Running

I had kept up my running ever since Marcella had suggested, after my pneumonia in the early seventies, that I start again, I having told her about my running cross-country in high school. In the mid nineties, when I was approaching sixty, and was experiencing a growing concern about gaining weight (I kept imagining myself getting out of bed one morning, looking down and realizing, "Oh my God, I can't see my toes!") — in those years I was running seven miles three times a week, an amount that now, some ten years later, I can hardly believe possible.

(In passing I should mention a thought regarding weight and running that often occurred to me when I saw a runner holding a miniature dumbbell in each hand to give himself extra weight to work against, and thus achieve a more strenuous workout, was: this is crazy! if the guy put on ten or fifteen pounds, say by eating more carbohydrates and junk food, then he wouldn't have to carry those blasted weights! Furthermore his heart would get more exercise just as a result of his normal, daily, physical activity.)

It was almost always drudgery, almost always the one thing I didn't want to do, which meant it was the one thing I *should* do. So I developed all sorts of arguments to push myself through the ordeal. Many of these are described in the section, "Running", in the chapter "Additional Thoughts" in my book *Thoughts and Visions* on the web site www.thoughtsandvisions.com. I tried to make an epic out of each run — I was the hero who had to succeed against overwhelming odds; I had been chosen to do the impossible. As in childhood, I tried to run at a pace I felt I could have kept up all day — as though my job in life were simply to run eight hours a day. And a few times a year, no more than four or five, for reasons I have never understood, the run would suddenly become an ecstatic experience. I flew over the sidewalks without fatigue, each intake of air was a triumph, the hills congratulated me for challenging them and praised me for having made it to the top without stopping, I owned all the beautiful houses I passed, I was at one with the cool spring or fall weather, there was no doubt in my mind that I could do anything.

Running Routes

I had several routes, and as I changed from street clothes to running clothes, I would go through the process of weighing which one I should choose that day, the process made difficult by the fact that each route differed from the others in degree of exertion required, in pleasantness of the streets, in degree of boredom. I was anything but the well-outfitted runner that one saw in the TV ads for running shoes and diet plans and cholesterol-fighting pills: I had a pair of ancient blue shorts that Marcella had given me when I had started running again, the broken waistband held together with a safety pin, plus a thick, smelly T-shirt with the name of a bank on it, given to me by a former girlfriend — I didn't wash it after each run, but simply left it hanging and stiffening in the closet — plus the blue baseball cap that Jeff had bought for me when I went to visit him at UCLA in the late eighties and the two of us had gone to a college ballgame together. The Code that I had obeyed since my childhood said: *never more than the minimum needed for the job, and never throw anything out*.

Here are the main routes I ran.

The South Berkeley and Oakland Route

This was: out the front door, turn right, half a block to Parker, then up the Parker slope about a mile to Hillegass, right on Hillegass, past the beautiful houses where I was meant to live, then into lower-middle-class Oakland, down Claremont, left onto Forest Street — a typical boring, virtually-treeless street with stucco houses on both sides, the very essence of the nowhere that is Oak-

land — with its short hill just before College Ave. to try to get you to concede that life is worthless. Then left onto College, past the stores, with now the chance to have eye contact with a young woman who you hope is thinking "He's old, but...", then after a mile or so, right onto Chabot with its old trees, past St. Albert's Priory, with its perfect green lawn behind a stone wall, the lambent sunlight on the lawn under the stately trees making you know once again how you were meant to spend your life in environs like this (though not in the Priory's subject matter), then slowly upward, trying to prepare for the heartbreak of Roanoke Hill that lay ahead, a hill so steep there was a herringbone pattern in the concrete to help prevent cars from skidding during the wet winter. Though the Hill was less than a quarter-mile long, it could only be conquered by keeping your eyes on the pavement in front of you — no looking ahead, no seeing how far you had to go — and by dulling the thoughts of stopping with a repeated "No,...no, ...no,..." in time with your pace ("No, I won't give up..., No, I won't give up...") until you saw the strange purple house on your left that told you that you were almost at the summit.

Then, the long delicious descent down The Uplands, with its houses set above the sidewalk on the hill on the left, the houses of old families who never had to listen to the racket of motor scooters on their street, or power saws, or the loud, raucous laughter of the lower class — down, down, only a few tenths of a mile but you have earned it. There was so little traffic you could run in the middle of the road. Then, at the bottom a turn almost back in the direction you had come from, onto Parkside Drive in a little valley with beautiful two- and three-story houses from the early years of the 20th century, each different from the other, each with at least a few old trees in the yard — houses in which, you could easily imagine, families lived through the decades, and graceful mothers who knew nothing of ghetto blacks and a corrupt, predatory City government awaited their daughter's return from Harvard, and the gardener came once a week. At the far end of Parkside, a half-circle around a tiny park, then a merciful downward block or two on The Plaza Drive to Domingo, right on it, up another hill, past houses you would kill to live in on both sides, under stately trees that the City Parks and Forestry Dept. wouldn't dare to cut down, then, at last you were at Ashby. If the light was red, you ran in place (a runner never stops running until the end, no matter what), which once prompted a pedestrian standing at the corner to ask her companion why the runner keeps running in place like that, to which her companion replied, "Because it uses less energy than stopping and then starting again". Then past the tennis courts of the Claremont Hotel on the right and Rick and Ann's Restaurant on the left, where there was always a 45-minute wait on weekends, but which had the best French toast in town, then through the rich, deep coffee aroma of Peet's Coffees and Teas, where you could buy a perfect cup of coffee while waiting for breakfast, then around the corner to Claremont Blvd, right on it and past a beautiful Julia Morgan house in her Mediterranean style, it having been occupied by an upper-level administrator at the University in the nineties, and then was sold for $2.4 million when the administrator decided he wanted to go back to teaching. (I took a tour through it.) Then past other ancient grand houses from the early 20th century — bankers' houses, the houses of Berkeley's old money — then down to Parker and the mile-long downhill that was your victory run.

Rockridge

This one was the same as the previous except that from Forest St. you turned right instead of left onto College Ave., then uphill past the stores to where College met Broadway. Then a sharp left, and after a few yards, across Broadway when the traffic finally permitted and up Broadway Terrace, past an apartment building on the left that I always thought had a particularly genteel quality, cool in summer, with imagined elderly ladies (retired schoolteachers) serving tea.

Steadily uphill into the Rockridge district with its affluent, mostly new houses, then up, up, to Marigold, left, up more hills to Acacia, up, up, just do this one and you'll never have to run again! the road so steep that, like Roanoke Hill, the concrete had a herringbone pattern in it. Then the summit with its view of the Bay, San Francisco, the Golden Gate Bridge in the hazy distance. The Berkeley/Oakland Hills fire of 1991 had come this far south and destroyed most of the houses and, of course, all of the trees, so now all the houses were new, mostly white stucco in Mediterranian style, with skinny little saplings in the sidewalks. (Unlike the lower class, the upper middle class puts trees first, or at least second.) Straight ahead was the steep downhill of Ocean View Drive; you had earned your victory run, and could stride past these homes knowing that by your exertions you earned the right to live there too! (even though you couldn't afford it); down, down, then right onto Broadway and home via the above route.

The Spruce Ave. Route

I will describe this route via an actual run.

For a reason I found out only later, my legs were in considerable pain, which was unusual for me. But I knew what the Code — and the runners' rule, No pain, no gain — demanded, and so I knew that I had no choice but to do the eight-mile Spruce Ave. run, the first four miles of which were virtually all uphill.

I set out on a nice sunny day: out the front door, left to Blake, up Blake, across Shattuck to Fulton, then left at the Witch's House, then along Fulton, past two- and three-story houses with fire escapes, the houses largely occupied by students, then past Ben and Jerry's ice cream shop on the other side of the street, past the sloping grass lawn on the right in front of the University, where students often lounged, resting from their labors, up a slight rise to Hearst, then right onto Hearst and then left onto Spruce. After a steep uphill came a nice downhill, then several level blocks, and then the real uphill ordeal began. This was prolonged hopelessness: you felt you were engulfed in acres of uphill concrete, that all there was, was up! The Bay came into view on your left as you lumbered past the houses of the professors, the professionals, the doctors and lawyers, of those who from an early age had done the Right Thing, two- and three-story substantial houses, no two alike, beige, light-yellow, off-white, some with tile roofs, some with stucco exteriors, some with pointed roofs, some with flat, all wedged into the side of the hill on your right, or situated on the steep dropoff on your left. Sometimes a bicyclist would go tearing by at who-knew-what-speed, the rider with a tense, determined expression on his face, he wearing a multicolored skin-tight outfit that always reminded me of the ads for motor oil. Past a little park on the left nestled below a a sharp curve of the road, and then, at last, almost at the summit, where Spruce met Grizzly Peak, some four miles from my house. Having made it that far, the pains in my legs hardly noticeable, I was feeling quite proud of myself. As I was following the sidewalk around to the left, onto Grizzly Peak, I failed to notice a raised slab of the sidewalk, and tripped and fell. My childhood talent for falling properly was still with me, and so, although I landed on one knee, both hands went out automatically to break my fall, my keys skittering ahead on the concrete. I knew I wasn't hurt seriously. I picked myself up, looked down at my legs, and noticed a splotch of blood spreading below my left knee. The pain was slight, so, naturally, I had to resume the run. A quitter never wins, a winner never quits, my father said.

I had nothing to wipe off the blood with, but even if I had, I wouldn't have used it, since it was far more impressive to run with the blood dribbling down my leg. I continued along Grizzly Peak: a little downward slope, with, on your left, the Summit Reservoir, which you wouldn't know was a reservoir unless someone had told you, because it was covered, no water in sight, just

dark gray gravel, and it occupied the better part of an entire block. A discreet and sensible reservoir that simply didn't allow its water to evaporate.

Then an upward slog to Beloit, left onto it, and now at last, this was the real summit, the highest point of the run. I could begin the long, delicious trip back, all downhill, the triumph and reward of my not having stopped once as I labored up Spruce.

I passed houses nestled close together, not elaborate by old-fashioned standards, but even in the nineties worth upwards of $750,000 I'm sure — these nice homes of the affluent, where the wretched sounds of the lower class are never heard. The sidewalk was so narrow you had to run along the left-hand side of the road. I turned left, then down to Cambridge, and saw, ahead, a woman working in her front yard. I knew she would be able to see my Red Badge of Courage, so I ran along her side of the sidewalk with my neat, clean, efficient, Frank Shorter[1] stride. I was hoping that, when she saw me, she might put her hand to her throat in alarm, as my mother had done when she saw me up in the cherry tree. And then maybe there would be a few moments of admiration, at least an "I bet you'd be kind of fun to know" flash of the eyes. She glanced toward me when she heard me coming, immediately saw the blood, gave an audible "Oh!" and immediately turned away. I had the distinct impression she was thinking, "Who is this ridiculous man running down our upper-middle-class street in the Berkeley Hills with blood coming out of his knee?"

Then it was down Princeton, a steep hill that forced you to put effort into controlling your speed, then to Amherst, then left again down to the Arlington: two wide lanes in the side of the hill with a grassy island down the middle, the sidewalk on the lefthand side uneven, so that you had take special care not to trip on the light fantastic toe. Down, down — oh, how magnificently easy it is to run downhill! — under the overhanging branches of ancient bushes, the houses hidden above you in the shrubbery, then finally arriving at the Marin Circle with its fountain in the middle down the short, curving Del Norte, left onto Sutter. Now a slight uphill, houses on the hill on the left, the playground of St. Mary's school below on the right, then into North Berkeley proper, striding in triumph past the shoppers, Black Oak Books and Saul's, a good Jewish restaurant and deli, on the left, then past Chez Panisse, one of the nation's great restaurants, a brown-shingle house from another age stuck in among the stores, no smells emanating from it because the kitchen was in the back and on the second floor, then straight down Shattuck, past the Post Office, the Elephant Pharmacy, stores on both sides, across University Ave., then eleven or so more blocks of stores, some vacant, even as the City fathers, for reasons you and I cannot possibly understand, were allowing the developers to build more mixed-use buildings throughout the city, with still more commercial space on the ground floor. Then a right onto Parker, increasing my speed to Milvia, and then after a sprint, meaning just about any further increase in speed I could muster, to notch the victory, down the length of my block on Milvia, past my house, turning around at the end and running back to mid-block, and turning into the front sidewalk, and the great labor was done.

But my leg pains were now so great I could hardly walk. Keys out, open the front door, hobble straight for the kitchen and a bottle of fruit-juice-flavored mineral water out of the refrigerator, pour it into a big glass, somehow stagger upstairs, lie down on the bed and turn on TV. The fatigue was often so great I couldn't bring myself to take a shower, and instead dozed off, and was wiped out for the rest of the evening except for reading and watching TV.

