempts.

Breakfast with David Kaffinetti

On Thursday and Sunday mornings, I had breakfast at Rick & Ann's restaurant, across the street from the tennis courts at the Claremont Hotel in Berkeley. One of the regulars, starting in early 2014, was a smiling Englishman. I can't remember how we got talking, but I soon learned he was a rock n roll pianist named David Kaffinetti with an extraordinary knowledge of the jazz of the 1950s and '60s. He was also something of a movie star, having appeared in at least one Hollywood film — as the pianist Viv Savage in Rob Reiner's amusing satire of rock n roll bands, *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984). The film is a mock documentary in which Reiner plays the interviewer. Much of the dialogue was improvised, David said. At the end, the interviewer asks Savage what his philosophy of life is, and he replies, slowly and deliberately, "Have a good time *all* the time." He laughed when he told me this, saying it was his favorite of all his lines.

He had first gained fame with the 1970s London-based rock band, Rare Bird, and had played with other bands. He said that in 1973 Chuck Berry, one of the great rock n roll stars, had asked to play piano on a recording of a tune called "Johnny B. Goode". The recording was chosen to be one of the recordings aboard the golden LP on the two Voyager spacecraft that were launched in 1977. As we spoke, they were heading into deep space following their visit to several planets.

At the time our conversations began, he was playing with several local groups: Sonic Boomerang, Sezu, and Imperial Messenger Service. He was in his late sixties, a bit overweight, with gray hair. However, one morning he turned up looking suddenly different — I won't say younger, just different. When he saw that I had noticed, he laughed and said he had had his hair dyed, which he did once or twice a year.

I went to hear a couple of performances by the first two groups when they were playing at a loud bar in Kensington, just north of Berkeley, called the Kensington Pub. It was difficult to hear him above the noise of the crowd, but he seemed thoroughly competent. The bands also played at various other clubs in the area, and at private parties, and at a commemoration of the 45th anniversary of Woodstock. When I asked him about his pay for these jobs, he said that if he made more than than \$100, he was satisfied. (I told him that was how much each musician earned for a weekend's performances when I had my band in the late '60s.)

Our morning conversations at the common table in the restaurant were almost always about jazz. He knew even more than I did about the great jazz era of the '50s and '60s, and had listened to, and loved, the same records that I had. Plus several other performers I had only heard the names of. I'm sure these intense exchanges — talking about jazz and classical music had always been one of the pleasures of my life — annoyed the waitresses and patrons, since they knew nothing about the subject matter, and couldn't have cared less. Unfortunately, he didn't have a computer, and hence had no access, via YouTube, to any recordings that he didn't happen to have in his own possession. In fact, I don't even think he had a record player. But he seemed to enjoy our conversations; he always had a big smile and shook hands when he arrived while I was waiting in line, or when I sat down at the community table, where he always sat. He always shook hands when he left.

Even though he had lived in this country for several decades, he retained his English accent. I asked him questions about British English, and told him that I think British pronunciations are much better than American ones. Surely *controversy* is much better than *controverisy*, and *contribute* is much better than *contribute*. I asked him to explain some of the expressions I heard in British detective series, e.g., *bob's your uncle*.

I told him how much I loved England and said, just kidding of course, that my greatest wish was to have an audience with the Queen. At first we discussed what I would have to do to achieve that. He said that if I gave her a champion racehorse, that would certainly help. Then I thought we should go over what I should and shouldn't say once I was in her presence.

I said, "How about, at the start, if I say something like, 'Your Majesty, I love the way you've done this room. It has such a nice ... regal ambience. Can you give me the name of your decorator?'" Probably should omit that.

I told him that I probably shouldn't consider the audience a *chat*. He, laughing, agreed. And that I should probably avoid slang terms, e.g., if we were discussing a policy matter that she hoped would be implemented, I shouldn't say something like, "Well, Your Majesty, all you have to do is get the Prime Minister to exert his influence in Parliament, and before you know it, bob's your uncle!" And I definitely shouldn't say, "Well, Your Majesty, I think that if you tell Parliament that if they get in bed with you on these matters that are of prime concern to you, then you'll be willing to get in bed with them on matters that are of prime concern to them."

And we agreed I should probably not say, "Your Majesty, I know I speak for the overwhelming majority of the American people when I say that, for us, the two crowning achievements of the British Empire over its long history are without question The Beatles and Monty Python." No, she might be miffed at my having left out a few things. .

We agreed that I definitely shouldn't say anything about Prince Philip, and that I certainly should not ask her how she could stay married to such an extremely conservative, boring man.

On a couple of occasions, he talked about his early life. He said he was half-Jewish and had been born in Folkestone, where his mother, then in her mid-nineties, still lived. "Kaffinetti" was his stage name. He had several relatives who were well-known in technical fields. One of them was Derek Piggott, a sailplane pilot then in his early nineties and still active. The name seemed familiar, so when I got home, I checked my sailplaning books, and found that one of them was Piggott's *Gliding: A Handbook on Soaring Flight*, which I had read during my sailplaning days.

