

## Georgia

I want now to talk about a woman who, with her husband, came to represent for me everything I despised about academics. Ironically, she was a leading force behind an organization devoted to independent scholars, that is, scholars working outside the university.

I contacted her in the mid-eighties after hearing of her newly-formed organization. I think we first met over dinner at the Bateau Ivre, in Berkeley. She was then in her late forties or early fifties, a tall, thin woman with glasses, a ready smile, and a manner that indicated she delighted in being in on anything potentially important pertaining to the scholarly life. She was friendly, and always seemed to be up on things you had barely heard about. You might raise a fairly obvious point about the difficulties of being an independent scholar, and she would have a couple of stories to prove just how bad it can be: she would tell of an eighty-year-old woman who had survived the concentration camps, and had written a memoir about her youth, but the publishers had been dragging their feet for years about publishing it. And there was a woman who had been working for decades on a history of something or other European, and still could not find a publisher, probably because — and then she would give some reason having to do with the arcane politics of this or that academic specialty. She once told me about the custom in French universities of a professor taking credit for the work of a subordinate — for years — until he felt the subordinate had earned the right to receive credit on his or her own. I was appalled, but she seemed to accept it, with a resigned laugh.

She herself had a PhD in art history, and had just missed getting tenure at Mills College, due, she said, to unforgivable behind-the-scenes politicking by another woman whom she regarded as obviously her inferior. After that, she had given occasional art history courses at Stanford and at UC Berkeley, but had given up further pursuit of tenure anywhere. Which by no means kept her out of academic life, since she was married to David — , a long-time professor of art history at — University. She had cultivated the academic sniff, although in her case it was closer to the academic snort. It was typically employed when she was describing the foibles of one of the experts in her field. She would call anything she didn't understand, and didn't believe it was important to understand, "a bunch of hoo-haw."

For a reason I never understood, at one point in her life she decided to get an MBA, and had actually taken a course in calculus. She always made it clear that she regarded the course as rather silly, another bit of foolishness on the part of academics who manage to get into positions of authority, and so it was clear she didn't blame herself for her complete perplexity about the material. She dismissed it all with a snort and a laugh.

She had been born and raised in the Midwest. Her father, who was Jewish, had been a doctor. Her mother, a lifelong depressive, eventually committed suicide. Her brother was a recovering alcoholic who worked in some sort of public service job.

She and her husband lived in a modest three-bedroom white house on Vicente Rd. in the Berkeley/Oakland Hills. It was perched over the wooded dry creek bed that ran down the Hills to Tunnel Rd. The neighborhood was an enclave for upper-class professionals of Berkeley, including academics and members of the university staff who had bought when prices were much lower. But also financiers lived there, building ever bigger additions on to their houses, and even a woman FBI agent, who lived a few doors up from Georgia.

Her marriage was apparently emotionally barren. She had no hesitation talking about David's lack of interest in her projects, his lack of physical affection for her. The first time I met him, I immediately detested him. She had invited me to the house. I remember it was a rather gray afternoon. He was working at a table near the window in one room, his back to the door.

We entered, she said, “David, I would like you to meet a friend of mine. This is John.” Without turning in his chair, without lifting his eyes from his work, he said something like, “Oh? Well...” She attempted to cover his rudeness with some words — I don’t remember if they were about me or about him — but we soon left the room.

Over the years, I heard more about the rudeness, the inconsiderateness, and the intolerance of this son-of-a-bitch, and on one other occasion, confronted it first-hand again.

He was a reasonably good-looking man in his sixties, with close-cropped gray hair, and spoke with a deep, well-modulated academic voice that always seemed to me affected. He called his wife “my dear”, though he was cold as a fish toward her and their daughter. Among his eccentricities, as told to me by Georgia over the years: he saved newspapers, rolling them up for use as logs, in order to avoid the expense of buying firewood. But he never built a fire. He spent months at a time in Europe doing research (I believe his primary specialty was coins of the early Christian era). But he never went to a good restaurant over there, preferring instead to live on canned peas, peanut butter sandwiches, and the like. He refused to pay his income tax, or at least to pay the amount that the government wanted, and so was in a long-running battle with the IRS, with the result that each year he owed more and more in penalties, thus completely defeating his original goal of saving money.

In addition to courses in the history of art, he also had to teach a course in photography and film once in a while. Georgia said he was a good teacher. I found that hard to believe. She said that he had long ago decided that no film of importance had been made (in the world!) after 1952. She didn’t know how he had arrived at that particular year. (I thought to myself: And mothers and fathers of the middle class scrimp and save so they can send their children to be educated by fools like this!)

He was at war with the University as well, and was apparently disliked, if not actually detested, by most of his colleagues. For years, the University had been attempting to force him to retire. One ploy they used was moving him to smaller and smaller offices. But he refused to leave.

He had studied nuclear physics before turning to art history, and would imagine he was impressing dinner guests who just happened to be current in the subject by showing off his 50-year-old knowledge. He refused to accept their attempted corrections and updating of his knowledge. If they persisted, they were never invited back.

On her walks, Georgia frequently ran into two retired professors, one of physics, the other of mathematics. She suggested to her husband that they invite the two over for dinner. He said he would have to think about it. He then looked them up in one of the Who’s Whos, checked their degrees (and, in particular, the schools where they got them), and their lists of publications, and then reluctantly decided it would be OK.

She told me about an old friend of hers, an art historian with a PhD, and a list of publications, who after retirement was forced to work in an office. When she told David, he thereafter refused to have the woman in his house any more, since she had now become a mere “noodge”.

Both his parents had been academics: maybe that explains some of his behavior. I believe one of them had been a professor at Harvard.

They had a daughter, Beth, tall and thin like her mother, who was in high school when I first knew Georgia. When Beth decided that she wanted to go to a small liberal arts college in the Midwest instead of Harvard, as her father wished, and she stuck to her decision, he disinherited her.

Over the years, I gathered that the reason Georgia stayed with him was simply that a divorce would have forced her to move out of the Hills and give up her connection to the academic life, which she needed.

I think already when Beth was in high school, her mother sensed that Beth might have lesbian tendencies. By the time she was out of college, it was clear she did. When she moved in with a woman in the mid-West, and finally came out to her father, he refused to believe her. For several years he refused to meet her partner.

The Berkeley/Oakland Hills Fire in 1991 was, in the short run, a disaster for them, but in the long run, it was a boon. The fire destroyed their house in less than 45 minutes. Georgia managed to save a few pictures and manuscripts, but that was all. David was in Europe at the time. He lost some 40,000-50,000 slides of coins and other works of art that he had accumulated over the course of a lifetime. But Georgia said that when he came back and viewed the ashes of his house, and the burned-out hulk of one of the family cars, his first question, uttered in absolute seriousness, was “There was a small air pressure gauge in the glove compartment. Did you manage to save it?”

The insurance company wrote them a blank check to rebuild the house. Georgia hired an architect and worked with him to design what in essence was a house for two people who hate each other. While the design and then the construction was going on, she lived in a little townhouse at 2312 Blake St., a few blocks west of Telegraph Ave. in South Berkeley. This was by no means an upper-class area, or even an upper-middle-class area, and yet she never complained. She was burglarized at least once, and saw the burglar, a black, escaping over the railing of the deck on the back of the house. I think her husband lived there, too, but I don't recall ever seeing him.

The new house, after much discussion with the architect, whom she thought highly of, was eventually completed. In certain aspects of the floor plan — relative location of the kitchen, the fireplace, the living room — it had a vague resemblance to the old house, but beyond that it was all new: it had beautiful dark wood throughout the interior, the roof beams visible. The roof itself was a warm, terra-cotta Spanish tile. When you entered, the dining room — or rather dining area, since there was no wall between living room and dining room — with table and chairs lined up, was straight ahead, marked by several square, wooden pillars. On the left was the kitchen. To the right of the dining room were stairs going down to the lower floor, which had Georgia's studio, and a small bedroom where we once or twice watched a video on a set with a microscopic screen when the set upstairs wasn't working. There was also a storage area. The living room — or really, living room area — had a large, comfortable sofa and a few chairs and a huge fireplace in which, as far as I know, to this day there has never been a fire, although it has gas logs. The warmest, most inviting room in the house was unquestionably the kitchen, which opened on the far side onto a patio that Georgia had had landscaped with plants and a few trees. Vicente Rd. was above, behind a bushy hedge. Straight ahead was a beautiful view down the valley, the creek bed having within a few years after the fire already become overgrown with greenery and new trees.

To the right of the stairs leading down to her studio was a small door which led to a narrow room lined with books. On the left of it was a bed barely wide enough for one person. On the right, a hot plate. There was a private entrance on the other end of the room. This was her husband's room when he wasn't traveling. There was a two-car garage to the right of his room.

In 2006, I strongly suspect the house would have sold for \$3 million.

Georgia had a black Lab retriever named Molly, a big, floppy-eared, good-natured old dog who, when you knocked at the front door, would come bounding up to it on the other side, nails clacking and sliding on the polished wooden floor, and bark until she had checked you out and Georgia had assured her you were all right. She took the dog for a walk every day, either in the Vicente neighborhood or up on the firetrail in the hills above campus. Sometimes I would go with her. But you couldn't say things like, "Shall we go for a walk?" when Molly was around, because she knew the word and would immediately start jumping excitedly and barking. So we had to say, "Shall we go for a *w, a, l, k?*" or "Do you think *M, o, l, l, y* would like to go for a *w, a, l, k?*" This left the option of deciding not to go on the walk right away. Molly liked to romp in any stream that they happened to come across, and drink the water, which got her into trouble a few times. In her old age, however, she developed arthritis, and so her walks grew increasingly short. When she died, Georgia got another dog, also a Lab, I think, which she named "Shadow".

Like many of the wealthy liberals in the Hills, she was often an appalling hypocrite. After the house had been rebuilt, she and her husband were probably worth — with their stocks and bonds, and the capital value of his pension<sup>1</sup> — at least \$5 million. Yet when I mentioned wine for a dinner, she would sometimes say that all they could afford was Wine-In-a-Box (which typically cost around \$1.98 then), so she would appreciate any decent wine I could bring.

Their daughter carried on the tradition. On a trip to Europe, which she supposedly was forced to make on a shoestring, she had to spend a night in London. Her mother asked me if there was any chance that Jeff could put her up, since he was then living and working in that city. I contacted him, he said he would be glad to, and he not only gave her a place to stay at no charge, but also took her out to dinner. As he told me later, as soon as she found out what he did for a living, she began lecturing him on the evils of capitalism. He told me in no uncertain terms never again to ask him to do any favors for her.

Georgia said that she had had a couple of lesbian relationships in her life, but I sensed that she enjoyed my company, and that if I failed to give her a welcoming hug, and a parting hug, she was disappointed. But I felt no sexual attraction for her.

She was an excellent cook, and she made it clear she enjoyed having me over for dinner (her husband was never around) not the least reason being that her husband, she said, never had the slightest appreciation, never offered a single word of praise, for her cooking. Since we both liked seafood, and in particular, oysters, we would go to Gertie's Chesapeake Bay seafood restaurant in Berkeley when it was still in existence. Then, she suggested we buy oysters for ourselves. She would come over to my house with a bag-full she had bought at Berkeley Bowl, bringing her two oyster knives and two thick padded mittens. It took hard work and physical strength and some investigation as to where to insert the knife. She had none of the three and so each time she would soon begin fuming over her lack of success, and I wound up opening most of them. I would previously have bought a bottle of Vouvray or Muscadet. After we had finished the oysters, she would unwrap a container of soup she had prepared, put it on my primitive gas stove, and when it

---

1. To determine the capital value of a pension, or Social Security, or any regular income whose principal you don't own, simply divide the yearly amount by the percentage rate, expressed as a decimal, you are earning on your current, conservative investments. The result is the capital value of the regular income. Thus, the capital value of a Social Security income of \$15,000 a year to a person whose conservative investments are returning, say, 5%, is \$300,000.

was ready, we would go into the living room and sit in front of the fire and enjoy this second course. Usually, we would watch a video afterward.

She had an enormous TV set, but she didn't know how to operate it, so it was always questionable if we would actually be able to watch the video that I brought when we had dinner at her house. One evening her thrashing with it got on my nerves more than usual. I controlled my temper, asked her if she had a manual. Yes..., no..., she wasn't sure. The set used to work when she did thus-and-so, but now it didn't. I asked her for a pencil and paper so we could keep a record of what we did and what happened. No, it should work, let's see, if I press this... I asked her if there was anyone we could call. Yes, but not at that hour. On it went. I was rapidly losing respect for this woman with a PhD who had taught at Mills, UC Berkeley, and Stanford and yet hadn't the vaguest idea of how to approach a problem rationally.

One evening I brought the French film *Camille Claudel*, a film I had recommended we watch because, first of all, I considered it outstanding in itself, and second, because I thought she would be interested in it since it had to do with her field, art history. Things went well enough until one scene, I can no longer remember which one, when she suddenly let out a shout of scorn over some incorrect historical detail. I tried not to pay too much attention, but she wouldn't let up. How could we watch a film that contained such an appalling error in historical fact? I tried to point up the many good points of the film, but it was no good. I left disgusted.

Then, one evening as she arrived at my house and was parking her car, I told I had picked up a new book by Lester Thurow, the MIT economist (*The Future of Capitalism*, 1996). She asked me what he said. I gave her a brief description of one point he made. She immediately dismissed it, called it stupid, or nonsense, or some such. I was appalled, not at her opinion, but at her lack of thought before making a criticism.

Later, I mentioned that I had bought James Howard Kunstler's book *Home from Nowhere*, and had found some of the ideas about the New Urbanism to be very interesting. She asked me what they were. I told her. She immediately dismissed the book, again without having read a word of it, repeatedly calling Kunstler "stupid". That did it. The next day I wrote her the following letter.

Nov. 20, 1996

Dear Georgia:

Because we have been friends for a long time, I am going to speak bluntly. I am calling a halt to our relationship, starting now. The reason, as you can probably guess, is your latest rant about a book or film I recommended to you.

The truth is, dear girl, that you don't know how to *think*, and as a result, you don't know how to carry on a discussion in which you disagree with the other person.

Among other things, thinking means the ability to separate *form* from *substance* (syntax from semantics). One of your major criticisms of Kunstler seems to be that "he can't write". The proper response to that is, "So what?" (Actually, I think the real problem is that you can't read, that is, you can only understand a limited set of styles. Beyond those, you're lost.) In a book like Kunstler's, the important question is, "What is he saying", and not, "How well does he say it?" But unfortunately, that high-class liberal arts education of yours never managed to convey to you and your fellow-students the importance of this difference. I doubt if it *can* be conveyed without the students also studying a little math and physics. As a result, the students — even those who become professors — go through life forever assuming that a neces-

sary condition of truth is excellence of expression in the currently most prestigious writing style. Nothing could be further from the truth (if you'll pardon the expression).

Another thing that thinking means is the ability to recognize when one does not know something — or, more precisely, the ability to recognize the degree to which one does not know something. You keep making these snap judgments whenever you sense that someone is wrong as far as you are concerned: snap judgments about what Kunstler is saying about cities, about the deliberateness with which General Motors pursued the goal of making America dependent on the automobile. I was appalled, several months ago, at the way you criticized some of Thurow's arguments when I showed you his book. Here is a man who is a nationally-respected economist, a professor at our most important engineering and scientific institution (MIT), a man who undoubtedly knows more mathematics than you have even the vaguest idea of, and yet there is Georgia, in the space of a few seconds or minutes, dismissing him as a fool, just as today you repeatedly dismissed Kunstler as "stupid".

Doesn't this kind of shallowness bother you? Doesn't it bother you never to ask yourself those crucially important questions like, "Why do I believe this is true?", "What evidence would I accept that I am wrong?", "Where exactly do I differ from y on this point, and what are the possible ways of settling this difference?"

What the hell good is all that education and knowledge (I am certainly not disputing the extent of your knowledge in certain subject areas) if you can't *think*? You can't even think straight about mundane problems like getting your VCR to work. Instead of proceeding systematically — beginning by following the manual and writing down what happens each step of the way, then trying alternatives and writing down the results, then, if it still doesn't work, calling a knowledgeable person and reading them the data you have collected, and if it does work, saving the data for next time — instead, we have Georgia thrashing and scrambling and cursing the TV and VCR every time we want to watch a film. (The question is *not*: Can you get the VCR to work or not? (I was unable to, as you know). The question is, Do you know how to proceed to solve a problem like this, regardless of how much or how little you know about the equipment?)

Well, enough said. I want you to know that none of my criticisms in any way diminishes my gratitude to you for all the wonderful dinners you have cooked for me, and it in no way diminishes my memory of the restaurant dinners we have enjoyed, and the films and the walks. This seems to be the year in which I break with old friends. Very sad but, I feel, necessary when I can no longer respect my friends' behavior in certain important areas.

I wish you all the best.

Sincerely,

P.S. Please drop off my cigar cutter as soon as is convenient. Thanks.

A week or so later she called me, asked if there wasn't some way we could resume our friendship. I was flattered, but not particularly enthusiastic, since she didn't give the slightest indication she had understood my letter, much less had decided to try to change some of her behavior. So I said that tentatively we could resume our get-togethers, but I would have to insist on no more tantrums about her TV set, no more nastiness about the films we saw, regardless if they conformed or

didn't conform to her view of art history. (Actually, I think I insisted on no more films about artists.)

Our friendship continued for several years. She made two videotapes about Gothic cathedrals which I thought quite good, although she ignored my advice to include clear drawings to illustrate what the narrator merely described in words regarding stresses in the cathedral structures. She then began working on a book about a man who had lived through the French Revolution, and had kept a diary, written in code. I noticed a trait in her that I saw again in a woman philosopher in her Independent Scholars organization who read several of my philosophy essays in the early 2000s. The philosopher was much brighter than Georgia, but like Georgia she seemed to have a genuine abhorrence of summarizing, of making clear, anything difficult she was working on. In Georgia's case, I got the clear impression that she felt that if she made it easy to understand the cathedral structures, why, then all her work would have been in vain! No one would consider her exceptional, no one would believe she had knowledge that virtually no one outside a select group of academics could acquire! Similarly, when I asked basic questions about the diarist, she made it clear that such simple questions could not be asked about such a difficult subject. Or, when I inserted some of my very limited knowledge of the French Revolution into something I was saying, she made it clear that my knowledge was wrong, or out of date, or at least not sufficiently detailed. The point was always to disagree with whomever you were talking to about an academic subject, because to agree was to be weak. The philosophy professor, one of whose fields of interest was philosophy of mathematics, likewise always gave me the impression that to make understandable the broad outlines of an idea underlying a paper she had written, was to give away the game, was to give up being special! In both women, I attributed the reason for this behavior to be that, as women in the academy — still a rare breed — they felt instinctively that they had to protect their hard-won positions, and the best way to do that (as the men knew practically from the beginning of time) was always to be difficult to understand.

On at least one occasion, I turned down her invitation to have Thanksgiving dinner with her and her friend Marian, a warm, very interesting woman who was also a gifted interior decorator<sup>1</sup>, because Georgia's husband would be there. When I told her my reason, she laughed and said that my reaction wasn't unusual, and was why "David has no friends."

We continued to get together at my house for oysters and soup and a video. On one of the occasions, the subject of George W. Bush came up. She said, with a contemptuous laugh, that the only difference between Bush and Saddam Hussein was that Bush had to operate in a democratic society. That did it. Several days later, on Oct. 8, 2002, I wrote her the following email, even though she apparently regretted her remark, and had tried to reach me by phone.

Dear Georgia,

First of all, let me assure you that I wasn't screening calls yesterday afternoon: that is not possible, as far as I know, with Pac Bell voice mail. I had an important email to finish and

---

1. With her meager income, she supported an alcoholic husband who had been an architect, but who had not been a good businessman. On one occasion, he did an extensive project in southern California for an Arab sheik without first doing a little research on such clients. The Arab then decided not to pay him, or at least to pay him in his own good time. Her husband sent several letters but was soon made to understand that in general it is not wise to dun a wealthy Arab.

send off to a math professor, hence my declining to talk.

Now as to our current situation: I am sure that you understand that I was, and still am, angry at your remarks during our discussion of Bush and his Iraq policy, in particular, your calling Bush “no different from Saddam except that he has to answer to voters”.

Not only did I find this and similar remarks offensive — Bush has not gassed his own people, he does not torture the children of prisoners in the presence of their parents, he does not execute those who disagree with him — but I found your remarks yet another proof that you simply cannot think, and that you don’t understand what a rational discussion is.

As I have said many times, it is NOT a question of our agreeing or not agreeing on political matters. One of my closest friends is far more to the right than you are to the left, and yet even though he and I disagree on a number of fundamental issues, in the course of some twenty years he has never failed to observe the rules of rational discussion. The reason is that, unlike you, he understands the difference between a statement and a metaphor, he understands basic logic, he knows the importance of evidence, he knows that there is nothing shameful about saying “I don’t know”, “I’m not sure”, “I was wrong” — phrases I don’t think I have ever heard you utter since I have known you.

Prior to writing this, I went back and read the letter I sent you in November 1996. What precipitated that one was your shoot-from-the-hip condemnation of James Kunstler’s latest book on architecture, and, in particular, your repeatedly calling him “stupid”. Prior to that, you had dismissed Lester Thurow’s latest book on economics with equally strong language. You had read neither book, and fired off your judgments on the basis of my sketch of some of the ideas in each.

The physicist Richard Feynman used to call liberal arts professors, “dopes”, and when I first read that, I thought it was a bit excessive, but now I don’t, one reason being my acquaintance with liberal arts professors over the years. In one of our conversations years ago, you told me in no uncertain terms that, at one of the schools you attended (I don’t remember if this was in your undergraduate or graduate years), you and your fellow students had to LEARN TO THINK. When I asked what exactly that meant, you revealed that it meant writing a paper a week and having the paper critiqued by ... Harvard professors! Wow. Unfortunately (as I tried to explain to you in my Nov. 1996 letter) writing style has nothing to do with truth, a fact that you still do not understand, but which reveals all-too-clearly your liberal arts naivete.

A verse comes to mind:

“Year by year, as you go through college,  
Beware all art that claims to be knowledge.”

I think that the fact that there is no way of judging who is right and who is wrong in the liberal arts accounts for the insufferable negativity which is part of the stock-in-trade of being a liberal arts academic, and which you practice so well. (“Nothing satisfies her: why, what a brilliant person she must be!”) I saw it again in an architecture professor I met several months ago. She had not one good word to say about any architect of the past 150 years. She remains the only person, architect or otherwise, I have met who has no praise for Cynthia Ripley’s superb restoration of the Berkeley Main Library. Yet her own work, at least what I saw of it, is mediocre when it isn’t eccentric.

A conversation with you is very seldom an exchange of thoughts, opinions, ideas. It is an opportunity for you to prove how learned, how intellectual, how on-top-of-things you are by



your instantaneous condemnation of anything that the other person sets forth that doesn't accord with the latest liberal Party line. I truly believe that for you, to be exceptionally intelligent and well-read is to be exceptionally good at dismissing other people's ideas. I can't recall a single time when I felt that you weighed an idea, considered it, turned it over in your mind, postponed judgment on it.

Anyway, I no longer enjoy our conversations, which for me have become largely exercises in controlling my temper — NOT (let me say it for the thousandth time) because of your political views, but because of your way of presenting them (I can't even call it arguing for them), and for your complete inability to hear, and consider, and reply thoughtfully to opposing views.

Maybe some time we will get together again. If we do, I'm afraid I will have to insist that certain topics be excluded from our conversation, including politics, economics, architecture, films that have anything to do with art history, and new books.

I conclude with the same words with which I conclude[d] my letter in 1996: "I want you to know that none of my criticisms in any way diminishes my gratitude to you for all the wonderful dinners you have cooked for me, and it in no way diminishes my memory of the restaurant dinners we have enjoyed, and the films and the walks."

Wishing you the best,

— John

People sometimes tell me that I should have gotten my PhD and become a professor. But when I think that that might well have meant having someone like Georgia's husband as a thesis advisor, my entire future in his hands, and that I would then have had to spend my intellectual life among people like him (and her), I say to myself, *never in a million years*.

## **Dianna the Jazz Singer**

The reader will recall a party at the Canyon home of Jonathan the painter in which I met a cute blonde. While we were necking, we fell into a closet (see last file of Vol. 3 under "A Party for Jonathan's Illegitimate Children"). We picked ourselves up and shut the door so we didn't have to listen to the guffaws of the other guests, and set about getting to know each other among the shelves and piles of stored items. I grew even more attracted to her when I found out she was a jazz singer. She gave me her number and I began pursuing her.

The reason she was at the party was that she lived on a boat in the Emeryville Marina, not far from the boat where Egl and Kathleen, Jonathan's son and daughter-in-law, lived. But she said she also had a house in Mendocino, an affluent little get-away town up the coast from San Francisco, and that her son had tried to throw her out of a second-story window.

She had a full-cheeked, butch look and I was mad for her, but, as usual, I sensed she wasn't mad for me. I cannot remember if we ever had sex. I do remember one time coming back to her boat with her late on a cold night, climbing up over the side and then down through the hatch, and being allowed to get into one of two side-by-side bunks. She played me some recordings of her singing, which I thought were not bad. She asked, in a token fashion, if I minded her bringing her cat to bed. I said, "Not at all!" When she was lying there snuggling with it, I remarked, "Now there are two pussies in this bed!" No response.

She would go off on trips occasionally, promising to call when she came back. I remember

two excruciating days of sitting by the phone in a state of mind exactly portrayed by Dorothy Parker in her story “A Telephone Call”, each moment an eternity, I knowing to the depths of my soul that if she didn’t call there would be no excuse, absolutely none, to go on living another day. She did call, eventually, and made it clear that at best we might be friends.

There followed a night of such appalling self-humiliation that I am determined never to reveal the slightest detail to anyone. The next evening, in my desperation and utter self-contempt, I called the Gay Hot Line in San Francisco and asked the guy who answered the phone if I could take a night course to learn how to be gay. He asked me how old I was. I told him (I was then about 54). He replied patiently, respectfully, that most gay men know rather early in life that they are gay — typically in their teens. He asked if I had ever desired men. I said no, but I could learn— it’s never too late to learn. And so the conversation went, until I thanked him for his time and ended it.