I was barely able to walk for several days. When I went to buy new shoes, the clerk at La Foot

1. Winner of the gold medal in the Olympic marathon in 1972 and of the silver medal in the 1976 Olympics.

said the old ones were so battered and falling apart he couldn't tell what the brand was, or even what kind they were: soccer shoes? running shoes? The new pair he sold me — Asics, I think — cured the pains within a single modest run.

On one of the North Berkeley runs (not an eight-miler), as I was coming back on Spruce and just nearing the bottom of the hill, I noticed a young girl running ahead of me, her blonde pony-tail swishing back and forth across her neck. She was moving along at a good clip, but I was feeling enormously good after the long downhill stretch, so I poured on the gas, came up behind her on her left and passed her easily. As I did, I gave a brief wave — a mere right-to-left sideways movement of my hand and said,

"Nice pace!" and then left her behind.

People, particularly women, to whom I have told this, have without exception shaken their heads and said I should have been ashamed of myself.

But God is just, and several months later, while I was running in the Elmwood District (one of several good running areas of South Berkeley), near College and Ashby, I heard footsteps behind me. I turned and saw a young blonde (not the same one) closing on me steadily, looking straight ahead, her face calm and determined and giving me not the slightest notice. I tried to pick up speed a little — I had already run five miles or so — but she kept gaining. And then she zipped past me without so much as a lifting of her hand.

Inspiration Point

Behind Berkeley was beautiful Tilden Park, which was set in the valley beyond the ridge at the eastern side of the City. It had a couple of lakes hidden among tall trees, and open meadows, a restaurant, steam trains for the kids, a botannical garden. In spring, I would sometimes treat myself to a run at Inspiration Point, which was the name of the start of a one-lane, four-mile asphalt path known officially as "Nimitz Way", after Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz who was in charge of U.S. naval forces in the Pacific during World War II. He had lived in a house in the Berkeley Hills which is still pointed out to passersby.

Inspiration Point was about seven miles from my house, and was reached by driving through the Park on Wildcat Canyon Rd. The asphalt path ran along the top of the ridge behind the Park. You parked your car in the little parking lot if there was room, which there usually wasn't on weekends, in which case you had to park in the dirt at the side of the road. From the parking lot you had views of Briones Park and Mt. Diablo to the east, Mt. Tamalpais to the west, San Pablo Reservoir far below, the visibility on some days being 20 miles or more.

You set off from the parking lot up a slight rise, past other walkers returning, talking, then you went down through ancient pine trees rich with pine smell on warm days, pines wiser than any human being, for they knew that all you have to do is stand still in silence in the place you grew up, with the sun and the blue sky above you, and that is the meaning of being. Along the side of the path would be saffron California poppies in spring, and small blue wildflowers.

After the pine trees was a Vista Point on the right, with a bench that gave you a view of the Reservoir and the hills beyond. Then began a long slope with Tilden Park below you on the left. There was a wooden bench every once in a while, so that people could sit and enjoy the view of the Bay.

In this early part of the path, there were more people. So you passed a pair of intense young women talking about PhD politics, families with little kids on their bikes, each kid wearing his little blue plastic helmet, then a couple of middle-aged men striding purposefully, once in a while a

runner, and then two or three bikers whooshing by. There was the toasty warm smell of hot grass in the summer, the cloying warmth all around you. Mileage indicators in faded white and orange paint could be seen in the asphalt paving, each of them a few feet from the others, all stating the same mileage. Beginning just a few feet beyond the one-mile point was a short, steep hill that could destroy the will power of even the most determined runners coming back the other way on a hot summer afternoon. Then, beginning at the base of this hill, another long, gradual slope which ended at the 1.5 mile point. Then, as a reward for your having struggled that far, a quarter-mile of the spellbinding peace and quiet of the Eucalyptus Grove, the sunlight flickering through the leaves, the tall ancient trunks with their peeling bark on each side, the air filled with the fragrance of the trees. And then out into the open, and after a hundred yards or so, the first cows.

After emerging from the Grove I often thought about living in a little dirt cave cut into the side of one of the hills, I having only my blankets and a few candles and books and a place to build a fire. All I would do each day is run, eat berries and oranges and trail mix, and be as one with the sound of the wind in the grass and trees.

I was enough of a loner enough to give this serious consideration. I imagined myself becoming a connoisseur of the smells of the woods and fields along the Nimitz Road, perhaps, among my few books, having a botany work that would enable me to identify all the plants and trees. In real life, when I was enduring the agonies of anticipating a routine checkup at Kaiser, I would think of what it would be like simply to say, "Beyond a certain level of care — dental care, the setting of broken bones, the prevention of skin cancer and glaucoma — I will live as healthily as I can and accept what happens." I would not carry health insurance. I would not spend my time trying to keep up with the latest progress in fighting cancer and heart disease and the other myriad of diseases, or keeping up with the latest warnings about lifestyles. Admittedly this was a much easier thing to say for someone who was in good health. I would give up living scientifically in return for peace of mind. And in fact, until the 20th century what I was contemplating was the lot of everyone, rich and poor. But how decide on the "certain level of care"? Simple: it would be what I could afford out of the savings I would be living on. (I couldn't let working for other people interfere with my daily work, which would be simply to run — seven, 10, 12 miles or more a day — rain or shine (on rainy days, I would always look forward to rolling up in a thick blanket in front of a small fire), my lean body flying over the Nimitz asphalt, and occasionally into the fields, past the cows — run, run, run!. My job in life would be this pure experience of Nature every day. The blessed life of strenuous physical exercise and doing without.

Beyond the two-mile point, the number of walkers and runners became fewer, though the number of bikers seemed to remain about the same. Once in a blue moon a horseback rider, leather creaking, came along.

On the left side of the path you now had before you, through the golden haze, the entire Bay Area, including San Franciso and the Golden Gate Bridge. On the other side, far down below on your right was San Pablo Reservoir, with moth-like sails on the blue enamel of the water. Cows, black and white, chewed patiently as they watched you go by, the expression on their faces telling you that they were thinking, though they would never say so out loud: "Christ, what idiots people are!"

Beyond the Reservoir, in spring until June or so, were rolling hills covered with a lush green carpet out of my childhood books. At the north end of the Reservoir were patches of white houses, almost insignificant in the vastness of the hills. You couldn't help but imagine kids building a plane, oh, in a day or so, out of canvas and thin pine slats, and placing it on the asphalt path you were running along, two of them climbing in, "Ready?" "Ready!" and then the one starting to

peddle, *creak*, *creak*, the propellor turning, now the little craft moving down the path, "*Faster!*"and then rising into the air, as perhaps it would if the canvas and the pine slats and the pilot and his passenger were filled with helium. As easy as riding a bike. And then up over the fields and the cows, "Let's go over the Reservoir!" and the other peddling hard, replying, "Yeah!" and off they would go, now far above the steep chaparral-covered slope that descended to San Pablo Dam Road. "Hey, This is great!" "Yeah! Let's land on the other side of the of the Lake!" And the pilot expertly banking to the left, the little craft now descending until it was just a few feet above the blue water, his passenger reaching out, trying to drag his fingers through the little waves, then the beach coming closer, closer, and the pilot pulling back on the steering wheel at just the right moment, the nose going up, and the wheels settling with a gentle soft crunch into the sand. Next day they would quickly make a balloon and fly it into the vast expanse of sky.

During those years — the nineties, when Jeff came out to visit me — or I visited him in New York City, we always did a run together. One that I especially remember was a Sunday at Inspiration Point. When we arrived, a throng of other runners was just about to start up the asphalt path. I asked who they were, was told it was a local running club. Off they went, while Jeff and I did our stretching exercises. Then off we went. After about half a mile, he said, "I think I'll just run ahead a little..." And soon he was disappearing down the length of the road. I kept chuffing along, knowing full well I couldn't catch him. Then, about a mile and a half farther, I saw a mob coming at me. The runners were on their way back from the gate at the four-mile point. I waved with what strength I had left. And there, close behind them, was my son, efforting on with that determined expression and concentration on his face. We waved.

I continued through the open pasture country, then down a merciful slope, then up the long unmerciful hill ascending to the cow gate — four miles from the start — at the start of the dirt road that went through rutted open grassland to the little town of San Pablo, several miles to the north. I turned at the gate, fought my way back. Sometimes, coming back, when you were soaked with sweat, a fly or two would decide to get to know you, flying over, under, around the swats of your hand. "Bet you can't touch m!." And they certainly were waiting for me on that day. At the end, my son was waiting for me, and seeming as though he had been so long he was growing a little tired of it. He said the only part of the run that had gotten to him was the short, steep uphill at the one-mile point. He said he thought he was going to vomit.

Smells

I have never had any interest in running with earphones playing music into my ears. Either you're outside, or you're inside. Not both. I wanted to hear the sound of my feet on the pavement, the sound of my own breathing, of the wind in my ears. And yet sometimes a passage of music would go through my mind endlessly, in time with my footsteps: for example, the harpsichord cadenza at the end of the first movement of the Fifth Brandenburg Concerto. In fact, this gave birth to an idea for a short film which is described in the chapter, "Literature and Art" in my *Thoughts and Visions*. The first movement of Bach's *Concerto for Two Violins and Orchestra* was another example. But most of the time, a dull monotonous sequence of notes whose source I don't know was repeated over and over in my head. But smells were a different story entirely.

Spring was the best season for running; the cloudy skies and rain and cold (no snow of course) of winter were past; now you ran through rifts of smells, a *puisse café* of smells, with, sometimes, warm air over cold. The glistening moisture in the grass; the black, moist earth, the orange-yellow newborn sun shining down on everything with the warmth and smile it had in my childhood drawings — everything was young and new again — Nature, forever optimistic, forever in denial

about the facts on a planet that revolves with a tilted axis around a sun, decides to try again ("Maybe this time..."). Bushes had green, shiny leaves; flowers suddenly appeared ("Hi! We're here!); the fruitless cherry trees were aglow with pink blossoms; sometimes, you noticed the shit stink of fertilizer; sometimes, for just a moment, I caught the immortal cedar or juniper smell from my first trip to Switzerland at age two; and then, making you young again, the smell of a woman's perfume.

On some spring days it was no trouble at all to run; you felt you could have gone on forever; up hills, down hills, you were not even breathing hard when you got home. I was the equal of the rich who owned the beautiful houses I ran past. I owned these neighborhoods that I couldn't afford to live in. I ran through the smell of roses, of other flowers I never knew the names of; sometimes there would be a trace of the smell of freshly-made cake, or maybe just cake icing, pink and white, made by some gracious woman in a beautiful house up in the Hills. I imagined the interior of the house: pink, white, baby things, perfume, all happy and busy. Then, sometimes, a faint smell of shaving cream.

With summer came hot sun toasting dead leaves and brown grass, the heat settling into everything; aroma of roses, once in a while honeysuckle, sweat on my skin, detergent in a washing machine, laundry soap (some woman was in that house, hanging things up, there were conversations, they were talking about buying something, or who would be coming to a dinner party); the smell of hot tar (eternal smell from my early childhood); smell of meat cooking: steak, hamburger, stew. The pencil smell of cedar...

Fall, after the oppression of Indian summer's heat, brought the smell of apples (especially on cold, rainy days), memories of the tight skin of a MacIntosh apple, the cracking sound when you bit into it. Memories of apple seeds, which to me always were a kind of shaped dark wood, little sculptures.

On a cold fall day, sometimes, the delicious, head-spinning ecstasy of the smell of wood smoke, all too rarely however, thanks to the relentless campaigning of hypochondriacal left-wingers without an ounce of understanding of science, who insisted that wood smoke was the main cause of lung cancer, and who, as a result, had induced the none-too-bright City Council to ban fireplaces in all new houses, and to prohibit the addition of fireplaces to existing houses.

The Reward at the End

Sometimes the only way I was able to keep going on warm days was by thinking of the delicious cold, sparkling, fruit-flavored mineral water that awaited me when I got home. Calistoga Wild Berry and Black Raspberry were the best (the company later got rid of the mineral water, although it continued to claim in its label that the fruit juice was pure). The promise of this reward was especially important on days when I deliberately kept running despite low blood sugar, so that I ran in a kind of trance, an elated giddiness. But on a couple of occasions, the consequences were definitely serious: I made it to the kitchen, but before I could drink anything, I collapsed, while at the same time experiencing a sudden attack of diarrhea. I have never felt that bad in my life; it was the kind of experience that we feel is impossible to endure one moment longer. I crawled the few feet from the toilet in the tiny room at the back of the house, to the refrigerator, somehow hauled myself up to get the bottle of juice, somehow opened the cap, and then glugged it down until I felt I could crawl over to the pantry and reach the honey jar, from which I scooped out two or three tablespoonsful. After that, some bread and a banana, and I slowly recovered. These experiences were enough to convince me always to have a plate of spaghetti or some other

source of carbohydrates before I did a long run at Inspiration Point.