As time went on, I became more and more aware of how much he talked, and at the time of this writing, I definitely put him in the category of non-stop talker. He was always delighted to have company for breakfast — he had met a couple, Martin and Maxine, in their sixties, who had come to hear a performance of his band in a local nightclub — and they began to join us for Sunday breakfast. They were both resuming an interest in jazz, he as piano player, she as bassist. I sent them several links to outstanding recordings on YouTube. But Dave's loud voice and guttural, always good-humored, laugh, meant that either one sat and listened to him, or else one tried to have a private conversation with the person sitting opposite at the table — for me, typically Maxine, while the other one, for example, her husband, simply sat and listened to Dave. He had a remarkable gift for being able to bring almost any subject around to himself, which eventually became tiring. And yet the three of us were fond of him. But I was always glad when the warm months came, because that meant he would play tennis before breakfast, and not come in until 8:45 or so, by which time the three of us could have had a nice conversation among ourselves.

The Most Perplexing Mathematical Problem I Ever Confronted

In March or April of 2015, I went to Fat Apples for a piece of apple pie and some tea. I had brought *The Princeton Companion to Mathematics* with me. I dug it out of my backpack, opened it to an arbitrary page. There I saw a paragraph which named two “non-constructive” proofs — that is, proofs that something exists, but that don’t reveal what that something is. There followed an example of the kind of problem that is solved by such a proof, namely, the problem of showing that there are *irrational* numbers a and b such that a^b is a *rational* number.

I made a note in the little notebook I always carried in my left shirt pocket, went home, added the example to one of my math essays, and then, a day or so later, wanted to copy down the names of the two proofs. But I realized that I had not entered in the notebook, the page number of the page, nor had I marked it with a piece of thick paper, as I routinely did articles I was reading in that book.

I then began the first of six, page-by-page searches through the 1,000 pages of the book. No sign of the page. On the third search, I found a paragraph on p. 157 that mentioned the a^b problem, but that did not mention the two proofs, so I knew that was not the original page I had accidentally turned to.

By this time, I had contacted an editor of the *Companion* and asked her if she could do a computer search. She said she would, but that she was leaving on vacation. More emails after she returned. Meantime, I found that an on-line search of the 2010 edition of the book I had the 2008 edition) was possible. I called a graduate student who I knew would be far more competent than me to do the search. He said the page didn’t turn up. He later did an online search of the three other math books I had been reading in at the time. No page.

I continued my page-by-page searches, eventually going through the book six times. The graduate student found another online copy of the book, and used a different search program. Still no sign of the page.

At the time of this writing, the page has not been found. Yet I remember distinctly the table I sat in at the restaurant, and that the paragraph was in the upper part of the left-hand column of a right-hand page, and that the book had a black cover, as the *Companion* has.

I am utterly, completely baffled as to what the answer is.

A Cancer Scare

In December, 2015, I went for my usual triannual teeth cleaning. But Rochelle, my regular (and beloved) hygienist was suffering from a spinal infection, and so I had a substitute, a bright Chinese woman. As a result of her natural Asian thoroughness, she observed a pimple on the center of the back of my tongue. She suggested that I have it looked at. So I called Dr. E-W at Kaiser, she took a look, and made an appointment with an Ear-Nose-Throat specialist. He said that pimples in that location are usually benign, but he recommended a biopsy. After he had taken the sample, I asked him what the treatment options were. He mentioned several therapies, but said that sometimes part or most of the tongue must be removed. I resolved then and there that if it came to that, I would end my life, just as I would if I ever became blind.

He asked me about my smoking habits, I told him I smoked two cigars a week. He nodded and suggested that maybe I should give them up.

Later that day, several lines came into my mind.

Cancer

This, too, is part of you,
The culmination of your days.
Make this stranger welcome,
Accept him for what he is.
He, too, has a life's calling,
He, too, wants to be noticed,
Even at your expense!
Be kind to him;
Like you he is only doing what he was meant to do.

I was remarkably calm during the days I waited for the result, mainly because I had the consolation of knowing I would end my life if worse came to worst.

On the day when the E-N-T specialist had said he would have the result, he called. I wasn't at home but he left a message: there was no sign of cancer.

I told friends that I was lucky this time, but one of these days, the news would not be good.

For several weeks, I didn't smoke any cigars. Then I had a few puffs each evening. Now I have a few puffs at noon and a few before the nightly BBC detective programs, for a total of two cigars a week.

The Struggle for Classical Music at Peet's Coffee

Next to Rick & Ann's restaurant, where I went for breakfast at least twice a week, there was a Peet's Coffee shop, one of a chain of these well-known coffee shops in Berkeley. Actually, its full name was "Peet's Coffee & Tea", Mr. Peet having been a Dutch coffee merchant who opened the first store back in 1966. I once dated a woman who had dated him. I asked her what kind of a guy he was. She said, "Rather serious." But his stores sold some of the best coffee available in the town. We heard that at one point he had become a member of the board of directors of Starbucks, a better-known competitive coffee franchise that we called "the Evil Empire". No one seemed to know why he had done that.