## **Amy the Poet**

In December 1987 I responded to a Life Profile in Perfect Strings, the singles dating organization for people interested in classical music. During that first conversation, she said she was a poet but had been suffering from a writer’s block, and so had returned to playing the piano. Nothing came of that first conversation. Then, in late August 1989 I tried again. We decided to meet for coffee at Cafe Soleil on Solano Ave., in North Berkeley. She was blonde, with a page-boy hair cut; and looked like a wealthy woman who raises horses. She was decidedly relaxed and calm during our first meeting, giving me the impression from the very start that she wasn’t attracted to me, but that she thought I might be amusing company for a while.

A couple of weeks later, she invited me for a walk. I found that she lived in a charming one-story wooden cottage near a hairpin turn on Euclid Ave. in the upper reaches of Professorville north of the UC campus. There was a large central room of dark wood with a wood-burning stove and bookshelves everywhere — a perfect house for a poet. In a letter to Heim, I described her as “a forest creature”. At the end of the month, she suggested that we see George Coates’ rather bizarre play *Right Mind*, which was playing in San Francisco. We did. It was based on Lewis Carroll’s life, and featured huge blowups of his photographs of little girls projected on the walls of the stage. I had never seen these photos before (he had given strict instructions in his will that all his photographs of little girls were to be destroyed). I don’t know who managed to salvage these; each was compelling; the girls often dressed in full Victorian finery, their expressions often having an undeniable quality of innocent sexuality.

Her father had made his fortune in the thirties selling aircraft parts. After she graduated from college in the East (I think it was a small liberal arts college in New England) she had worked for a year or two in publishing. Then her father died and left her enough to live on comfortably thereafter. She was, or soon became, a libertarian, with nothing but contempt for those who didn’t work for a living *if* their reason was other than that they had inherited money. Her mother was still alive. I met her at a party at Amy’s in October 1989. She was in her seventies and only a few months before had tried sky diving, making it to the ground without injury. She liked Scotch, which she drank like an old hand, sweeping the glass from the table and taking several swallows at a time.

I suppose it was inevitable that, being a poet, Amy would have strong feelings about language. In any case I remember that early in our relationship she made it clear that she didn’t like me to say “How’re you doing?” It had to be “How are you?”

We discussed poets and authors, of course, but never classical music, in which she gave no sign of having any interest despite her occasionally practicing the piano — like many upper-middle-class women, she had placed an ad in *Perfect Strings* in the belief that men who liked classical music tended to be of higher quality. Sometimes she recommended a book. One was a book on sex and the brain<sup>1</sup>. I was reading it while sitting in the commute bus at 5 p.m. on Tuesday, Oct. 17, 1989, when the Loma Prieta earthquake struck<sup>2</sup>.

She went to France in October 1989, didn't call me when she came back. Finally I called her, and during the subsequent conversation, she said she felt no chemistry toward me. Now, it is true that I wanted to have sex with her, but not out of love, or even sexual desire. My self-esteem simply demanded that I succeed with this upper-middle-class, self-satisfied, financially independent literary woman whom I wasn't impressing and who, in fact, regarded me as merely an amusing diversion in her life. By the end of the conversation, she said she felt a little chemistry toward me. I decided I needed to search elsewhere for sex, and in December met the beautiful Marcia G., as described in the section below<sup>3</sup>. But I continued to see Amy, since I valued the literary talk. In December I gave her the ms. of my collection of essays, *Thoughts and Visions* (then a slim volume). It made no impression. She told me to read Cyril Connolly's *The Unquiet Grave*, which was written in the same précis style as my essays. I shouldn't have been too surprised at her reaction, since anything intellectual put her off. She would look at me with that smile of amused curiosity and say, "You're too cerebral!" Her judgement of my writing style was "You're too 19th century!"

We went out for dinner at local restaurants. It turned out she had a bit of a problem with alcohol. I remember once at Lalime's, one of Berkeley's best restaurants, I had poured her a glass of wine, which she drank. I then poured her another which she started to drink as we began our dinner. Halfway through the meal, almost in mid-sentence, her head tipped forward and fell, *thunk!*, on the table, just barely missing her plate of food. The waiter came over as disapproving patrons looked at the spectacle. We managed to revive her. She was only slightly embarrassed, explaining that alcohol sometimes made her very sleepy. Early in our relationship, she introduced me to Stolichnaya vodka ("Stoli").

She said several times, after I told her that I had been a jazz musician, that she had always wanted to learn to play jazz. I was delighted, and played for her the Modern Jazz Quartet recordings of "Two Degrees East, Three Degrees West" and "Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea", pointing out to how simple, yet effective, John Lewis's piano solo was, and emphasizing that she certainly had enough technique to be able to play it. She listened, nodded, but did nothing more. We did go once to hear Dick Hyman, the jazz pianist, perform at Maybeck Hall in North Berkeley. That year I had begun writing pornography — I was convinced I could do a much better job than what was found in the usual paperbacks. I asked her if she would be willing to read my story, "Christmas Party Girl". She said she would, and afterward encouraged me to write more of these stories. I told her I already had. In the course of conversation, she emphasized the importance of voice in a story. I gave her another of the stories; she said she liked that one, too.

Still, I persisted in trying to have sex with her. My son and Kathy, the woman I lived with for five years in the eighties, had years before given me a bottle of 1967 Ridge Zinfandel for my

---

1. My notes say it was *Sex and the Brain*, but a book by that title wasn't published until 2007; it may have been *Brain Sex*, which was published in 1989.

2. See second file of Chapter 2, Vol. 3, under "I Am Almost Killed in the '89 Earthquake".

3. Amy's kindness at the end of that relationship is described in that section.

birthday. (The winery was located in the foothills above Silicon Valley.) So I suggested that Amy and I have a nice dinner at her place and enjoy this gift. She agreed. Before the day of the dinner, I called one of the better wine shops and asked what the bottle was currently worth. The clerk said around \$110. So we sat at the table in the dining portion of her big, wood-panelled room, and I opened the bottle, probably even poured some into my Nieman Marcus decanter to let it breathe. Then, at the right time, I filled her glass, then mine. The moment had arrived. I swirled it in the glass, taking in the bouquet, then filled my mouth with the beautiful dark red liquid, sloshing it around between my teeth, breathing in the whole time. There was a long silence, then I lowered the glass and said, "It takes like a Swiss watch". Since she was clearly a little baffled by that description, I hastened to explain that the flavors went together like the parts of one of those classic timepieces. She drank some, agreed, enjoying my metaphor, and the dinner went well.

Knowing from our conversations that I had a Mother Problem, she got an idea that clearly delighted her, and that was to invite my mother to her place and have a dinner party. At first, of course, I declined. But she kept challenging me with that laugh of hers. And so, incredibly, I actually succeeded in getting my mother to agree to let me pick her up at her house in San Francisco and drive her to Berkeley for a nice dinner with a real poet.

Amy's friend Leslie was there, also. She was a lesbian who was nearing the end of long relationship with an older woman. She worked at Alta Bates Hospital, near Oakland, and once described the crushing rage and anguish of wealthy wives from the Berkeley Hills who suddenly found out that their philandering husbands had made them HIV-positive.

My mother sat at the table with an uncomprehending look as she tried to understand the whirl of conversation going on around her. Amy took several pictures of the evening, some of which I still have.

I also still have quite a few of the poems that Amy gave me copies of. Some had been published in small magazines, including one published by Harvard. With one exception, they never impressed me, seeming to be little more than typical melancholy musings and occasional delights in Nature expressed in ornamented prose that had then been cut into free verse lines. The one exception was a poem about a runner running past pear trees and stopping at a pool of water. I won't quote the lines because it may have been published, and I want to preserve Amy's privacy.

She encouraged me to join a writers' group she knew about in Oakland that was run by the poet Clive Matson. Which I did, in hopes it would soften her reluctance to have sex with me. The group met in the large, rear room of a big, dark house. There were about half a dozen members not one of whom gave any sign of having read any literature of the past. A tall, heavy, blond guy was exploring "found poetry", that is, sequences of words from everyday life — newspapers, magazines, signs, flyers, business documents — that could be regarded as poetry, or at least as verse. I had written several thinly disguised confessional stories about a middle-aged man's failures with women. I tried to overcome the unmanly character of these bleetings by introducing a sickening, and transparently false, note of self-deprecating humor. I submitted some of these. I forget if stories were read aloud or if copies were circulated. (The poetry of the members was read aloud.) I remember emphasizing to the group the importance of "frames" in literature. The group dutifully commented on my submissions. Then Amy suggested that her friend Gail, who was an editor, go over them.

Gail was a middle-aged woman who lived in Palo Alto, was a writer, worked as some sort of technical editor. I gave her the mss. of several of the stories, which she marked up and returned. It was clear that she was trying her best to find something to praise in them. Both she and Amy criticized me for sometimes changing tenses in stories. I said that I was sure that major authors

had done this but couldn't remember any specific instances. But Amy and Gail were very sure that I was wrong, that real writers don't do that kind of thing. Later I came across several examples to prove my point, for example:

“But I must go back and pick up the thread. I am walking down the boulevards beside M. de Charlus, who has just chosen me as an informal intermediary for overtures of peace between him and Morel. Seeing that I did not reply, he continued, ...” — Proust, Marcel, *The Past Recaptured*, tr. Frederick A. Blossom, vol. 7 of *Remembrance of Things Past*, The Modern Library, N.Y., 1932, p. 121.

Having seen how she could get me to do just about anything, she suggested that I go to a woman she had heard about in Atherton (one of the two wealthiest communities in the Bay Area) for a make-over. I don't think that is the term she used, but the woman specialized in advising women, and men, in how to improve their looks and how to dress more appealingly. There was in her suggestion the subtle hint that maybe she would be willing to have sex with me if I did this. So I did. The woman lived in a ranch-style house on a leafy street. There was a patio and a big garden behind it. She was tall, thin, and had the worried expression of a woman whose one concern in life was maintaining her position in her wealthy community. She had what seemed to be a high-school girl who ran minor errands for her: each time the girl appeared, the woman would interrupt her talking to me to give her a few instructions, and the girl would leave. There wasn't much the woman could do about my balding pate, so I think she simply made some recommendations about my clothes. I probably paid her between \$100 and \$200.

No sex with Amy resulted. But with the same subtle hint in her voice, she next suggested I start studying yoga — there was a young guy whom she clearly had the hots for, who gave sessions in Berkeley. I trooped over to one, found that the guy was handsome indeed, and tried to convince myself that spiritual (and sexual) advancement could occur if I could only learn to touch my toes while being relaxed. But the absurdity was too much, and I quit after a few sessions.

Eventually she relented and one evening, after we had gone out for dinner and drunk a lot of wine, she let me have sex with her. I remember how skinny she was, how little desire I had. I'm sure I was at least semi-impotent. I remember that amused laugh of hers as I struggled to please her.

And then, some weeks later, she told me that she had begun seeing a black man from Marin who, although on the verge of bankruptcy, was determined to continue trying to raise racehorses. There was no doubt she was having sex with him. She told of this latest development with that laugh of hers, as though it was just a lark. I may have met him once, but I was not only humiliated but furious at her hypocrisy — her having a sexual relationship with a man she otherwise wouldn't have been caught dead with.

She sent me an elaborate card on Valentine's day — three big, red, paper hearts with a pattern of little hearts cut out of the paper to make a kind of lace. Inside she had carefully pasted clippings from newspapers: “Brains of Men, Women Differ”; “They Gave Their Lives for Love” about thousands of frogs dying annually at a little town in France because they had to cross a country road to answer mating calls from a pond away from the area where they spent their winter; Q. “Ask your Love and War man how a woman knows when a man is falling in love with her. A. He says the first sign is the fellow starts telling her about himself. When she catches this signal, she's advised not to yawn”; “Benjamin Franklin also said: ‘He who falls in love with himself will have no rivals.’” “In matters romantic, who's the boss? ...among humans, the female is in con-

trol more often than not;” “Item No. 5336A in our Love and War Man’s file is a psychiatrist’s contention: “The man who unconsciously leaves his hands relaxed in his lap, on a chair arm or atop a table, is usually a good husband.” She signed it, “Happy Valentine’s Day to John, Love, Amy.

Nevertheless, later in February, I told her I was ending the relationship. There were several conversations. Then, as I brought back the books she had loaned me, she asked that we take a walk. There was no doubt that she was worried that we were about to say goodbye permanently. “Can’t we say, ‘to be continued’?” she asked. In late afternoon, there was a message from her on my machine, asking me to call her back, which I did. She said she wanted me to know that our friendship was probably the richest she had ever had with a man.

Years later, I saw her at Black Oak Books in North Berkeley. She had come to hear a reading and talk by the right-wing author Charles Murray (who wrote *The Bell Curve*). I was surprised at how old and thin and hard she looked. I don’t know if she recognized me. I had no inclination to say hello.

## **Beautiful Marcia G**

There are women so beautiful you say to yourself, “I could spend the rest of my life just looking at her face.” Marcia G was one of them.

In late 1989 I decided to comb through my collection of Personal Profiles from Perfect Strings, the singles organization for people who liked classical music, to see if I had missed any good ones. I came across one that I had passed over because from the little photo in the lower right corner it was clear that the woman was very attractive. She was also fifteen years younger than me. But under “Your favorite pieces of classical music” she had written “Kiri Te Kanawa sings Verdi & Puccini with London Sym. Orchestra; Ashkenazy with London Sym. Orchestra; Bach ‘Concerto in D Minor’; Isaac Stern & Jean-Pierre Rampal play Vivaldi & Telemann”, so I thought there might be a possibility of a connection.

I first called her on a Tuesday evening in December. The conversation didn’t go well. She seemed reserved, her voice became brittle every once in a while. Since she didn’t pass the voice test that had proved so reliable for me in the past, I mentally wrote her off. She said she she was going away the next weekend. I said I’d call her the following Monday, without the slightest intention of doing so.

When I came home from work the next day, I found a message on my machine: that same slightly husky, occasionally cracking voice: since there were several days before we might meet, would I mind sending her my photo and a copy of my Profile? I was now convinced that she was very concerned about physical appearance, and knew I would lose on that count, so I put her out of my mind.

A week passed. Then there was another message: she was wondering why I hadn’t called. She had enjoyed our conversation. If I was still interested, she would be in that night after nine. I called. The conversation was stiff, but she laughed at a witty remark of mine so I thought there might be hope after all. I suggested we meet. We set a date for that Friday at four p.m. at the Bateau Ivre in South Berkeley. The restaurant had become my standard meeting place. I first met Yolanda there and others. It had an elegant interior, with abundant dark brown wood, and candles on each table in the evening. A Berkeley intellectual’s place if there ever was one. But the food was mediocre.

She was already there when I arrived, sitting at the same table in the front with a full view of the doorway from the front foyer, where other women I had come to meet had sat. She was utterly beautiful. (I detected a flicker of disappointment in her face when she first saw me.) . For the first time in years, I was almost speechless. She had a flawless complexion. I suspected the aid of a cosmetic, but I couldn't tell. Full cheeks, full lips, pale lipstick, wavy black hair cut at the nape of the neck. A few bewitching strands of gray. Her eyes seemed, in some strange way, hidden, but at the same time they had a kind of softness and a readiness for laughter that made me think they were the eyes of one who enjoyed looking at beautiful things.

She wore a dark pink sweater and over it a kind of ski sweater: white background with little black flowers except for one flower above her left breast that was exactly the color of the sweater underneath. She was wearing the most maddeningly subtle, absolutely-appropriate-for-her perfume.

We began to talk. I seem to remember telling her, right at the start, that I knew a wonderful painter (thinking, of course, of Jonathan in Canyon) and that I knew he would love to paint her portrait. I would, of course, pay his fee. But if I told her this, I don't remember her response. She said she was a widow, her husband having been killed in an airplane accident three years previous. She was just beginning to emerge from the long period of mourning and withdrawal that had followed the accident. She was taking courses: in painting, singing, acting, in an attempt to overcome her lifelong shyness. Prior to her husband's death she had been a film editor, working on various industrial projects. She wanted to do something more creative but was suffering from a block; she had no confidence in her abilities. She brightened a little when I told her of my interest in films. Had she seen any of Peter Greenaway's? No, she hadn't. Well, we would have to see a few.

As we talked, I noticed that my normal fluency had left me. My throat was dry. My voice seemed to have developed the same occasionally brittle quality as hers.

She said that she was going to a movie after our meeting. Since there was still time before she had to leave, I suggested we take a short walk before we parted. We walked with heads slightly down, as people do when they are listening intently to each other. The moment to say what I was dying to say presented itself.

"Listen, I have to tell you something. I've met a lot of women over the past fifteen years, but I've got to tell you: You are just beautiful."

"Thank you," she said, obviously pleasantly surprised. "I need to hear that, because I don't think I'm attractive at all. I'm afraid I have very low self-esteem."

My heart leapt up. A breathtakingly beautiful woman with low self-esteem. "Not attractive? Have you any idea — ?"

She laughed uneasily. "No one has ever called me beautiful! But I thank you for saying it. I need to hear it." She said that she received only three replies from her ad in Perfect Strings. She had also been going on Sierra Singles hikes, but so far no one had shown much interest in her. I couldn't believe this but I had no inclination to distrust such good news.

As we parted, I gave her a warm hug. Her response I can only describe as the resting of her fingertips briefly on the back of my coat. Well, maybe it was her shyness. When I got home, I left a message on her machine telling her how much I had enjoyed talking to her and that I'd call on the weekend. In the intervening days, I kept thinking of the fourth movement of the Telemann *Concerto for Flute and Strings in D Major*, knowing that she was the woman who belonged in the scene I always visualized when I heard that music (see below in the section "Telemann's Flute Concerto in D Major"). I saw her in her gown in the 18th century country house, greeting guests

for our dinner party, saw our life together, felt the happiness, saw the windows, the red flowers in old pots, the stone pathways, the smell of cooking, the horses being led up to the door for the morning's ride, saw the babies we would have.

When I called her, she didn't mention the message I had left. Unable to bear the anxiety, I reminded her. Oh yes, it was very sweet (as though she were reading the words from a script). More back and forth. Would she like to see *Fanny and Alexander*, which we had discussed during our first meeting, and which was playing at a local theater on Thursday? She couldn't make it. Would I like to go to a candlelight Christmas sing in San Francisco. My long pause clearly said no. She had classes Tuesday and Wednesday, so we couldn't do anything those evenings. I told her I would see what I could come up with. I went home, ran a few errands, came back to find a message on my machine: her classes would be over by eight, so maybe we could have a late dinner.

I selected Omnivore, a small French restaurant in South Berkeley, near the Oakland border, whose food quality was considerably better than its location. When I picked her up, I found that she lived in a little house in the woods on the side of a hill in Montclair, a small affluent town above Oakland. In memory I still see the white paint of the interior, the spare furnishings, the open space at the top of the stairs to the second floor. Everything neat and with minimal decoration. During dinner she thanked me again for my compliment, said that people thought that, because she grew up in the sixties, she must have engaged in all sorts of free love, but she didn't. Sometimes she wished it had been otherwise. She had been a loner all her life. Once, on a week-long hike in India with an American Buddhist sect, she and a handsome blond guy had become separated from the main group for a day and a night. They pitched a tent, their sleeping bags side by side. She was half-hoping he would make a move. But he didn't.

When I asked about her late husband, whose name was Bill, she said she couldn't talk about him over dinner because it made her nauseous. Apparently she had been given vivid details about the plane accident that killed him.

We talked about music. She hated Glenn Gould, liked Bach to be played "more Romantically". She loved Verdi's *Aida*. Her favorite film was *The Music Lovers*, a biography of Tchaikovsky.

She didn't mind sad films, but she didn't want to see *A Story of Women* because it was about abortion.

Her mother never praised her, was only concerned with her appearance. She was in therapy even though her Buddhist church disapproved.

The old male/female roles were obsolete. "It is women's business to say No, man's business to say Yes." She recommended the novel *Perfume*.

Two foods she didn't like were peas and oysters. She preferred to drink Coke with dinner.

She didn't like cocktail party chatter.

I asked her what perfume she was wearing. She replied, "It's a secret." I thought: Interesting name for a perfume! Then it dawned on me that might not be the name. I wracked my brain trying to figure out why a woman wouldn't want to tell a man what perfume she was wearing.

Her parting hug was even lighter than before. The next day I wrote a farewell letter to her. But before I sent it, I called Marcella to ask her advice. She said it was too early to be writing farewell letters, I should give the lady a chance.

The following Saturday there was a message on my machine: she was leaving to spend Christmas in Los Angeles with her sister but she wanted to let me know how much she had enjoyed being with me for dinner.



I was growing more and more madly in love with her, but I was also losing more and more of what little self-confidence I had. The music that I now associated more and more closely with her was Corelli's Concerto Grosso No. 5, No. 8 (the Christmas Concerto), with its feel of deep brown wood and expensive furniture in an old house — the house I sensed I would never live in with her. The day after she returned from her sister's, I invited her to see the movie *Camille Claudel* on New Year's Eve. On the way to the theater, I told her about Jonathan's bohemian circle in Canyon. I said, "If we decide to hang out together, I hope you will get a chance to meet them." She, almost before I finished: "I hope we *do* hang out together!"

In the course of conversation, I told her that I was writing a letter to my son, who had just graduated from college. A girl he had been going with for over a year had rejected him the previous spring; recently he had heard that she was getting married. His mother told me he was feeling depressed about it. The purpose of my letter was to urge him to make a lifelong practice of studying how to make relationships work, and that included learning about the art of love-making and all the anatomical knowledge related to that art. She suddenly brightened, complimented me, and said that she was doing something similar for the 18-year-old daughter of a friend of hers. She went on to reveal, quite casually, that she read pornography and had even rented X-rated videos.

After the movie, she proposed that we go to a New Year's concert at TownsEnd in San Francisco and do some dancing. I told her I wasn't a very good dancer. She said that was OK, but if I went, she asked that I put my heart in it, and not do it merely to please her. I saw myself sweating as I tried to perform this social ritual that had been a torment for me since junior high school. But I wanted her to regard me as a man of courage, so I agreed.

For two hours we stood, a few feet from the bandstand, in a mob of young men and women less than half my age listening to Chris Isaacs and his group. I was filled with envy of this man with a full head of hair. Now she wanted to dance. There was no room for dancing on the main floor but she found a spot near the wall. With a superhuman exercise of will, I forced myself to go through the motions, attempting, on wooden legs, with palms sweating, to show I was enjoying this torture.

Midnight approached. I said, "You know what's customary at the stroke of New Year's." Incredibly, she replied No, she didn't, because she had never been to a New Year's party before. I told her it was customary for the man to kiss the woman he was with. She nodded. At midnight I gave her a chaste kiss on the lips. No response. As the crowd continued to shout and applaud and make a racket with their noisemakers, I gave her two more. Same response. But at the end of the evening, her goodnight hug was much warmer than before.

Jonathan had a party on a Saturday. On the way, she asked if my address was on my Personal Profile, because she wanted to send me a card from Scotland. Then, a few minutes later, she said she wanted to pay my way the next time we went out together. At the party, she seemed definitely to be with me: no roving eye, not yawns, no looking at her watch. By then, I knew how to make her laugh, and did so several times, she always seeming to try to resist it by keeping her lips pursed, but then half-turning away and laughing aloud. I noticed Jonathan couldn't take his eyes off of her.

Two guys engaged us in conversation, both of them obviously eager to make an impression on her. She listened, responded without a trace of shyness. For a while I was worried because one of them was a singing teacher, and young and good-looking. But he did all the talking, hardly asked about her at all.

When we were back at her place, I remarked on how eager the two guys had been to impress her. She: "Well, they didn't seem to want to talk about anything but themselves. They didn't ask

one question about me, about my life.” I told her that if she had been at the party alone, at least one of them would have asked her if she had a lift home afterward. Her eyes suddenly filled with tears. “No one has ever asked me that at a party.” I tried to comfort her, then I told her that, although I felt a certain emotional distance between us, all day and throughout the evening I have wanted to sleep with her that night. It could be without sex, that would be perfectly OK.

She replied that she couldn’t imagine sleeping with a man until she had known him for a very long time. Not even after having sex with him did she want him to stay the night. I had never heard anything like this before. She said that the presence of an unfamiliar body, one that might snore or breathe too loudly or keep bumping against her in the night, made sleep impossible for her. There was a pause. I didn’t know what to say. We were still holding hands. Then, with obvious hesitation, she said, “Since we are speaking from the heart, I have to tell you something that I know will hurt you.”

“Go ahead. I can take it.”

“I’m afraid I don’t feel any chemistry toward you. I am so sorry to have to tell you this because I know how much it will hurt you. I want you to know that I have enjoyed every minute we have spent together. And I want you to know that I am so very afraid that this will mean that we will not be able to go on seeing each other.”

I sat there, numb. We continued to hold hands. I told her that I suspected this was coming, that I even wrote her a farewell letter after our first dinner, but that my ex-wife had urged me not to be so hasty. But I should have known I didn’t stand a chance.

“But you *did* stand a chance with me. You’re a neat guy! You’re nice-looking, you’re smart, you’re kind, caring, funny and you have a wide range of interests, and you’re curious about things, and you’re articulate.

“All along I felt there was a possibility of a relationship with you. But that certain something didn’t appear. It has rarely appeared in my life. I have had very few relationships.”

In my cracked voice, I asked her about her marriage. It was passionless, she said. They had lived together for two years before they were married. He was so kind and generous to her that at that time in her life she felt that marriage was the best for her. They had been married eight years at the time of his death. No children. After his death she had had an intense six-month relationship.

“Why didn’t you continue it?”

“He was married.” Then: “You have a lot to give! Why should you have been so willing to give up so soon? My singing lessons are valuable to me because my teacher won’t let me say, ‘I can’t’. I can say, ‘This is difficult,’ or ‘I am having trouble with this’, but never ‘I can’t’.

“After the party I thought that if we had a relationship and I was upset or sick, that you would hear me and believe me and try your best to support me and try to make the problem go away. You have a lot to give! Besides which, you love music and art and you’re bright and charming.”

Never in my most successful relationships had I received so many compliments.

She went on. “You feel I’m rejecting you. That’s the way men always look at it. And I’m sure that’s how they feel it. But from my point of view, what I’m doing is not *choosing* you. For me, that’s a very different process. I’m not saying it doesn’t hurt not to be chosen. It does. But it’s not the same as rejection.