But after a normal run, in order to impress my housemate if she happened to be in the kitchen, I would stagger in and gasp out the words, "Piece-a...piece-a...cake..." She was rarely impressed, more often genuinely concerned about an imminent heart attack.

On cold days, especially cloudy, gray, cold days when rain was imminent, what often kept me going was the promise of a nice, hot bath at the end. Turn on some classical music in my study — ideal weather for Schoenberg's solo piano music (Schoenberg weather) — then climb in while the water was still filling the tub and adjust the temperature to be hot, but not quite unbearably hot, when the tub was full. Then lie back in the steamy water and resume my ongoing attempts — conducted only in the bathtub — to see if I could achieve the Zen state of no-sense-of-self. Surely with the sound of the hot water dribbling lazily from the faucet as the overflow went down the drain behind the drain valve, surely in this pleasant warmth and pleasant random sound, I should be able to not be self-conscious for a few seconds! But I never achieved it. A voice in my mind kept repeating, "Stop thinking of not thinking of yourself! In fact, stop thinking!" Hopeless.

The Physical Result

Despite the fact that, after a seven-mile run in late afternoon or early evening, I was too tired to do any intellectual work except desultory reading, there was absolutely no doubt about the physical benefit of the exercise in succeeding days. I had an enormous feeling of well-being the next day after a run, as though every cell in my body was bathed in oxygen. I felt as though I was glowing with health. My weight then was around 160, sometimes a few pounds less. (My high school running weight had been 148.) My pulse rate at rest — for example, after waking up in the morning — was sometimes as low as 54, once I think down to 52. (Dr. McKenna, our old GP on the Peninsula, said that the resting pulse rate of Palo Alto High School track-and-field athletes was 40.) Now that I don't run anymore, my resting pulse rate is around 60.

Sybase

Starting as a Contract Writer

I no longer remember how long I had been out of work when someone told me "Sybase is hiring". Somehow I got the name of Wendy Hoben, who was the manager of Programming Publications, and in June 1993, I started working as a contract writer for her. She had graduated from UC Berkeley with a degree in Women's Studies or Political Science, and lived in a little house on Milvia in North Berkeley — it was on one of my running routes (as I found out when I had to deliver some papers to her at home one time).

The company had been founded by Mark Hoffman and Robert Epstein, the latter a former UC Berekeley professor of computer science. Epstein, always referred to as "Bob" Epstein, was a short man with a robust sense of humor who was famous for his eccentric taste in neckties — not merely because of their loud and bizarre colors, and occasional small electric lights, but also because of their materials: not only cloth and silk, but wood and plastic, I was told. I asked programmers who had worked on the original Sybase software, which he had programmed, how his programming was. The universal response was: not very good; he was a much better manager of programmers.

The company prided itself on its forward thinking, and so the floor layout in the building in Emeryville, a few miles from Berkeley, that I worked in was not rectangular, but instead vaguely triangular. The result was that you pretty much had to memorize where people were with whom

you had to interact, because the layout was no help at all. (Someone told me that the purpose of the non-rectangular design was to promote creativity.)

My records say that I was hired to work on an online Help system, but I can find no copies of anything I produced. The only thing I remember is that, as usual, I didn't know how to run any of the software — in this case, Unix software — that was required in order for me to do my job, and so, as usual, I found someone knowledgeable in the department and simply asked him. This poor soul was Brad Andersen, and for several weeks, he patiently replied to my questions, whether over the phone or via email or via in-person demonstration. He was friendly, so we talked briefly sometimes about non-work matters: he said he was thinking of leaving to become a minister. Once again I was struck by the fact that what most competent workers do is learn to be good at using equipment and software. I suspected that an engineer could fail to come up with any creative ideas at all, but keep his job by being extremely adept and fast at the keyboard.

I was struck by how much the Sybase culture revelled in the technical terms associated with the products. The term "client/server" was on everybody's lips, as was "SQL" (an abbreviation for "Strucured Query Language", and pronounced "sequel") and "enterprise" this and that. Sybase products were built on a solid foundation, namely, that of a relational data base. I had heard about these already at HP in the '70s, and admired the basic concept, which was to represent data in tuples, and then use a standard algebra to find things in these tuples. Thus, for example, there might be a tuple for each employee in a company, the tuple being, say, <last name, first name, age, company dept., years with the company, salary>. Then you could use the algebra to get answers to questions like, "What are all employees whose last names begin with "S", who have been with the company for more than three years, and whose salary is less than $50,000?"

I tried to learn the meanings of the terms, and why what they represented was important, but I was talking to people (mainly, writers, not only in our department but throughout the company) who had no background in computer science, and so had no knowledge of the importance of the difference between function and implemenation, semantics and syntax, the What vs. the How. So their explanations did me little good.

By Mar., 2012 it was clear that the company's obsession with impressive-sounding technical terms had reached new heights. The Sybase web site is almost incomprehensible to anyone not in the business, and yet the underlying concepts and functions are easy to explain.

Eventually Brad's patience wore out. I could tell it first when he began saying things like, "Look, John, I'm kind of busy. Maybe you could ask ..." or "It's easy! You can figure it out for yourself." But I kept pestering him, and eventually he went to the boss about it. I couldn't blame him. But from then on my days were numbered. I managed to transfer to another contract job, this one under Pierre Chavanne in the Connectivity Products Group, my assignment being to finish an online Help system.

Wendy was a lesbian, and I soon realized that Sybase was a veritable hot-bed of lesbianism. An editor or writer, I'm not sure which she was, in our department, was also the editor of the lesbian magazine *Frighten the Horses*. She gave me a copy. I remember an article titled something like "My First .38 Revolver", and another one on Aileen Wuornos, the Florida woman who had been sentenced to die for killing six men. It was clear that the author of the article considered her crimes fully justified.

This editor had a boyfriend whom she brought to work sometimes. (I don't know if they had a sexual relationship.) He seemed content to follow her around (literally), like a pilot-fish. She had

a reputation for coming in late and leaving early, and once in a while I would hear grumbling among the males that her sexual preference got her special privileges from the boss.

I kept wondering if the head of Training, a dominant, thoroughly capable blonde, might also be a lesbian, but I felt angry at myself for harboring the suspicion about a woman who was merely unusually capable at a highly technical job. I used to go for Sunday breakfast at a place called The Brick Hut on Martin Luther King Jr. Way ("M, L, K" or "Milky Way", as the natives called it) in Berkeley (the restaurant later moved to a larger space on San Pablo Ave.) that was known (a) for being a lesbian hangout, and (b) for its outstanding breakfasts. When I took Kathy (the young woman I had lived with in the eighties) there once, she was a little put off at seeing two women necking at one of the tables. Then, one morning, as I was walking among the tables at the San Pablo location, whom should I see but — the head of Training, with another woman! Our eyes met, I think I nodded, her expression said, I hope you don't imagine there is something unusual, much less wrong, about this!

An Opportunity to "Help Invent the Future"

Already in July, Andrew Davis, a recruiter I knew from technical writers' society meetings, told me that a manager in Sybase was looking for a senior technical writer for a special company project. He gave me the manager's name, which was Stan G — , I wrote him a letter, and he asked for samples of my work, which I sent him. Then he invited me for an interview.

The Interviews

I think we met in the cafeteria. Stan gave the impression of a man who had always regarded himself as good-looking (although his black hair was now thinning). He was nattily dressed, with a narrow tie. He did most of the talking, which can fairly be described as a torrent of big, new, high-tech words I had never heard before. One thing I remember was that he said the project was "to invent the future", but he couldn't give me any details because it was top secret. Another thing he said was that he was a classical trumpet player, and performed with some of the regional orchestras in the Bay Area, among them the Redwood Symphony. He also said he was a composer of electronic music, had taught for many years at local universities, and had been a pupil of, and was now a close friend of, the composer Lou Harrison, who lived in the Bay Area. He said that when the company initially approached him, he told them he was reluctant to leave North Carolina, where he was then working, because his fiancée was still there. The company said he could fly back and forth as often as he liked in order to visit her, and the company would pick up the tab. He said he had just rented a tower in what is known among Berkeley architectural aficionados as "The Castle" (Hume House, 1928; John Hudson Thomas, architect, 2900 Buena Vista Way), a replica of a Spanish castle which an eccentric professor had built in the Berkeley Hills. Since I desperately wanted the job, I ascribed my difficulty in understanding him to my own ignorance and mental slowness. I kept nodding, making sounds of agreement and of being very impressed, and did my best to show my eagerness to become a member of the team. When the torrent of words was over, he said he wanted me to talk to one of his newly-hired writers, Esther G — . An appointment was set up.

Esther was a strikingly attractive woman in her twenties, with neck-length black hair, bright, penetrating eyes, and a quick, impatient manner that clearly said, "I am young, very attractive, very smart, but I don't take this kind of work completely *seriously*". (Toss of hair.) For some reason, she arranged for our first interview to be in the vast mall in the Emeryville Market Place, which was full of ethnic restaurants, with rows of tables and benches. She seemed not to want to

be bothered with the formality of an interview, and often sat with her chin in her hand as she asked me the standard questions.

Several days later, I got a call from Stan saying that I had been hired. I would be paid more money than I had ever been paid in my life: $68,500 a year. This was in early September, 1993.

The Brahms Project

The project was formally named "Integrated System Services" (ISS), but code-named "Brahms", and its nature was secret even from the other divisions and departments of the company. In fact, the company had created a new division for it and housed it in a separate building — the Watergate Office Towers, 2000 Powell St., one of several office complexes and hotels on a little block-wide peninsula west of Highway 80 in Emeryville. The division occupied the entire fifth floor. A certain resentment at being kept in the dark soon developed among employees in the other divisions and departments. Brahms's sole charter was to make a giant leap into the next generation of database software. (But even that was confidential.) Specifically, it was to be an implementation of some of the latest database theory with the goal of enabling a financial company to keep track of complex stock investments in all its branches and offices around the world, and in addition to perform sophisticated financial analyses on these investments.

To achieve this breakthrough, the company eventually wound up hiring some 50 to 60 programmers and support staff, including several PhDs in computer science. I soon learned that their self-confidence, I am inclined to say *arrogance*, left no doubt that they had long ago decided they were in the genius class.

In order to make sure that the product in fact met the needs of the financial market it was aimed at, the company established what it called "Design Partners". These were companies, for example, Merrill Lynch, who would send members of their elite technical staffs to review and comment on the project plans. (When these representatives were due to arrive for a day of slide presentations, the word would go out, "The Partners are coming!") In effect, the Design Partners would pay us for the opportunity to influence the development of the product, give us feedback on how we were doing and, in return, would not only get a product that would meet their needs, but would be the first ones in their field to get it, and they would also get special discounts on the purchase of it and on support contracts.

The Brahms Team — Managers and Programmers

The manager of the Brahms project was Mike Donaldson (although his title on organization charts was "Director, Technology and Business Analysis"). Like the managers immediately below him, he was personable and had extraordinary skills with PowerPoint, a program that enabled you to create dazzling color-slide presentations that were projected on a screen directly from the computer.

My initial impression was that the top management and all the middle managers and programmers were first-rate. I will here describe briefly only those members of the staff whom I remember clearly.

The head of Training was Bennett Falk, a tall guy with a bemused expression and a finely tuned sense of humor, who reminded me of the British author, John Morton, creator of *Rumpole of the Bailey.* He lived in North Berkeley. Once, in explaining an object-oriented programming concept, he used a metaphor that I thought a marvelous illustration of the concept: "This is my grandfather's axe. My father replaced the handle, and I replaced the head, but it is still my

grandfather's axe."

The head of Marketing was Hal Spitz. He had a quick manner and a one-of-the-boys wit. He was good at giving talks, always putting his audience at ease with a joke or two. But one of his slogans crystallized a fundamental idea in my Environment concept, although he knew nothing of my Environments. One day I heard him say that one of the guidelines for the Brahms software was, or should be, "*Put the intelligence in the Environment!*" (The Environment he had in mind was the set of screens that the user of Brahms would see in the course of using the system.) I immediately thought, *That's exactly it! That is exactly the whole idea underlying the Environment concept!*

Another key member of the staff was Robert Hodges, the head of Quality Assurance. One of the Brahms goals was that not more than ten bugs would be discovered in the first six months after the first release of the product to sales, an unbelievably ambitious goal for a piece of software the size that the Brahms software would be (many thousands of lines of programming text). But if there was anyone in the world who would be able to achieve that goal, it was Robert. (He always asked that he be called Robert, not Bob.) He was, without doubt, one of the half-dozen best managers I came across in my entire career in industry. Not only was he completely adept at handling the various complex programs he needed in order to get his job done, he was also a first-rate speaker and creator of PowerPoint slides, very personable, and considered a good manager by his employees as far as I could gather from talking to them. He had already earned his reputation on other projects at Sybase, and, so the story went, had been rewarded sufficiently well that he and his wife, a German woman he had met on a trip to Germany, had been able to buy a nice house in the upscale Thousand Oaks section of North Berkeley. He spoke German fluently. He and his wife had one daughter.