Our Sunday Morning Breakfast Club met at R & A's at around 7:45. I usually went to Peet's about half an hour early for a cup of coffee and some math study before the meeting. Maxine, one of our members, would then come over with a smile and a warm hello and a hug to tell me everyone had arrived at the restaurant.

In any case, when I ordered my coffee — a small or medium cup of dark roast, in a real cup — a white porcelain mug, not one of the wretched paper cups — and as I was paying, I would say, "And could you turn on the classical music?" Normally the background music was pop, which made studying math impossible for me.

The reply would sometimes be a smile and a "Sure!", but often it would be an apologetic, "I'm afraid I don't know how. I'll see if I can find somebody." And about 50% of the time she would manage to find someone who knew how.

I would tell her afterward that I had offered on several occasions to sit in on the training seminar, take notes, and write up the instructions so they could be posted next to the music-playing machine in the back room. I would tell her that I had worked for many years as a technical writer, so the management could be assured that I would do a good job. There would be no charge.

Then, one time, the manager heard my pitch and came over and said that one customer had asked for the classical to be turned off, because it was too slow and boring. He: “Don’t get me wrong. I like classical...” I thought, but didn’t say, “You stupid all-American dumb-shit. You like classical about as much as I like rock n roll.” Instead, I said that I would be glad to have the classical turned off if anyone made that request.

I must not fail to mention that the shop was within a mile of a world-class university (the University of California at Berkeley) which had, on its campus an internationally-known concert hall, namely, Zellerbach Hall. And yet, over the years, when I asked a server if anyone else asked for classical music, the answer was always no.

Eventually, I decided to contact corporate headquarters in Alameda. I explained in an email the situation, mentioning that at least one Peet’s store had no problem with turning on the classical whenever I asked for it (the store on the corner of College and Alcatraz), and that I had heard that Mr. Peet, in the early years of the store, required that classical be played at least 50% of the time. I got the usual formal courtesy reply. The months and years dragged on. Then a man named Joseph Piazza, with title Customer Experience Manager, made what seemed like sincere reply, and soon after, fewer servers said that they didn’t know how to turn on the classical.

In fact in 2017, one the servers — she had purple hair at the back of her head — turned on the classical as soon as I entered the shop! I would always thank her, and put a dollar bill in the tip jar, telling her it was for the music.

But then some of the servers developed a new tactic, namely, agreeing to turn on the classical, but setting the volume so low that it couldn’t be heard¹. I of course went to the counter and asked for the volume to be turned up. Sometimes there was half-hearted compliance, and during the moments when the conversation among the patrons was at a low ebb, one could just barely make out the sound of the music. (I should mention that one of the customers, a tennis coach with a pig-tail behind his bald head, who always wore shorts and liked to sit with his legs facing out where everyone could see them, was so loud, both in conversation and in laughter, that some patrons took their coffee outside to the little patio next to the shop. I detested the son-of-a-bitch. Someone told me he was from some Eastern European country bordering on the Adriatic.)

I would always go back and ask, humbly, apologetically, if it would be possible to turn the music up just loud enough so that it could be heard. One server, with visible annoyance, said that actually, the servers needed music with an “upbeat vibe” to accompany their work. I thought, but didn’t say, “You stupid bitch, the music is for the customers, not for the workers.” Later that day I wrote an email to Mr. Piazza, and thereafter, I never heard those words from a server. Furthermore, the volume thereafter was almost what it should have been.

“What If My Whole Life Has Been Wrong?”

In late November, 2006, I discovered a major flaw in one of my ideas regarding Fermat’s Last Theorem (FLT) It revealed quite clearly that the intuition underlying the FLT paper in the book I had published in 1985 was fundamentally hopeless. Faith in the validity of this intuition had been one of the things that kept me alive for 25 years. For days I tried to retrieve something from the idea, but was unable to.

In my desperation, I re-read Tolstoy’s story, “The Death of Ivan Ilych”, which is about the life