“After our dinner at the French restaurant, if I had been really attracted to you, I would probably have been even *more* self-contained. When you didn’t seem very enthusiastic afterwards, I thought, ‘I shouldn’t have worn black and white: too severe. I looked like I was coming to a business meeting. I wasn’t appealing enough. I didn’t give him messages I was interested.’ I was

still making up my mind, feeling it out, checking things out. There was no way I could have known after that dinner what direction things were going. I was beginning to get a sense, but it was still only an inkling. But slowly I came to the conclusion I did.

“I told a girl-friend that I felt badly about not telling you sooner. She said, ‘Well, there’s no reason to tell him until he makes a move. Then tell him.’” She paused, looking at me. “I guess I’m just very particular. I guess I just like tall blond guys.”

I sat there, under her gaze, then slowly got up, put on my jacket. “Well,” I said, opening my arms. I gave her a warm hug. She responded with the warmest hug she had ever given me. She touched her forehead to my shoulder. “I know how much this has hurt you. The Buddha says that love is pain, and a hundred loves are a hundred pains. Thank you for not storming out of here. I was so afraid you would.”

“You didn’t have to worry.”

She gave me a squeeze, half-turned her head upward. “You’re a wonderful man.”

I went home, loaded my .38 Ruger, got into bed, cocked the hammer, put the muzzle to my head, started to squeeze the trigger. But I thought of my son, and remembered that I hadn’t completed my life’s work, and so I had to prolong the agony for a few more months. In utter despair, I called Amy the next day, and told her what had happened. For three hours she sat with me and held my hand and did what she could to help me through those worst hours. At one point she said that my “lack of sexual presence” may have contributed to the rejection. I knew that this lack was a direct result of my lifelong feeling that I was not attractive to women.

[Cécile, in *Bonjour Tristesse*]: “...j’éprouvais en face de gens dénués de toute charme physique une sorte de gêne, d’absence; leur résignation à ne pas plaire me semblait un infirmité indécence.”<sup>1</sup>

I [felt] vaguely uncomfortable in the presence of anyone completely devoid of physical charm. Their resignation to the fact that they were unattractive seemed to me somehow indecent.”<sup>2</sup>

She suggested I see a therapist, and gave me the names of two she thought might be helpful, even though their approaches were different. Instead of trying to decide which was the better one, I began seeing both.

At my next appointment with one of the therapists, I told everything that had happened.

He: “I want you to know I’ve given this a great deal of thought. The fact is that my wife and I have just adopted our second child. Both our children are very young — one’s a year old, the other a year-and-a-half — and the oldest has some problems with illness. My wife and I have our hands full, and so, I don’t feel I could respond adequately if you were to call in the evening.

I told him I was feeling better and doubted if I would have to call him.

He nodded and continued. “Also, I don’t feel I can work as well as I must unless you change to a weekly basis, and possibly to several times a week when necessary. You have done phenomenal work in the short time we have been together, and, I tell you frankly, you are one of the best patients I have ever worked with, but I just don’t feel we can continue.”

I asked him to put me on his waiting list.

---

1. Sagan, Françoise, *Bonjour Tristesse*, Julliard, 1954, p. 14.

2. Sagan, Françoise, *Bonjour Tristesse*, tr. Ash, Irene, E P Dutton and Company, 1955, p. 9.

“I’m afraid it’s rather long — about two years in fact.”

I told him that I had been rejected by potential employers, and by women, but this was the first time I had ever been rejected by a therapist, especially one I had gone to in order to get help in dealing with rejection.

Marcia went to Europe in February, and, in response to a despairing remark I had made about rejection, wrote a letter that was meant to be kind. More compliments plus a repetition of “I don’t like to think that I rejected you. It’s just that I didn’t *choose* you.” She added a P.S. “My perfume is Opium by Ives St. Laurent.”

## **The Poor Man’s Contact Lenses**

In the early nineties, knowing that I couldn’t wear contact lenses, I decided to try giving up wearing eyeglasses except when driving. Even though I my vision is 20-400 or worse, I found I could see perfectly well in most circumstances. I could see signs across the street, perhaps aided by a little squinting; I could read, and could even watch television and movies, though I usually preferred to wear glasses in the latter two cases. Strangely enough, my near-vision seemed to have improved after my forties, and I could easily read type that was as close as 10 inches from my eyes. In other words, I had discovered the poor man’s contact lenses.

Once in a while, looking in the mirror with my old glasses on, I couldn’t believe how ugly they made me look. No wonder all those women rejected me.

## **Working as a Free-Lancer**

After leaving HP in 1991, I began the ordeal of looking for freelance work, an ordeal filled with anguish and that I thoroughly hated. I filled a folder and then a binder with sheets bearing names (all in alphabetical order) of companies and individuals who might have work for me. I remember nothing of the people I called with one exception: somehow I got the name of a company on the Peninsula that needed a contract writer. The hiring manager was a woman. We had a nice phone conversation, and then she asked if I happened to be the author of — (the book I had self-published in the eighties). I said yes. She said it had become a cult classic. (But I never heard anyone else say that.) But I didn’t pursue the job prospect any further because I didn’t want to be forced to commute to the Peninsula again.

I next did contract work at two small companies in Berkeley: Abacus, which sold StatView, a PC program for doing statistical calculations, and Franz, which sold a system for writing programs in the Lisp dialect named “Franz”. The most important job I had after HP followed these two, and is described in the third file of this volume, under “Sybase”.

## **Abacus**

Abacus was located in cramped quarters on the first floor of a charming building of warm old red brick behind the Golden Bear Center. The address was 1918 Bonita Ave., at the corner of Berkeley Way, so only about twelve blocks from my house, and only half a block from my favorite coffee shop, Au Cocquelet.) The architecture seemed vaguely Federal style, with a square cupola, small, ironwork balconies on one side, and dark, green shutters on the tall, arched, first-floor windows.

The company sold a PC program called “StatView” that was a collection of various statistical functions. There were three of us in an office that would have been considered small for a single

person. I once again attempted to write my manuals in the task-oriented way I had been developing, with everything in alphabetical order for rapid look-up.

My boss was a man named Kipp. I think that at the time he was dealing with an illness in his family. He was one of those hard-working, no-questions-asked, PhDs who learned what he was supposed to learn without ever wondering if there might not be a better way of presenting it than the traditional expository style.

Many of the functions in StatView were those used in W. Edwards Deming's statistical quality control method, and I found these interesting. In fact, I spent most of my time reading about him and how he developed his ideas.

I thought that such a product, with the numerous mathematical functions it made available to the user, was ideally suited to my documentation method, which was designed for rapid look-up of information (users could look up the statistical function alphabetically and find the instructions for executing it on the user's data). But it was clear that Kipp was not pleased with the pages of the manual that I showed to him. I worked harder. He was pleased less. It was clear that what he wanted was that I demonstrate that I had been able to quickly figure out how to use the product with little or no pre-existing documentation or help from the staff, and then that I produce a document in the old style that demonstrated my proficiency in using the software.

Then, one day, he fired me, saying, in his report to the company manager, that what I had produced "doesn't flow". I thought: you fucking idiot, a manual is not a literary document — it is not a PhD thesis — it is a tool for enabling the user to accomplish certain tasks, and the more efficiently it does that, the better. But it was clear that he believed that a manual was something that people read from first page to last, and learned, and then applied. In memory, I stood in front of him with clenched fist, on the verge of smashing his face. I wrote to Heim of how much I yearned to commit suicide but kill him first.

## **Franz**

In 1992 I was hired as a contract writer by a company called "Franz, Inc.", the name being derived from the name of the company's one and only product, which was software to enable people to program in Franz Lisp, a dialect of Lisp, the programming language (as the reader may recall), that I considered far superior to all others. (The name of the product clearly revealed that at least one of the founders of the company was a classical music lover<sup>1</sup>.) A history of the company, which had been founded by a UC Berkeley professor and others in the early eighties, could be found, in July, 2008, on the web site [franz.com/about/company.history.html](http://franz.com/about/company.history.html).

The company was located in spacious offices, with windows the length of the outer wall overlooking University Ave., on the second floor of the Golden Bear Center, 1995 University Ave., in downtown Berkeley. This was a modern six-story light gray office building with round pillars at the corners between storeys, and lots of glass, catty-corner from one of my regular coffee shops, Au Cocquelet, in downtown Berkeley and right around the corner from Abacus. It was only about eleven blocks from my house.

My boss was David Margolies<sup>2</sup>, who, despite having a PhD in mathematics, lived in Oakland. Within days after my arriving on the job, having heard me mention an interest in mathematics, he suddenly said, "Prove there are no uninteresting numbers!" (by which he meant positive integers).

---

1. For the classical-music-challenged: one of the great 19th century composers was Franz Liszt.

2. Or "Margolis", I am no longer sure

I replied (having read about this problem in a popularization), “If there were uninteresting numbers, then there would be a minimum one, and that would make it interesting.” He seemed to grudgingly accept my presence after that.

The manual was well over 1,000 pages, and was clearly the work of technical minds that had not the slightest interest or concern with the efficiency of use of their software product. All that mattered was adding refinements upon refinements, features upon features. To be of any use, you had to, one way or the other, learn a major part of the manual. I realized once again that my task-oriented approach to documentation had no place here. I would be judged on how quickly I mastered the language, how impressively I could write Franz Lisp code. I had no interest in doing this, and so I muddled along, performing what amounted to mere editorial tasks.

The company had made a few people rich, or at least moderately wealthy, including a husband-wife team who worked there (the husband’s name was Sean; the wife, apart from her other duties, had become a kind of office mother, keeping things running, resolving disagreements) . They had their own plane, which they flew on weekends. The atmosphere was friendly. The guy whose project I was to document was a handsome Taiwanese who wore cowboy boots and had a masculine, no-nonsense competence about him. We occasionally talked of matters unrelated to work. During a discussion of education in which I commented on the effort that many teachers had to put in to maintaining discipline, and about the reports of violence in the classroom that we frequently heard, he said, “In Taiwan, you hit a teacher, you a garbage man.”

I remained at the company for less than a year, then was matter-of-factly let go on the grounds they didn’t need my services any more.

## **Depression**

The financial uncertainty of working as a freelance technical writer, and my utter contempt for the people I worked for, guaranteed that I continued to be as depressed as ever. As always, I could rely on sleep as a temporary escape. But I was sorely tempted by the thought of a permanent escape.

On the other hand, I knew, though I hated it, the truth of Proust’s observation:

“Happy years are wasted years; we wait for suffering before setting to work. The idea of suffering as an ineluctable prerequisite has become associated in our minds with the idea of work; we dread each new undertaking because of the suffering we know we must first go through to formulate it in our imagination...When we understand that suffering is the best thing we can encounter in life, we contemplate death without dismay as a sort of emancipation.” — *The Past Recaptured*, tr. Frederick A. Blossom, vol. 7 of *Remembrance of Things Past*, The Modern Library, N.Y., 1932, p. 241.

## **On the Difficulties of Committing Suicide**

It is remarkable how difficult it is to commit suicide properly. By “properly” I mean with due concern for those you leave behind and, most important, for seeing to it that what you want done after you are dead will be done. This is particularly true for an author.

Assume you have a house in a heavy crime area. You have a gun with which you plan to do the deed, a safe, reliable Ruger . You have plenty of ammunition. Now if you just plan to walk out in front of your house and blow your brains out in the street, should you lock the door? If you

don't, there is a good chance the blacks will not only take your gun as you're lying there, but also that they will go through your house and perhaps destroy some of your manuscripts and computer disks. So, you need to lock the front door and, while you're at it, you might as well set the burglar alarm. But now you will somehow have to tell those who find your body, how to turn off the alarm when they enter the house.

You could write down on a piece of paper the code to turn off the alarm, then attach the paper, and the key to the house, to your wrist with a rubber band, but then if the blacks find you before your neighbors, your house will be burglarized.

You know that your friends, not to mention your relatives, will not be willing to listen to you talk about your plan to kill yourself, so you won't be able to make arrangements for them to be on hand when you do it. You have to choose a better place, which you probably want to do anyway: who wants to die in an ugly neighborhood? You probably want to donate your kidneys, heart, corneas, and whatever else might be useful, so a hospital might be a good place to perform the final act. On the other hand, you'd rather do it in a place with a nice view, say on a hill, with trees and grass. But then they might not find the body for days, by which time the organs will be useless. And then there is the undeniable fact that the need for at least some of your organs may not be particularly great at the time you end your life, so if you really want every organ to count, you will have to call the hospital and find out what the optimal time would be, from their point of view.

What about performing the deed inside your house? You could call the telephone operator, give her your address and tell her to wait for the shot, but you have to tell her where the key is, by which time she may already be calling the police. You could leave the front door unlocked and the burglar alarm turned off. Then you can call the operator, keep it brief, but tell her that you want to donate organs, so she should get an ambulance there as soon as she hears the shot.

That leaves the writing of notes. You have endured this miserable life this long, certainly you have a right to want things done the way you want after you are dead. You make a list of the people you want to say goodbye to. The list is surprisingly long: it contains over a dozen names, if you want to be thorough, including ex-girlfriends and especially women who have rejected you. So all these notes have to be written. There is considerable repetition in what you say to each. Might as well use your word-processor. Now you have to find the addresses. Some of these people you haven't spoken to in years. How can you be sure they are still at the addresses you have?

At this point, things are complicated enough that you realize that you will have to make out a to-do list. Clearly, the way to develop such a list is to work backwards from the final item ("Pull trigger"). Might as well use the word-processor.

Then there is the question of all your manuscripts. You need to leave extensive notes on what is where. Then you have to explain how to work the computer, or at least leave the name and address of someone you trust who can show your executor what to do. It will take you a couple of days to write out all these instructions. Then, by rights, you should test the documentation by having the executor try to carry out the instructions.

It dawns on you that all this time you are spending on getting your suicide done right could be spent working on the books whose perennially unfinished state is one of the main reasons you are planning to end your life.

Realizing how difficult a task you are leaving for your literary executor you decide to put the whole thing off until you have completed your life's work yourself.

“Razors pain you;  
Rivers are damp;  
Acids stain you;  
And drugs cause cramp.  
Guns aren’t lawful;  
Nooses give;  
Gas smells awful;  
You might as well live.”

— Dorothy Parker, “Résumé”

## **Music**

Throughout my life, I have listened to music every day that I have had access to an FM station or to records or CDs. One of the things that makes travel such a nearly unbearable ordeal for me, is the absence of music, hour after hour.

### **Bach’s *Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue***

One afternoon in the nineties I stopped for a cup of coffee at Cafe Milano, on Bancroft Ave., just east of Sather Gate. (On the right-hand side of the entrance was the graffito, “Poetry happens to be wherever the stupidly mocking smile of duck-faced man is not. — Lautréamont”) It was not a coffee shop I frequented, first, because, like Cafe Romano up the street, it didn’t serve a normal plain coffee: you had to buy something called (at Cafe Romano, at least) “Cafe Americano”, which I think amounted to a diluted espresso. And second, it was always packed with undergraduates trying to study at too-small tables.

But on this one particular afternoon, I decided to give the place another try. I ordered a coffee, and then stood waiting for a table to clear. Suddenly, through the loud voices, something about the music being played on the overhead speakers caught my attention. It was a piano piece, classical. I could make out a flurry of arpeggios, then a sequence of single majestic notes coming through the din. I moved to the back counter, where I could hear better. The notes continued. It was a fugue. For a while I couldn’t even breathe. I turned away so the students couldn’t see the old man with a cup of coffee in his hand, standing transfixed as he listened to some classical music or other, his eyes filling with tears. When it was over, my face red, I breathing heavily, I heard the announcer say it was Alfred Brendel’s recording of Bach’s *Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue in D Minor*. The vision immediately came to me of Bach sitting in a large wooden room, the angled roof beams overhead, the light of the setting sun coming in through the windows on a cold winter afternoon. There is music paper on top of the piano (or harpsichord) in front of him, but he is not writing anything. He sits, eyes closed, fingers spread wide on the keys, and starts to improvise. This great work is the result. He writes it down later. But at the moment of its creation, the only sound in the room is that of the music, and his chair squeaking once in a while as he moves with the music, and a distant bird in the cold distance.

I went out and bought the CD as soon as I could. After countless listenings, this work continues to have the same effect on me as it did on that afternoon.

### **Bach’s Oboe Concerto in D Minor**

For several years, I had Sunday breakfast at the Inn Kensington (located *in Kensington*, the little upper-middle-class town north of Berkeley that, with its bland fifties’ architecture made you



realize the eclectic beauty of the houses in North Berkeley and the Hills). A Bach oboe work had just started on one of the FM stations as I left my house. I am sure that I had heard this concerto before, but this time, for some reason, I was seized by it. The third movement had just begun when I turned onto Spruce St. in North Berkeley, and the music was suddenly so overwhelming I couldn't keep driving. I pulled over, parked, and simply sat there listening, sobbing. As always in such moments, I had no doubt — not the slightest — that I was once again being given access to another realm. The announcer afterward said it was Steven Hammer's recording of Bach's *Oboe Concerto in D Minor*. The next day, I began a search that continues to this day for this recording<sup>1</sup>. Needless to say, being a great performance, it has been taken out of print. A friend of Eva's (Eva will be introduced in the next chapter) had a copy of the CD and made me a tape copy, which I still have. The local FM station, following the example of the recording companies, no longer plays Hammer's performance, instead using that of Anthony Robson on an original instrument, but it cannot compete with Hammer's extraordinary performance.

I was convinced that, when Bach wrote these two works, he was in direct communication with God — talking to No. 1, as I put it when talking to others about this music. Other examples: Brahms' Clarinet Quintet, the second Movement of Ravel's Piano Concerto in G<sup>2</sup>; the last movement of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, the last movement of Bach's Concerto for Two Violins in D Minor<sup>3</sup>, the third movement of Mahler's Fifth Symphony (the Adagietto).

### **Telemann's Flute Concerto in D Major**

Sometimes a piece of music provides incontrovertible evidence (as if I needed it) that I was born into the wrong age. One such piece is Telemann's Flute Concerto in D Major, in particular, the fourth movement (Vivace), in the Jean-Pierre Rampal performance with the Franz Liszt Chamber Orchestra, János Rolla conducting (CBS cassette tape MT 42362). (In every other recording I have heard, the conductor seems to feel that the way to make his recording stand out is to insert incongruous rubatos and momentary stops at the end of the main theme. Rolla has the sense to know that the rhythm must be steady throughout, up to the very end.)

Whenever I listen to this movement, I see the same elegant country house on a warm summer afternoon. A grassy sward, perhaps half a mile wide, leads up to the house; on each side is thick forest. Down the center of the sward meanders a white/gray gravel road. An evening dinner is in the offing, a few of the lords and ladies having already arrived; every once in a while, another black carriage makes its way down the road. Several carriages are parked in front of the house. I could describe, to any degree of detail you asked for, any room in the house; plus the orchestra setting up in the grassy garden in the rear of the building, the smell of meat cooking, the nobles talking among themselves, the ladies bustling about, the atmosphere of preparation for an important social event. I don't know if the country is Germany or England, but whenever I hear this movement, I am overwhelmed with homesickness.

---

1. In January, 2014 I somehow found Hammer's email address. He very kindly sent me a link to an online copy of the recording.

2. On the evening when physicists finally decide they have discovered the Theory of Everything, one of them will go home to his comfortable house in the suburbs, the family asleep, step into his large living room with its subdued lighting, go over to the stereo, and play this movement.

3. Especially as performed by Hilary Hahn and Margaret Batjer (Deutsche Grammophon)

## **The English Composers**

In the early 2000's I first heard Richard Stoltzman's superb performance of Gerald Finzi's *Bagatelles*. Fortunately, the local classical music station played it every now and then, because, as I soon found out, it had been allowed to go out of print, and was impossible to find in Berkeley's used-CD stores. This piece got me interested in other works by Finzi and by the English composers of the early 20th century, including George Butterworth, Hubert Parry, and Frank Bridge. (But not Delius, whose music, with the exception of "On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring", for some reason has never meant much to me.) The music of these composers captured the England I knew I was meant to live in, with its leisurely, green summers, and cottages hidden away under trees, and grand stately country houses, but which I could only live in vicariously through Masterpiece Theater productions on PBS. When I listened to Parry's *Lady Radnor's Suite*, I pictured the country house where I imagined it was first performed; with vases full of flowers, and the artistically inclined members of the upper class gathered on a Sunday afternoon. I thought, "If Lady Radnor didn't let him have his way with her after he presented her with this work, she should have been ashamed of herself."

## **The Saddest Music Ever Written**

Somehow, possibly through a CD I had taken out from the Main Public Library, I came upon Benjamin Britten's *Lachrymae* (op. 48a) as performed by violist Kim Kashkashian and the Stuttgarter Kammerorchester, Dennis Russell Davies conducting (ECM Records). The entire CD is devoted to the music of mourning, and contains Hindemith's *Trauermusik* and Penderecki's *Concerto for Viola and Chamber Orchestra*, but without question, the final two movements of the Britten work are, for me, the saddest, the most heartbreaking piece of music ever written.

(Other things that can bring me to tears: Cecilia Bartoli singing Caldara's "Selve amiche" and "Sebben, crudele"<sup>1</sup>; Keith Jarrett playing the Courante of Handel's Suite I, No. 8<sup>2</sup> in F Minor (an example of musical perfection); certain houses in Berkeley that I have visited on the annual Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association tours; Michael MacLiammoor reading Yeats' "Under Ben Bulbin"; the closing scenes of Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage*; the last paragraph of Joyce's story, "The Dead".)

## **How Many Times in a Lifetime Do We Hear Our Favorite Works?**

I write this at the age of 70. The question occurs to me more frequently in old age, "How many times have I listened to the great works of classical music that I never tire of? The above-mentioned works of Bach, for example, and in fact all the violin concertos, and many of the keyboard works, and, yes, the Brandenburg Concertos, plus the Beethoven symphonies, concertos, and piano sonatas, and works by other composers." Let us say, conservatively, that I listen to each of these works two times a month on average, or 24 times a year (which seems low). Since my parents had classical music playing, on radio or record, throughout my infancy and childhood, though certainly not constantly throughout each day, I think it is fair to multiply 24 by 70, and get 1,680 as the number of times I heard some classical works by the age of 70.

---

1. Bartoli, Cecilia, *If You Love Me*, London Records

2. Jarrett, Keith, *Händel, Suites for Keyboard*, ECM 1530

## **Trying to Contact People from My Past**

In the mid-nineties, as I set to work on this book, I began trying to contact people from my past. I was appalled at the response. If you happened to find their current address, they didn't reply to your letters. Somewhere now at the highest level of their corporations, and I got the distinct impression that, although they were willing to get together with you once, for dinner, they were not in the habit of talking to people of such low rank, and were not about to spend a lot of time reminiscing. Others, including those who at one time were deeply grateful for your willingness to be a friend and to try to help them deal with their often overwhelming problems, were seemingly glad to hear from you, but were terribly busy at the moment, perhaps later they would be able to find time to talk. Marcella refused even to talk or write about our marriage years.

All this seemed all too American to me. No American, I thought, could ever have written *Remembrance of Things Past*, or would have wanted to.

But not everyone was determined to avoid his past. All along there had been one man I had worked with at Hewlett-Packard who was willing not merely to talk about those years (the eighties) but also, because of his extraordinary memory, was able to give me many names of fellow employees and managers and company history I had long forgotten. In 2003, a man who had been a student at Lehigh when I was there contacted me after I had put the chapter on Lehigh out on my web site.

And, amazingly enough, several of the kids I had known in Valhalla, now old men, of course, found their names in the first volume of the autobiography after it was on my web site, thanks to the thoroughness of search engines, and not only contacted me, but also supplied me with details I had long forgotten.

## **My First Book Published By a Real Publisher**

In the fall of 1995, soon after I had reached age 59, my book describing a new way to produce computer documentation was published by Peer-to-Peer Communications in San Jose. I had just turned 60. It was the first time a book of mine had been published by a commercial publisher. It sold a few hundred copies, and generated no interest whatever in the technical writing community, much less the human factors or programming community. Getting reviews — which, for some reason, the publisher expected me to do — was a matter of persistent prodding.

The method that the book described allowed the technical writer to guarantee that users of the software product would be able to find out how to do what they wanted to do in less than half a minute at least 80% of the time. The method was rigorous and, of course, easily subject to test: simply write documentation as described, and then have users test it. If they couldn't find the instructions they wanted in less than half a minute, then the method was invalid (or had been improperly implemented).

But the book “fell still-born from the press”<sup>1</sup>. The technical writing profession ignored it completely. To this day (2008), only one person, as far as I know, has recognized the importance of having a simple metric for documentation. That person was an engineering manager in Canada who wrote a very favorable review of the book, a review that was almost cancelled by the nega-

---

1. David Hume's comment on the initial reception of his chief philosophical work, *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-1740).

tive review of a woman technical writer who didn't have the courage even to give her name. Needless to say, she was angered by some of the things I said about woman technical writers.

Even though the basic idea underlying the method was in place by the time I got my Master's from San Jose State in 1976, and may be said to go back to my undergraduate struggles with calculus, the book was and is, as of this writing (2006), still years ahead of its time.

Everything else of mine continued to be rejected automatically. Even when I offered to pay people to read my work, I had great difficulty finding readers. But, nevertheless, by my mid-fifties, I felt that at last I had learned how to write.

## **I Start a Company**

Since the publisher of my book did nothing to promote it, I had no other choice but to try to do the promotion myself. And so I began attending meetings of the Society for Technical Communication (STC). At a meeting of one of the East Bay chapters, I happened to sit next to a guy, Orlando T., who, when I told him about my book, seemed interested. He said he had been developing a self-documenting programming language — when you wrote a program in this language, all the comments (explanations of what individual statements or groups of statements did) would be inserted automatically. I told him I was skeptical that such a thing could be made to work, but I let him try to convince me. During the course of our conversation, it became clear that he knew a lot about the latest computer technology, and so, at some point during the meeting, or in succeeding days, I told him that I wanted to start promoting my method and maybe form a company. I said I felt he would be an ideal partner, since he knew so much about the latest technology (I didn't tell him how much I detested the details of it).

He lived in a modern townhouse in the Hiller Highlands behind Berkeley. It was part of a townhouse complex below the top of the hills, the complex having been rebuilt after the East Bay Hills Fire of 1991. All the townhouses looked the same, everything sleek and modern. He showed me how we could offer video conferencing to people wanting to adopt our method.