As part of his research, he made a trip to study the reliability of the Space Shuttle software, then generally regarded as the most reliable software in the world, or at least in the country, and gave a talk on what he learned. The main point was that that kind of reliability costs a great deal of money.

His team put together a system that automatically checked all programs that were impacted by any change made in any one program, and notified the appropriate programmer when it detected any matters that might need attention as a result of the change. In addition, the team developed an automatic testing regimen for all programs in Brahms. Finally, they created a set of procedures that programmers had to follow in the course of writing programs, in order to be sure that programs conformed to the high standards that the quality assurance goals demanded. The procedures included formal reviews of functional specifications, and a procedure for processing errors and points of contention. It was a major accomplishment, and was already working within a year of the time I joined the project.

The Technical Writing Dept.

The Technical Writing Department was given the high-falutin name of "Information Resources" (IR). There were six of us: Stan , Esther, and I, and three other women: Deirdre McClure, Dee Elling, and Caren Weisglas. As it turned out, all the women except Esther were lesbians. No one in the department except me had the slightest formal education in any technical subject.

Esther G —

Esther was the most interesting of the group, first, because she was by far the most intelligent of the women (and more intelligent than one of the two men), and second, because she had developed a way of dealing with her technical ignorance in a way that commanded respect, even admiration.

In conversations with her, she remarked that she was the daughter and sister of scientists[1], and so regarded herself as the black sheep of the family because all her talents seemed to lie in the area of computer documentation, multimedia, and online systems. She was also an occasional news reporter on the local PBS radio station, KQED-FM.

She lived in a charming one-bedroom condo on Cedar St. in North Berkeley. On seeing it — I think I gave her a lift home one time — I was so taken by it that I told her I wanted to buy it when she was ready to sell.

She had a way of making sure that she was No. 1 among the writers, and I had to admire her psychological skill at doing this. First of all, she had a manner that said, "Of course, this is not the way we should be doing this, but what can you expect?" — a manner that also gave you the impression that she didn't really have to be there, didn't need the work, had many other options. No matter what you might tell her that you thought was new or interesting, she had a manner of — perhaps not dismissing it, but making sure you knew it wasn't really that new or interesting. I first heard the expression, "Been there, done that, got the T-shirt", from her. She always seemed to know the company rumors before anyone else. The result was that you felt you always had to scramble to keep up with her.

She claimed to like classical music, and I'm sure she did at some level, but she seemed to want to give the impression that her taste was so refined that she could never bring herself to actually discuss any given piece of music that I might have come across, much less listen to it on the CD player she had in her office. If I told her that the piece in question — say, the last movement of Vivaldi's Flute Concerto No. 2 in G Minor (RV 439) as played by Michala Petri — only lasted *2:03 minutes* (that's all, just a fraction over 2 minutes!) she would reply that she might have a chance to get to it the next day if I left the CD on her chair. But she never did.

Stan put her in charge of new systems we had to learn. One of these was a huge, lumbering word-processor made by ArborText. One part was called "Document Architect", the other "ADEPT Publisher". These enabled us to go from typed-in text directly to displayed online help text. We had to take a week-long seminar, in Palo Alto, simply to learn the basics of its use. It was all I could do not to plead with the instructor to let me show her a much better way of organizing information on using such a product. People didn't need to take a *course*! People didn't need to have the phone book read to them! Maybe I broached the subject once or twice, but she only listened politely and went on teaching us, in linear order, how to enter text, how to specify all sorts of typefaces and type colors, how to save a document, move a paragraph from one document to another, and how to carry out the incredibly complicated process of converting the text file into an online help file, each of us meantime making a separate set of notes from her lectures. A grotesquely inefficient process. But I suppose her indifference to my ideas was understandable, since, if they worked, they would put her out of a job.

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1. Her father had committed suicide in their living room, an event that, it was clear from our conversations, profoundly affected Esther for the rest of her life. Her mother, I gathered, doted on her.

Esther learned quickly, but she did so by a combination of native intelligence, experience with previous word-processors, intuition, and trial and error. She had absolutely no systematic approach to a learning task.

I remember one morning asking her how to do something on the new system. She immediately embarked on a dazzling performance at the keyboard and mouse, fingers racing over the keys, mouse clicking everywhere, all the while carrying on a running dialogue along the lines of, "OK, let's see (*damn!* fingers just aren't working this morning. Where's my coffee?) OK, so we want to (*what?* [clicking the mouse button repeatedly] this mouse is *use*less). OK so we want to (*there*) Now, let's see, I don't know why they're giving us all *that* [peering at the screen] (this is a *terrible* interface). OK, OK, now all we have to do is (*damn*, this machine is slow, let me try again). OK, so..." And, eventually, with more of this thrashing, she succeeded in finding out how to do what I had asked her. I was naive enough to suggest (once) that maybe we — she and I — should sit down and record the steps that actually worked to accomplish each thing. Then we could circulate them among the other writers, and wouldn't have to keep repeating the process of trial-and-error. She gave me a withering look that said, in no uncertain terms, "Come on, John. Are we professionals or not? (My God!)"

She had a sharp sense of humor. One time, when the subject of speaking French came up, she said a friend of hers often used the phrase, regarding something that was being discussed, "It has a certain *je ne sais qua*[1] I can't put my finger on it". I felt that I could stay on her good side by employing a little humor of my own. I think, in spite of herself, she enjoyed it sometimes. I remember her on a couple of occasions trying not to laugh over something I had said.

But her lack of systematic thinking drove me crazy. On Apr. 13, 1994, I wrote to Heim:

"Am in a foul mood today, being in the midst of another argument with my co-worker, Esther. You cannot know how much I detest the females in my profession, even those at the top rank, as E. certainly is. Not one of them — not one! — has the slightest background, education, or interest in technical concepts, or, I should say, in the kind of reasoning one does in technical subjects, and not only the reasoning, but the kind of mental discipline that goes along with it: the habit of asking questions like, 'What do we really mean by this term?', the understanding of the importance of rigor, for example, the rigor of sticking to a given model once you've decided to do so. (The eternal female, forever changing the rules to fit the circumstances.) E. is Jewish, and thus is easily impressed by mental razzle-dazzle — she just did a PBS [radio] report which included interviews of local futurists, a bunch that any decent scientist regards with unconcealed contempt — and, being Jewish, she is also easily seduced by new technology, never once asking the important questions like 'What exactly does this technology allow us to do better than the old? and What do we mean by 'better'? and What are the tradeoffs in cost and learning time?'

"She knows how to make all sorts of programs more or less work, having learned by trial and error, yet she couldn't begin to give you a proper definition of fundamental terms like 'function', 'set', 'algorithm', much less the ones specific to our own work, like, 'relation', 'object', 'type', 'model', *nor does she think this ignorance a limitation on her ability to do a good job!*

"My old mentor back in the HP Labs days, John Allen, used to be downright nasty to people in the software business who didn't study mathematics, and I am proud to say I did whatever I could to make sure I was not one of them. Most of the engineers I work with — and they are certainly an elite crowd — consider mathematics a tool and nothing more, but at least they are capable of

1. "I don't know what"

following a line of reasoning. (By the way, several of these engineers are women, some of them sharper than the men. So don't take my ranting about E. as some kind of sexist line.)"

And yet in February 1995 she sent me a Valentine, I assume as a joke.

On Apr. 15, I added to the letter:

"Turns out that E. ran into the boss on the way out Wed. evening, mentioned to him our disagreement (which concerned a way of organizing the mountain of work we have before us), and he immediately called a meeting the next morning. She, no doubt sensing that she might have to defend her views in a rational argument, didn't come in — when the boss called her on the phone, she said she was checking some work that had been done on her roof, and also baking a cake for two employee birthdays that afternoon — but, in any case, he and I sat down and went over the planning document. Within half an hour, all was resolved, things had been put in their proper place, meanings of terms nailed down. Since the original document had been at least 50% his own design, I was deeply impressed by his willingness to discuss improvements to it, and by his obvious desire to deal with my criticisms point by point.

"The three of us met again at 1:30. The first words out of E.'s mouth as she flounced down into her chair were, 'I hope this is short.' Which it was, because the boss and I had done all the work in the morning. But I know that I, who had troubled to raise questions about what terms meant and why we were doing things the way we were, came off with a hell of a lot more credit in the boss's eyes than this bitch who can never be bothered with such dull matters."

She had a way of blaming others sometimes for things that went wrong with the project. I cannot recall a single instance of her admitting that she had been wrong. When I told her one day that it might be a good thing if she blamed herself once in a while, she replied, with apparent genuine amazement at my criticism, that I shouldn't take seriously everything she said, it was just her way of letting off steam. Once again I was amazed at her psychological acumen, because her reply was nothing less than a declaration that she expected to be able to say whatever she wanted and never be blamed for it. She could be as critical as she wanted to of her fellow employees, and if anyone complained about her behavior, she could always say that they took her seriously just when they shouldn't have. (But how could we know when we should and when we shouldn't take her seriously?) Thus people walked on eggshells when they dealt with her, they wondered privately what kind of a mood she was in that day, and if perhaps this orneriness of hers might not conceal unusual depth and intelligence — maybe her failure to get much done was due to the fact she was so intelligent that the ineptitude of others, and the poor quality of the software, really did hold her back! Why, the truth was, she was brilliant! And if we were only half as brilliant, we would understand her, and see that our ability to get the job done on time, much less our expectation that she do the same, was really — when you looked at it properly — something we should be ashamed of!

But like the rest of us she was exasperated by the growing evidence of Stan's incompetence. We grumbled among ourselves, but one day she announced she was going over his head. So she got an appointment with Mike Donaldson (manager of the Brahms project), and complained about him. She made no attempt to conceal it from Stan . All along I had the impression that she and Stan had a special relationship — I don't mean that they were lovers, but that, perhaps because they were both Jewish, they had an understanding, and that this was why he tolerated such arro-

gance on her part. In any case, it was clear, despite this arrogance, that he liked her, in fact, respected her.

Many, perhaps most, of the men on the project, including me, were hot for her. I on the one hand hated myself for being old and bald and, I was sure, something of a comic figure in her eyes, but on the other hand, I knew to the depths of my soul that even if she had found me physically desirable, her personality would have made it impossible for me to sustain a relationship with her.

The field of her pursuers gradually narrowed down to two, both of them star programmers. One was a heavy-set, earnest guy whose name was Hamish Reid. He, like Hal Spitz, made a remark one day that has stuck in my mind ever since, and that sums up pages, volumes, of technical discussion on the nature and importance of the concept of data types in computer languages. (The reader will recall the argument against data types made by my mentor in computer science, John Allen at HP Labs, insofar as data types meant built-in protections so the user could not assign the wrong type of number to a variable: "If programmers want the benefit of using sharp tools, then they will simply have to learn how not to cut themselves.") During the course of a talk — I'm not even sure if he was making a particular case for types, but merely drawing boundaries to the concept he was trying to set forth — Hamish said, "Somehow I don't think you should be allowed to take the tangent of the date." At the very least, that one sentence expresses the essence of the data types concept.

Eventually, Esther chose the other of the two programmers, Bart W. — , and later, I heard, they were married. He left Sybase and started a software company in Oakland, and fortunately sold it before the dot-com crash. So I assume they were financially independent after that. Around 2002, I ran into her in downtown Berkeley while she was waiting for her car at the car wash. She was now the doting mother of two bright little girls, and was as bright and cheerful and confident as ever.

Deirdre McClure

Deirdre, our editor, had the cubicle next to mine. (She made it clear, when I once pronounced her name as *Deer*druh, that it was to be pronounced *Dare*druh.) Stan had asked several members of the department, including me, to interview her when she was applying for the job. Because she was a musician, I had immediately felt comfortable talking to her. She had a boyish attractiveness, with full cheeks and short hair, and liked to come to work in a long trenchcoat. She was the director of the Club Foot Orchestra, the Club Foot having been a nightclub in San Francisco. She had an undergraduate degree in music and was planning to go for a PhD at the Peabody Institute of Johns Hopkins University. And even if she, like Esther , wasn't ready to listen to all the music I wanted her to, at least we could talk about something that was in the blood and bone of each of us. We could whistle or sing a fragment of a theme and know that the other would either recognize it immediately, or know that he or she didn't know it. We could notice the odd interval that a phone ring had, and then think of all the classical pieces that began with that interval. With her I lost all my shyness, or, rather, all my otherwise constant attention to the other person's reactions whenever I talked, a habit cultivated out of necessity over a lifetime.

She conducted the premier of Erling Wold's chamber opera, *A Little Girl Dreams of Taking the Veil*, which was based on Max Ernst's collage novel by the same name. Performances were held in the Intersection for the Arts Theater on Valencia St. in San Francisco, from Jan. 19 through Feb. 5, 1994. I saw it twice, and thought she did an outstanding job as conductor. She had a sister who was also a technical writer.