1. “...I was thinking of a plan/ to dye one’s whiskers green/Then always use so large a fan/ that they could not be seen.” — Lewis Carroll, the White Knight’s song, Chapter VIII, *Through the Looking Glass*

and death of a judge whose success was due largely to his having always done what was expected of him. Then, as he is dying of a terribly painful illness, he asks himself, “What if my whole life has been wrong?” I had asked the question, in one form or another, throughout my life, but now it seemed to demand an answer, even though I knew that Tolstoy had written the story after his conversion to a Buddhist-Christianity, and even though it is clear he felt that if Ivan Ilych had lived a spiritual life, he would not have asked the question in his final days — “Ivan Ilych’s life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible.” “But why”, I wondered, “should we believe that his life would have had meaning if, instead of adhering to bourgeois values, he had adhered to the values of this or that religious sect? If it is wrong to live one’s life conforming to others, then that applies to living one’s life conforming to the dictates of those who say that one must be true to oneself, one must believe in oneself, one must go one’s own way.” Or was Tolstoy saying that the judge should simply have “been himself”? But that is the view of the artist. Certainly the life of writing great novels is preferable to the life of working as a judge and doing what other people expect of you — if you prefer literature to the law and to the status that can bring. But suppose one is not an artist. I thought: “Just as, in the gambling casinos, they ring a bell whenever someone hits a jackpot on the slot machines, but never when someone *doesn’t* hit a jackpot, so we only hear about those who believed in themselves and accomplished something, never about those who believed in themselves and accomplished nothing.” I thought of English professors, those prestigious bureaucrats with lifetime guaranteed incomes, lecturing their students about the importance of intellectual and artistic courage and of going it alone. I thought of the hope pushers of our time, telling eager college-educated audiences during public television pledge drives, that they can have it all if only they will be true to themselves.

But when people like me find that their intuitions are worthless, life becomes a waste of breath.

I Should Have Stayed at Beckman Instruments

I could have faced the loss of 25 years’ work if I knew what I *should* have done with my life. I now think that my biggest mistake was leaving Beckman Instruments in the late sixties. At first, technical writing had been my loser’s solution to the problem of having no talent for technical subjects (especially engineering). I had told myself, “The reason I don’t understand this subject is that it is not clear! So I will devote my life to making difficult things clear!” And because I knew I had more writing skills than the vast majority of engineers, I also was able to believe, “Only *I* know how to make this clear!” In old age, I no longer have this self-abasing attitude regarding the task of presenting technical information. I think that task is of paramount importance because it relates directly to the efficiency with which technical work of any kind is done — especially operating a computer and solving problems in mathematics (including problems which are at the moment unsolved). To work on rectifying the things that profoundly trouble you is to live a meaningful life.

To this day, I believe that the book I wrote describing a new kind of technical documentation — one that enables users to find the instructions they need in a few seconds¹ — was an important book, though at this writing, some 14 years later, not a soul in the technical documentation community has tried to implement even the basic ideas.

Had I acknowledged to myself in 1968: (1) that in Manny Gordon I had the best boss I would

1. See “My First Book Published By a Real Publisher” in the second file of Vol. 4.

probably ever have; (2) that although my management work had become routine, and that at least one or two of my employees had hopes that I would leave so that they would have a chance at my job, that in no way required that I move on, the fact was that I was a good manager; in fact it would turn out that management was the only thing I was ever successful at; and (3) that I could pursue my interest in symbolic logic (see “A Seminar That Changed My Life” in the first chapter of Vol. 2) and then, later, in programming and mathematics, without having to be the slave of my vanity by becoming a programmer or getting another degree. Had I acknowledged these things, I would have been in a position, because I was a manager, to start implementing my early ideas regarding a much better way to write manuals and textbooks. I know that the book I wrote on a new way of doing technical documentation that enables users to find the instructions they need in a few seconds¹ is an important book, even though at this writing, some 14 years after the book’s publication, not a soul in the technical documentation community has tried to implement even the basic idea.

(The extraordinary difficulty of figuring out how to use the Thunderbird email facility as it existed in March, 2011, could have been vastly reduced using my documentation method. There was no question about it. A simple test could have justified my confidence:

(1) Create a portion of a Help system utilizing my method.

(2) Select two users at random from the set of users having the knowledge and ability assumed for all users.

(3) Select a task at random from among those in the portion of the Help system created by my method.

(4) Let one user use my Help system to find the instructions, let the other user use the existing Thunderbird Help system. Time how long it takes each user to get the instructions to perform the task. I have no hesitation in stating that the answer would be a few seconds for my Help system, and many minutes, if ever, using the Thunderbird Help system.

If I had stayed at Beckman, I would not have had to spend thirty years trying to convince insufferably dim technical writers that I had come up with an important idea (as late as 2007, a veteran technical writer asked me, in all seriousness, “Why would anyone want to be able to look up instructions in only a few seconds?”). I would have been in a position to say, “It will be tried *now*.”

On the other hand, staying at Beckman would have meant having to endure the cultural sterility of Palo Alto and the Peninsula, which may not have been all that bad compared to living among the lower class in South Berkeley, in a city run by corrupt politicians, and with the black problem always present.

A book derived from mine by another author applied the same ideas to mathematics and indeed all technical subjects. Using that book in my own studies convinced me, in old age, that I had made the right decision in staying out of the university, because the book made clear the inefficiency by which the university justified itself — the inefficiency of professors teaching courses instead of finding a way (that the book described) of enabling students to access far more quickly

1. See “My First Book Published By a Real Publisher” in the second file of Vol. 4.

the information they needed to solve problems — an inefficiency that the professors made the most of to justify their paychecks and tenure and exalted status (“without us, how could they learn?”). I could not have brought myself to work for an institution I had no respect for. But still, there were times when I couldn’t help thinking of the professor I might have been — imagining snow flakes falling outside the window of my elegant house in New England, my daughter home from college, my slender, gracious wife preparing dinner, I, a venerable, beloved professor at a nearby famous university...