He made calls to technical writers and managers he knew, trying to get them to adopt just a few features of my method. No one was interested. I managed to get a favorable review of the book in one of the STC publications. We heard about an annual STC convention in Santa Barbara, and applied to give a paper. We were accepted, and carefully worked up our overhead slides and notes. We shared the stage and described the theory behind the method and how much the method would improve documentation. The audience was polite, asked a few questions afterward, but in the feedback slips that were routinely filled out by members of the audience of each presentation, one said, "Christ, next time get some guys up there who *know how to give a talk!*"

I didn't give up, nor did Orlando. And we got absolutely nowhere. Meantime, his girlfriend had left him, and he was clearly in a state of depression. He sold his townhouse and moved to the Southwest, where he had relatives. We lost contact with each other.

Years later I wangled an invitation to speak at a meeting of the Sacramento chapter of STC. Again the audience was polite and uncomprehending, obviously far more interested in a talk about the fine points of some new documentation program. Years later I gave a talk at the San Francisco chapter. Again a polite reception, followed by no interest whatsoever.

## **Attempting to Sell FrameMaker on the New Method**

Since I regarded the manual of the word processor I used every day, namely, FrameMaker, to be typical of the difficulty that the traditional manual presented to users trying to find information

rapidly, I called their San Jose office and asked if they would allow me to make a 40-minute presentation on the ideas in the new book. They referred me to their office in Palo Alto, and I was invited to appear. When I arrived, I was met by a young Asian. Some ten persons, including a heavy, bald, middle-aged man who I think was the head of the department, sat at a large, oval table and listened dutifully to what I had to say. A few token questions were asked, then the head thanked me for having taken the time and said they would get back to me. They didn't. So I called the Asian again and emphasized what my new approach could do for sales, since FrameMaker would certainly have manuals that were easier to use than any of the competition's. I was invited back to make a second pitch. Same audience. I emphasized that my method came with a built-in test of its effectiveness — namely, simply see if randomly-selected users were able to find the information they wanted within the time limit guaranteed by the method; I told them that it was not necessary to write an entire manual in the new way: they could begin by just changing one index entry at a time, since the new index format was what enabled users to find information rapidly; I told them I would gladly serve as a consultant free of charge. Same response as the first time.

During my talks, I emphasized the importance of the documentation department having good communications with the Support department, since the latter would be receiving ongoing data as to what the users weren't understanding in the manual. Later, I heard from a source I considered reliable, that for more than a year a war had been raging in the San Jose office between the two departments, and, as result, the writers no longer had anything to do with Support.

### **Another Book, Derived From the Previous**

In the summer of 1996, I finished the first draft of a book that described a new way for students to take math notes, and which, in reality, also described a brand new type of mathematics textbook, one whose format was optimized for speed of problem-solving. It was based on the ideas in my previous book. It was promptly rejected by the three or four publishers I sent it to. I didn't have the courage to keep sending it out since the rejections made clear how little anyone in the publishers' offices had thought about the question of improving textbooks. All of the publishers were in the iron grip of the course-based, learn-everything-in-order-to-do-anything mentality of the universities, and none would even think of doing anything that might lower the prestige of the academics they served. Years later, I made the book available on one of my Internet web sites, under a pseudonym.

### **The Light Dawns Regarding the Task of Writing**

I have debated with myself whether or not to reveal what has been the solution, for me, to my lifelong problem of learning to write, since, at the very least, if I say nothing except that I discovered a solution, I become more interesting as an author, and that, conceivably, might lead to someone being willing to read what I write. But I have decided that to play such games with the world is only to play into the hands of academics, who love only too well such mysteries and the career opportunities they provide. If some expert reminds me that every writer must learn for himself how to write, I will reply that all I am doing here is setting down what I learned, without the slightest desire that others follow it. If it saves someone a few hours, or years, of anguish, then that is good. If that someone does not achieve what he or she might have because I enabled them to take the easy way out, well, that is a risk they have to be aware of.

Let me make clear what I mean by a solution to the problem of writing. I mean nothing more or less than finding how to make the most of the abilities you have. I refuse to use the word “talent” in this context, because it implies that either you have it or you don’t, and that there is no way to find out which is the case for you, just as, with the Calvinists, either you are among the Elect or you are damned forever, and, worst of all, you have no way of finding out. A solution to the problem of writing is knowing how to approach the task, knowing how to proceed, knowing how to make it your own, to wrest it away from the others who would presume to tell you how.

The solution for me was simply this: *Write meanings, not words*. That is, put semantics first. The idea is expressed concisely by the Duchess in a conversation with Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*: “Take care of the sense, and the sounds will take care of themselves.” Martin Gardner adds an enlightening note: “Surely few American readers have recognized this for what it is, an ingenious switch on the British proverb, ‘Take care of the pence and the pounds will take care of themselves.’ The Duchess’s remark is sometimes quoted as a good rule to follow in writing prose or even poetry.<sup>1</sup>”

This solution came from two sources: one was computer science, with its emphasis on the difference between syntax and semantics, which freed me from my confusion about the relation of words to a story or novel. The observation of Dana Scott, whose mathematical semantics of programming languages I had done my Master’s thesis on, were always in the back of my mind: “Whatever is based on syntax is not likely to be very deep”<sup>2</sup>.

*Finnegans Wake* notwithstanding, there *is* a difference between the story and the words that describe it. It is all right, in writing fiction, to imagine the scenes, and then find words to describe them — to separate *what happened* from the description of it! This realization was a major breakthrough for me.

The second source was working on *Thoughts and Visions*, the book of essays on the web site [www.thoughtsandvisions.com](http://www.thoughtsandvisions.com). My goal from the start had been to reduce each thought to its minimum expression, regardless of the cost in chances of being published or in reputation among academics. There was a price for adhering to this goal, however, namely, that of having to face how trivial many of my ideas turned out to be when I tried to express them in a sentence or two, or even a paragraph. Sweat droplets often broke out on my bald head when I realized how bland, how ordinary, the supposedly profound thought I had had really was. But I felt then, as I do now, that if you are doomed to failure, it is better to fail because you carried out what you believed in. If you fail trying to do things the way the world wants you to, all you and the world have learned is that not everyone can do things that way, which was clear before you started. If you fail trying to do things your own way, then you have learned something new, namely, that your way doesn’t work.

Montaigne was also there as an ever-present reminder of a man who had set down his thoughts the way he wanted to, even though by today’s standards, anyone writing that way would be unpublishable and certainly would not be able to get a PhD. Montaigne always seemed to me to write “from the center”, whereas modern essayists did not.

---

1. Gardner, Martin, *The Annotated Alice: Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass*, by Lewis Carroll, *With an Introduction and Notes by Martin Gardner*, New American Library, N.Y., 1960, p. 121. His next sentence is, “Unsound, of course.” I have no idea what he means by this, unless he means that it is unsound advice in the writing of poetry, which I agree with.

2. I do not know the source, so I am recalling the words from memory, and hence they may not be entirely accurate.

Almost equally important with the idea of writing meanings (and images), not words, was the recognition of the power of the idea of viewing *writing* as *a process of successive approximation*. At each stage, the best we can do is come up with the least bad version of what we are trying to accomplish. Perfection is impossible. It is useless to try to “do our best”, because we have no idea what our best is, much less whether we are, in fact, doing it. But we can work by the rule of always trying to do the *least bad job*, because that means that all we need to do is be able to see what needs improvement, and then to make some attempt, any attempt, at improvement. At any given time, we have the best version so far. We can say, “At least this much has been achieved.” If only a few words on a book in a week, then so be it. Fifteen minutes’ work in a day is still better than no minutes’ work. The organization of any written work, fiction or non-fiction, can be conceived as the task of filling buckets of various sizes with words, phrases, sentences, that successively approximate the desired work. At first there is only one bucket, containing every word, phrase, sentence that we believe will be relevant. Then the contents of this bucket are distributed into a few smaller buckets representing the next refinement in organization. And so forth for each of these buckets. Precise language, grammatical sentences, the *bon mot*, come at the *end* of the process, not the beginning or the middle. The word-processor makes all this much easier than it would be with typewriter.

Finally, I realized that *there is absolutely no reason to work in one direction only*, for example, from beginning to end. We can begin with mere notes, mere phrases, each on a separate line. This is merely an elaboration of the successively-smaller-buckets process. Each day we can begin our work anywhere (meaning, in any bucket), changing this word or that, moving phrases and sentences around to other buckets. We are under no obligation to work linearly in this linear medium. The process here described is, in fact, more like that of a painter, adding here, subtracting there. No work is ever completed. Endless revision is the life of the work. The result may or may not have merit, but you are the master of how it is produced.

## **The Therapist**

In the early nineties I met a Jungian therapist — I can no longer remember if it was through an ad I placed in the *Bay Guardian*, or through Perfect Strings, a singles’ group that catered to lovers of classical music. She was a good-looking blonde in her late forties who had just gotten her PhD and who lived in a nice little house on — St. in Oakland, where she conducted her practice. This woman was about as grim a piece of work as I had run across: serious, thin-lipped, very conscious of her standing in the world now that she had a PhD. Once we took a walk up Shasta Way, near Tamalpais St. in Berkeley and she revealed that she was related to a famous person whom she was almost certain I knew but whose name she couldn’t reveal. She made it seem that this secret was yet another burden that her privileged status in life forced her to carry. Several dates later, under my persistent but gentle prodding, she said it was the actor Joseph Cotten.

Despite all these signs, and against my better judgment, I allowed her to see my house. She looked at its undecorated rooms and less-than-pristine exterior with a clearly pained expression. Seeing this, I remarked that at the moment I couldn’t afford to spend more than what was required to preserve the investment. She, from on high: “*Everyone* can afford to decorate their house in a tasteful manner.”

The end was in view but I kept trying. One time, sitting at a corner table in Olivetti’s, on College Ave., I asked about her research. She said she didn’t like to talk about it to anyone who didn’t have a PhD in psychology because they wouldn’t be able to understand it. The thought

immediately went through my mind, “If I believed for one moment there was *any* idea in psychology that I couldn’t understand in fifteen minutes, I’d get a gun and blow my brains out.” I regret that I didn’t have the courage to say it to her.

The end came during a phone call on a rainy Thursday evening. For some reason, she began to wonder about why I seemed to be losing interest in her. I replied, “Because you don’t seem to have any spontaneity.” She said, clearly angry, “*Who do you think you are?*” and I hung up.

## **I Am a Tutor Again**

From the very first day I moved to Berkeley, I frequented the coffee shops, feeling the need at least twice a day for the village square function they provided. (But at the time of this writing, after eighteen years living in Berkeley, I have had less than half a dozen conversations with people I met there. These were not the coffee shops of 18th-century London.)

One that I went to was Au Cocquelet, about eleven blocks from my house. It was owned by two Iranians, and was one of the oldest in Berkeley.

One of the owners, whose name was Mike, seeing me always with my nose in a book, asked if I would be willing to help his son Omid with his math. He (the father) was trying to get him into Lowell High School, one of San Francisco’s most prestigious. I said I would do my best. When I see a Third World family in this country trying to improve the chances of their children to have a good life, I feel I cannot say no to a plea for help. I think the father offered me \$20 or \$25 an hour but I refused to take more than \$15 (and was reluctant to take even that), because I couldn’t guarantee success. I also told him that I wanted it understood that he or Omid could terminate the instruction any time and there would be no hard feelings on my part.

Omid turned out to be a short twelve-year-old with wavy black hair and a ready smile. When we first met, he was sitting at one of the tables in the dining area of the coffee shop, a little self-conscious, with an expression of curiosity as to what his father had come up with to help him get into a good high school.

We shook hands, and I asked him a little about himself. When he said he was interested in jazz, and in fact played trombone in the school jazz band, and I told him that I had once been a jazz musician, the bond was sealed. We decided we would meet in the dining room of the coffee shop on Saturday at 10 in the morning. I told him to make a note of the problems he had trouble with, and then we would go over them.

It soon became clear that he much preferred to talk about other things than math, especially jazz. Amazingly, this little guy liked Louis Armstrong above all jazz stars he had so far heard, Louis had died years before he was born! So we would spend a few minutes on fractions and algebra, then we would spend a lot of minutes on improvisation, and Louis’s greatness, and who other great jazz musicians were.

He also did remarkably good oil paintings, landscapes, and still lifes, as I found when, one weekend, he asked if he could have his hour of tutoring at his house in San Francisco. He was also the president of his class, and a member of the basketball team. And he had an excellent singing voice, as I found out when he invited me to see a musical that his school was putting on.

But the musical events he was most eager to have me attend were the performances of the school jazz band at Hoover Middle School, out in the avenues of San Francisco. I thought it every bit as good, if not better, than most of the high school jazz bands in the area. The teacher was the most uncharismatic man you could imagine leading a band — he never announced the pieces, he bowed uncomfortably to the applause at the end, and yet he did a superb job in getting his collec-



tion of junior high school students to perform superbly. Omid had a couple of solos during each performance: the band would play a few choruses, then stop and suddenly this golden bell of a huge trombone would appear above the heads of the assembled musicians, and out would come a youthful, at times awkward, but nevertheless impressive solo. Only by straining your eyes could you see the little guy below the level of heads who was playing the instrument.

For some reason, I also remember a tall white girl who played piano like Count Basie, but did so without the slightest expression or extra movement of the body. She just sat there and produced the most charming *plink, plink* solos, then went back to lay down the chords when the band came back in.

I brought Yolanda to one of these performances, and the next time Omid and I met, he asked me, “Was that your woman?” and I had to laugh and say, “Well, she used to be, but now we are just friends.”

What touched me as much as the music at these concerts was the need for the president of the PTA to announce at the end that due to lack of funding, all the school’s music programs were in danger of being cancelled. I don’t remember if they actually passed a hat or simply indicated where people could send checks. But it made me sad and angry. I was sure that there was still plenty of money to pay for uniforms for the football team.

Somewhere along the line, Mike or Omid told me that there were quotas for each of the major nationalities in the better San Francisco high schools. I thought it would be a good idea to find out exactly what the quota was for Iranians, and, if possible, what a student had to do to be selected. In the course of talking to an administrator in the San Francisco School District, I asked why they had quotas at all. He replied, “Because otherwise the best high schools would all be filled with Chinese girls.”

So, in between talk about jazz, we worked on problems, although it was clear his heart wasn’t in it. I got a first-class lesson in how much that even I, by no means a fast study in mathematics, took as “obvious”, when I happened to remark to Omid that an equation like  $y = x^2 + 4$  is “the same” regardless whether the letters are  $x, y,$  and  $z,$  or  $a, b,$  and  $c,$  in which case the equation would be  $a = b^2 + 4,$  provided no values had been previously assigned to  $x, y,$  and  $z$  or  $a, b,$  or  $c.$  That was too much. He put his pencil down on the table, leaned back in his chair with a thoroughly fed-up expression on his face, and said, “You people just make this up stuff as you go along!” And he had a perfect right to be annoyed, because apparently none of his teachers had bothered to explain to him, or to the rest of the students, the nature of the variable — that a letter like  $x, y, z, a, b,$  or  $c$  merely stands for any one of a set of numbers; it is merely a labelled box, so that, for example, if you put the number 5 into the  $x$  box, then the first equation says that in the  $y$  box you will find the number 29, because  $5^2 + 4 = 29.$  But you could just as well label the  $x$  box with a  $b,$  and the  $y$  box with an  $a,$  and then if you put the 5 in  $b$  box, the second equation says that in the  $a$  box you will find the number 29.

It became clear, in talking to Omid, that he was making the perfectly reasonable assumption that, since the *letters*  $x, y, z$  are clearly different from the *letters*  $a, b, c,$  then so must the equations be different. Unless the nature of a variable has been carefully explained to students, it is completely understandable that they should be utterly baffled by an equation like  $x = y,$  because clearly, the *letter*  $x$  does *not* equal the *letter*  $y.$

Because of his interest in jazz, and, in particular, in improvisation, I made a tape for him, a collection of what I considered to be great jazz solos from various records. I then wrote up some notes to go with the tape:

“NOTES FOR THE TAPE ‘GREAT JAZZ SOLOS’<sup>1</sup>

Good improvising is not just playing notes that fit the chords, it is not just demonstrating one’s technique. It is putting together musical “sentences” that say something (preferably something “important”!). A good solo “goes somewhere”, it has a beginning, a middle, and an end. It keeps the listener sitting on the edge of his chair, waiting to hear what happens next. All the great solos on this tape have this quality.

My apologies for the poor quality of the recording. One of my stereo channels keeps dropping out, as you will notice. Also, some of the records are very old and worn.

“Tiny Capers”, from Pacific Jazz album PJ-1214, *Arranged by Montrose*. Personnel: Clifford Brown, trumpet; Zoot Sims, tenor sax; Bob Gordon, baritone sax; Stu Williamson, valve trombone; Russ Freeman, piano; Carson Smith, bass; Shelly Manne, drums.

Clifford Brown was one of the most joyful musicians in jazz, and one of the greatest improvisers. Charlie Parker is reputed to have said to him, “I hear what you’re doing, but I don’t believe it.” (Many musicians said the same thing to Parker!, as a friend of mine reminded me.) Listen to how his “sentences” just flow from one to the next.

Both Clifford Brown and Richie Powell (a jazz pianist) were killed in a car accident on the way to a performance. Brown was only 26 years old.

“Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea”, from Atlantic album 1265, recorded in the 1950s. Personnel: John Lewis, piano; Milt Jackson, vibes; Percy Heath, bass; Connie Kay, drums.

Milt Jackson’s solo is good, but John Lewis’s is great. Listen to how much he does with so few notes — it’s as though he were telling you a story. A beginning piano student could probably learn to play most of this solo. I think this is about as near to perfection as jazz improvising will ever get.

Percy Heath is one of the two or three greatest bassists who ever lived. Listen to how perfectly his bass line supports the piano solo. The bass is way too loud relative to the other instruments due to a problem with my stereo. You will have to make appropriate adjustments when you play it. On the other hand, you will have the opportunity to hear some superb bass work.

“Rhythm-a-ning”, from Riverside Records’ album RLP 12-262, *Thelonius in Action: Thelonius Monk Quartet*, recorded at the Five Spot Cafe, New York City, 1957-58. Personnel: Thelonius Monk, piano; Johnny Griffin, tenor sax; Ahmed Abdul-Malik, bass; Roy Haynes, drums.

---

1. The only copy of these Notes I have is marked in pencil, “Sent with Heim tape. Written for Omid.” So it is possible that some of the comments were different in the Notes that I gave to Omid along with his copy of the tape.

*Freelancing, and Working at Sybase*

Two great solos here: first, the one by Johnny Griffin, the second by Thelonius. Listen to the long, very complex “sentences” in Griffin’s solo. Sometimes they are a bit rough, sometimes he gets off track a little, but this is still an incredible solo. Pure all-on-fire inspiration, the work of a man with more to say than he can possibly get out! Thelonius’ solo is much more disciplined, orderly, and brief. Note that it is made up of just a few very powerful phrases, repeated in interesting ways. He used to be criticized for playing “wrong” notes, but they are not wrong, they just add a bit of “lemon juice” to what he’s playing.

The Quartet’s theme song, “Epistrophe”, follows

I used to go to the Five Spot in the late ’50’s when this Quartet was there. The place wasn’t much bigger than the back room of your father’s coffee shop. (I don’t know if I was actually present on the night this recording was made.) These performances were a major event in jazz. Monk never spoke to the audience. He simply came onto the band stand with a soup bowl (no one knew what was in it), the rest of the band followed, and they just started playing. He always had audiences who thoroughly understood the music. The grunts and finger-snapping are Johnny Griffin’s.

“Give a Little Whistle”, from Fantasy 3-8, *Jazz at Storyville: The Dave Brubeck Trio and Quartet*, recorded Oct. 2, 1952, at George Wein’s Storyville in Boston. Personnel: Dave Brubeck, piano; Paul Desmond, alto sax; Lloyd Davis, drums; Ron Crotty, bass.

Brubeck used to take a lot of shit from the hipsters for playing stuff like this, but I think, considering it purely as a piece of improvisation, regardless of what school it’s supposed to belong to, that it’s great.

“Lady Be Good”, from Onyx Records album 221, *Charlie Parker First Recordings!*, recorded Nov. 30, 1940. Personnel: Charlie Parker, alto sax; Bob Mabane, tenor sax; Bernard Anderson, Orville Minor, trumpet; Bud Gould, trombone, violin; Jay McShann, piano; Gene Ramey, bass; Gus Johnson, drums.

...this and the next is Bird at around 20. The recording quality is terrible, and furthermore everything but Bird’s solos on this and the next one is horribly dated mediocrity. But keep listening through the mud and you will know why they called him Bird already at that early age.

“Honeysuckle Rose”. Same album as above, same personnel.

It’s as though everyone is driving souped-up Model A Fords, and suddenly he pulls out in a brand new Buick hydramatic.

“Lady Be Good”, from Verve album MGV-8002, re-issue of Norman Granz’ Jam Sessions, date not given. Personnel: Charlie Parker, alto sax; Oscar Peterson, piano; Ray Brown, bass; Barney Kessel, guitar; J. C. Heard, drums.

Bird with some of his peers, just layin’ out the facts, squeaky reed and all.

“Gertrude’s Bounce,” from Trip Records’ album TLP-5511, Clifford Brown & Max Roach at

Basin Street, recorded in 1956. Personnel: Clifford Brown, trumpet; Richie Powell, piano; Sonny Rollins, tenor sax; Max Roach, drums.

Another typical joyful Clifford Brown solo. Sheer happiness. One of his best. Sorry about the goddamn channel dropping out right at the start of his solo.

How in God's name I failed to include Chet Baker's solo on "Love Nest" I cannot understand (Pacific Jazz 1232, Chet Baker, trumpet; Russ Freeman, piano; Leroy Vinnegar, bass; Shelley Manne, drums). Unquestionably this solo belongs in the category of great jazz solos. I have listened to it what must be hundreds of times over the years, and still can't get over the perfection of it. If I were teaching a course in jazz playing — something I would be reluctant to do, since jazz playing is not something you learn in a course — Baker's solo would be one of my prime examples of how a good solo has a beginning, a middle, and an end, and how, in a good solo, the "sentences" are connected to each other.

Despite all the time we spent talking about jazz, Omid squeaked by in his tests with the grades he needed. Then we waited for the judgment from Lowell, and finally it came: he had been accepted. I felt proud that I had been able to live up to my unofficial contract with his father. But then there were family conferences, I think motivated by Mike's realization that, although his son was talented in several areas, he might not have the drive to succeed in the competitive academic atmosphere of Lowell. So it was decided that Omid would attend a school with almost as high a reputation as Lowell, namely Archbishop Riordan High School.

During the time I tutored him, he gave me two gifts to express his appreciation — ostensibly for helping him with math but I am sure far more for telling him a little about jazz. The first was a blue-gray shirt which ten years later I still had and wore, although by then there were holes in the elbows; and, for a Christmas present, a bottle of champagne.

I didn't see much of him after that. Occasionally I would ask Mike how he was doing, and Mike would say fine, and years after that, that he was going to college (I forget which one) and was majoring in communications. And then, one day, as I was huddled over my books in the restaurant area of the coffee shop, a shadow fell across my page, and a deep, baritone voice said, "Hi, John." I looked up, and there was this tall young man who it took me some moments to realize was Omid, all grown up. I stood, we shook hands warmly, I commented on how tall he had become, and asked him how he was doing. One of my only two former students (the other having been Stephanie) was apparently doing just fine. A few years later I heard that he had obtained a law degree from Loyola Law School in Los Angeles and in 2007 had begun practicing law in that city.

## **Housemates**

### **Lori**

I had been out of work since February, 1993, and was growing more desperate each day. In June I remarked to Steve, my neighbor, that I was thinking about renting out the middle room upstairs. He said one of the cooks at his and Jane's restaurant was about to leave her apartment; he'd ask her to stop by.

One evening there was a knock on my front door. It was two young women, one with short black hair and dark, flashing eyes like Laura's, the next-door neighbor with whom I had the brief affair when I was living in Cupertino in the early eighties. She introduced herself as Lori; the

other woman was her sister, Jan. They began talking about the three rose bushes in front of the house, how they needed pruning and spraying. Lori offered to help me with them. She remarked that she was leaving her apartment, could't stand her roommates, and had heard from my neighbors that I had a room to rent. The opportunity was irresistible, even though she had two cats. At first I offered her the master bedroom in the front of the house on the second floor, but then, thinking of the labor of moving my Stuart bed, and the prospect of living without a view, I called her back, told her honestly that I didn't want to move out of the front room. Would she consider the middle room, even though it needed painting and I couldn't afford to do that just then? She said yes. I think I charged her \$350 a month.

She moved in with her rag-tag collection of belongings. Since she didn't own a bed, I let her use Jeff's, and also his chest-of-drawers.

In the ensuing weeks, we often sat together in the kitchen or the dining room, talking. She said she was 31. Several times she remarked, "I don't like people. I'm a loner." It became clear that the main reason she didn't like people was their treatment of animals. Her only friends were her sister, Jan, who lived a few blocks away, and a soft, blowsy woman named Liz. She would quote her father, whom she hated: "All people are rotten." She disliked children, didn't ever want to get married though she was totally, madly, in love with Jon, her boss at the restaurant (who was bald!). He had warned her at the start that he would continue to see other women, but she wanted him anyway. One weekend day, I was forced to listen to them going at it, their cries as they neared orgasm: "Oh", "oh", "Oh", "oh", "Oh", "oh", ... Then he stopped calling her, gave no further explanation. She waited days for the phone to ring. She started sleeping twelve and more hours a day.

In our conversations, she talked about her other long-term relationships: one with a biker who beat her up on occasion, then, after a motorcycle accident that broke his skull open, requiring 92 stitches, how he would suddenly become violent for no reason. Another relationship was with an illiterate working-class Englishman named Chris. They lived near Roseville. He bought a run-down house with the intention of fixing it up, but had no idea what he was getting into. He kept promising to marry her, but never got around to it (she was clearly disappointed when she told me this). Once she remarked in passing that one of the great stimulants of sexual pleasure is being beaten.

When she was angry about something she would lapse into a kind of tough guy personality, use foul language, speak with a Southern accent. She would start pronouncing the word as "fokin'", sometimes just saying it, out of the blue, and not in reference to anything.