Deirdre's girlfriend was a cellist. She seemed shy and reserved on the one or two occasions I happened to talk to her on the phone. (I can't remember why I was calling Deirdre at home.) Eventually, they got married. From Deirdre's description, and the pictures, the wedding celebration was quite a bash.

She had a good sense of humor. The two of us got into the habit of, at odd moments, mimicking the chin jerk that was a mannerism of tough guys. She was aware of, and amused by some of Stan's mannerisms, for example, his habit of extending a single finger vertically down through his thinning hair to scratch his scalp. She had the same low opinion of his competence as I did.

Karen Weisglas

Karen Weisglass was older than the others in the department except for me. She lived with her female partner in a little house in Oakland — they gave a party one time, I remember. She said she had worked as a lexicographer years before. She laughed at the profession, made it seem haphazard, with the usual collection of liberal arts losers marking time, waiting for something better (rich husband, time to write the novel that would take them out of all this). I was appalled. What I thought was one of the few corners of excellence in the miserable world of words was now revealed to be no better than the rest.

Dee Elling

All that I remember about Dee is that at one point, when I was trying to explain an elementary programming concept — the reader should keep in mind that we were working on a project at the very forefront of database theory — she said (I recorded her words afterward), "Oooh, ick, that makes my head hurt!"

A Promising Beginning

On April 13, 1994, I wrote to Heim:

"Our team [meaning, here, the programmers] continues to be the best I have ever worked with. Absolutely heads-up, do-it-right management. Two of the programming geniuses have been carrying out a months-long battle over technical issues. Just heard today that the managers have gone out and hired a communications expert to help them reach a compromise. But the word is out also that if, after such special treatment, they can't reconcile their differences and get down to business, one or both will go."

From the beginning, Stan led me to believe that he wanted to implement at least some of the ideas in my book (which he never read), and so my hopes remained high.

In my letter to Heim of Apr. 13, 1994, I wrote:

"A guy from Prentice Hall recently came to Sybase, gave a short talk, said he was interested in publishing books written by employees. I made sure I said hello to him afterward, told him I had a book already written, he said great, send it along. So, maybe, now that I know someone on the inside, as opposed to those female liberal arts air-heads they post in the front offices... The Franklin method is now driving the design of our online Help system, although that is taking all my political and interpersonal skills. But if, or rather when, our product hits the marketplace, I

guarantee you articles will be written just about the online Help: it will be called the best ever done, a revolution, etc. And it all can be applied to any software system, including those for musicians and composers.

"Nothing more boring than these narratives of arguments on the job, which is why I have kept them to a minimum over the years. I hope the above will also stand as evidence of my respect for this guy I'm working for, and I'm saying this after some seven months in his dept. He may have as little technical background as E., and be inclined to be led astray by technobabble, but at least he is capable of carrying on a logical argument. He also seems to have a unique concern for the well-being (including financial well-being) of his employees. And he is a first-rate artist (musician, composer)."

About the same time, I wrote to Marcella :

"Things are going extremely well, except for a bit of trouble with my co-worker, who is driving me nuts with her superficial, *grande dame*, attitude toward the difficult task we have before us. Are there any women *who can think* in my profession (now that you have left)? Or at least who can follow a logical argument? Her shortcomings are particularly noticeable because the woman programmers, and our one woman manager, are outstanding. Better than the men in a couple of cases. The woman in the next cube, I just found out, has a PhD in mathematics from Carnegie-Mellon, and for several years was on the research team at DEC, knew Ken Olsen [founder of DEC].

"Anyway, the boss seems to like me, so, after seven months, the blush has still not left the rose. He just completed my review, has been giving abundant signs that I can look forward to the maximum raise my job category will allow, and that after that, he is going to introduce a new job category so I can continue to get more money. May I brag a little, after all these years of bitching and moaning? My total annual income now, including interest, some of it tax-deferred, is...$110,000. Not bad, eh, for a guy in the late afternoon of life, with one foot in the grave, etc.?...

"Needless to say, am buying Sybase stock even outside of the employee discount plan. We are going to make history, you watch."

Meantime, I tried to appreciate the stroke of fortune that had granted me, in middle age, what was obviously the opportunity of a lifetime. On June 24, 1994, I wrote to Heim:

"Man, oh man, things have been a hell of a lot worse in my life, you know that? Around 4 o'clock each day, I take the elevator down to the ground floor (we're on the fifth), and walk a hundred yards or so to the edge of the Bay. Angel Island off in the distance, Mount Tamalpais, the Berkeley and Oakland hills on the right; wooden walkway on my left with flowers and bushes (it goes past a condo development where, incidentally, Gere [a former girlfriend] used to live; a half mile farther on is the sailboat where Egl and Kathleen live — was over there last night drinking ale and talking with them and some of their friends). The Bay waters lapping at my feet, soft breezes, sunlight, blue skies. Things have been a hell of a lot worse."

The trouble was that I wanted to put all our initial work into the *structure* of online Help, and leave questions of style, screen appearance, to last. The other writers, and Stan , wanted to do just the reverse. We spent an enormous amount of time on the icons that would appear on the screen — what color they should be, etc. — and on writing style. I had the distinct impression that the

writers, and Stan , naively believed that if you got the design of the icons right, then the rest of the writing project would fall into place.

In order to show them how much could be done without spending time on typefaces, I wrote — accumulated over the weeks and months — what amounted to a partial implementation of my Environment concept: it was 125 pages of most of the technical terms used in Brahms, all in alphabetical order, with brief explanations of each term. I showed it to Stan and the writers. I explained that it could be made available to users of Brahms, and tested, right now, in paper form, without even being transferred to the computer. It made not the slightest impression. The writers and the boss wanted to spend their days and weeks on typefaces and screen colors.

On Dec. 17, 1994, I wrote to Heim:

"Sorry for not replying sooner, but today will be my second day off since early November(!) Seven days a week most weeks, sometimes 12 hours a day, racing to meet a deadline of Dec. 19, when we send our first prototype to our Design Partners...

"I doubt if I have ever worked so hard in my entire life — much harder than the youngsters in my department. Major fights with the boss and with Esther . I made another attempt to call a truce with her last Sunday, and also with Deirdre, who got on my enemies list largely because she had to do what the boss told her. Anyway, the long and short of it is that I am thoroughly disgusted and now do not believe I have a prayer of seeing my ideas implemented. The rest of the project would be perfectly willing to let me, but I am working for a fool. *Think of this*: here is a guy who hasn't taken a math course since high school, if then, who has never taken a programming course or done any programming, who has even less knowledge of the hard sciences, or the history of science in this century, much less the history of mathematics and computer theory A complete and total technical illiterate. Completely inept at even the most elementary problem solving. Time and time again I had to bail him out (and my two coworkers) when they couldn't figure out why the software we were using didn't work. I'm talking *zero* skills in this area: something peculiar happens on the screen, and they just pound the keyboard, thrash with the mouse, pace the floor, go back and pound on the keyboard some more: I've never seen this degree of ineptitude in the industry. I try to teach them some of the basics, like reducing the number of variables, repeating the same steps each time, so you can see where the trouble begins, keeping data — no, no, no time for that.

"Monday it got so bad that I asked for a meeting with the boss's boss, that is, the head of the whole project. Told him I had to wash my hands of the Procedures part of our documentation because the boss had screwed it up so badly. ([My] Boss and the editor sat down and went over it, neither having the slightest comprehension of the content. Then, because they didn't have time to "edit" several pages, he just deleted them! Vital instructions for the user just... cut out! Unbelievable.) The project head said that he had received several other complaints (one I know came from Esther). He said that in the new year he would have one of the other managers act as a consultant to the boss, and that he would require him to start taking some courses, but I think it's hopeless, because, unlike the two women, the guy is fundamentally not bright. 'Dopes', the physicist Richard Feynman used to call liberal arts types like this

" So I've come within inches of the dream, and now, once again, it is snatched away from me by fools."

On Feb. 2, 1995, I wrote to Heim:

The Sybase job continues its descent into the depths of mediocrity. Each day I get another lesson into the astounding ignorance of math and computer science among members of my team. A big argument is currently raging among these stupid illiterates over the question: if you can only have five steps on a level (on a screen, say), is there a way always to have no more than two levels no matter how many steps there are in a procedure? The answer is that, if you have more than 25 steps, then you *must* have more than two levels (each step at the top level can have at most five steps at the second level: 5 times 5 is 25). They think this is a matter of deep "research" (exactly the word the boss uses)! It makes me want to puke.

"But there is hope elsewhere in the company: got an interview with a woman[1] who is in charge of improving documentation for the whole corporation: she seemed interested in what I had to say, asked if I could wait till March for possible job. I said sure. Then, the members of the company online Help committee asked me to chair the monthly meetings. They have been more than willing to listen to some of my ideas on improving speed of access to information (the *central* issue). So, am putting my not insignificant political skills to good use. (The boss, incidentally, wants me to cut out chairing the meetings on the grounds that they require too much of my time, this after I told him they require less than three hours *a month*!)"

Trouble for Brahms

As with the IR dept., things at first were promising indeed for the project as a whole. A favorable article on the company appeared in *Business Week* in early 1994. In mid-April, *The Wall Street Journal* sent a reporter to interview the top managers. (The total number of Brahms employees was then still under 40.) The managers leaked just enough about Brahms to keep the financial world interested, but not enough to give away any secrets to the competition.

Fridays after work, members of the Brahms team would go over to Charlie Brown's, a large restaurant and bar about a hundred yards from the entrance to our building. It had dark wood, big windows providing views of the Bay, and quick, sexy waitresses. There the members of the team could show that, although young and brilliant, they were capable of relaxing after the week's labors and enjoying a few drinks, laughing loudly (as Team Players do) over the gossip about the managers (the ones who weren't present), and other rumors and tales of incompetence elsewhere in the company.

But what would turn out to be the Achilles' heel of the project, though no one recognized it as such at the time, made its first appearance after a presentation to a PhD from Merrill Lynch, a

1. She was another tough lesbian and was known as "The Dragon Lady" because of her tyrannical personality. In the early days of the company she had been a secretary. Since none of the engineers or programmers wanted to waste their time writing manuals, the job fell to her. As the company grew, she was made head of technical publications, and rose in power and stubbornness. I heard that some of her decisions had cost the company a great deal of money, but the top managers did not want to fire her or demote her because then it would seem that the company had no loyalty to those who had been loyal to the company in its early days. She was not entirely incompetent, however: she had written a manual on one of the key pieces of software used in the early Sybase products.

company that was one of the Design Partners. This PhD looked to be about 20 years old. After the presentation, he said, in his strong New York accent, "OK, so I'll be honest with you. I've read your data model document and it's all very impressive, what with modular co-variance and distributed polymorphism, and frankly I haven't the slightest idea of what you're talking about. Sounds like you're going to do everything for everyone, and that makes me nervous. Look: I've got 20 programmers working for me, and I'm paying them a fortune. I have to think about re-training them. You've got to convince me that all that time and trouble is going to pay off."

There was a flurry of activity in the days following. The document was rewritten in something approaching plain English. Marketing sat down and started writing out a scenario of typical use of the product, with Merrill Lynch's business as the example. Information Resources' star rose as the managers ("The Grownups", as one of the geniuses, Hamish Reid, called them) realized how important usability was to our prospective customers.

Unfortunately, no one was capable of getting to the heart of the matter — or, I should say, no one saw what the heart of the matter was, namely, that the crucial first step was the design of the first screen that a user saw when he invoked Brahms. I talked to Bennett Falk about this, tried to convince him that until the project had established the minimum vocabulary that would be assumed for beginning users, and until the project had agreed upon that first screen — which would show users the major tasks that could be performed with Brahms — there was no use proceeding with the design of software. Bennett listened patiently, agreed in principle with what I said, but as far as I know did nothing to try to convince others of the value of the idea. I had a strong impression that the programmers, especially the geniuses, would have regarded the idea as trivial. The screens, the human interface[1], were what you designed *after* the product was finished, not before. I also discussed the idea with Stan, and, I'm sure, with at least some of the members of Information Resources, but I am sure they had no real comprehension of the value of the idea.

Sybase Stock and Jeff's Remarkable Skill at Managing Risk

I had begun buying Sybase stock early on while I was at Sybase, and urged my son to do the same, since I was convinced the Brahms project would put the company ahead of all the rest. He took my advice. Eventually we owned, I think, between $10- and $20,000 worth of the stock. At one point, I was buying it at $52 a share. But then, for reasons I am not sure of, the price began to drop. In a panic, I called Jeff, asked him what we should do. He said, quite calmly, "Put a stop-loss at $20" (that is, place a note in my account that the stock should be sold if the price reached $20). Together we watched the price continue to go down: $40 a share, $30, $25, $21. At $20.50 the price turned around and began to start rising. I called Jeff. "What should we do now?" He: "Put a sell at $35." Which I immediately did. The price continued to rise: $25, $30... It passed $35, all our shares were automatically sold. The price went up to $37 and then dropped to $7, where it remained for years. I was amazed at the young man's skill at cutting our losses. Later on he would tell me that what he did on the job was not ask, "How can I make a lot of money?" but "How can I best manage my risk?", an idea that some of the leading economists of the time were promoting also.