I Should Have Stayed With Jazz

But then, looking back across the years, I thought: “I should have stayed with music — yes, even with Dixieland!” If I had had the courage of my convictions, I would have begun making a catalog of phrases in improvisations (the building blocks), and attempted to arrive at an answer that I could accept to the question that dogged me throughout my jazz career, namely, “What is improvisation?” I would have written down the phrases, just to see what they looked like on paper. Here as elsewhere, I could have refused to allow myself to be bullied by the prejudices of better musicians I played with, in particular, Heim. Make it your own! I could have made an all-out effort to play like Sidney De Paris — not to the exclusion of other styles, and by no means, because I should have, and could have, patiently learned the progressive idiom, meaning, in particular, the way the accents fell to get that old-time, but updated, Arban’s self-accompanying effect¹ (the effect that that so fascinated me). Nothing would have prevented me from getting a low-level job in industry — for example, technical writing — while I settled down to become a jazz musician on my own terms.

(I should remark in passing that, over the years, I often thought that if I had it all to do over again, I would have become a bass player. That was the only instrument I ever imagined myself being good at.)

I Should Have Been a Servant

And yet, when I watched a film about servants, for example, *Upstairs, Downstairs*, or *Remains of the Day*, or *Jeeves and Wooster*, I thought, “I should have been a servant!” It would have been the perfect job for one so desperate for approval as I was. I thought back to those days in my childhood when I imagined what it would be like to Be Perfect. (See first chapter of Vol. 1 under “The Two Dilemmas”.) If I had been a servant, every movement, every thought, every word I spoke throughout my life I could have made Perfect. There would have been a perfect intonation for saying “A gentleman to see you, sir. He did not give his name. He said he was a representative of Pendergast and Co.”

“Show him in.”

“Very good, sir.”

I would have had my little room, like Stevens, the head butler in *Remains of the Day*, where I would enjoy my cigar in the evening, and where I would have my few treasured books on a small bookshelf. My few clothes, no more than I needed, but always pressed, would hang in the closet. My recreations would be, say, a walk on the grounds of the estate and perhaps a trip to the nearby

1. Arban’s was the name of a standard book of exercises for trumpet players. One of the techniques it taught was how to play in a way that sounded as though the player were accompanying himself — as though two instruments, not one, were playing. This was done by accenting the notes of each melody and then playing a triplet, more softly, below each one (the accompaniment). The progressive jazz trumpet players made use of this technique in playing their solos, perhaps, in part, out of a droll sense of humor.

village to see a film on Saturday night. The Perfect Life, whose value would have been beyond question.

On the other hand, the truth is that the only times in my life when I was successful in a job was when I was a manager¹.

I Should Have Made My Life My Own

What neurotics like me fail to do all their lives is to make their lives their own.² Even when they attempt to do this they fail. They ask themselves, whether in words or feelings, “Am I making my life my own *in the right way*?” Certainly my lifelong ineptitude at using hand tools arose from my conviction that I could never use them in the right way. How much this conviction can be blamed on my father, the best craftsman I ever knew, is irrelevant. Similarly, in jazz the question for me was always, “Am I being original in the way that the best players would call ‘original?’” And similarly with writing. And with sex: “Am I performing the way the books say I should be? Am I pleasing her? Am I meeting her needs?” (A good motto for me, starting already in my early twenties, would have been, *I don't do needs.*)

Strangely enough, in mathematics the question whether I was being original in the proper way seldom occurred to me. There the question was, “Will I be able to convince mathematicians of my originality?”

I was going to say that being a servant is the opposite of what I am discussing here, but that is not true, since one can set out to make oneself into a servant that one knows is one of the best..

And what must be mentioned, too, is that in contemporary American culture, if you are deeply neurotic and failing at everything, you at least are never alone. An entire sub-culture exists to hold out the hope that your illness can be alleviated and to console you and explain why you are the way you are. When I observed my son, who was always thoroughly competent in the management of his life and in that of his family — a man who was not driven to thoughts of suicide at the prospect of having to plan a trip, or of buying a house, or maintaining it — and thought of myself being the same kind of man, the sense of loneliness convinced me: it's much better being a victim.

“Honor the Best That Is In You”

One night in February, 2018, I had a dream in which I was arguing with some people about a reason to live. At the point of breaking down, I suddenly blurted out to them, “*Honor the best that is in you!*”

I had not come across these words in waking life as far as I know, though I have to believe they have been uttered many times. If I had had that dream in my late teens, my life might have been different, although Michelle (whom I have written about elsewhere in this book, and who at the time I had known for some 38 years) said, when I told her of the words, “I think you do it every day.”