She had a way of standing at the sink in her cut-offs, her ass and those glorious, young, thick, horseback-rider thighs moving from side to side as she scrubbed a dish. I thought about offering her reduced rent if she would give me her panties at the end of each day.

She was raised on a farm in Nevada or Nebraska. Her mother died when she was nine. In her loneliness, she began adding to her collection of pets — dogs, cats, fish, I can't remember what others. Her father announced one day that she couldn't keep them in the house any more. She got him to allow her to keep them in the garage. Then, one day, after school, when she went to the garage, she found all of them gone. She asked her father what had happened to them. He told her he was sick and tired of having them around. He had taken them all to the pound. It was clear that, after that, her hatred for the old man was fixed for life. In her late teens, she joined the Army, but proved to be so rebellious that they gave her a dishonorable discharge.

When we talked in the kitchen in the afternoon or evening, and she had to go to the bathroom, she used mine, in the laundry room, instead of hers, on the second floor. She would sometimes leave the door to the laundry room open and also the door to the toilet as she peed.

As soon as she was settled, she asked me if she could take a corner of the back yard near the gate and dig it up for a garden. The lawn was just weeds, but I hesitated at first because it might have meant a fractional decrease in the value of the house. But then I decided that a garden would probably look better, so I said all right.

There was no denying her love of animals. For a few days, there was a possibility that she would be able to get a Lab retriever that was lingering around the restaurant and that had been sent to the pound. She was full of life over the prospect, but said she wouldn't take him if he was kept there for more than a couple of days, because the pound is like "a rubber room" for animals (that is, an insane asylum); they are all terrified, they feel the lack of love, perhaps sensing that some of them are sentenced to death. She said that some animals never recover from the experience, even when they are given a loving home. One Thursday evening we watched *The Wizard of Oz*. She sat perfectly erect on the couch, motionless. I heard a snuffle once in a while during the scenes where Dorothy is about to lose Toto. Next day, she found out that the owners had reclaimed the dog. She went to bed at six, slept till seven or eight the next morning, and was uncommunicative the next day.

Her cat would sometimes come and sleep in my bed. I would be awakened at five in the morning feeling something soft on my face. It was the cat. She would look intently into my eyes, and stroke my cheek with her paw. Plants and beer and food seemed to be the only things she spent money on. Sometimes I would give her a few dollars for flowers. She would fill a vase and put it on the TV set in my room. She had no savings, as far as I know. Steve and Jane offered medical insurance to all employees who stayed beyond a certain minimum length of time (six months or a year, I think), but for some reason she didn't take advantage of it. So one day when she got very sick with cold and fever, and decided she needed to see a doctor, the only hospital she could go to was Highland General in Oakland, which was known to provide emergency treatment to those with no medical insurance. She let me know that she had no way to get there, and so, naturally, I offered to drive her. We sat in a big room full of blacks, Latinos, a few whites, listening to a never-ending chorus of groans and grumbles as a busy staff mechanically checked in patients and then called out their names as a doctor became available to see them. The place had a Dante-esque quality about it. I thought of Orwell's essay, "How the Poor Die". The doctor gave her some pills and I drove her back home, receiving a perfunctory thanks for my efforts.

One Tuesday evening in November of 1993 she invited me to share the dinner she had cooked. She had also made a fire. I, feeling good about her sudden display of warmth, suggested we open a bottle of champagne — it was the one that Omid, my math student, had given me the previous year as a Christmas present. She bustled about, seemed eager to please me. She was wearing her old, mid-thigh-length, soft brown-checked nightshirt.

After dinner, we sat with the fire going and talked about the usual subjects: her job at the restaurant, plants, animals — mostly the cats — then drugs. She had done most of them, she said. She especially liked cocaine, but had given it up out of fear of becoming addicted.

She seemed to do a lot of running in and out of the room: once to get a bottle of her own champagne after we finished mine, but often to go to the bathroom, as though she were preparing something.

I told her how little marijuana I had smoked in my life, described a few of the fantasies I had had while under its influence. Suddenly she disappeared, came back with a longish cigarette, lit it,

took a deep inhale, squinted, and handed it to me. I wasn't sure for a moment what it was, because it was in white paper, but it turned out to be a remarkably well-packed joint. I took a deep drag, handed it back. I asked her how she was able to roll it so tightly; she said she had a machine. The effect turned out not to be all that strong, not even after half a bottle of champagne. It was just right.

She was sitting on the couch, Indian style, face aglow. Once or twice she left the room, came back to the couch, each time sitting down in that female way she had.

It all seemed too good to be true. I could be completely misreading the situation. But I couldn't let a possibility like this go by, so I suddenly said, looking over at her, "Damn! Would you mind if I came over and sat on that couch?"

She shrugged. I was over there in a flash. There were her clean-shaven thighs, the night-shirt covering them barely half-way. I put my hand on her thigh, begin caressing her. She gasped, threw her head back, eyes closed.

"Jesus, you have nice legs," I said. "All that water is worth it." (A few days previous I had gently suggested, as we discussed the large water bill, that maybe we could reduce the length of our showers, to which she had responded that she took a long time because she had to shave her legs.)

Her face was sweaty, puffy from pot and alcohol. I can't remember the words now, but soon thereafter, no doubt in response to my suggestions, she wondered if we could really have a sexual relationship. I replied, feeling very strong, "As long as you understand it could never be long-term. We don't share enough interests." Then I bent forward and licked her left knee. I couldn't resist those smooth, young, female, chunky thighs. Then, after a while, I bent down and bit her other knee.

I think she first took hold of my hand when I attempted to caress my way up underneath the night shirt. I thought I saw a few cunt hairs. I would have let her have a month rent-free if she had let me look at it for thirty seconds. She held my hand in hers, rubbing, stroking it. Her skin was rough from years of working around restaurant grills. She kidded me about how soft my skin was.

Our whole conversation was centered on the question of whether we could have a sexual relationship. "I often think about it," she said, eyes closed, rubbing my hand.

I kissed her neck under her ears. My arm was around her shoulders, hand hanging down. At what I thought was the right moment, I allowed the fingers to reach down beneath the neck of her shirt and feel one small, erect nipple before she pulled my hand away.

She said that she couldn't just have a sexual relationship, she needed love.

I can't remember the circumstances leading to our first kiss, but it occurred on a day after the marijuana evening and was immediately a French kiss on her part as well as mine. Later she complained that I never took her out on a date. I countered, with mock pouting, that I was constantly inviting her to breakfast, dinner, movies, but she always said no. Later she said something about the possibility of jealousy arising if we became sexually involved, but didn't say in which one of us.

The old anxieties returned, even though — no, just because — I was about to realize a dream I had had for months, the opportunity of a lifetime: this maddeningly sexy 31-year-old and me, close to 60! Compared to Jon, how well would I perform? I'm not good at throwing women around, being rough with them. Maybe that's what she wants. Suppose I lose the erection...

I convinced myself she didn't want sex right away. (Furthermore, I had got her to be willing to let me kiss her and caress her thighs, so that counted almost for full credit, didn't it?) She lay

with her head back, eyes closed. I got up to go upstairs, then bent down and kissed her on her forehead. She: “Don’t I get a real kiss?” I bent down, kissed her on the mouth. She immediately gave me a French kiss, her tongue flicking against mine. Then I left her and went upstairs and didn’t come down again.

Next day when I got home, she was already asleep.

On Thursday morning I left a note for her: “Lori— Don’t forget: Mystery night tonight” in reference to the weekly TV detective shows on Channel 9. She was asleep when I got home at six in the evening and slept till six next morning. I left another note on Friday saying that I would get some take-home Italian food, wine, we could have dinner by the fire. She called me at the office, said she had eaten too much for lunch, we could just have a fire. When I came home, she barely said hello. There was a knock on the front door. It was Liz. I went down to the kitchen. Lori was more boyish than I had ever seen her: punk, angry, wise-ass. Liz and I kidded her about her stubbornness, but I could see that the two were on a private wavelength. I went upstairs, it being clear that I was going to sit alone by the fire. I heard them come up to her room; there were sounds that indicated she was gathering some of her belongings. Lots of giggling. Then they left the house. She came back early the next morning. I decided to give her the silent treatment, which I remembered was so painful for Marcella.

I threw the roses she always put on the TV in my room into the garbage can, where she would see them. Saturday and Sunday and Monday she didn’t leave the front porch light on for me as she always did. Sunday night I left a note saying I would be having a few friends over to watch a video at seven. Shortly before they arrived, I heard her running breathless down to shut and lock the back door, which was her responsibility.

On Monday I decided I was tired of the war. I left her a note saying I’d like to talk to her when I got home. It would be brief. She shouldn’t worry, I was not going to kick her out. That evening, she was sitting on the living room floor, shelling walnuts, a fire going. I sat in my chair, so that we were both facing the fire.

I: “I suppose I should begin by asking if you know why I was angry?”

She: “I didn’t know you were angry.”

I: “I haven’t spoken to you in three days!”

She said she hadn’t noticed anything.

I: “You said hello to me in the kitchen Saturday. I completely ignored you.”

She said she assumed I had something on my mind.

I told her the reason. She said she didn’t think that her saying we’d have a fire together was all that binding. I should have told her.

From Tuesday on, the front porch light was back on when I came home from work. There were new roses on the TV. When I went downstairs, she was sitting on the couch/bed in front of the fire. I took her hand and told her how much of a home she had made of the place. Her face lit up briefly. But then her face became sullen.

She said she wanted to cook a Thanksgiving dinner. I said there were at least six people I could invite, but that it was important that we got a group that could talk to each other. She: “I don’t want any *system*.” She wanted people to be able to come whenever they wanted, say nothing if they preferred, leave whenever they wanted. She asked about getting a Christmas tree. I said fine, I would pay half. She spoke in that sullen, I-suppose-I-have-to-ask manner of hers.

I was utterly baffled by her not wanting to have another evening like the one we had had. She couldn’t possibly have guessed the depth of my anxieties. I thought: This is one tough chick: a man fails to deliver the goods just once, and he is *out*.



When Jon was in the mood, he came over and I had to endure listening to them going at it on the living room floor. The whole house shook, and that made it even worse for me, since it only pointed out how poorly built the place was. Months later, she took up with a guy named Craig, a house painter. I would see the guy in the morning, lounging in my back yard, sitting in my lawn chair, drinking coffee. He had long hair, was moderately handsome, had a self-confident swagger about him.

But by that time I decided she had to go. In revenge, she took a crow-bar and pried off all the knobs on Jeff's dresser, which I had given her to use. I had the locks changed immediately, so that I could be sure I would be there to make sure she didn't steal anything when she moved the rest of her stuff out.

After Lori, I resolved never again to rent to the working class. From then on, only Cal students (female, because I wanted a woman's touch around the place). At the time of this writing (2005), eight have lived here, and they have been a source of much pleasure (none of it sexual) and not a little anxiety. They included Carrie, who graduated from Cal with honors at age 19; Naomi, who gave piano lessons to little kids while earning her degree in philosophy; the beautiful Tatiana, an expert on Gypsy music who already as an undergraduate gave courses in the subject, and the wonderfully bohemian Zoe, who was the leader of a lesbian circle at the University, and who hosted unforgettable parties and dinners at my house.

### **Carrie**

In late summer of 1994, a tall, dark blonde answered my ad in the Student Housing data base. She had a no-nonsense manner as I conducted her through the house. After Lori, I decided not to allow housemates to have overnight guests (in their room) but that didn't seem to be a problem for her. She asked a few questions, then said she would take the room, although she first had to call her father. He had been a corporate lawyer and had then decided to become a minister, and at the time was in his last year of seminary. I told her she was welcome to call him from my phone, and that I would be glad to talk to him. He was clearly nervous when I spoke to him: here his very attractive 19-year-old daughter had called from bohemian, radical-left Berkeley — on the West Coast — to tell her father, who was about to take the cloth, that for the school year she would be sharing a house with a middle-aged man. I explained to him that I had been a researcher (stretching the truth a little) at Hewlett-Packard Labs in Palo Alto, that I was divorced and had a son who was a currency trader. He asked questions, and I could hear that he didn't know what to do. But when I handed her the phone, it was clear he was, very reluctantly, going to give her his permission.

She was an English major, and very smart, being already a senior at age nineteen. One of her senior papers was on the Nobel Prize winners at the university. She had a boyfriend, R. J., a blond guy who didn't say much. The two of them had a motorcycle, and would sometimes work on it in the driveway. She also had a cat, India, whom she dearly loved.

It was difficult to carry on a conversation with her because she was a constant interrupter. I got the impression that she simply didn't have — for whatever reason, genetic or upbringing — the sense of timing in conversations that most of us take for granted. I used to wait a second or two after she had finished expressing her thought, just to be sure that she had, in fact, finished, but as soon as I started to utter a reply, she broke in and said more. Then I tried not waiting at all, but starting with my reply almost before hers was finished. But she interrupted after a few seconds. I tried to figure out what the correct interval was between her talking and my talking, but never found it.

She seemed reasonably comfortable with her life — at least she never talked about problems. But one winter day I came home and found her huddled in front of the fireplace, with a tiny flickering flame under a single Presto log. Like virtually all women, young and old, whom I have ever known, she had no idea how to build a fire, and so she assumed that all you do is put a log in the fireplace, with maybe a few pieces of paper under it, light the paper and wait for the log to catch fire. It was one of the saddest sights I have ever seen: this poor girl wanting the comfort and friendship of a fire in the fireplace during what may have been a sad moment in her life, and getting instead a single, weak flame that was about to go out.

I suppose this is as good a place as any to mention that in the more than ten years I rented rooms to young women students, I never found one who was consistently able to build a fire. I soon got into the habit of offering to build fires for them, but when they seemed reluctant to have to depend on the landlord for such a simple task, I used to give little lectures: “OK, now the basic idea is to go from *light* to *heavy*. OK? Light...to heavy. So first you begin with something very light, namely, newspaper: you loosely wad up three full-size sheets, put them between the andirons. Then on top of the newspaper, put some thin sticks of kindling [here I picked up a few thin sticks from in front of the firewood holder]; then on top of the thin sticks, you put thicker sticks, like these [picking several up]; then a few thin logs [picking up one or two]. Then you strike the match and hold the flame *underneath* the newspaper. Why? Because fire burns *up*. It burns *up* through the stuff that burns easiest, namely, newspaper — the light stuff — then up through the stuff that burns next-easiest, namely, the thin sticks [pointing], then *up* through the thicker sticks [pointing], then up through the thin logs [pointing]. See? The fire burns from *light* material *up* to *heavy* material. Then, when the fire is burning nicely, you can put on a thicker log or two...” I thought no set of instructions in the history of the planet had ever been clearer, and yet I would seldom see a fire that a housemate had built. More often than not, they would wad up a piece of newspaper, put a few sticks of kindling on top, then put the largest piece of wood in the firebox on top of that. I suppose their logic went something like: “Big fire as soon as possible = big log as soon as possible”. One housemate, in 2005-2006, at first showed real promise in mastering the art, but then I realized that most of the time she was using the rectangular fire starters that came with Presto logs, and either starting the Presto logs burning directly using them, or else skipping the newspaper and the nice succession of light to heavy materials I had so carefully explained and simply getting the fire starter to work on some fairly thick kindling. I always wanted to say, though I never did: “I simply cannot give you full credit for a fire-starter fire start.”

I say again: women are not like the rest of us.

In passing I should mention that the above 2005-2006 housemate told me that one of her friends who was visiting while she had a fire going exclaimed that she had never heard a fire crackle before! All the fireplaces she had known, including the one in the house in which she was raised, had been gas-fired. The difference between youth and age (at least my age) was revealed even more amusingly when a young woman student, not yet 21, who sublet my regular housemate’s room in the summer of 2006 remarked that her sister had become interested in old popular music, and actually bought one of those machines they had then that played these large, black, plastic, disk things. It took me a few moments to realize she was talking about the long-playing records — LPs — of my youth and early adulthood. For years, whenever I talked to the young about Lenin, I had always added (for comic effect), “That’s Vladimir Ilych, not John<sup>1</sup>”, but now I realized that many of my listeners would have been genuinely confused without my clarification,

---

1. That is, not John Lennon of Beatles fame

wondering why they had not heard before that John, in addition to being a musician in one of the most successful groups of all time, had also led a revolution in Russia.

Carrie and I never became close friends, but to this day, every Christmas she sends me a card. Since I hate to go through the trouble of buying and mailing Christmas cards, I always call her in San Francisco, where she has lived since graduation from UC. (She worked first as an editorial assistant for the high-tech business magazine, *Red Herring*, then in a private agency concerned with American Indian affairs, then as a technical writer and factotum for small software companies.) We always have a nice if brief conversation, she still not having mastered the skill of not starting to speak at exactly the same moment as the other person. Once she even dropped by to visit while she was in Berkeley. We sat under the lemon tree and talked, and I found that one way to solve the interruption problem was simply not to start to speak very often.

### **I Plant a Rose Garden**

In spring of 1995, with help from Doug J., I cleared the bamboo and the huge, ugly cactus plant from the flower bed in the back yard, and planted seventeen bare-root roses. In order beginning closest to the house, they were (and are): Taboo, Fragrant Memory, Tournament of Roses, Pink Peace, Ingrid Bergman, Blue Girl, Sunsprite, Pink Parfait, Taboo, Bewitched, Tournament of Roses, Joseph's Coat, Blue Girl, American Pride, Sunsprite, and Olympiad. The smells: Taboo: like a dark-red velvet chair in a beautiful Victorian home; Fragrant Memory and Pink Peace: like a house made of pink petals in a meadow surrounded by woods on a sunny afternoon; Blue Girl: like sexy little old ladies; Sunsprite: like shaving cream; Pink Parfait: like a freshly powdered baby's bottom; Bewitched: like perfumed kerosene but nevertheless like pure happiness. Later, I added an antique rose in the little dirt rectangle bordered by heavy, dark-brown square beams at the foot of the back porch stairs. This was a bushy rose with abundant clusters of small, blue flowers through most of the year. I sensed, however, that it was losing some of its vitality as the years went on, and no doubt wanted to retire, perhaps do a little traveling.

Although I am, like my mother, effectively drug proof, the smell of any one of these roses for a few seconds can completely abolish the normal depression in which I have spent my life. The effect is not to be countered even if I try to.

Over the years, I tried not to force my housemates to exclaim over the roses. Some housemates — for example, Naomi, to be introduced below — were generous in their expressions of appreciation, others less so. After 2000, I began offering them \$5 to smell the blooms on certain specified plants, this on days when the roses were so fragrant that I thought it criminal not to get as many people as possible to enjoy them. Usually the offer was greeted with a laugh, but the housemate nevertheless spent a moment or two over a bloom on each indicated plant (hesitantly leaning forward, holding her hair to the side of her head with hand, saying “Ohhh...!”). I think on one or two occasions the payment was accepted. (I also offered payment for watching a film I thought was particularly good, and that I thought they should see as part of their cultural education. In this case, the pay was usually \$15.)

Every once in a while, a visitor would remark to another, “He likes gardening,” to which I would respond, “No, I don't like gardening, but I like having gardened.” I dreaded the pruning that had to be done in January, and then the applying of a cup or two of the various fertilizers (different each year, depending on the clerk I spoke to at Berkeley Horticultural Nursery) to each plant in March, along with steer or chicken manure or whatever else the clerks deemed advisable. Later, in the early 2000s, I somehow heard of a superb gardener, Linda Sobolewski. I had her do

the annual pruning and offer advice as to fertilizers. But her and my labor was amply rewarded as the shiny new leaves, almost oily in appearance, some of them red, began to appear already in February, thanks to global warming. By late April, the first crop of blossoms turned the back yard into a paradise. Thereafter, there were always a few roses in bloom, but the differing rates of recovery following removal of spent blossoms usually meant there were usually a few bushes without any flowers. Nevertheless, on occasion from April through November, I had rose blossoms (beautiful pink Bewitched especially) that were more than seven inches across. When there were plenty of blossoms in the garden, I cut a few and put them in a vase on the newell post at the base of the stairway in the front hall.

Always trying to overcome the cruel blow of Fate that forced me to live among the rabble in a lower-class neighborhood, after the roses were planted I instructed housemates *never* to say to visitors, “John is working in the back yard”, but instead to say, “John is overseeing certain important projects in the western acreage of the estate.”

I knew that every respectable gardener has a compost heap, so I started one at the far end of the flower bed, next to the garage. Into it I put all cuttings from the yard, plus all organic kitchen waste, plus for a while all the leaves I raked, until it became clear that magnolia leaves were effectively like sheet metal — they took that long to decompose. So thereafter I put all these leaves in the large green plastic bin that the City provided, so they could be hauled away by the City and recycled. I was amazed at the appetite of the compost heap: a two-foot high pile of leaves and cut ivy from the front of the house would, in a month or two, be reduced to dirt only a few inches above ground level. And the truth is that, over the course of a year, very little of the rich compost soil wound up in the garden, simply because there was so little of it, given that I always had to have some on hand to cover the latest pile of leaves and kitchen garbage with. As the years went by, I more and more began to think that the real purpose of a garden is to allow you to have a compost heap. My neighbor Jane, who knew everything, decided on the basis of one visit that the compost heap was no good because the center of it was not warm enough, in her opinion, to kill seeds of unwanted plants. I dismissed her criticism since, warm enough or not, year after year the heap ate huge amounts of organic material, producing a rich, moist soil in return. I used to tell visitors, “I have seen mature plants *tear themselves out by the roots* and hobble across the lawn just to get at that compost heap!”

As far as the lawn was concerned, I hit on an idea I consider one of my best — a genuine transvaluation of values — namely, to let the grassy weeds that covered the back yard grow and become my lawn! These were not dandelions, and so, if I kept them watered and mowed, and the edges neatly clipped, they became, to all but the most expert eye, a perfectly nice lawn. This was the kind of idea that I knew would have delighted Michael J — , my friend and co-worker during the HP Labs years. Later on, I began digging up the weed grass that flourished in the rose bed and transplanting it to bare spots in the lawn. In passing I should mention two other ideas that I am sure would have delighted him. Both occurred to me about ten years later, but I will mention them here. In early 2006, I discovered that I could avoid the tedium of raking leaves by picking up the leaves by hand each day. This took only a few minutes, but, far more important, it provided much of the same exercise that I would have gotten by standing in my bedroom and bending forward, trying to touch my toes, then straightening up, then repeating the movement, as is done in the course of traditional exercises. So I was performing a needed task and exercising at the same time.

The second idea was occasioned by the fact that the afternoon sun shone through the window of my second-floor study in the back (the west side) of the house. Since my computer was on a

work table facing the window, the sun got into my eyes in the afternoon. I had hung a large blue towel over part of the window, but at a certain time in the afternoon, the rays came in through the part of the window that the towel didn't cover. I began thinking that the time had come for me to buy a proper set of blinds like the one I had on the window in my bedroom on the other side of the house. But then, knowing that that meant enduring the dreaded ordeal of shopping, I began asking myself, "What else prevents the rays of the sun from getting into your eyes?" Well, certainly curtains or blinds or towels on the window. But also — a baseball hat! And so I got one of my baseball hats out of the closet — these no longer being needed to hide my baldness after a friend of Gaby's (both women to be introduced later) gave me a natty black beret. So now when the rays get around the curtain, I put on the hat and solve, in a matter of seconds and at no additional cost, what would otherwise have cost me days of going to stores, plus \$50-\$100.

As the years went by, the morning glories at the rear corner of the house, outside the kitchen, grew in profusion, climbing up the side of the house and onto the shed dormer that was one wall of my housemate's bedroom on the second floor. They eventually all but covered the kitchen window that faced Crazy Tom's kitchen windows in the house next door. They also began crawling out on the ancient black electric wire that ran to the garage, and then up to the second floor in the back of the house, so that most of the year we had blue flowers peeping in around the edges of the rear window of the kitchen. I would proudly tell visitors they were my "English cottage look". But just about every contractor and carpenter who did any work on the house hated them, saying they destroyed shingles and should be removed. Naturally, I ignored this barbaric advice.

## **Naomi**

I was having considerable difficulty finding a renter in the summer of '96, after Carrie left. (She had graduated and found a job in San Francisco.) Not even my sense of humor seemed to do any good — for example, remarking in passing, when discussing the rent with a prospective renter, that for renters who wanted it, I also offered a Nagging Parent Option, in which every day I would ask them if they had done their homework, and cleaned their room, and written to their grandmother, and why weren't they hanging out with better company, but that I charged an extra \$50 a month for it. In August, I saw Chet on the sidewalk in front of his house, talking to a young woman. He called me over, asked if the room was still free. I said yes. He introduced me to the young woman, whose name was Naomi, and said she was looking for a room. She asked what the rent was. I said \$350 a month plus half of utilities. She asked if there was room for a piano in the house. I said sure, in the downstairs front parlor. She asked for my phone number, and said she would let me know. A day or so later she called, said she would like to take the room.

Naomi was an Israeli who spoke perfect American English. (She had been born in Israel, then from age two to five lived in Los Angeles, then in Israel until age 20.) She was studying philosophy at UC Berkeley. She was already 22 at the time she moved in, but that was because she had spent a year or more in the Israeli Army. In addition to English, she spoke fluent Spanish and Hebrew.

Her father, Luis, a native of Mexico, apparently had come within months of getting a PhD in mathematics (differential topology) from UC Berkeley, his thesis advisor having been Prof. Czern. But he had quit when he decided he was not going to be able to solve the problem he had hoped to solve to the degree of perfection he felt was necessary. He told me that he later regretted his decision. He became a junior college math professor.

Her mother, Miriam, worked at the Lawrence Hall of Science, at the top of the hill overlook-

ing the UC campus. This was a science museum with an emphasis on exhibits aimed at primary and secondary school students. She was part of a group that developed materials for teaching science in the public schools, and often helped Naomi with her term papers. Naomi had two sisters, Avital, who was a couple of years older and was studying political science in Washington D.C., and Michal, a few years younger, a music major at UC who played the cello. The family home was in a nice residential district in lower Piedmont, which Naomi humorously referred to as “Baja Piedmont” because, in comparison with upper Piedmont, with its grand old mansions, lower Piedmont was equivalent to the primitive desert peninsula in southern California known as “Baja California”.