When I heard on the news in 1995 that Nick Leeson, a currency trader for Baring Bros. Bank,

1. The word "interface" was a word that marked you as a professional. You knew that employees who counted would consider you one of their own if you used it. Similarly with the phrase "binary search" in discussions of the trouble-shooting of programs or equipment. (It simply referred to the sensible policy of dividing the problem domain into two parts and seeing in which part the problem was. Then dividing that part into two, and seeing in which part the problem was. Etc.)

had managed to plunge the Bank into bankruptcy by losing over $1 billion through incompetent trading — he had originally shown remarkably profitable performance, so his managers pretty much let him do what he wanted, and when he began to lose, he kept making buys that he thought would recover his losses, but which didn't — I asked Jeff what he thought about the whole matter. He said he had nothing but contempt for Leeson. "When you've lost $250 million, it's time to quit."

I Attempt Another Palace Coup

Stan's reputation throughout the company continued to drop, like the price of the company's stock. I continued to go to the monthly meetings of the committee for improving documentation. I openly discussed Stan's incompetence, and privately thought that with a little behind-the-scenes effort, I could get the company to get rid of him, and at least put someone in charge who understood my ideas, and would take steps to implement them. I tried to write the horribly complex, incomplete procedures, in my structured format, ignoring style, just to get something down on paper. And Stan, who knew that he had a palace coup in the making on his hands, began to take his revenge. He called me into his office and said that my writing was not acceptable, that he was putting Deirdre in charge of me to edit all my work. I was to submit all my writing to her from then on.

Nevertheless, I trusted her, since she had no more respect for Stan than I did. But after several weeks when she submitted her first report to him, he called me into his office, and he said that she had said that, among my many shortcomings, one was that my writing had "too many 'i.e.'s — there should be no more than one per module". She told him, he said, that my writing style was "hopelessly old-fashioned" . My sentences were often too long. He said that the other writers laughed and called me "Faulkner" over one of these sentences. (I had written it quickly just to get something done, the document being for internal use only anyway.)

As at HP, I spent my days — the hours when there was nothing to do because of the on-going wrangling among the writers over typefaces and screen colors — reading mathematics books (the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Mathematics*, Gauss's *Disquisitiones Arithmeticae*), even though I knew that my ignorance in the subject would be laughed in every mathematics department But I thought as I had ever since my mathematical reawakening, I would rather be a failure and a laughing stock in mathematics than a success in the liberal arts.

My next review, in spring of 1995, was the beginning of the end. In summary, Stan said to me, "You don't write well, you're too engineering- and programming- and theory-oriented, too stubborn, too Sybase oriented — you're a company man." (This last was a negative quality in his eyes.) He put me on probation: I had three months to fix all these problems. I was outraged (this ignorant son-of-a-bitch was getting ready to fire me for putting the company's interests ahead of his). But I drew up a weekly to-do list, did my utmost to toe the line, and even asked for a private conference with him at the Bateau Ivre restaurant in Berkeley to apologize and to promise that I was determined to change my ways.

On June 18, 1995, I wrote to Heim:

"After he put me on probation, he said he noticed I still had my Contractor ID badge from when I started working at Sybase. He came over, put a hand on my shoulder, looked me right in

the eye and said, 'John, first thing tomorrow, I want you to go down to Personnel and get a *Permanent* Employee badge.' You would normally take that as meaning that he was sorry he had put me on probation; that it was only meant to be a warning; that he didn't really intend to fire me. But you would be dead wrong: it was his way of making himself feel better about the set-up he had just put into effect; his feelings, expressed in words, were something like, "Sometimes I have to be treacherous to people, but I do my best to deceive them into thinking I am not going to hurt them, because that way they will feel better until I finish them off: what a basically decent guy I am!"

I was faced with the extraordinary difficulty of unlearning what I had labored so hard to learn, namely, to write clearly, and, far more important, to think structurally about the technical documentation task. My task was nothing less than to learn how the members of my department thought about technical subjects. A superhuman task, roughly the equivalent of a literate person-trying to train himself not to understand the words of his native language when he sees them on the printed page. I tried to put myself in the minds of the women, tried to see this complex technical material the way they did. It was the most baffling task I ever attempted. I knew they didn't say to themselves, "OK, what are we trying to accomplish here? Now what are the steps by which we can accomplish it?" Theirs was more a kind of exercise in writing sentences using the many big words that the Brahms project produced: here a partial explanation of some of the words (but only some, since the women had regarded it as rather pedantic and silly to have to list, before our writing project began, what terms the typical user was expected to know and hence what words we would have to explain) , then a few steps, but by no means a rigorously complete set. Theirs was also an exercise in using the abstract terms that were needed to format text using the ungainly ArborText software. The writing task for them was a matter of showing that one knew the languages, that one could imitate the programmers' and engineers' often obscure writing in their memos, that one could make a piece of text all but incomprehensible because of the numerous embedded ArborText terms. Documentation was a kind of decoration for the product, the main purpose being to show that the women could be technical too, despite the fact they had no technical training, and not the slightest interest in acquiring any. And they knew how to protect themselves in a way that most of the programmers and engineers approved of, because it took all responsibility off everyone's back, namely, by saying to anyone (for example, me) who didn't understand something in their writing, "The user will know...", "The user is expected to know..."

The words kept going through my mind, "Please, God, help me learn how to be incompetent."

I Am Fired

For those three months, I made an honest effort, tried to conceal all my contempt for the members of the department, tried to be consistently respectful to Stan, and gave up attending the meetings of the company documentation improvement committee. It did no good. At the end of the three-month period, Stan called me into his office and told me I was fired.

On June 18, 1995, I wrote to Heim:

"...In answer to your question: there's no doubt in my mind that he was going to fire me. I have written a few paragraphs in The Book [that is, *Thoughts and Visions*] about this guy, because he is a type I've never run into before, a guy who, like Esther , has the gift of self-deception, only far more so. This was a guy who could weep real tears as he was sticking the knife in your back. A few weeks ago, his son was arrested for drunk driving — the third time in some five years, and

out here they throw the book at you when that happens. The young man, who is around 23 or 24, was looking at 1½ years in jail plus heavy fines. The boss was clearly shaken. He wasn't at work for several days so he could appear in court to plead with the judge. I saw him in the elevator one morning, asked him how it was going with his son. Tears came to his eyes: 'Not well.' Eventually he was able to get a deal whereby the kid would spend some number of months in a rehab facility, then spend the rest of his sentence working during the day and returning to the facility at night. I often wonder if the kid, who has never attended college and goes from job to job in the restaurant business, is simply unable to deal with the yes but no, lies are truth, deception is reality, which is the world view he got from his father. The sliminess of that son-of-a-bitch, the looking you in the eye, the deep concern he pretends to show for you, can't be limited solely to employees. And when this kind of evil comes from a parent, it is all the worse, since the vast majority of kids haven't the slightest idea of how to recognize, much less deal with, such psychological subtlety.

"If I'm honest, I have to say that I do feel better being away from that job. In fact, if it weren't for the constant money worries, I could probably live this way the rest of my life."

God Is Just

In January, 1996, I ran into Karen Weisglass, one of the technical writers in the department, and she told me that Stan had been laid off. I thought, "The wheels grind slowly in industry, but sooner or later justice is done." She said the entire Brahms project was being cancelled. Estimates were that the company had spent at least $25 million on it.

Later I heard that Stan had been hired by.Hewlett-Packard to handle recruiting of technical writers.

What Went Wrong with the Brahms Project?

Throughout my programming career, no project I worked on ever reached the marketplace. And yet I never heard of any attempt being made by any of the companies to try to learn from experience, to come up with an internal document that managers could use in future projects. (Michael J —, who at one point had been hired as a consultant to a startup in San Francisco, said that none of the managers in the startup had the slightest interest in learning or studying management techniques. They were all programmers "just winging it".) The reader will recall what the response was when I suggested, to the managers of the Amigo project at HP, that they write up an analysis of why the project had failed: it was out of the question because it might cause some of the managers to lose face. But I continue to believe and to hope that someday the business community will want to benefit from reports of past failures, and so I offer the following.

After I left Sybase, I ran into one of the programmers on the Brahms project at the Emeryville Marketplace. He said Katrina Garnett (the vice-president who was charged with overseeing the development of Brahms) had been asked by one of the Brahms managers why the company had cancelled the project. She replied, "Because, frankly, we never understood what you people were doing." (Exactly the point that the young PhD from Merrill Lynch had made.)

And yet I cannot resist pointing out that had the design been outside-in, as I discussed with Bennett Falk several times, programmers and management would have been forced at the very start to answer the question, "What are we doing? What are the top-level tasks this product is supposed to perform?"

In fact, if I had been granted only one wish regarding Brahms, with the promise that it would be implemented, it would have been that the design be outside-in. In this design methodology, the

screens that the user sees are designed *first*, and only when these have been decided upon down to some level — and tested to be sure that beginning, as well as experienced, members of the class of intended users, can actually get to the screen pertaining to the task they want to perform — is the software written that implements the various tasks. This would have forced the designers to have a clear idea of the major, top-level tasks that the Brahms system was to perform, and what the minimum level of knowledge (technical terms already understood) was to be for first-time users. If the number of those tasks was "too large" to be put on a screen, or on several screens, that would have been — should have been — a warning sign. Outside-in design would have forced the designers to decide, even before they created a single screen, the minimum vocabulary and skills that would be expected of Brahms users. (You cannot design a system for "everyone".) It would also have counteracted the genius culture that was rampant in the project, since it would have said, in effect, we don't care how brilliant you are: if your software is not usable by its class of intended users, with minimal training and instruction, it is not useful to us.

If I had been granted a second wish with the promise that it would have been implemented, it would have been to get rid of all the technical writers who had no formal technical training (or who had not acquired a minimum of technical knowledge by self-education).

From the vantage-point of more than 15 years' hindsight, I know what I should have done. (I considered doing it while I was still with the company, but never acted on it.) I should have gone to Bob Epstein, one of the co-founders, and made a pitch for being allowed to develop some examples of my documentation method. He could have found a niche for me (outside of Brahms) in the organization chart. I would have told him about my master's in computer science. Since he had been a professor of the same subject, that would, I believe, have inclined him to listen to what I had to say. I would shown him my book, and would have have emphasized that my approach was similar to structured programming and to object-oriented programming. I would have emphasized that the resulting documentation can easily be tested and that these tests would reveal that at least 80% of the time users can find the instructions they wanted in less than 25 seconds. I would have told him that the method works on software of any size and complexity, and would have proposed a few small starting projects. I would have carefully avoided, throughout my presentation, any criticism of Stan or the IR Dept. — in fact, I would have made a point of praising both. I would have offered to take a salary cut until I had proved the worth of my ideas, and would have agreed to work on any low-level projects he, Epstein, asked me to.

Knowing what I know of Epstein's character, I think he might have given me a chance — say, three months — to prove that I was really offering something important to the company.

Two More Companies, Then Freedom

After Sybase, in June, 1995, I applied to Diva, a small company in downtown Berkeley, this one attempting to market wireless phone systems to Third World countries (where copper phone wires are stolen as soon as they are put up). It was the usual story: a couple of computer science professors at UC Berkeley had decided to go into business. But knowing nothing about management, the company soon began having difficulties. The engineering manager who interviewed me was clearly nervous. At one point, he asked me if I knew what an obscure technical term meant. I said no, but that is the kind of thing I look up when I need to know it; I don't fill my brain with such things. The marketing manager had a reputation for being a micromanager. He was aware of this, and did his best to convince me that he was reforming. I didn't like the feel of the place: the

geniuses at the top who clearly didn't think that management skill was very important, the types like the engineering manager I would be forced to deal with, my having to get along with a boss who would probably be a nuisance. I said I would have to think about it. Afterward, I received a letter from my prospective boss saying how obviously qualified I was, how valuable I would be for the company. It was the first time in my life I had ever been pursued by an employer. But there would be a delay of a few months before I could actually be hired. Not wanting to throw away an opportunity, I wrote eager letters to the prospective manager about how I was studying the product literature and would send him a proposal for how we might do the manuals.

Among the companies I meantime applied to was Wind River Systems, located in a new industrial park in Alameda, about 15 miles from my house. I don't recall what its products were then, but in 2010, according to its web site it was "the global leader in device software optimization (DSO). We enable companies to develop, run, and manage device software better, faster, at lower cost, and more reliably."