What Will Happen to This Life After I Die?

I began thinking of death even more than usual. I felt it coming toward me just a few days

1. See first file of Vol. 2 under “Beckman Instruments” and second file under “Working at Signetics”. Of course, my leading of various jazz groups as an undergraduate was also a form of management.

2. See the section, “Who Possesses My Experience?”, in my essay, “Psychology”, in *Thoughts and Visions*, on the web site www.thoughtsandvisions.com.

ahead. I became obsessed with questions like, “How do you get used to oblivion?” and “How will my familiar surroundings look to me after I am dead?” I didn’t mean, “How will they look to others?” because that question could have been answered by taking photographs of the scenes that were part of my daily life: the view of the back yard from my back porch as I had my morning coffee and a few puffs of my cigar; the always warm, inviting view of the living room, which, with housemates, I always called “the fireplace room”; the view of the neighbor’s trees through the window of my second-floor study. I meant, “How will my familiar surroundings look to me when I view them knowing I am dead?” Or not knowing.

I tried to imagine my world without me in it. (But that is the goal of Zen Buddhism: to live in the world without a sense of self.) Who will be climbing the stairs, contemplating suicide, when I am not here? What do you do to kill the time when you are dead? How can anyone possibly endure the *shame of being dead*, the shame of suddenly and forever no longer *paying attention*?

“I am not so much afraid of death, as ashamed thereof; ‘tis the very disgrace and ignominy of our natures.” — Sir Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*, section 40.

I thought: “I don’t remember my birth, and I probably won’t remember my death.”

I asked, like just about every human being who has ever lived, “What is death *like*?” I thought: “It is impossible that all this awareness — and this awareness of awareness, and awareness of that awareness, and ... — could suddenly disappear. Maybe it’s impossible to die if one is aware as I am!”

I thought, as I had throughout my life, “This was the worst life ever lived,” but immediately was ashamed for thinking it..

“The worst is not
So long as we can say, ‘This is the worst.’”

— Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act IV, sc. 1.

What Have I Accomplished?

Before I pull the trigger, I should certainly answer this question. One thing I know for certain is that if the time I have spent thinking about sex and suicide had instead been spent on thinking about something constructive, I might have accomplished something in this life. But, in any case, I and my ex-wife must count as an accomplishment the fact that we raised a son who has none of the mental ills of his father, and who seems a genuinely happy and admirable human being who has also achieved great success in his field. Certainly that must be counted as a major accomplishment. Second, I wrote six books that I am not ashamed of: this autobiography, the collection of essays, *Thoughts and Visions*, a book describing a way to create computer documentation so that users can find the instructions they want in only a few seconds, a book applying that idea to mathematics and technical subjects in general¹, a collection of papers on mathematics and computer science (I now believe I wasted thirty years on these papers and achieved nothing except to demonstrate the degree to which we can live in self-delusion when we are desperate), and a small collection of short short stories that achieved a goal I had since my teens.

These books were written in a prose style that I had aimed for, but had been unable to achieve, for forty years of my adult life.

1. I omit the titles of these books in order to maintain my anonymity.

And, I suppose, some will expect me to regard as an accomplishment the enduring of more than 70 years of an unbearable life. But those who are inclined to regard that as an accomplishment, implicitly assume that others will benefit from my experience. And, in fact, when I first set out to write this book, I had as one of my goals to write the book I wish I had stumbled upon when I was 18. But now I must say to the 18-year-old self who reads this book, “Don’t waste your life believing in yourself unless you have abundant evidence by the time you are 25 there is something worth believing in.”

Words of Wisdom

Old people are sometimes asked, usually as a joke, whether they have any words of wisdom about life. If anyone were to ask me, I would reply unhesitatingly that the single most important thing is to *get through*. Get through the boredom of the classroom, the terror of exams, the battles with at least one of your parents, then the shame and self-contempt of acne, the boredom and terror of college, the self-hate of not measuring up on the job, and the series of crushing defeats that will greet your every effort at doing something you regard as important. Get through the unbearable anxiety of courtship and marriage, and the morbid fear of going to the dentist, then the despair of divorce and aging, the agony of rejections by women, then the pain and fear of the final months, weeks, days of your terminal illness. Just *get through*.

The Future

Old men are sometimes asked for their views about the future. I am afraid that mine are deeply pessimistic.