Her father was a superb craftsman. He had remodelled their house, installing a large pot-bellied stove in the living room that, because the staircase to the second floor was at one end of the room, allowed him to heat the entire house for \$250 per winter. He also built at least one large kayak in the basement, and sometimes took it to Lake Merritt in Oakland for a Sunday outing with a passenger or two. He clearly had the same patience and love of materials that the two other great craftsmen in my life, namely, my father, and Cor Laan, the illustrator in my department at Beckman Instruments, had had. For him it was the pleasure of the work that mattered, not the final product. For me, throughout my childhood, it was the other way around: I hated the ordeal I had to go through in order to obtain the one thing that justified all the effort and frustration, namely, the boat or derby racer or hut or whatever.

He had a natural warmth and I think it is fair to say that everyone liked him. Chet told me that one day when he arrived at their house, he was reading poetry to his wife.

I was invited to the picnics the family sometimes had in parks, and once to their Hanukkah dinner; Naomi’s grandfather was a professor of sociology at UC Berkeley, even though he had gotten his PhD rather late in life. His wife, Hadassah, was active in the League of Women Voters.

Naomi was studying piano under Sharon Mann, a truly gifted teacher who lived in the Berkeley Hills, and had made her initial reputation with a PhD on the performance of baroque music, in particular, that of Bach, on authentic instruments, back in the days when that was a novel idea. She had made a CD of the Bach partitas, and it immediately sold out in Berkeley. By the time I knew Naomi, it was almost impossible to find, though I succeeded eventually. I only heard Sharon play once — at a recital in San Francisco with other Bay Area piano teachers. She played Chopin, and I was very impressed. She was married to Jack Hollander, a physicist at Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory.

Naomi was a dedicated student both in music and in her academic pursuits. She practiced several hours a day. I came to think of some of the pieces she played as “Naomi’s tunes” — Chopin’s *Nocturne in B-flat Minor*, Op. 9, No. 1; Mozart’s *Piano Sonata No. 12*; Schuman’s *Arabesque*; and Beethoven’s *Sonatas No. 6 and No. 18* (“*The Hunt*”) — because whenever I heard one of them played on a classical music station, I was immediately reminded of her practicing it, over and over. I don’t recall her exclaiming over any particular classical pieces except for Dvorák’s *American String Quartet*, which she loved.

Already as an undergraduate she had set her sights on getting a PhD in philosophy, specializing in Spinoza. I told her (truthfully) that I would be glad to read some of the papers she wrote for her classes. I also told her to keep in mind, throughout her schooling, Larry Kroger’s essay on *Macbeth* in his final English exam (as quoted in the *National Lampoon 1964 High School Yearbook Parody*), which included sentences like “*Macbeth* is one of the most important plays in the English language. Unfortunately, time does not permit me to go into detail about this important

play and its many characters, which are among the most important characters in any play in the English language...”

Naomi regularly gave me copies of her papers, and I offered the most positive commentary I could. One of her ideas was that in the Infinite Intellect there are no abstractions, no categories, so subsets, because God does not need these: to conceive the set of even numbers, for example, God simply conceives of every even integer; he does not use a defining property such as “the set of all integers that are divisible by 2”. To conceive of, say, the set of all computer programs that are guaranteed to eventually halt for every input, God simply conceives of every such program. I told her I thought this idea was an interesting one, especially given that the Infinite Intellect was infinite, and thus had “room” to list every entity in the infinite set of entities in question.

But her papers made me more convinced than ever that philosophy is fundamentally literature, and that academic specialties devoted to the study of individual philosophers of the past are nothing more than self-perpetuating cultures in which the fundamental criterion of correct and incorrect is interpretation, thus dooming these cultures never to accomplish anything except exercise their practitioners’ skill in arguing over interpretations. But I never mentioned this to her.

She and Chet were lovers, though he was close to 25 years older than she, and I am sure that the fact that my house was right across the street from his was one reason she took the room. In the evening around ten, after she had finished her homework and her practicing, she would gather her towel and toothbrush, walk across the street and climb the steps to his front door (he had one of those typical Berkeley houses in which the first floor contains a two-car garage and perhaps a small apartment, and the main living quarters are on the second floor). Early the next morning, she could be seen crossing the street back to my house, towel and toothbrush in hand. Chet told me (or maybe Naomi did) that her parents were not altogether keen on the relationship because, although he was a classical pianist and teacher, he was not Jewish (he was, in fact, a fallen Mormon).

### **Her Students**

She had about eight students, ranging in age from 5½ to 11, none of them, I think, ever having taken piano lessons before. There was Henry, 5½, extremely shy, as will be described below. There was Elizabeth, whose mother, Caroline, had a smile and an obvious eagerness to be liked that made you wish you had become a lawyer or doctor or professor so you could have married her and lived with her in a nice house in North Berkeley or the Hills. Elizabeth’s sister, Marina, like several other sisters of Naomi’s students, was a born artist. Sometimes her mother would bring her to the house during Elizabeth’s lesson, and let her amuse herself in the back yard. One time, she came over to me as I entered the back yard, looked up at me through the thick little specs that sat on her nose, and said, “Hey, John, come here.” I followed her to the back of the yard, under the bay tree. She pointed at a neat little arrangement of stones and twigs and leaves on the grass. She: “What’s that?” I, peering intently: “Well, I don’t know, Marina. It looks very nice...” She: “It’s a salad!” At other times she drew pictures on the sidewalk with colored chalks, then put stones, twigs, leaves in them. She was a five-year-old master of collage.

She played violin, her mother having bought her the cutest miniature version of the instrument you ever saw. At one of the recitals, she was asked (allowed) to play a tune, and she did.

Naomi encouraged her young musicians to make up their own melodies. One of the best at doing this was Noam, another Israeli, who was seven. His mother told Naomi that one day, as she and her son were driving along in the car, Noam announced, “I can name three composers!” Her

mother, intrigued (and impressed) said, “Oh? Who?” Noam: “Mozart, Beethoven, and me!” Another time, after Naomi had taught him about the various degrees of loudness at which one can play — *forte* (loud), *mezzoforte* (half loud), *piano* (soft), *pianissimo* (very soft) — he went to camp. When he came back, she asked him how it was. He: “Oh, mezzohard.”

And then there was eight-year-old Cassey, who I saw one day standing on the piano seat as Naomi, seated next to her, talked to her. Naomi told me later that she had decided to quiz her on harmonic vs. melodic intervals, which she had taught her recently.

N. (pointing to music): “What’s this one?”

No response.

N. “It begins with *mmmmm*.”

C.: “Metamorphosis?”

N. (laughing): “Sweetie, that word is longer than you are! Where did you hear it?”

No response.

N.: “Do you know what it means?”

Shaking of head.

Naomi then said to me, and I think correctly, that for the very young, big words are the property of adults, and one big word is pretty much as good as the next because they all mean the same thing, namely, something incomprehensible.

And then there was Monica, the daughter of a German woman who once asked if she could borrow a book from my library — just for a few days. I, who never allowed books to leave the house in anyone’s hands but my own, decided to make an exception in this one case (I mean, my God, who could imagine the German mother of a sweet little piano student not returning a book on time). But she didn’t, and it took several phone calls to get it back.

And there was Bouvé, an Asian girl, who, while her sister was having her lesson, would wander upstairs, take the artificial flowers — essentially little tufts of fiber on long wire stalks — that were in a vase on the little hall table and adroitly place one of them, oh, say, in the keyhole of the bathroom door. Naomi tried to explain to her that perhaps one shouldn’t take the flowers, artificial or otherwise, that one finds in a house one is visiting, and stick them in keyholes, and Bouvé would nod, and after the next lesson, there were two in the keyhole, plus several arranged nicely on the top of the toilet.

And Sydney, an older student (she was around ten or eleven) who would have been the clear winner in any Miss Self-Confidence competition. One day, as she was leaving following one of the recitals described below, she noticed the roses I had in a vase on the newel post at the foot of the bannister in the front hall. She stopped to look at them, and then said to me as I was coming down the hallway, “Excuse me, sir. These are very nice, but I think they would perhaps look even better without the yellow one, because yellow doesn’t coordinate as well with pink and red.” Aft-ward, I told Naomi, “That kid is going to be President some day.”

### **The Quarterly Recitals**

Four times a year, Naomi had her students give a recital for the parents. She collected all the extra chairs in the house, borrowed others from Chet, and I helped her line them up in rows in the living room. At each recital, she would have each kid stand up and introduce him- or herself, tell how long he or she had been studying with her, and then announce the piece he or she was going to play. Understandably, some of the kids were shy, none more so than Henry, aged 5½. He stood up, eyes lowered, at one side of the doorway between the living room and the front room, and said in the smallest voice you ever heard (or didn’t hear), “My name is Henry.” She asked him to



Speak a little louder but he couldn't. So she repeated his words at audible volume. "My name is Henry." Small voice: "I've been studying with Naomi..." Naomi's voice: "I've been studying with Naomi..." Small voice: "...for...for two months...three months." Naomi: "For three months." Small voice: "Today I am going to play..." Naomi: "Today I am going to play..." And then he named his piece and Naomi repeated it. He made his way to the piano bench, sat down, put his music on the rack with some help from Naomi, and then, as he gazed at the music, his little fingers began playing a melody. Everyone clapped enthusiastically afterward, of course.

One by one, the students took their turn, bowing with eyes lowered afterward, and taking their seats in the audience, next to the beaming mom and dad.

The pot-luck dinner was always in the back yard when weather permitted, so that people could enjoy the roses, and sit under the lemon tree if it was hot. Naomi always provided some colored chalk for the kids to amuse themselves while the adults talked. This talk was almost always about the politics and other goings-on at the private schools to which many of these parents sent their kids. The deep thinkers on the radical left, in Berkeley and elsewhere, had decided that if white kids from homes in which school was a very important matter indeed were forced to spend their days in classrooms with black kids whose parents couldn't have cared less about school, then the black kids would suddenly change, and develop a passion for learning. Nothing remotely like that happened, and so the wealthy liberal families managed to get an amendment to the busing rule that, in effect, allowed parents to choose which school their kids would be bused to. But that idea was not a complete success either, and so eventually all the liberal families that could possibly afford it sent their kids to private schools.

After one of these dinners, Naomi had a photo taken of her and her smiling young musicians in front of the roses, and gave it to me. It is included in the Photo Album chapter of this book.

### **"Milvia Conservatory"**

Naomi and her students were not the only musicians who filled my house with music. Her younger sister, Michal, who was still in high school when Naomi first moved in, was a member of a little string trio<sup>1</sup> which, in its ongoing search for places to practice, sometimes wound up in the downstairs front room of my house. Michal was one of those rare people who had so much music in her that if she made a mistake, or played a note out of tune, which she sometimes did, you didn't mind. The trio she played in consisted of teenage friends of hers — Emily Adams, violinist, the daughter of John Adams, the famous American composer, and the amazing Masha Kozhevnikova, pianist, who was then only 15 or 16 years old. I remember them working through a Brahms piece, and there was Masha, not only playing the piano part flawlessly and effortlessly and, as far as I could tell, hardly looking at the notes, but also conducting whenever she felt it was necessary, making suggestions to the other players, all this with obvious delight. Her parents were Russian refugees who had been members of the Moscow Theater before they fled their country about twenty years earlier. Her mother, Olga, and I used to talk about Russian literature when she visited here. She told me about the author Mikhail Bulgakov and got me to read his *The Master and Margarita*. But she was concerned about her daughter. She would look up at me, with her sad eyes, put her hand on my arm, and say, in her irresistible Russian accent, "John... I am worried." I would try to reassure her, tell her that her daughter had a remarkable talent, that the future was hers. But it did no good. And, in fact, the poor woman's concerns turned out to be justified, because instead of going on with her studies (Masha was being home-schooled at the time), she

---

1. Possibly it was a quartet, I no longer remember. But I only recall the three musicians indicated.

began acquiring ne'er-do-well boyfriends. (She and one of them, Ian, knocked on my front door on a couple of occasions to ask if they could borrow a few dollars so they could get home on BART.<sup>1</sup> Naturally, I was glad to give them the money.) A few years later, my neighbor Chet told me that she and Ian, or possibly another boyfriend, had set up a website and that she was appearing in pornographic films. Eventually she gave up music — a very sad loss, because she was a genuine, natural talent<sup>2</sup>. At one point, I offered her \$100 to learn Bach's Fugue in B Minor on a Theme by Tomaso Albinoni (BWV 951), which is one of the Master's triumphal marches through the land of the fugue. (I had just heard it on a Glenn Gould CD I had bought<sup>3</sup>.) She smiled, seemed eager to take on the task, but never got around to it.

As part of my ongoing campaign to understand atonal music, I asked every student musician who passed through the house<sup>4</sup> if they understood this music and if so what about it appealed to them. Not one seemed to have the slightest interest in it, or to understand it. Michal took a course in it, and afterward I asked her my questions. She shrugged, told me a little of the book knowledge she had learned, and went on with practicing and performing and listening to the classical repertoire.

I made a point of attending all the concerts and recitals that Michal participated in — for example, those by the university symphony orchestra, which was surprisingly good. (They had a tall blonde young woman who played trumpet, her face always expressionless, I suppose as a way of discouraging people from looking at her (“if I show no expression, they won't notice that I am a girl trumpet player”)). I remember Michal's deeply moving performance of the beautiful cello solo<sup>5</sup> in the fourth movement (“Lento maestoso”) of Charles Ives' Symphony No. 2. After each performance I would go backstage to give her a hug and praise her. Members of her family were always there too, her mother bringing a bouquet of flowers. Michal sometimes performed in chamber music concerts, one I remember at the College Ave. home of her elderly first teacher. Miles Graber, a doctor who had decided to spend his old age accompanying promising young musicians on the piano, was usually a member of the group. After graduation she won a year's scholarship to study in Paris. I had told her that Gaby and I would like to take her out to dinner when we were there on vacation. Somehow she managed not to get my phone call when we arrived. On her return to the U.S., she spent a year or more at the Boston Conservatory. But at

---

1. Bay Area Rapid Transit

2. On Dec. 3, 2009, with help from my computer consultant, I was able to find her current phone number. We had a pleasant-enough conversation, but it seemed that she was merely being polite. The old spark was gone; she sounded world-weary. She was then 27, had spent most of the previous ten years in Arcata, Calif., with her boyfriend (possibly husband) Steve, a former piano student of Chet's, but she was now back living with her parents in the Oakland area. She had a three-year-old daughter but had broken up with Steve. She was studying to be a chef specializing in “natural” foods, then planned to return to Humboldt State College, in northern California, to study art. (She had previously been a music student there.) She had all but given up music.

3. *The Glenn Gould Edition*, Sony Classical

4. Sometimes a music student, for example, the talented and very attractive Asian, Jolie, would ask, upon hearing that Naomi was to be away for a few days, if she could practice in the front room while Naomi was gone. Naomi asked me if I would allow it, I of course said yes, and so I was treated to a pleasant alternative to Chet's daily hammering. I heard Jolie's excellent performance of Bach's Goldberg Variations in Wheeler Auditorium on the UC campus, a performance of a major work being the thesis required of all undergraduate music majors. She went on to become a student at the respected conservatory at Indiana University, and studied in Germany for several months.

5. Is there a human being on this planet who can listen to this solo without being brought to tears?

family gatherings she seemed hardly to notice me. I got the distinct impression that, now that I was no longer needed to attend her performances, I had outlived my usefulness. I never forgave her for it.

Ours was a street of musicians. Bill, the beefy guy who lived next door in the cottage in back with Virginia, and whom we called “The Sheriff of Milvia” because of his no-nonsense attitude toward black teenage troublemakers, was a blues harmonica player. Charles, an Englishman who rented the little apartment on the ground floor of Chet’s house, was a blues guitarist who played, and recorded, and toured with the Mark Hummel band. I heard the band only once, at a club in Oakland. I thought it quite amusing to listen to a man who spoke perfect BBC English singing blues lyrics in a near-perfect Southern black accent. And, of course, there were Naomi and Chet, who gave lessons and practiced throughout the day. There was so much music going on in our block that Sharon, Naomi’s teacher, began calling it “Milvia Conservatory”.

### **Naomi as Tenant**

Naomi was an ideal tenant. If I had to point to a fault (and I can hardly call it that), it would be that sometimes, on hot summer days, she would leave the window in the living room open, which was not a good idea in that neighborhood, since it could readily be seen by passersby on the sidewalk. Always believing that the reminder of a rule is best presented in an appealing form, I composed a short poem and Scotch-taped it to the front door:

As I leave this house I’m sure  
The downstairs windows are secure:  
Each is closed and tightly locked,  
So all the burglars’ plans are blocked.  
How good I’ll feel throughout the day  
Knowing that there is no way  
That anyone can take my stuff  
And thereby make me mad enough  
That I can’t read or concentrate  
Even though I stay up late!  
How better to come home and see  
That all is just as it should be.  
And this will happen if I’m sure  
The downstairs windows are secure.

I think it is fair to say that the only thing about my behavior as a landlord that bothered her was my reluctance to have the place professionally cleaned each month. The rental agreement<sup>1</sup> said that cleaning duties would be shared equally between tenant and landlord, and that if the tenant wanted additional cleaning, she was free to pay for it herself. But Naomi had grown up in a family that could afford to hire professional help, and so she wasn’t about to start scrubbing floors herself. She asked me why I couldn’t hire someone each month. I explained that the cost would

---

1. This was a couple of pages that I had each prospective housemate read and comment on and then sign. It spelled out details about when the rent was due, about cleaning duties, about keeping music turned down, and, most important, it stated that no books were to leave the room they were found in. It also stated that I would pay interest on the cleaning deposit that I required in advance (until the early 2000s). I felt that no housemate should be forced to make interest-free loans to me.

be close to \$100, and considering the low rent I was charging (\$350), that would hardly make it worthwhile to rent the room at all. Perhaps I offered to be a little more conscientious about sweeping, but in any case she reluctantly accepted my policy, and didn't raise the issue again. (In passing, I should mention that, several years later, in a discussion about my housekeeping habits, a housemate did tell me that I was "pretty neat — for a man.")

She stayed at my house for three years, until she graduated from UC (with honors: she gave the graduation speech for her department) and headed south to UC Irvine to start working toward her PhD in philosophy, specializing in Spinoza. I think I caught the tail end of her breakup with Chet. They were both sitting on the living room couch. She apparently had just delivered the news that their relationship was over. Chet was visibly taken aback, and was scrambling for words. I got the impression that she had simply told him bluntly, but without any nastiness, that their relationship was over, that she was moving on.

She got her PhD a few years later then moved to Tel Aviv, Israel. She held teaching and research positions at several leading universities in the country.

### **Suicide of a Piano Tuner**

Naomi's and Chet's piano tuner was a man named Sheldon Smith. His large clientele included several of the greats, including Alfred Brendel.

I only talked to him a few times, namely, when he was at the house to tune Naomi's piano. He was a tall, bearish guy in his early sixties, with a full mane of white hair. He knew a great deal about jazz, and also had anecdotes about some of the famous pianists whose pianos he tuned. I remember him saying that Alfred Brendel was a first-class son-of-a-bitch. (Great pianist, though.)

In August, 1999, he put the muzzle of a shotgun in his mouth and pulled the trigger. Chet said that the rumor in the piano community was that his wife Linda was getting ready to divorce him. Chet said that she was all that any man could ask for in a wife, but after some twelve years of trying to deal with Sheldon's manic-depression and alcoholism, she couldn't take it any longer. Chet said that when Sheldon's mother heard of her son's death, her only comment was: "All I did was give him a few slaps when he was a kid, and he always made such a big deal out of it." Sheldon's father also committed suicide. Chet said that Sheldon described his mother as a real Hitler.

Chet also told me that, on one of the many occasions in the past when Sheldon had attempted suicide, he received a letter from Robin S., pianist for the San Francisco Symphony, and it helped pull him back. It was written on purple stationery, in a florid hand, and was part of Robin's coming-out.

### **Tatiana**

#### **Love At First Sight**

After Naomi left, I began advertising in the UC Housing computer database, and in that way found Tatiana. In the first phone call, I immediately liked her quick voice: "This is Tatiana, —, with a rolling of the *r* in her last name, as though she took it for granted that anyone she bothered to call would understand that she was from Europe — in fact, from the Czech Republic. We set up a time for her to see the house. She rang the bell, I opened the front door and found a beautiful 21-year-old with what to me were perfect Slavic looks: high cheek bones, a very slight narrow-

ness of the eyes, smooth skin, shoulder length soft light-brown hair. It was love at first sight (for me).

She liked the house immediately, wanted to sign the contract as soon as possible. She started to move in on Aug. 31 [1999]. I couldn't take my eyes off her maddeningly fetching red sweater, with its so femininely modest turtleneck. (Oh, to kiss that neck!) And her young, pointy breasts. And the beautiful, expensive-looking dress with red flowers she wore several days later.

### **Spiders!**

As soon as she moved in, she began decorating her room. Her personality may have rejoiced in beautiful things, but it also had a morbid terror of spiders, as I discovered one morning when, a few seconds after she had closed the front door behind her on her way to school, I heard a scream. I raced downstairs and saw her standing frozen at the base of the steps, speechless, her finger trembling, pointing at something in front of her, which I soon saw was a spider in the web it had built across the front walk in the night. I said something like, "Don't worry, I'll remove it, let me get a broom." I went to the laundry room, got the broom, and was ready to fold spider and web into it when she said, "Don't kill it!" I was surprised to hear her say this, but I promised I wouldn't and I suppose just wiped the broom carefully on the ivy.

Afterward, when she had calmed down, she explained that she had always been terrified of spiders. I didn't think that was the best time to tell her that, in those old houses, spiders were perpetual residents. Instead, I told her that spiders were Nature's engineers, and that only recently have scientists been able to figure out exactly how they are able to construct their marvelous webs. I may have quoted a few lines from Whitman's poem:

A noiseless patient spider,  
I mark'd where on a little promontory it stood isolated,  
Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast surrounding  
It launched forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,  
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them...

and reminded her that Whitman then compares his soul to the spider in its endless launching forth of gossamer threads to connect to other things and people. Surely a great poet wouldn't compare his soul to something that was horrible!

But these arguments did absolutely no good.

I was in the kitchen one evening when she came down and stood, feet together, palms clasped in front of her nose, as women do when they are embarrassed about something. She, shyly, girl-ishly: "Can we get a tarantula?" I: "Well, uh, sure, but...can it be in a box or something?" For a while I had no idea what had prompted such a strange request at that hour. Then she said, "It's the only thing that will cure me of my fear of spiders." Then, in an embarrassed whisper, "*There's one in my room. Right over my bed.*" She shuddered. I got a paper towel, we went upstairs. She: "Don't kill it! Or if you do, I don't want to watch." She turned away I: "Don't worry, I won't kill it." It was a big, spindly, daddy-longlegs. I made a kind of claw out of the towel, grabbed the spider, took it downstairs, out the front door, and shook it out into the bushes. She, with obvious appreciation: "Thank you, oh, thank you!"

In the course of the year she spent in my house, there were many times when that blood-curdling scream would make me jump out of my skin, I would race to where it had come from, and there she would be, finger shaking, pointing, barely able to utter the words, "There's ... one ...

there.” And “there” might be, say, the bottom of the tub, or on the wall in her room, but usually in a web across, or next to, the front walk. Once she saw one in the corner of the bathroom near the ceiling. I removed it. I, afterward: “Suppose I weren’t here, what would you have done?” She: “Not taken a shower.”

Since her middle name was “Petra”, I at one point said, as she was calming down after a spider incident, “You were petra-fied!” But in her mental state, she wasn’t in any condition to appreciate puns.

Eventually I simply resigned myself to beginning the day — since I was always up earlier than she — by getting the broom and clearing the webs from the front walk and bushes before she left for school, and then doing a Spider Patrol at least once each day in the upstairs. She definitely appreciated my efforts. “You’re a saint,” she said once. “I tell everyone about you.”

### **She Decorates Her Room**

Her parents, usually her mother, came several times to help her furnish and decorate her room. The two women fussed in the room, chattering away in Czech. Her mother gave her a bright red coverlet for Jeff’s futon, which I had allowed her to use. Tatiana showed the coverlet to me. I, kidding her, shielded my eyes, said that visitors would have to wear sunglasses. She was hurt a little, I think, so I quickly retracted it, saying, given a choice between my son’s dark blue cover, and hers, I would choose hers any day. (But then I felt badly about this slighting of my son.) She put a white coverlet on the middle.

Her parents bought an orange chair for her, a rather ingenious structure: a mere wire frame with cloth in between. It couldn’t hold the clerk in the store, she said, but he weighed more than 200 pounds. She pointed out how the white coverlet offset the orange.

She was anxious to have me admire her room, invited me in to look at it several times. She had put a cross up on the wall (she was Russian Orthodox, and very devout). She said one of the reasons she chose my house was that it was within easy walking distance of her Russian Orthodox Church. When I told her that Sonia, Heim’s former girlfriend, was thinking about converting to one of the Orthodox faiths, she leaped up, said “Yes!” with the sweep-of-the-arm gesture that was common in those days as an expression of enthusiasm. She said she knew a bishop in New York City who would be glad to talk to Sonia.

I had to keep reminding myself that I had a devoutly religious person living in my house. Example: it took a while for the phone company to get her phone installed and connected. Meantime, I let her use mine. One time, after she had used it, I noticed Chet’s letter to the *Chronicle* regarding Mormon persecution of the gays lying on top of my pile of papers. It included the words “...Bertrand Russell’s observation that every moral advance in history has been opposed by organized religion...”. I was worried that she saw it.

On her computer desk was the iMac her father had bought for her, he having insisted the computer be a MacIntosh, not a PC. The room looked larger, cleaner, neater, than it ever had in the past.

A few days after she moved in she said to me: “I couldn’t sleep last night?” I: “Why?” She, referring to her room: “Because it’s too perfect!” She showed me how her wire shelf, with the red and green balls at the corners, fit perfectly between the foot of her bed and the futon. The fit was so perfect that it applied just enough pressure to hold the red cover in place.

She asked me to remind her about turning off the lights in the bathroom, because in school they were automatically turned on and off by motion sensors. In the kitchen she always turned off the light as soon as she didn’t need it — unlike Naomi, who always left lights on.