The man who interviewed me was a pleasant sort, and when he asked for references, one that I gave him was an engineer at Sybase who had been a source of some of the information I was assigned to document. But I didn't get the job, and so, in accordance with a rule I had set for myself, I asked the interviewer if he could tell me why. He was clearly uncomfortable with the question, but eventually I gathered it was because he doubted my technical competence. He said that the engineer had told him, "John is a nice guy, but he's mentally slow."

I eventually found work at Wink, in Alameda, which was attempting to develop an interactive product-ordering system for attachment to TV sets. I attempted to write the manual in a modified form of my method. The programmers never had time to check what I had written. I talked to another free-lance writer about the situation. He said that I should always have a line on the bottom of my bills, "Payment of this bill constitutes satisfaction with work performed so far." And then, suddenly, without warning, in April 1996, I was informed that my services were no longer needed. No explanation was given. I was 59½. I checked my finances, and decided I had enough money so that never, ever again would I have to waste my time working for my inferiors.

Eva

Around 1995, in my ongoing search for a way to get published, I somehow came across the name of Kevin Langdon. I seem to recall writing him about the possibility of his publishing a few paragraphs from *Thoughts and Visions*. (I distinctly remember walking up the steps of the Berkeley Main Post Office with a letter to him.) He replied with a very cordial letter and invited me to attend the next meeting of something called The Brain Center. This, as I learned over the next few months, was a front for a Gurdjieff sect. (Heim had been a member of such a sect, as will be described in a later chapter.) The meetings were held at a little restaurant in South Berkeley, and all I can remember of them is that one of the assigned tasks for each person was to try to remember all his or her thoughts over a 24-hour period. Kevin's kindness, I came to feel, was the kindness of the seeker of converts.

(I was surprised to see, at some of the meetings, a man whose name I recognized as that of a well-known UC Berkeley mathematics professor. Beresford Parlett. I wondered what a man of that intelligence was doing with a bunch of Gurdjieffians. After a while, I asked him to look over one of my papers, which he did. Not a word about the ideas — all his comments were strictly editorial, and were strong criticisms of my writing style, although clearly they came from a master of that style.)

In the 70's Kevin had developed several at least two very difficult IQ tests — the Langdon Adult Intelligence Test and the Langdon Short Form Intelligence Test. By way of comparison: the test that the high-IQ society Mensa used as a basis for selecting new members could be passed by an average of 1 person in 50; Kevin's tests could only be passed by an average of 1 person in 30,000. I tried to answer a few questions on one of his tests, found them hopelessly difficult. Furthermore, I was not at all convinced that what he deemed to be the correct answers, could in fact be called "correct" by any objective standard. Some of the tests were published in *Omni* magazine.

He had a congenital problem with his hips, and in fact was almost crippled. At times he walked awkwardly a cane, at other times with two, and sometimes he was in a wheel chair. When he was standing he appeared to have no hips. He had undergone several operations. And yet apart from this terrible affliction, he was a handsome man. I gradually learned a little about his background from a woman in the group named Eva (to be introduced below).

According to Eva, he had been a brilliant student at UC in the 60's, but then had become involved with drugs, and never got his undergraduate degree. Instead, he decided to make a career developing brutally difficult IQ tests. My hunch was that, on the one hand, he wanted very much to be regarded as among the exceptionally intelligent, but on the other hand, didn't want to put in the labor required to earn degrees, and so he decided that becoming known as the creator of brutally difficult IQ tests was one way of accomplishing his goal.

He had a tiny apartment on Shattuck Ave., in South Berkeley, in a high-crime area close to the Oakland border. It was filled with science magazines and magazines devoted to IQ, plus piles of technical papers and various computer parts and software.

And yet he was apparently married, and to a very attractive woman, and had a house on Santa Barbara Rd. in the lower Berkeley Hills in North Berkeley. It was a one-story structure at the top of a small hill, set far back from the road, under trees.

At the Brain Center meetings was a young woman with whom I began talking. She was short, not unattractive, with long, soft hair. I was struck by her intelligence. We began discussing the questionable aspects of Gurdjieffianism. She remarked once or twice that she felt that Kevin was trying to seduce her. One time, as we sat in the empty meeting room, she said, "Would you stroke my neck?" I quickly answered "No". I didn't like what I regarded as an almost pitiful attmept to draw me into a relationship. She had previously been the girlfriend of Ted Davis, and was still on friendly terms with him. The man was a born entrepreneur, constantly on the outlook for business opportunities, all of them in the microbiology field. He aways seemed to have a beautiful young woman in tow when we went to visit him at his house near Moss Landing, on the ocean side of the San Francisco Peninsula. One of these woman became his wife. He founded Teknova, a company that produced "pre-poured agate plates and microbiology media". According to a friend of Eva's, his wife died around 2008, and the loss all but destroyed him.

Eva was at the time working for a local company named DNA Plant Technology, called by all its employees, "DNAP". She only had a BS (from UC Berkeley) in plant biology, but I was impressed not only by her knowledge of her subject, but by her genuinely scientific mind. I couldn't help comparing her to Yolanda, who had advanced degrees, and had come within months of earning her PhD in pathology, and yet had never seemed to have the mind of a scientist.

DNAP was trying to use the latest DNA discoveries to breed new varieties of plants, including a black rose[1]. But the company was saddled with inept management and, Eva gave me to understand, some highly questionable practices by way of increasing the price of their stock. The founders had managed to feather their nests early; one of them, Dr. John B — , had acquired a

nice house in Piedmont, with a maid and someone to care for the kids, which was useful, since his wife also worked in the company. Eva would tell me about all the office intrigues — about one of the married female managers and another manager screwing in the parking lot during coffee breaks. Soon there were layoffs, and Eva was one of those who was asked to leave. She eventually found a job at UC, working as a technician in the laboratory of a well-known professor of molecular biology. One of her jobs, I remember, was to tend the plants that were being raised in the big nursery that occupied an entire city block at the west end of the campus. .

There were only a couple of technicians in the lab. All the other members were PhDs or PhD candidates. The principal product of the lab, of course, was published papers. In the course of our phone conversations and during Sunday breakfasts at the Inn Kensington (always after 12 noon, because she typically stayed up till three of four in the morning), she would tell me about the work, and about some of her ideas, which seemed to me to be original and worthy of serious attention. Unfortunately, as she found out when papers began to be published, she received absolutely no credit for her contributions — she was never listed among the contributing authors, whereas the head of the lab was always listed, regardless of how little he might have contributed to the actual research.

"Regardless of the actual involvement of the laboratory director in the intellectual and physical work of a research project, he or she has unchallenged intellectual property rights in the project, much as a lord had unchallenged property rights in the product of serfs or peasants occupying dependent lands. The chief product of a laboratory is in the form of published papers and the chief manifestation of the director's intellectual property rights is that he or she will be coauthor on every publication from the laboratory, sometimes including even general review papers and book chapters written by subordinate group members....

"Scientists in training are conscious of the appropriation of credit for their work by senior scientists and they resent it but feel that they cannot protest. They will fight bitterly with colleagues of their own rank about who should be first author on jointly authored publications. Yet when they too become seniors they will engage in the same fabrications of intellectual credit. The fabrications and falsifications of scientific results that we condemn as fraud are carried out from the desire for fame, status, and economic reward. But the misappropriation of credit by senior scientists arises from the same motives. How can we expect scientists to hold literal truth about nature as an inviolable standard, when they participate, en masse, in a conscious everyday falsification about the production of truth?" — Lewontin, Richard, "Dishonesty in Science", review of Judson, Horace Freeland, *The Great Betrayal: Fraud in Science*, *The New York Review of Books*, Nov. 18, 2004, p. 40.

Eva knew that her treatment was standard procedure in such laboratories. One justification, she was told, was that the PhDs needed to build a list of publications if they were going to advance in their field, and therefore they should be the only ones listed as authors. (Why the pres-

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1. "DNA Plant Technology was an early pioneer in applying transgenic biotechnology to problems in agriculture... Some of the plants and products they developed included Vine sweet mini peppers, the Fish tomato and Y1 Tobacco.

"In the mid 1980s, DNAP attempted to use somaclonal variation with corn to produce buttery-tasting popcorn without the need to add butter.. While working for DNAP, the scientists Richard A. Jorgensen and Carolyn Napoli made discoveries about post transcriptional gene silencing that went on to form the basis of a number of U.S. patents on gene regulation and crop manipulation....— "DNA Plant Technology", Wikipedia, 5/24/12.

ence of a technician's name would detract from the presence of their own names among the authors, was never clear.)

Several times she went to the professor who ran the lab and complained, but it did no good. Eventually, she grew so angry that she left.

Her struggles made me think again about my own decision not to go into the university, and once again, for all the loneliness and isolation and near impossibility of being published, I felt I had made the right decision, because I wanted no part of a team that could not conceive of a person without a PhD having original ideas, or, even if she did, that would deliberately exclude her from mention in published papers.

Later I read about the shameful discrediting, by James Watson, of the contributions of Rosalind Franklin toward the discovery of the structure of DNA. Still later, I came across the following:

"In 1967 Jocelyn Bell, a graduate student, discovered the first pulsar, and in 1974 the Nobel prize was awarded — to her adviser.

"'The Jocelyn Bell thing was very bad,' said Geoffrey Burbidge. 'Fred [Hoyle] thought it was outrageous, and so did many of my other colleagues.' Hoyle wrote a letter of protest that appeared in *The Times* of London. Yet Hoyle's objection to what he and other astronomers saw as a travesty probably cost him the [Nobel] prize." Croswell, Ken, *The Alchemy of the Heavens*, Anchor Book, Doubleday, N.Y., 1993, p. 117.

Denying Fred Hoyle the Nobel Prize was even more outrageous than denying it to Jocelyn Bell, because Hoyle had pioneered the research that led to one of the great scientific accomplishments of our time, namely, the proof that virtually all of the basic elements come from the stars.

"In the 1940s, when Hoyle began advocating the idea that the stars had created the elements, most scientists thought the idea preposterous, but by the mid-1950s the discovery that old stars had lower metallicities than young stars convinced many astronomers that he was right — that the Milky Way, through its stars, was the true creator of the elements." — ibid., pp. 101-102.

A team of four astronomers, E. Margaret Burbidge, Geoffrey Burbidge, William Fowler, and Hoyle worked for ten years on the problem, following Hoyle's inspiration. Their paper describing how the elements are produced appeared in 1957.

"The work of Burbidge, Burbidge, Fowler, and Hoyle was a major accomplishment, and three decades later, in 1983, the Nobel Academy recognized their work — albeit in a way that provoked great controversy. That year, the Nobel prize in physics was awarded to two scientists. Half the prize went to Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar, for his work on white dwarfs. The other half went to Fowler, and Fowler alone. None of the others who had labored on B^2FH [abbreviation for the paper authored by the above four physicists] shared the prize, not even Hoyle, who had started the whole business." — ibid., p. 116.

"Said Hoyle, 'Fowler [said he was told that] they [the Nobel prize committee] had an absolute rule that anybody who criticized them never got the prize. And it's certainly true that I had made comments that were not complimentary to them over the pulsar award.'" — ibid., p. 117.

Another outrage by the Nobel Committee was denying the Prize to Lisa Meitner, who had discovered nuclear fission, and instead awarding it to Otto Hahn, who had worked with her.

There were few opportunities available for Eva in the genetic engineering field, and so she decided to learn computer programming. She had a small inheritance that enabled her to take courses at Diablo Valley Jr. College without also having to work full-time. I was impressed by her dedication and hard work. She took courses in computer hardware as well, and eventually became competent at building clones. The computer on which these words were first typed was built by her, and ran without hardware problems for over four years, until I bought a Dell, having been warned by a number of computer consultants that it was asking for trouble expecting a computer to run for more than three or four years. But when she installed the computer she had built for me, and began quickly demonstrating how to run some of the programs, for example, the file transfer program WS_FTP, I couldn't resist telling her that my documentation method would make all this training unnecessary. She became angry. Several Sunday breakfasts thereafter ended in fights, because I became less and less able to control my temper when she told me that I needed to buy computer books and go to seminars and "keep up". She didn't understand the whole "just-in-time-learning" concept — the idea that if you can always rapidly find the instructions you need when you need them, then there is no need to learn them in advance. The truth, I think, is that she didn't want to be told that perhaps a good deal of the effort she had put into learning software and even computer languages, was unnecessary.

When I first knew her, she lived on Prince St., in South Berkeley, very close to the northern end of the Oakland black ghetto. She had a nice ground-floor condo in a building that had been designed by a famous architect whose name I no longer remember. Unfortunately, a few months after she moved in, the guy in the unit overhead decided to learn to play the drums. She asked him if they could work out a schedule so that he wasn't playing at night, when she was reading and studying, but he refused. She then found out that there were no provisions in the building's Covenants and Restrictions that prevented owners from making loud noises with musical instruments, and so she eventully had to sell. Her condo was bought by an unsuspecting professor who, like her, either didn't study the C and R's carefully, or else didn't mind listening to drums at all hours. She moved to a nice studio apartment in a converted garage behind a house on Kenyon Ave. in the Kensington hills, just north of Berkeley, an apartment she later bought as part of a tenants-in-common arrangement with the person who bought the property.