I am pessimistic about the Third World — outside of China, Japan, South Korea, and perhaps India — ever confronting the single major cause of its problems, namely, population growth. The Third World will continue to produce babies without limit while coming with outstretched hand to the West, begging for help, and the West — at least Western politicians — will, as usual, prefer popularity to the risk of the unpopularity that might result from speaking the hard truth. As this is written (July 2005), two rock ’n roll stars have managed to convince world leaders that what Africa needs is another \$50 billion dollars in aid. These deep thinkers from that citadel of profound thought about world problems, the entertainment industry, apparently have no idea that the West has already poured more than \$500 billion¹ into that wretched continent and gotten nothing but corrupt regimes and poverty and disease and civil war in return. Can anyone with the slightest intelligence seriously believe that if, tomorrow, AIDS were completely eradicated from the whole of Africa, the poverty would decrease and African governments would become responsible? What is needed in Africa and throughout the Third World is what is most difficult and unpleasant to promote: a change in culture, in particular, a change in the culture of having as many babies as possible and then blaming the West for the consequences.

I am pessimistic about our chances of defeating the Muslim fanatics who are trying to destroy our civilization.

“I hope you good, loyal Americans understand that in the long run the Islamist extremists are going to win. Because you can’t beat numbers, and you can’t beat fanaticism — the willingness

1. Total external debt as of 2003 is close to twice that figure. (Wikipedia)

to die for an idea.

“A country like ours, preoccupied with Jet Skis, off-road vehicles, snowboards, Jacuzzis, microwave ovens, pornography, lap dances, massage parlors, escort services, panty liners, penis enhancement, tummy tucks, thongs and Odor Eaters doesn’t have a prayer — not even a good, old-fashioned Christian prayer — against a billion fanatics who hate that country, detest its materialism and have nothing really to lose.” — George Carlin

I believe that we *could* defeat them if we were capable of realizing that to win a war, major sacrifices must be made — most of all, sacrifices in vanity, including:

the vanity of believing that the war can be won without major sacrifices;

the vanity of believing that with “understanding and forgiveness” we will be able to overcome the enemy;

the vanity of believing that we need not give up any of our freedoms in order to overcome the enemy;

the vanity of believing that a press that does the enemy’s research for it, free of charge, by consistently revealing all the weak points in our national defense, is a good thing;

the vanity of believing that wide-open immigration can only benefit our country;

the vanity of believing that huge bureaucratic intelligence systems run by mediocrities are all we need to protect us from terrorist attacks;

the vanity of believing that God is on our side, and will ensure our victory as long as we continue to believe in him and obey him.

As has been pointed out countless times to no avail, chief among the sacrifices we should be making is in our use of oil. Yet the only (modest) reduction in Americans’ purchase of gas-guzzlers came about through the increase in the price of gas, even though numerous writers had pointed out that every gallon of gas that Americans bought helped fund the terrorists. A nation that is perfectly willing to fund its enemy’s war effort is a nation doomed to defeat.

Although I have the highest admiration for Tom Friedman¹, I think he is dead wrong in his belief that we should keep our doors open to the Third World, in particular, to students from the Middle East. It only takes one or two Al Qaeda undercover agents posing as PhD candidates, plus a few underlings, to create a bomb that could devastate New York City. The case of Aafia Siddiqui proves my point. She was a Pakistani woman who had graduated from MIT and who held a PhD in neuroscience from Brandeis University. When she was arrested in July, 2008, she was found to be carrying maps of New York City, including the subway system, and extensive information on explosives and biological weapons, plus computer links to other terrorist cells in the U.S. She was considered the most important Al-Qaeda capture in five years.

Further reinforcing my point is the case of Najibullah Zazi, an Afghan immigrant (though not a student) living in Denver, CO., who in Sept., 2009 was arrested for being at the center of a bomb plot that would have been, according to experts, the deadliest terrorist attack on the U.S. since 9/11. And also the case of Hasam Maher Hussein Smadi, a 19-year-old Jordanian who tried to blow up a downtown Dallas skyscraper. Fortunately, an FBI agent had posed as an accomplice and made sure that the explosive device did not work.

Reinforcing my point still further is the case of Khalid Ali-M Aldawsari, a business student from Saudi Arabia, who on Feb. 23, 2011 was arrested in Texas, accused of buying chemicals and equipment to build a weapon of mass destruction.

1. *New York Times* columnist and author of *The Earth Is Flat* and other books

The question I ask Tom Friedman to ask himself is: suppose one of these students, or graduates, or other immigrants from the Middle East were able to set off a bomb in New York City: would you still believe it was a good idea to keep our doors open to Third World immigrants? Would you seriously argue that the cost of closing those doors would have been greater than the deaths of thousands or hundreds of thousands of New York residents?

I believe that reason demands that we reduce as much as possible the chances for Al-Qaeda agents to enter this country. The wonderful tolerance practiced by many Western European countries likewise must go. (You would think that by now, these countries would have learned their lesson: they were sound asleep up to 1914 and as a consequence suffered terrible losses in World War I; yet by 1925, they had returned to their slumbers, until the Germans again awakened them and caused far greater suffering than they had endured in World War I. Surely that would have been sufficient to keep them alert forever after!. But as soon as the Cold War was over, they returned to their sleep again, allowing the menace of Islam — which may turn out to be the greatest menace of all — to take root and multiply within their very borders.)