## **A Gypsy Girl**

She had been born and raised, until the age of about ten or so, in the Czech Republic, after which her parents came to this country. Her father was a scientist who had developed the first practical test for mad cow disease. Her mother came from Gypsy stock, and had ignited in her daughter a passionate love for Gypsy culture and for the Gypsy cause, if the latter is the right term. Tatiana, who had a superb singing voice, was a music major at UC, and hoped to get a PhD in ethnomusicology, specializing in Gypsy music. She often talked about these people, their suffering in World War II. But she wanted me to know that their proper name is “Roma”, with the *r* rolled. An individual member (at least a male member) is a “Romani”.

As a birthday present for me, she invited me to see a premiere of the film *American Gypsy* which was playing at the Roxie Theater in San Francisco. She had written to the director, Jasmine Dellal, over the Internet, and would introduce me to her. I carefully planned ahead, called Doug J. for advice on parking in that part of town, called the Berkeley police on when to leave in order to get there on time. She was bubbling away about Roma during the entire trip to the city. It was a cold evening. On the way from the car to the theater, she several times remarked about how she liked boyfriends to put their arm around her shoulder when it was cold. Of course, even before she said it, that was my impulse, but the episode with A.<sup>1</sup> was constantly on my mind. It didn't seem appropriate to ask her if she would mind if *I* put my arm around her shoulder, so I walked close to her, but without touching. I kept thinking she would regard anything more intimate as inappropriate. But I was torn between doubt about how she would react and my desire to demonstrate something of my feelings toward her.

The film was about a community of gypsies in Seattle, Washington, who were falsely accused of burglary because the police did not realize that the Gypsy community made a practice of storing its valuables in the house of the community leader, and so, when a series of burglaries occurred, the police searched the house, found all the valuables, assumed they were stolen. Far worse, they physically searched several of the women, which, because the women had been touched by a man other than their husbands, meant ostracism from the community for the women and, I think, for their children. The film recorded the attempts of Jimmy Marks, the leader, to clear the community's name.

I thought the film was a competent piece of work. Afterward, we met the director, who was on hand to answer questions following the showing.

## **The Perfect Housemate**

Tatiana always had a cheery greeting in the morning, or when I or she arrived home and the other was already there. “Hello!” The *o* was almost sung. And similarly, when one of us left the house, she would always call out, “Have a nice day!” She seemed eager to tell me about her daily life.

One morning, I came downstairs and saw only two cans and a cork on my side of the sink. Did I wash up the previous night? I couldn't remember. Later, as I was finishing making my coffee, I noticed that her dish rack was full — of my dishes. She had washed them all. It was the first time any renter had done this. Some renters had washed a spoon or a glass of mine, but that was it.

---

1. A graduate student with whom I had made a complete fool of myself

She even had emptied the jar of moldy tomato sauce which she had asked about the day before, cleaned it, washed the top.

So I started washing her dishes too, though neither one of us did it all the time — just once in a while, as an affectionate gesture.

She always smelled the roses I put on the newel post downstairs, or on the table in the upstairs hallway. She had a way of cradling them in both hands, inhaling deeply. I told her she had a perfect right to have the flowers she wanted in the vases downstairs and on the upstairs hall table. It didn't have to be roses, roses, all the time, month in month out. She, laughing: "Well, it's not like they are some kind of ordeal!" She would laugh at my frequent: "They're fading." She: "You're such a perfectionist!"

I came home one evening, found her preparing to mop the kitchen floor. We were almost out of Mop & Glo, and I was feeling bad at her having to do this work, even though it was part of the contract, so I asked her if it would be OK with her if I just cleaned the spots with the washcloth. She was bothered by my using a washcloth for this purpose, so I said, "OK, I'll use a rag from the rag drawer." This was fine with her, and when I said that it was not a proper mopping of the floor, she said, "Well, it's the goal that counts, not how you achieve it." Which I took to be a sure sign of her intelligence.

She had brought her knapsack from home — pink, very girlish, with black straps. She wore it as she marched off to school in her brisk way, her long hair held in a single clasp. She worried aloud, and only semi-seriously, about whether it went well with the colors in her room. I told her sure it did, and it was the cutest knapsack I had ever seen.

She cooked several meals a week for me. She was wonderfully solicitous about my eating well. When I thanked her for having made me lunch or dinner, she replied, "After all you do for me?..." In early September, she asked me when my birthday was. She said she had wanted to give me a surprise party but she didn't know all my friends yet, so she couldn't call them. I said surprise parties make me very nervous. But I was deeply touched by this offer of hers, and suggested we just have C. and Charles over for a glass of wine. This appealed to her, as she was hot for Charles.

One night, after a chorus rehearsal, she having taken seriously my warning about walking the streets of Berkeley at night, she called me in a booth at the corner of Telegraph and Bancroft, so I drove up and got her. A few weeks later she came home late one evening, called at my door, asked if I was asleep. I said no, just lying in bed staring at the ceiling. She said she was unable to get a Shuttle bus at campus, had to walk home on the dangerous streets. She said she had had a light supper with Mattheus, a graduate student whom she was in love with and whom she ran into at Tower Records.

Later she asked why I was just lying in bed staring at the ceiling. I said because of being overwhelmed by the amount of work I had set myself to complete in the next seven years. To cheer me up, she gave me a marshmallow (I kidded her that, according to Joanna, a friend of Chet's, they are made of horse's hooves), then had me go through a ritual: while eating the marshmallow, close your eyes and repeat, "*Shmishmellehwww, shmishmellehwww...*" at the same time imagining your soul being flooded with smooth, white spiritual substance, then bubbles of happiness rising. Finally, you must repeat "Om".



The following Saturday evening, I built a fire. She mentioned roasting marshmallows; the question arose: What can we put them on to hold them over the fire? I remembered a branch which the blacks ripped off one of our newly planted trees, went out to the compost heap, removed the leaves, broke it in two. It worked just fine. So, instead of going upstairs to watch *All Creatures Great and Small* (downstairs TV didn't get channel 54), I roasted marshmallows with her as she chattered about Ivan, Charles, Mattheus, and boyfriends in her past, meantime repeating her maddeningly sexy *shmishmellehwww* incantation.

The next day she baked a lemon cake using my wretched oven, and invited Chet and Charles to come over and celebrate my birthday. Charles made English tea the proper, English way. Chet, always uncomfortable in social situations, withdrew into washing the dishes. During the party, one of them asked how old I was. I hemmed and hawed in a becoming manner, then finally revealed I was 63. An immediate chorus: "63!" "63? You can't be 63!" I was only too aware how much I looked my age, so I knew it was a put-up job, but I was flattered nevertheless. I: "Well, how old do you think I am?" They: "53!", "Early fifties!"

One day she asked me a question about logarithms. She was taking a geology course centered on the phenomenon of earthquakes, and the Richter scale that is used to measure the intensity of earthquakes is logarithmic. I did my usual explanation — "log means exponent", then cited as examples  $10^1$ ,  $10^2$ , ..., explaining that the superscripts 1 and 2 are the logarithms of 10 and 100 — but it was clear it was over her head. A few days later she said she was having trouble with her assignment, which involved transformations from degrees of earthquake severity as experienced on the ground, to some other scale. We sat at the kitchen table. I looked over the pages in the textbook. As usual, there were no references in the index to definitions of several terms: you read and memorized from page one, or you were lost. She stumbled on an appendix which seemed to contain the clue. I showed her how to do the transformations. She was delighted, tried to give me "high-fives" — fingers and thumb of each person's right hand extended, hand held vertically, then striking the other person's similarly oriented hand at the palms. I had never done it, so we practiced it a couple of times, she heartily amused at my inexperience at this common teenage congratulatory gesture. A few weeks later she showed me her homework, with the grade: 94/100.

I had until then never been in love with any of the women who rented a room in my house (it was pure lust in the case of Lori), but this one had stolen my heart. I loved to please her — get rid of spiders, help her fix her computer/phone connection, get her new portable radio working (she had the batteries in wrong), keep the back yard green and mowed, cut the roses, all for that light in her eyes. I wondered how I was going to endure the sounds of her making love to Charles or Mattheus in the next room. Before going to sleep each night, I whispered (she in her bed in the next room and not hearing a thing, of course), "Good night, sweet girl."

### **Baby-Sitting**

In order to earn a little money, she baby-sat for a family in the Berkeley Hills. But the term is not appropriate here, since one of her charges was around ten and the other around twelve. One morning she brought them to the house. She and they were in the back yard when I joined them. She introduced the older one, whose name I have forgotten, and then said, "And this is David. He's into money and death." It was all I could do not to say something like, "So how long have you been interested in death?" but I was concerned that perhaps his interest had been motivated by a death in the family, so I asked him about money instead. He had the preoccupied look of a

young person who was there only because someone in authority had asked him to be. But then, looking at the lemon tree, he said, “You could make money from those.” When I asked him how he would go about doing that, he said I could bring them to local supermarkets. We discussed price, the amount of time it would take to pick the lemons and put them in bags, computing profit. He seemed to think methodically, but without any particular youthful excitement. His brother just stood, looking around the yard, politely waiting for the time to pass.

### **Post-it Notes As An Art Form**

She was amused by the yellow Post-it notes to her I would leave on the hall table: “You always leave these nice notes!” When she left dishes in the sink much longer than usual, and I washed them for her, I would leave one of these notes:

Kitchen Sink  
Styling  
by  
The Phantom  
Dishwasher

with a black mask drawn below it. She might wash a couple of my dishes afterward, and leave a note

Token thank-you  
two-dish-washing  
by the  
Pathetic Student

with an arrow pointing to a cartoon drawing of a very sad, embarrassed face.

I felt that the superior landlord always found a better way than plain English to request that a tenant’s stuff be removed from a public space. She had brought some collection of I don’t know what home from a class and left it on the kitchen table for several days. So, recalling the incidents with my neglected clothes when I was living with Kathy, I got the idea of labelling these as works of art. For example, three carrots she left on the kitchen table I titled, on a Post-it note

“Early 21st Century Example of Motile Sculpture  
(3 Small Carrots Growing Smaller Due to Dehydration)”

South Berkeley School, etc.

And then, when she had removed something, I would leave a Post-it note

“Title Placard From Totally Removed Work of Art Titled,  
‘Partially Decomposed...’ ”

John Franklin, Berkeley, late 20th century

I always had a lot of arrows pointing from my notes to the object in question. I couldn’t resist

giving these a title as well, so next to them I often added a Post-it note:

“Arrow Pointing to Work of Art”  
[then an arrow pointing to the other arrow]  
(South Berkeley School, probably early 21st century)

And then sometimes I got completely carried away. For example, I once left her the following:

Tatiana — I swept upstairs, stairs, and downstairs. — John “Cleaning” is my middle name” F.\*

\*This is incorrect. The correct middle name for the above signatory is not “Cleaning”, as claimed, but “Cleaning is my middle name”. He should have signed himself John ““Cleaning is my middle name’ is my middle name” F.

However, this is not correct either. No, he should have signed himself, John “ ‘ “Cleaning is my middle name” is my middle name’ is my middle name” F..

But this is not correct either ...

There was no limit to how far art-work-title-craft could be taken. She had placed some notebooks outside her door, and left them there for several days. I created the following label for them:

UC BERKELEY STUDENT’S NOTEBOOKS PLACED ON FLOOR OUTSIDE OF HER ROOM  
SO AS NOT TO BE FORGOTTEN, AND THEN FORGOTTEN  
Anon, 1999

And then, after she removed the notebooks

EXAMPLE OF “MOVED SCULPTURE” \* A GENRE BRIEFLY POPULAR IN LATE 90S

\*ALONG WITH LABELS

Then she somehow became temporary custodian of a parakeet named K — (I don’t recall what the letter stood for), and I soon I was leaving notes on his sophisticated taste in music: “Tatiana — K — likes Bach cantatas! He chirps away whenever I play one! (He doesn’t like Benjamin Britten string quartets, however.) — John ; “Tatiana — K — understands Michael Tippett (4th string quartet)! Sings along on the offbeats. *This bird knows.* — John ”

### **Her Boyfriends**

Over the course of several conversations, I learned about her past boyfriends: Vince, the aspiring playwright with whom she lived for a year and a half in Prague; Tom, 31-year-old ex-theology student, now a recruiter of executives, who wanted to marry her; Dylan, undergraduate at UC I think (immature, according to her, always running away when she indicated willingness to have a relationship, always pursuing her when she indicated she was no longer interested); and then Ivan (whose name she naturally pronounced the European way: *eevohn*) Ilic. She had gone to spend a

few days with him in Aspen, where he was at a summer camp for classical students. But he didn't call her when he got back. She: "I'm going to drop him." She didn't seem deeply bothered at the prospect. I wanted to say: if he doesn't call you every day he's a fool! but I didn't. We talked in the downstairs hallway, I standing with arms folded, as usual. She said she didn't want marriage, she wanted a casual relationship, in which each person was not constantly in the other's space.

One night Ivan dropped by. He was European looking, with a sharp Tartar beard, a watering of s's. (She said later he was a Serb, rolling her eyes to express, "Bound to be trouble", since she was Czech.) He was taken with my math books, which were on the shelf across the hall from her door. We started to talk. She hadn't seen him in many days and was anxious to have him all to herself. She tried to be patient as we talked (I tried to throw her a little attention once in a while). Then he was kneeling in her doorway, turning the pages of a math book as he talked. She went into her room and slowly pushed the door closed on him. We got the message, stopped our conversation. Then there was only the muffled sound of voices once in a while, I wondering, "Are they doing it?" (despite the stipulation in the rental contract)? Then, they left, I assumed to go to his apartment. I emerged from my bedroom, started to go downstairs, noticed that she had left her door partially open, perhaps to demonstrate that they were going elsewhere to do it. Downstairs, I found that she had locked the front door like a good girl. Strangely, I felt worse that they had gone to her apartment to screw than if they stayed here. I thought of that young girl, with her pointed breasts, being mauled by him, and loving every minute of it.

The next morning, shortly after six, I went down for my coffee, noticed her door closed: she had come back early and, I saw, dutifully turned off the light in the piano room.

Afterward, she told me that Ivan had been forced to share a room in his fraternity with another of the brothers. I felt bad about the two of them having to make love in the car, so I sat down with her and told her that, for a month trial, I would be willing to let him stay for the night. She: "You're being very sweet." But she said Ivan had told her he hated her room, that is, the colors she had used to decorate it. He was trying to find a room of his own, she said.

She seemed not to hold any strong attachments to previous boyfriends. One day she asked if she could use my phone to return a call to Dawn, a girlfriend of hers who had called her from New York. I said sure. Afterward she said that the reason Dawn had called was that she wanted to ask her: If you are strapped for space, should you keep all the stuff your old boyfriends gave you? Tatiana said she kept some, but not all, of the emails. She recalled a ring and necklace that Vince, the guy she had lived with in Prague, had given her. She decided to hide them, but then, after she got over him, she couldn't remember where she had put them.

Even though she continued to have a relationship of sorts with Ivan, she had her eye on a musicology graduate student named Matthew (which she always pronounced in the European fashion, *Mattyieu*, though she often called him by the variation *Mattheus*). It was clear she wanted very much to snag him, but was a little unsure of what techniques would work best, so sometimes she would ask me what she should do if, for example, he had promised to call by a certain day, and didn't, should she call him right away? (No.) I asked her about Ivan. She replied, "Oh, he and I are *so over*." It was the first time I had heard that expression, and I thought it superb.

One day, Charles said hello as I was watering the lawn. I asked him where he was going on his next tour. He said the Midwest. I asked if Blind Lemon Jefferson and Big Bill Broonzy weren't from the Midwest. He said Jefferson was from Texas, but Broonzy may have spent some time in Chicago. I mentioned that I just bought a Django Reinhardt CD after seeing *Latcho Drom*

with Tatiana. He asked how she was and whether she and her boyfriend (that is, Ivan) were getting along. I said well, actually, the relationship was no longer hot, but that was confidential. He said that relatives on his mother's side were Gypsies. I told him that she would be glad to hear that.

Later, when Tatiana came home, I told her that I knew someone within one block whose relatives were gypsies. She, eyes wide: "Who?" I: "He lives near here." After a while, I told her who it was. She was fairly dancing for joy. She jumped up and down, leaned her elbows on the banister, kicked her legs out like a little girl. But she wanted to be absolutely sure that he had asked about her first. It was then that I suggested she invite Chet, and him to a very modest birthday celebration for me, with no gifts (except she could give me one privately if she wanted, and as long as it didn't cost more than a couple of dollars). We could have cupcakes, and I would provide some wine. She was all excited. She: "You're such a matchmaker."

But then she worried aloud about Mattheus. I told her that, Well, if Mattheus rejected her, there would be Charles, and knowing that would give her confidence when talking to Mattheus. She said it was all right to go out on a date with one man on one night, another on the next, but once she has kissed one, then it must stop. She could not be kissing two men.

She then pointed out that she was wearing a miniskirt (black and white print, and black stockings and pink sweater) — I had noticed — but that she didn't think it looked right, she had to walk so carefully. I said I thought it looked great. She said No, she was going to change. I, kidding her: "I'll lower your rent if you keep wearing it..."

### **Her Musical Talent**

She seemed eager, at least initially, to listen to the CDs I recommended. I asked her about "Selve amiche" on the Cecilia Bartoli CD. She: "It made me cry." She gave me four of Janacek's works after I told her (truthfully) how taken I had become with his music. She said she once had met Rudolf Firkusny, whose CD of some of Janacek's piano works she loaned me.

One evening she asked if I would mind if she practiced singing in the parlor. She was singing in a choral group, performing a Steve Reich work (four voices, Jewish theme), which would be recorded for a CD. (A previous recording she made with a choral group was used as background for one of the PBS natural disasters documentaries. While she was living at my house, she also spent a Saturday afternoon at Luke Skywalker Ranch, making another CD.) I said of course I wouldn't mind. Then, lying on my bed, I listened to her beautiful, vibrato-free, crystal clear voice racing around the intervals in the Reich piece.

I was so happy that I whistled as I walked around the house (fragments of classical pieces I had been listening to). She, one day: "You're a good whistler!" The comment came from an excellent singer, so I was flattered. I told her about a picture Yolanda took of me whistling the last movement of Bach's *Orchestral Suite No. 2*. I did a few bars of it for her. She was impressed.

One of us observed that a door or other squeak had musical potential. I told her about Saint-Saens, who as a young boy heard door squeaks as musical sounds. Once or twice, I adlibbed a little melody based on one of these sounds.

### **Heartbreak**

Even though I was making no sexual advances toward Tatiana, and had no intention of doing so — I used to tell Steve, "I'm a dirty old man, but a non-practicing dirty old man" — and even

though she had her heart set on another man, I felt she and I still had a special relationship. I was sitting on top of the world. And then, one day, when it was clear that Matthew wanted to reciprocate her attentions, all her warmth toward me stopped as suddenly as if she had flipped a switch. There were no more cheery hellos when I came into the house, no more invitations to a dinner she was going to cook, no more eagerness to discuss her course work or music or anything else. I was so shocked by the change that I plunged into a depression and began thinking of suicide again. I didn't think I could go on unless I talked to someone, and so I called Steve. He was glad to talk to me, and although he didn't give me any solutions to my misery, our conversation, held in his office in his converted garage, helped a great deal in itself. (During one of these, he quoted an amusing variation on an old saying: "Women — you can't live with 'em and you can't live with 'em.")

I decided that I had to say something to her, had to somehow let her know how I felt, and so I asked her to sit down with me. I told her that I felt I had allowed myself to be lured into a misunderstanding because she was such an attractive young woman, and because of all her invitations. From now on, I felt it would better if she no longer cooked for me as she had, or did other things that could make a man believe the relationship was any closer than landlord/tenant. She seemed utterly surprised that she had had any effect at all on me, but said that now that I mentioned it, that might explain the attention she always seemed to get from older men, including professors. I truly believe she had no idea of the attraction she exerted on the older males she came in contact with. It wasn't that she was unconscious of her beauty. (When she fell from her bike one rainy day and required 32 stitches, I think on her arm, she was clearly worried about what the sight of the stitches and the possible scar might do to her physical appeal. And yet if I mentioned, as I did, a young woman who was very plain, or who had suffered facial injuries in an accident, she would immediately dismiss the other woman's concerns with a curt, "Looks are not important!") It was rather that she simply wasn't aware of the effect her beauty had on older men. She suggested I try to find someone my own age, and I promised I would place an ad in the *The New York Review of Books*, which I did. The results are described later in this volume in the section, "Danielle, or, The Composer".

After a few weeks, I was able to resign myself to our new relationship. I even returned to my Post-it-note art form once in a while, because I couldn't stand the thought of her not liking me just a little.

She and Matthew became lovers and then she announced her next campaign, that of getting him to marry her.

### **Graduation, and On to Harvard**

In June of 2000, she invited me to a graduation dinner that her family had planned for her at a Roma restaurant in San Francisco. I wasn't particularly in the mood, but I said I would love to attend. She gave me directions, I misplaced them, spent an hour and a half winding through the hills of the City trying to remember what the directions had said, eventually gave up and called the restaurant from a pay phone. It was too late for me to attend the dinner, so I apologized profusely to Tatiana for my stupidity regarding the directions. But after that, I sensed another cooling, perhaps even resentment, toward me, and I felt there was nothing I could do to make up for it.

Both she and Matthew got scholarships at Harvard, and a couple of years later, they were married. .

## **Zoe**

In May of 2000, a young woman who was a senior in Comparative Literature (English/French) responded to my ad in the UC Housing database. We settled on a time when she could come and see the house. She was an attractive young woman with neck-length dark hair and nice breasts, but what initially impressed me most about her was her smile and her eagerness to see what sort of living accommodations I was offering to someone who obviously had a lot going on in her life. I showed her through the place, she asked questions, I showed her the back yard, then she said, "John, I really like it. But I have just a couple of other places to look at. Then I'll let you know." And off she went. A week went by. I showed the house to one or two others. Then a phone call. "Hi, John! This is Zoe. I looked at the room last week. Is it still free?" "Well, yes." "When can I come by and look at it again?" So we set up a time, and there she was at the front door with her smile and quickness. She looked at everything again, then said, "I really like it a lot. I have just one more place to look at, and then I'll definitely let you know." Another week went by. I continued to show the house. I assumed she had chosen another place. Then, another phone call. "Hi, John! This is Zoe. Is the room still free?" "Well, yes..." And so she came by again. This time Gaby, my soon-to-be ladyfriend, was there, following our first meeting in the Hotel Andrews in San Francisco, as described later in this book. I encouraged Zoe to talk to her, since Gaby could act as a character reference for me. I left the two of them in the room, and I went downstairs. Afterward, Zoe asked several times if I allowed visitors. I said sure, as long as they didn't just move in. Female visitors? Of course. I wondered why she asked that question several times. And then, incredibly, she said she would take the room.

Her parents helped her move in, and I immediately developed a fondness for them. Her father, in his sixties, white-haired, with a South African accent, was a famous surgeon who worked for Kaiser. He had been one of the pioneers in the development of microsurgery, the technique that makes it possible for surgeons to reattach severed fingers and, I think, even hands and arms. I thought, as he and I were carrying her furniture up the stairs: "One false move on my part and I could destroy an international resource!" namely, the hands of this famous surgeon. He had a dry sense of humor and a habit of talking about his early years, but not in the boastful fashion that makes you resent it (or that you normally expect from surgeons). After the 9/11 attacks, when we would discuss the Middle East situation and the menace of radical Islam, he would sooner or later in the course of the conversation wag his forefinger at me and say, by way of explaining it all, "Always remember: my God is better than your God."

Her mother, also in her sixties, was very attractive, and spoke with a slight European accent. She had been born in Poland, then moved to Berlin briefly around 1940, then spent 1942-47 in Vienna (I never asked her, or discussed with Zoe, how she, a Jew, managed to survive under the Nazis during the first three of those years). She then spent a few years in Paris, after which she moved back to Vienna, where she lived for several years during the '50s. She was a background actress for TV and films in Hollywood, and had appeared in, among many other TV shows and films, *West Wing* and in *Something's Gotta Give*, the 2003 film starring Jack Nicholson and Diane Keaton. You can see her walking by in a sidewalk scene as Nicholson and Keaton talk. Zoe said she had also appeared in one of the Miss Piggy films.

Zoe had two sisters, the older one married to a lawyer who, I think, worked for the teachers' union in southern California, and the other a lobbyist for Jewish causes, she living in San Francisco.

On the first day that her parents helped her move in. Her mother had nothing but nice things to

say about the house, even though compared to theirs, in Tarzana, as I found out years later when they invited me to visit, it was at the level of a gardener's cottage. She immediately set to work and within the space of fifteen minutes, I found that the black-encrusted aluminum foil that covered each of the metal pans surrounding the burners on the stove had been expertly replaced with fresh aluminum foil (the job typically took me half an hour, after days, weeks, of putting it off). She then made several recommendations regarding ways to improve the kitchen at very low cost, for example, by getting a butcher block table and adding a couple of shelves above it. She volunteered to go with me to buy them, or in fact, to do the shopping herself at Ikea. I managed to let her decide that the second was the better alternative, and so before she and her husband returned home, the items were in place, the shelf installed. She was definitely a take-control Jewish mother, but in a way that made it impossible for you to dislike her.

Zoe's parents made several trips from Los Angeles to bring her more of her stuff. There was some kind of heated discussion the last time, and then, after they left, I heard choked sobs in the downstairs front room. I approached hesitantly, asked her what was wrong. She was sitting on the futon with her head in her hands. She said, through her tears, "They drive me crazy, but I love them so much." I thought it one of the most touching things I had ever heard a young person say about her parents.

### **A Lesbian Bohemia**

Zoe was interested in photography — more than interested, she wanted it to be her life's work. Accordingly, I made a little sign for the door to her room, à la Lucy's sign for her sidewalk psychiatric service in the comic strip *Peanuts*. The sign said

Artist-in-Residence  
The Artist Is:

and below, on a pin, was a little sign that said "In" on one side and "Out" on the other. There was a hole in the sign so that it could easily be removed from the pin and turned around to reflect the actual occupancy status of the Artist. (Zoe was not conscientious about doing this, although she enjoyed the designation of Artist-in-Residence.)

It was natural that she would get a job at a photo lab on campus. There she met the beautiful, the extraordinary... Natascha, about whom more later. ("Oh, John, you have to see her!")

Among Zoe's friends was a tall, attractive young woman named Leora, also a student, but aspiring to a career in dance. Leora met her boyfriend Alex in the following way: She and Zoe and several of their friends were tooling down University Ave. in the car of one of them, when a handsome guy on a motorcycle rode past. They pulled up alongside, opened the windows, and began talking to him. One thing led to another and soon Leora had a boyfriend. I think he was a student, but he was also another aspiring artist, in this case, a sculptor. Some time later, he had a showing of his sculptures at his apartment and Zoe invited me. It had been many years since I had set foot in bohemia, and so I was glad to say yes. I still have the note she scribbled: "tonight chez Alex + Leora 1418 5th Street (@ Gilman) phone 528-1708 7:00 p.m." The sculptures were scrap iron plus some other things, not bad, and after I had given them all the attention and respect I could, and was drinking yet another glass of wine and thinking of leaving, Zoe came up and said, "John, this is Natascha!" I shook hands and tried to calm my pounding heart because the girl was absolutely movie-star, New-York-model gorgeous. She had the kind of face you would marry a woman for, just so you could spend the rest of your life looking at it every day. She was slim, had



no figure to speak of, but that didn't matter in the slightest. Her trace of an Austrian accent made her even more desirable. Somehow we got to talking about Rilke, and she lit up, exclaiming what a great poet he was. Now, the only lines of Rilke I had memorized were the opening ones to his prose-poem, *Die Weise von Liebe und Tod des Cornets Christoph Rilke*<sup>1</sup>, which I immediately launched into:

“Reiten, reiten, reiten, durch den Tag, durch die Nacht, durch den Tag.  
“Reiten, reiten, reiten.”<sup>2</sup>

She immediately picked it up:

“Und der Mut ist so müde geworden und die Sehnsucht so gross. Es gibt keine Berge mehr, kaum einen Baum. Nichts wagt aufzustehen. Fremde Hütten hocken durstig an versumpften Brunnen. Nirgends ein Turm. Und immer das gleiches Bild...”<sup>3</sup>

She knew whole swatches of the work by heart. I told her that I had an LP of Lotte Lenya reading it and *The Life of Mary*. And so two people on fire over a great poet talked about his poems and one of the two recited lines from them. I mentioned the eighth *Duino Elegy*, and other poems of his I loved. On it went. I know my face was red, I know that I was entirely too unmasculinely overwhelmed by her, too eager to please her, but I couldn't help it.

Later Zoe told me she had asked Natascha if she didn't want to meet a certain sexy woman who was at the party and whom Zoe had promised to introduce her to, and Natascha had replied, “Oh, no, I've had my orgasm.”

In succeeding months and in fact years, Natascha would occasionally drop by for a visit. Zoe and I joked with each other afterward about how swept away we were by her beauty. After one of these visits, I told Zoe, “That's it: I'm going to have the operation.”

Zoe had musical talent. During the year that she rented the room, she went back East to visit an elderly friend of the family. I told her to drop in and say hello to Gaby, which she did. Gaby told me that after introducing herself and admiring the apartment, Zoe spotted the piano at the other end of the living room, immediately sat down and began improvising.

She was also a natural leader. Wherever Zoe was, there was the center of attention, the center of interesting things going on. You just wanted to join her in whatever she was doing or had in mind. So it was entirely appropriate that she started a campus group called Sisters of Sappho, for, as she revealed to me soon after she moved in, she was a lesbian. They held their regular meetings on campus, but held some of their social events at our house.

She had friends everywhere, it seemed. The summer she moved in, she asked me if a student she knew, the Amazing Jenn, could move in for a few days, sleeping on the futon in the downstairs front room. Having already met her, I said “Sure!” because she had one of the fastest verbal minds I had ever known. Lightning banter, I have to call it: puns, word-play, jokes, deadpan humor thought up on the spot — you had to constantly be on your toes when you talked to this girl. She had had an intense affair with a young Asian woman in New York City, but was soon to

1. *The Song of the Life and Death of the Young Cadet Christoph Rilke*

2. “Ride, ride, ride, through the day, through the night, through the day. Ride, ride, ride”

3. “And the spirit has become so tired, and the longing so great. There are no more mountains, scarcely a tree. Nothing dares to stand up. Alien cottages crouch thirstily at marshy springs. Nowhere a tower. And always the same view...” [translations mine]

convert (my term) after she met, in France, a young man named Didier. But long before that, the French contingent began to move in, with my somewhat nervous approval — young women whom Zoe had met on her travels to France (she spoke fluent French): Sandrine, quiet, warm, very attractive, unhappy in her work in Paris as a teacher of French to business people (she christened the house “La Causerie” — the place of good conversation), wanting to stay in San Francisco because (I was amazed to hear) Paris was hostile to lesbians; eventually she succeeded in getting the necessary papers via a well-known ploy; she and Zoe had been lovers; Sarah (pronounced *Sarah*), tall, a bit heavy, who spoke almost no English and wanted to become a movie director. Later there was the beautiful Emilie, a photographer and aspiring movie director, whom I immediately nicknamed “La Mystérieuse” because you never knew what she was really thinking. These Zoe called, at least to me, “the Frenchies”. For several weeks that summer, there were a total of five people living in the house. The place was jumping.

All of these young women were against global capitalism and the big corporations. Sometimes it took all the self-control I was capable of to refrain from reminding them that the CD players and cell phones and TV sets and movies and cars and cheap airline travel they all took for granted were direct products of the global capitalism they so despised. The limitations of the education these young women were receiving in humanities departments that were totally committed to the multicultural Party line became all too evident in other ways. For example I remember telling Jenn that I felt that population reduction might well be the simplest, most effective way for the Third World to start recovering from its problems. She was shocked. To implement such a policy would be to allow the white males of the First World to dictate reproductive policies to the poor women of the Third World, and that could not be tolerated. Nowhere in her reply, or in our subsequent discussion, was there any sign of the kind of rational thinking one would expect from a person about to graduate from one of the nation’s — the world’s — leading universities.<sup>1</sup> There was no citing of attempts to reduce population that had been vigorously fought by subject populations, or that had proved to be too expensive to implement for the country concerned, no citing of instances in which, despite reductions in population, economic improvements had been only marginal. To me all this was remarkable, given the extraordinary mental agility she displayed in our banter. I thought: once again we see the dire consequences of teaching — in fact encouraging — young persons to think about the problems of the world without giving them the tools they need.

Zoe had a great sense of humor, even about lesbianism. When she would ask if she could have some school friends over in the evening, or have a dinner or a party, I would kid her by saying things like, “OK, but you have to promise not to do the Lesbian Hob-Nailed Boot Dance on my hardwood floors.” And she would laugh and say, “I promise!”

I maintained a running gag about the imaginary servants I employed: there was the loyal Wilkins, the elderly English butler (a gentleman’s gentleman), who would always bring the car around when I was ready to leave; Françoise, the cook, and her husband, François, the gardener and handyman; Babette, the upstairs chambermaid, who always wore short black skirts and black stockings, and Raoul, the chauffeur, who I strongly suspected was getting it on with Babette.

I would say, to express my contempt for some new government or university policy, “I take out my member and *wee-wee* on such nonsense,” and she would laugh. And she always laughed when I called Lynaire’s cat, whose name was, “Pooky,” the “Dog”. “Zoe, I think the Dog’s in the

---

1. “It also didn’t occur to [her] that the Third World women probably didn’t have a whole lot of choice about reproducing.” — J.S.

house.” (Lynaire was the blonde who lived in an apartment in the house on the south side of mine.) Pooky was the kind of cat I could easily hate. He always seemed so... idle. I used to tell Lynaire, “That cat needs a job,” to which she would reply, as she picked it up and snuggled it, “He *has* a job. His job is love.” She told me how he would come into her bed at night, purr, and keep her warm. But he also killed birds (I got into the habit of turning the hose on him when he was in the back yard), and seemed to feel that the job of humans was to cater to his pleasure. When people walked by on the sidewalk, particularly mothers with children, he would run out in front of them, turn over on his back with his paws folded, and say, in so many words, “You have to rub my belly.”

Zoe’s lesbian friends weren’t the bull dykes I used to see at the Brick Hut, who all looked like squat working men, with silver chains dangling from their belts, and sheath knives over their hip pockets. They were without exception attractive, feminine looking, perhaps once in a while with a boyish look. One of them, who was from Kuwait, had fallen in love with an Afghani girl, and then the two of them had come to this country to study at UC. Their relationship soon soured, and, according to Zoe, the Afghani turned very nasty indeed. Apparently she even sent email threats to any other women who had anything to do with the Kuwaiti. Unfortunately, the Kuwaiti was here under the sponsorship of the Afghani, who, if she withdrew her sponsorship, would force the Kuwaiti to go back to her native country, where almost certainly she would be killed because of her sexual orientation. She stored some of her stuff in my house in the downstairs front room while she looked for a room, eventually finding one in San Francisco while she waited for the authorities to decide if she was to be given a death sentence by being sent back home, or if she would be allowed to stay. I don’t know what happened to her, since the legal proceedings went on long after Zoe graduated.

I cannot deny that one of the things that made me so fond of Zoe was her love of the house and, in particular, of the living room and the fireplace. Sometimes, when she had friends over, I would build a nice fire for them. If she had a dinner party, I would make a discrete, avuncular appearance once things got rolling: say hello, talk to the guests, and then retire. One night, as I was in my bedroom, reading, I heard a burst of loud giggling, then silence, then another burst of giggling. This went on over the space of half an hour or so. I assumed they were telling jokes, or naughty anecdotes. The next morning, as casually as I could, I asked Zoe what was going on that was so funny. “Oh,” she said, and then, after some hesitation, “I can’t tell you.” “That’s OK.” I said. But after more hesitation she said, blushing a little, “We were having a strip-tease.” She emphasized, however, that it was only waist-up. I told her I was sorry she didn’t invite me.

I liked immensely the fact that I could talk about female beauty with her, and know that she could appreciate it from my point of view. In the winter of ’99 I had watched the entire 26 hours of Edgar Reitz’s masterpiece, *Heimat 2*<sup>1</sup> (*Second Heimat*), and had fallen madly in love with the actress playing the female lead, Salome Kammer. I had Zoe watch a few scenes featuring the actress. “So what do you think? Isn’t she irresistible?” Zoe agreed. We lusted over other actresses — Emmanuelle Béart, Juliette Binoche — and watched a couple of lesbian films together. She was not offended when I told her that, in my opinion, most of these films were

---

1. In 2001, I watched the entire 26 hours a second time. As far as I know, I am the only person in America who has ever heard of this great film, much less watched even an hour of it, still less watched it in its entirety. I have offered to pay people \$15 to watch just one episode, but have had no takers. Chet, my next door neighbor, a teacher of classical piano and therefore someone who should have been interested in a film about classical music students, albeit classical students immersed in the avant-garde of the time, watched a few minutes of it and laughed at its German melancholy.

absolutely dreadful, *Go Fish* being the worst.

Whenever we watched a film together, and especially if she had a friend or two over, I would give a little speech before the show began in which I made clear that (1) anyone could leave at any time, without explanation, although on the way out they couldn't say things like, "This film is dog puke!"; (2) everyone had nodding-off privileges: they would never be awakened by another viewer, they would never get an elbow in the ribs and a lecture on how rude it is to fall asleep when watching TV with someone else. The girls laughed and seemed to appreciate that such rules were in effect.

Another time, Zoe decided to have a dinner party for a few friends outside on the picnic bench. Leora was there, and Natascha, and the amazing Mariam, a refugee from Afghanistan who had shown remarkable intelligence from an early age, and wanted to go to college. In her native country, such qualities and aspirations in a young woman meant she would very likely be killed, so in the dead of night she and her parents left their home, managed to get across the border and make their way to Germany, where she completed Gymnasium (equivalent of high school) and perhaps a year or so of university education. Then she came to this country, was accepted by UC Berkeley, and was just completing her senior year in physics. She had been accepted at Harvard, with full scholarship, to pursue a PhD in astrophysics. She spoke perfect English with only the slightest accent, and was extremely articulate. I could hardly keep myself from monopolizing all her time when she was here, asking her about the latest developments in her field.

Zoe bought some bamboo torches, five feet high, and drove them into the lawn near the picnic table, then loaded them with some sort of oil, and so we had dinner by torchlight and candlelight. It was like the dinner scene at the old music teacher's house in the film *Un Coeur en Hiver* (*A Heart in Winter*).

Some of these parties went on past midnight, with loud talking and goodbyes on the front porch. Steve and Jane went to bed around ten, and the next day I got phone calls from both Steve and Lynaire, asking me to tell the guests to talk very quietly on the front porch, and to keep the music down after ten. I told Zoe, and she did as requested.

And then there was the Christmas dinner she gave. We put together a few tables between the living room and the front room to make a long table. She covered them with a tablecloth of her own devising, but so many people came that some had to sit on the living room chairs to eat. I built a fire, and had a place at the table, next to Erin of the gorgeous legs, which I couldn't stop myself from sneaking looks at while she talked amiably of school. Then, over dessert, Zoe got up, made a short welcoming speech, and said words to the effect that this time of year was celebrated by several religions, and so she thought she would recite a few verses, in Hebrew, from one of the Hanukkah ceremonies. I was amazed to see that the entire roomful of guests listened intently even though very few if any understood a word of what she was reciting. Only Zoe could have pulled that off.

I think it was after one of her parties that I observed she had invented a clever trick for mopping the floor without having to get out the mop and fill a bucket with soapy water. She simply dampened a washcloth, placed it squarely on the floor, then moved it around with her foot, pressing down as hard as necessary. She used the plastic dish scrubber to remove stubborn spots. The trick worked fine, and I used it thereafter. It had the added advantage that you could apply it only to the parts of the floor that actually needed cleaning.

### **Wine Tasting, New Style**

It was at one of Zoe's dinner parties that I introduced her and her friends to my new approach to wine tasting, which I had begun developing in the early nineties. (I told them, "They don't call me 'Peter the Grape' for nothing!")

The normal approach, with its special terminology — tannin, acid, oak, length, corners, finish, legs — I had always found too abstract. Furthermore, most casual wine drinkers didn't know any more than I did what the words referred to. So I devised a new approach, in which you took a sip of the wine, sloshed it around in your mouth and between your teeth in the standard way, breathing in all the while to enhance the taste, and then you closed your eyes and simply allowed yourself to free-associate, taking additional sips as you went. What did the taste remind you of? Common answers were: a grassy meadow, a mountain stream. French white wines often brought, for me, a path next to a stone wall in the French countryside on a misty, cold fall day, lots of tall brown grass, and ahead, on the left, down below the path, an ancient cottage hidden among low trees, smoke rising from the chimney, inside the floors uneven, ceiling low, the furniture old and misshapen but infinitely comfortable. Zoe and her friends enjoyed this approach much more than they did the standard one.

I recently found, in the course of idly going through some computer files, a transcription of what I said on one of these occasions.

*Chateau Roquetaillade Le Bernet Graves, 1998:*

(First sip) OK: I'm getting...a woodland stream, rocks, gravel bottom, trees overhanging it from both banks, every once in a while an old tree trunk lying across it, moss covered...smell of rotting brown wood, dragon flies hovering... a sunny day...pools broken occasionally by trout lips.

(Another sip) OK: Now I'm climbing up the stream bank and at the top there is a smell of old gray wood...wait: I'm looking along an overgrown dirt road that runs parallel to the top of the embankment, and I see, in the distance, coming toward us, a horse, head bobbing, tail switching back and forth as it plods along, pulling a creaky old wagon. On the seat is an old guy, dressed in black work clothes, head nodding, half asleep, reins held loosely in his hands. I smell the wood.

(Another sip) Now I'm back on the bank overlooking the stream, and I'm getting, very faintly, something that smells like wet, young skin. What can it be? Of course! a young girl had been wading in the stream the day before, and I'm detecting the smell of her feet on the gravel at the bottom of the stream.

Another time, possibly from the same bottle, I perceived a very faint metallic smell. What was it? Then I knew. Several days before, someone had dropped a silver pocket watch into the stream, and this was the smell of the metal rising through the surface of the water!

A red wine might yield a response something like: there's a faint smell of cherries and blackberries...there's a meadow, low trees and shrubs around it, bushes, in the far distance a river valley, rolling hills. I'm walking down the gentle slope toward the river. Wait! Over there, a tall tree...it's a cherry tree, and below it there's a thicket of blackberry bushes, with whiskery berries ripening in the warm sun.

Or a red wine might yield: a library full of leather-bound books in an English country house, with a beautiful, but rather dominant, lady from the neighborhood in the hallway outside. Other guests are standing around, waiting for dinner.

### **Our Continuing Friendship**

While Zoe was at my house, I told her several times that she was, without question, the winner of the Best Housemate of All award. We remained friends after she left. She spent two years in France, teaching English and improving her photography skills. Some of the pictures she showed me on her return I thought very good indeed, and I told her so. She had a way of capturing the personality of those she photographed: her UC friend Yasmin (an excellent poet and superb cook known as The Silent One), who rented Zoe's room the year after she left; a young woman she met in Paris; and Zoe's mother. She then moved to Los Angeles, working as a commercial photographer, but when she met Nikki, who lived and worked in San Francisco, she found a job in an advertising firm in San Francisco and moved into a loft in the Mission District (actually, a converted car-repair garage). After much anguishing, she revealed to her parents that she was a lesbian. Her father found it incomprehensible; her mother was genuinely sad, one reason, I am sure, being that it meant fewer chances for grandchildren. But her mother made a real attempt to understand, and to be at least civil to Nikki when Zoe brought her to her parents' house. Her father could barely bring himself to say hello to his daughter's new love.

In later years, her mother grew more accepting. During Rosh Hashanah, Sept., 2011, when Lydia was visiting her parents, she and her mother had the following conversation, which Lydia recorded and then sent to me in an email (she made a significant part of her living as a wedding photographer):

mom: "when you work a wedding , do you wear lipstick?"

me: "no"

mom: "too bad you're not a lipstick lesbian...because it brings color to a face, it makes your eyes shine... I know why, though, because then the boys would come on too strong, and you don't want to fight the boys off.... your personality and your boobs, the boys would cling.... (I start laughing here)... oh forget it"

Every couple of months or so, Zoe would write me an email or call. This bright voice on the phone would say, "Hi *John!* It's *Zoe!*" in exactly the same tone of voice that someone might say, "It's *Christmas!*" We would set up a time for her to come visit and I would buy the two cheeses I had introduced her to that had become her favorites, namely, St. Augur and Blue Castello, and a bottle of 1999 Chateau Rieussec Sauterne that had been recommended as a good accompaniment for those cheeses by Daria, a clerk at Solano Cellars on Solano Ave. in North Berkeley, and that had likewise become Zoe's favorite. And so for two or three hours we would sit in front of a crackling fire and talk — about her family, her life with Nikki, her photography. On one of these visits, but only one, she brought Nikki, and we sat in the backyard under the lemon tree and talked and had wine and cheese. I liked Nikki immediately, felt happy that at last Zoe had found a partner.

Her parents often invited me to come and visit them in Southern Calif., and so one year I took them up on their offer. They lived in a beautiful, but not lavish, home with a swimming pool in Tarzana. ("Modest elegance" is the phrase that comes to mind.) Her father's sculpture collection was on display in the living room (he did some sculpting himself and had a little studio on one side of the house). The collection was mainly African pieces, but also included several by a South

American woman who had been one of his patients. As I recall the story, she had worked on a plantation, and since she was a beautiful young woman, one day the son of the owner began making advances toward her. She turned him down, and so he came back with a vial of acid and threw it in her face, permanently disfiguring her. (Being a son of the aristocracy, he was never prosecuted, much less penalized, for his crime.) Somehow Zoe's father heard of the case, and he offered to try to repair some of the damage. The woman underwent many operations, but although they improved her looks, they were unable to restore her beauty, or even to make her attractive. During these years, she had worked hard on becoming a sculptor, and out of thanks to Zoe's father, who had performed all the work at no fee, she gave him several of her best works.

I stayed for a few days, during which they took me to several places of interest (Zoe's mother wanting to show me as much as time permitted of a part of the country she clearly loved): a town on the coast whose name I have forgotten and a couple of museums, including the Getty.

Each morning her father, who had suffered a heart attack, or come close to one, in the nineties, had a healthy breakfast of oatmeal and fruit, and then did his exercises. He urged me to do the same.

I have said that he was, to me at least, a most untypical surgeon, what with his dry, self-deprecating humor, his interest in talking to me about matters other than his career and his fame (for example, politics and in particular the Mid East situation), although we had to be prepared sooner or later to be regaled with stories about his early years, when he was perfecting his craft and becoming famous. On several occasions, he said there was no need for me to call him "Dr.," I should call him by his first name. I told him I was flattered, but that I had always felt that when ordinary people start calling doctors by their first name, that is the beginning of the end of the Republic As We Know It. The truth was, I couldn't bring myself to do as he requested. Doctors you simply always called "Doctor".

In 2004 Zoe invited me to a Thanksgiving dinner at her loft, and it was probably the best Thanksgiving dinner I ever attended. Her parents were there, and her uncle Eli and his young daughter and son. (Eli was involved in a nasty years-long battle with his Mexican ex-wife over the settlement of their property and the custody of their children.) Also her sister Gia, the lobbyist. It was a dinner such as I believe is only possible in Jewish families, the conversation excellent, and on a variety of subjects: advantages and disadvantages of a national health plan, public schools, the Bush administration's policies, movies (Lydia's mother always had a list of the best ones to see).

Then Zoe invited me to a show of her photography at the gallery next to her loft, but I had to miss it because I was sick. Then the following week she invited me to a party that turned out to have close to a hundred guests and a four-piece band that played with what I thought was amazing precision. On one wall was alternately projected a soft-porn film featuring Betty Page, a pinup star of the forties or fifties, and a cartoon featuring grotesque gnome-like characters. A translucent cloth screen around the sleeping loft was illuminated in a way that projected the silhouettes of couples doing erotic dancing in the loft, and each time a new couple began dancing, the crowd would ooh!

I of course was very flattered that Zoe would invite me to these events, especially considering that I was more than twice the age of any of the other guests.

A few weeks later she invited me to what she called "a small intimate gathering" (only about forty people) to celebrate her new web site showing her photography portfolio. Nikki had broken off their relationship a few weeks earlier on the grounds of needing more freedom to explore the

lesbian community (she had been a late-starter) and so there was Zoe, with her smile, expertly making the rounds of her guests, and with a degree of décolletage I hadn't seen before (I, looking there: "Aren't you worried about catching cold?")

At least once or twice a year she had an exhibit of some of her latest photography. I remember one that featured a series of large photos, mounted on the walls, of a young woman who, as a student, had shared my house for a year while she was completing her senior year. She was probably the quietest, shyest person I ever knew. After graduation, she became a chef. Yet there she was, half-nude, in fishnet stockings, in all sorts of seductive poses, being ogled by Zoe's guests.

We are still friends at the time of this writing, some nine years after that first day her smile greeted me when I opened the front door, but her visits — though not her promises of visits — have notably dropped off. "John, we have to get together! I'll be in Berkeley next week. I'll call you!" But she almost never did. Yet a month or so later, there would be another phone call, with a similar promise. Eventually, there would be a visit. Friends of hers spoke of similar Yes but No behavior. I told them what I thought the explanation was: if you had as many friends as she did — maybe a hundred or more — you couldn't possibly actually *visit* them with any frequency. But on the other hand you didn't want them to feel ignored, or to feel that you didn't *want* to visit them, and so the simplest solution was to do what she did.

But sometimes, when I received an email or a phone call from her after not having heard from her for many weeks, I would say, "Zoe! It's so nice to hear from you! I thought Total Hate Had Set In." I explained that the phrase had occurred to me years before when I was thinking back to my high school years. On Monday you would pass some of the kids in the hall, and say, "Hi, Scott! Hi, Debby! Hi, Mark! Hi, Jennifer!", and they would cheerily reply, "Hi, John!" On Tuesday, you would again pass them in the hall: "Hi, Scott! Hi, Debby! Hi, Mark! Hi, Jennifer!" and this time there would be no reply at all. You never knew why. Maybe the wave in your hair was not perfect that day, maybe you were wearing shoes they regarded as fruit boots, maybe you had said something to another student the day before and it had been decided you were no longer a person who should be talked to. You spent the day trying to figure out what you had done wrong.

We kept in touch via emails as well as phone. Below is an example of her email style. I had written her the following email in November, 2007:

Dear Zoe,

Jamie [the graduate student I was sharing my house with] and I were talking about you last night (all of it very complimentary, needless to say). She said we should write you an email and say hello. So I am. A further motivation is that I just put on Madeleine Peyroux's CD (with the tune "Dance Me to the End of Love") and for some reason she always reminds me of you. She's "the other Zoe".

Anyway, our house wishes your house (and all relatives thereof) a very happy Thanksgiving.

Love to you and Danielle [her girlfriend],

-- John



Her reply:

That is so funny! I was just listening to her the other day, and she reminded me of you, since you were the one to recommend her to me! I ended up buying her cd for my mom, who fell in love with her as well!

John! I miss you! I'm in Palm Springs with Danielle and her parents – it's very relaxing, except for the fact that I threw my neck out somehow yesterday in transit, holding heavy bag – that's what you get, I guess, for shlepping around two vanity fairs and a Sunday new york times, and a camera....

I will be back in the bay [area] this weekend, and would love to see you soon! it's been tooo long.

Savd [i.e., "Save"] nov 29 for a little photography showing in the city of my work.

Smooch

Zoe

There were other housemates after Zoe, all of them students. I hope to include descriptions of them in future editions of this book. Once in a while I would comment to Steve, my next-door neighbor, how little they seemed to know of history or literature (forget about classical music<sup>1</sup>) or art or science or math even though they were about to receive bachelor's degrees from one of the world's great universities. I would complain about how difficult it was to have interesting conversations with most of them, despite my observing as strictly as I could my rule of never talking about my interests unless I was specifically asked about them. "These kids live in their own world!" I would remark, and Steve would look at me with an expression that said, "You mean instead of the world of a depressive male intellectual three times their age?" Then he would gently remind me that their primary purpose in renting a room at my house was *not* to provide me with companionship.

The students' ignorance of the past did not only apply to academic subjects. I was told on several occasions that a young woman undergraduate at the University was overheard asking a friend in a coffee shop, "Was Paul with any group before Wings?", referring to Paul McCartney, founding member of the immortal Beatles.

---

1. Naomi and Tatiana and some of their friends were the only students I met (other housemates or their friends) who in the more than 15 years I rented out a room, loved classical music. All the rest showed not the slightest interest in, much less knowledge about, this greatest of all art forms.