Zero immigration quotas for Muslim countries are essential, and to those Muslims who are already within the country's borders, a clear and simple message must be sent: if you disrupt our way of life, if you murder people who disagree with you, if you commit crimes on the grounds that we do not give you enough money and food, if you plot to overthrow our government, you will go to jail for a very long time or else we will send you back to the countries you or your parents came from. No excuses, no exceptions. If you refuse to learn how to earn a living in our country, you will receive no aid from us. You and your children can starve. We did not ask you to come here.

The goal should be nothing less than to make Europe and the U.S. the last place any Muslim would want to live.

To summarize: there is no hope (none) of a country defeating its mortal enemy if: (1) the enemy is invited to live within the country's borders and to openly advocate the destruction of the country, and to recruit fighters in the country for this purpose; (2) the country makes a point of routinely publicizing all the weaknesses in its defensive measures against the enemy; (3) the citizens of the country insist on making no reduction in their financial contributions to the enemy (which is precisely what they do every time they buy a gallon of gas).

As far as global warming is concerned, I don't see how any rational person who is capable of facing the facts can have any real hope that the problem will be solved before the planet is changed forever. It is conceivable (we don't know if it is possible) that someone might find a way to remove carbon dioxide from the air and sequester it, or that someone will find a way to make fusion power actually work on a commercial scale, but to be optimistic about the future of the planet on this basis is to be foolish indeed. If the world were full of Scandinavians, I would be capable of believing we have a chance, but it is not.

For all these reasons, I believe the future is very bleak indeed.

“Two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity; and I'm not sure about the universe.” — Albert Einstein

I want to conclude this section with a description of an image that more and more haunts my mind. In one of the documentaries about WW II in the Pacific, there is shown, I think after the

battle of Okinawa, an infant sitting outside the cave where he and his family had been hiding during the endless bombardment. He is covered in near-white dust, and he sits, not crying, just looking straight ahead, his little hands out in front of him, his entire body trembling — shaking — uncontrollably. I try to imagine the days of unending, terrifying noise, the screams of others in the cave, his mother's obvious fear and trembling as she tried to comfort him (if she was still alive), the choking dust in the air, the unexplainable never-ending horrible noise.

If you can look at that image, knowing that far worse happened to many thousands of infants during that war — if you have read the history of the 20th century — if you have read a history of capital punishment and torture, then it seems to me impossible for you, if you regard yourself as a humane and intelligent person, not to reach the conclusion that I did many years ago, namely, that the human race must be ended — not destroyed, but ended, by attrition, as a result of an ever-increasing number of people realizing that otherwise there will be no end to the appalling misery that has been the lot of the overwhelming majority of human beings throughout time.

Preparing for Death

At 73½ I was still in good health. I noticed no significant deterioration in my mental abilities (which had never been very good to begin with), apart from an increased tendency to forget names. (In keeping with my theory of how to slow loss of memory, I always looked up anything I realized I had forgotten — names, dates, titles of works, lines of poems, minor mathematical facts — no matter how much of a nuisance it was.) I remained slow in learning, as always. I spent part of each day anguishing over the amount of stuff my son would have to dispose of after my death. In my mind, I fought for each additional square foot it would take to store what I wanted preserved. Would he give me ten by ten feet in a storage unit? ten by twelve? We imagine that all the things we love will become part of our children's house, but that is not so, and in the modern age, many people say we have no right to expect it.

As I walked around my house, I asked myself, "Is the heart attack going to happen ... *now*? The answer seemed to be no. "How about...*now*?" Again, no. "But wait: surely it will happen now that I am beginning to think it won't happen!" And similarly for The Big One (there seemed to be an increasing frequency of news items on TV predicting that the Big One would occur on the Hayward Fault, which was only a couple of miles from my house.) "Is the Big One about to happen ... *now*? No. "Was the ground starting to shake? Is this it? Will both my consultants and my book designer be killed? (Then all will be lost.)" And similarly with the computer. Each morning as I pressed the start button, I knew that the hard-drive crash could easily occur. Then weeks of anguish while a consultant bought a new hard-drive and installed my software (my wretched word-processor, FrameMaker 11, and my wretched email facility, CompuServe or, later, Thunderbird and then Outlook).

If you're old, prepare for death —
For breathing your last breath.
Do not ask "Why me?"
It simply has to be:
It's one of nature's laws
And they have no "because".
If you're old, prepare for death — ...

Last Wishes

I have three last wishes: the first is that, when I am told I have a terminal illness and that the doctors may not be able to control the pain in the final stages, I have the courage to keep my long-overdue appointment with a bullet to the head.

The second is that there be no afterlife. But if there is, and if it consists in my being reincarnated, then I ask that I come back as the bass parts in all the works of Bach.

My third wish is that whenever someone begins to talk about the importance of believing in oneself, of going it alone, of persevering, with the always-present implication of the inevitability of happy endings, — in short, whenever someone begins to talk about the value of the religion of achievement — someone else will tell them about my life.