Down the street from Eva lived a gay couple, Doug and Dean, whom we sometimes referred to simply as D 'n D. Doug was a PhD who worked at DNAP until he was fired. He then decided he had had enough of corporate life and so started a business in the back yard of his house growing orchid seedlings and selling them to nurseries. He was without question the best craftsman I ever knew, after my father. He built the laboratory where he started the seedlings, did numerous improvements around his house, built a beautiful gate for the back of my driveway, repaired the always leaking roof of Lynaire, who lived in the apartment next door, the property management company simply never responding to her calls. Dean worked at one of the UC libraries, and was a better-than-average artist, specializing in large abstract paintings and in abstract drawings. He had exhibitions in Los Angeles and New York, as well as in Europe.

For a while, the four of us had a film club, which I christened the Kensington/Berkeley Greater Film Society and Social Club (KBGFSSC, to be pronounced *koh-big-FASS-sock*), but it died because none of the members except me had any interest in film.

Doug and Dean sometimes invited Eva and me for dinner at their house. It soon became clear that Dean was another of those individuals like Egl who, without any musical training, nevertheless understood serious music. He had a genuine appreciation for at least some late-20th-century classical, including atonal (perhaps because it was the equalivalent, in sound, of his own paintings and drawings). He also was thoroughly acquainted with pop music, and introduced me to, and made a cassette tape copy of, Laurie Anderson's *Big Science* album of the early eighties, an album that I thought was the most original piece of work to come out of the wretched pop music genre since the sixties. I was captivated by "Oh, Superman".

It became clear at these dinners that Doug was not a reader (but then neither was Eva, outside of technical books, nor was Dean, as far as I know). But Doug was visibly bored and impatient whenever the conversation turned to anything that might have been called "intellectual", his expression and fidgeting making it clear he had no use for things that were mere words.

Although the question of homosexuality never came up at these dinners (there were several pictures of handsome males on the refrigerator door, including one of a brawny guy who I believe they said was a local fireman), I used to imagine a conversation in which I would have to explain why I wasn't gay. At first I thought that I would tell them that the idea of having sex with a man was about as exciting to me as the idea of spending the afternoon at the Post Office. But I thought that would have been unnecessarily cruel. So I came up with an explanation that used a dinner as a metaphor: "OK, imagine that you were invited to a dinner at someone's house. The first course is salad. Fine. Then the next course is brought out. It is salad. Well, OK. And now for the main course, which turns out to be...salad. Oh, boy. The course after that is salad. And then, for dessert? Right: salad. Now, to me, that would be a boring dinner, because everything is *the same*. It's the same with homosexuality. I can't see the point if both participants are *the same*."

Years later, when the subject of homosexuality came up, my only comment tended to be, "Listen, I have so many personal problems that I simply don't have time to worry about what other people do with their naughty bits[1]."

Around this time, Eva had a boyfriend named Nick Clyde, whom I met once or twice. Things seem to be going well for the two of them until one day Eva called and said that Nick had been found dead. Doctors had no explanation. He had simply gone to bed one night and never woke up.

Eva and I continued to have our Sunday breakfasts until I asked her to recommend a web site designer to redesign the web site that promoted my documentation method. She recommended a young woman. I contacted her, described the initial project, and made some suggestions as to how we might proceed. The women wrote back a truly nasty email saying that she was a professional and didn't appreciate being lectured to. I wrote back a far nastier email, full of profanity, and then left a phone message, filled with even more profanity, for good measure. She wrote back an email saying that if I ever attempted to contact her again, she would report me to the police for harassment.

I wrote Eva telling her what had happened, and sending copies of the relevant emails. She never replied, and I have never attempted to communicate with her since.

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1. "Here is a three-stage model of Tchaikowsky...here you see the legs, used for walking around, and which can be jettisoned at night...([expert] *takes the legs off*) And this is the main trunk, the power house of the whole thing, incorporating of course the naughty bits, which were *extremely* naughty for his time..." — Chapman, Cleese, et al., *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, Vol. 2, Episode 28, Pantheon Books, N.Y., 1989, p. 68.

The Dinner in Paris With Jeff

I had always felt that two of my chief responsibilities as a father was to help my son, via example, to develop a good sense of humor, and to introduce him to the best things in life, in particular good food and wine. When he was a teenager, and in his early twenties, I promised him that someday he and I would have a superb dinner in Paris. The opportunity arrived in 1995 when he invited me to come visit him and Trish in London. We would take the Chunnel Train to Paris, have our dinner, after which we would go on a tour, which he would arrange, of several wineries in the Loire Valley.

I had not been on a trans-Atlantic trip since Marcella and I went to England in the early seventies, and so I knew nothing about the laws governing passports. I had had a passport then — it was in my safe deposit box — and I assumed that I could just use it again. A few days before I was scheduled to leave for England, someone — possibly Jeff — asked me if my passport was up-to-date. I asked what that meant. I then learned that passports need to be reapplied for after ten years. I realized there was almost no chance of my getting a new passport in the time remaining before the flight. I was furious at myself, and also filled with despair that this long-talked-about trip would now not take place. I told Jason, my friend from my HP days, that I was ready to commit suicide. I could sense in his voice that he took me seriously. He asked me not to do it, saying that he would find life a lot duller if I weren't around, which I found quite touching. In a last desperate attempt to save the trip, I went to the Passport Office in San Francisco two days before the flight, waited in line for an hour or two, was told they would try to put through the necessary paperwork, and that I should come back the following day (a Friday) in the afternoon. Which I did. They had the new passport.

The flight was non-stop to Heathrow. After getting off the plane, as I was walking down a passageway, carrying my luggage, a pleasant-looking young woman at a low desk on one side addressed me and asked me to come over to her. I did. She asked me to place my bags on a bench next to her and open them. As I recall, she had me lift up various items while asking me questions: where was I from, where was I going, etc. I asked her why she had singled me out from the crowd of arriving passengers. She said that I fit a certain profile. I told her I was honored, and what was the profile I fit? She smiled, said she couldn't answer that question. We chatted briefly and she allowed me to go on my way. I was then only a few months short of turning 60. I had a beard, was balding. I could only speculate that I bore some resemblance to some Mad Scientist profile they had.

I can no longer remember if Jeff came out to meet me at the airport, but in any case I do remember how small and clean the tube seemed that carried me into London.

He had a basement flat, #1, at 33 St. Luke's Road, in the Notting Hill District (W11 1DD). I remember trees along the street, and steps down to the front door. The apartment even had a little enclosed back yard with trees. I had a room all to myself, carefully prepared, everything neat and clean.

I find the following list in my folder from the trip:

"Trip

Sat. Mulligan's at Mayfair
Guinness & oysters

Sun. Oxford, The Eagle & the Child

Rules, London

Mon. Louvre (outside), Tuilleries (fever)

Tues. Eiffel Tower, L'Orangerie

Wed. Versailles

Thurs. Musee d'Orsay
Maison Blanche

Fri. Luxembourg, Louvre, Latin Quarter
That brasserie on the corner Prof Berlitz at other table

Sun. Kahns, London, curry"

We took a train to Oxford, and my immediate feeling, once we were walking through the streets, was that Oxford was the only city besides Paris that I ever felt I was meant to live in. But I already knew that from watching Inspector Morse on PBS.

Rules was said to be the oldest restaurant in London, going back to the late 18th century. Jeff had chosen it. We arrived first, took our table: Trish was to meet us later, after work. It was an elegant place with lots of heavy, carved wood, thick carpets. Among the items on the menu were quail and venison. A note on the menu said that the source of these and other dishes was the restaurant's own game preserve in Scotland — "in the High Pennines, 'England's last wilderness'" , according to a restaurant flyer.

He and I took in Kew Gardens, with its carefully cut lawns, purple flowers. I wondered aloud how much the houses cost that we saw on the way there and back, since it was obvious to me that I would have found complete and utter happiness had I been able to live in one them. I think he put the figure at something over $1.5 million.

Our plan was to take the Chunnel train to Paris, spend a few days there, have our dinner, then Trish would come and join us for the wine tour. At the time, the train had only been in service for about a year, so taking it was still something of an adventure, at least for an American. I marveled at its speed, and at the fact that, for some 20 miles or more, we had the English Channel above our heads. The speed became more apparent as we sped through the flat, green farmland of the French countryside, which I had last seen some 45 years earlier. At one point, a child in a family sitting behind us began crying, and the mother was unable to quiet it. Jeff, who was reading a newspaper, came out from behind the pages, leaned toward me and said, "See? That's why I don't want to have kids."

He had booked us into a charming little hotel, the Hotel Duc de Saint-Simon, at 14, rue de Saint-Simon, a little tree-lined street off the Boulevard St. Germain. My son's exquisite taste was once more in evidence. He had a room at one end of the short hall, I the room at the other.

Monday evening, I became ill with some kind of a fever. As I lay in bed, thinking about this trip that my son had planned for his father with such care, I suddenly broke down in tears, and for a long time couldn't stop crying.

The fever had passed by morning. The next few days we spent walking the streets of Paris. I had always wanted to see Les Deux Magots, the renowned café where Sartre had written some of

his books, not the least reason having been that his apartment was too cold in the winter. As with Robert Burns's house in Scotland on our trip in the early seventies, and the Lake District, it seemed much smaller than I imagined it.

And then came Thursday evening, when we were to have our dinner. I think he had heard about the restaurant from one of his co-workers. In any case, it was La Maison Blanche, which we were able to walk to from our hotel. It was the top floor of a four-story building on the Left Bank, the ground floor housing a concert hall, although no concert was under way while we were there. Our table faced a large window along one entire wall of the restaurant. The chairs were soft and comfortable. Outside, in the orange light of evening, we could see the Eiffel Tower. I don't remember what we had, and apparently I didn't make any notes afterward. I do remember that everything seemed superb. At a large table between us and the window were about eight or ten serious, distinguished-looking diners, who all seemed to be subordinates of a middle-aged, handsome, Asian woman whom I immediately began to call, in my mind, and in later conversations with Jeff, The Dragon Lady. I assumed she was the head of a company of which they were all top level managers.

After dessert, we called the waiter over and asked if we could order some cigars. He said that he would send the cigar steward over right away. (I thought: a cigar steward — a man whose sole job is to serve customers cigars! What a classy restaurant!) The cigar steward arrived with a trolley containing a variety of cigars. We asked him if he had any Havanas. He replied, "Monsieur, *all* our cigars are Havana cigars." We each chose one, and then he poured some cognac into a little dish on the trolley. He moistened the palms of his hands with the cognac, then he rolled one of the cigars between his palms, which, he explained in response to our question, was to impart some of the cognac taste and aroma to the tobacco. Then, from the trolley he took a piece of cedar wood and lit the end with a match. When the wood was burning, he applied the flame to the end of the cigar, twirling the cigar as he did so over an ashtray on the trolley. (He did not, of course, place the cigar in his mouth!) Then, when the cigar was lit, he handed it to one of us, and repeated the same process with the other cigar. Thinking back from these health-obsessed times, it doesn't seem possible that diners would be allowed to smoke cigars in a restaurant of that quality, but I know that we did.

And then it was time for the bill. The elegant leather booklet was placed discretely, expertly, on the table in front of me. I opened it. My notes say: "For 2: $300" and Jeff thinks that is correct, but in memory it cost something like $400, which, with tip, made a total of close to $500 for a dinner for two. (Perhaps the lower figure was merely for the dinner, excluding wine and cigars and tip, which would certainly have brought the total to nearly $400.) In either case, it was worth every penny.

Jeff had hired a woman named Anne-Marie Audy Bazin of Ceptours to drive us — Trish had now joined us — on our tour of the wineries. She was a blonde, pleasant, middle-aged woman, and she did a first-class job. As we drove along the Loire, she pointed out the caves in the sides of cliffs where people actually lived. These residents were called "troglodytes" . The cave homes were actually bought and sold just like ordinary houses, and supposedly, although they were inclined to be a bit damp, the heating bills were much lower than for ordinary houses. I thought: Yes, I could live in one of these! We saw the famous chateaus but always from a great distance, it seemed. They were like great ghosts of the distant past, perched on the horizon.

I was impressed by how different the wineries were from ours in California. All were family-owned. None were crowded with visitors. (It may have been that most visits were by appointment only, I am not sure.) Each had a wine cave that we descended into down long flights of

steps, the temperature distinctly cool if not actually cold. The bottles were neatly stacked along the cave walls. I got the distinct impression, throughout our tour, that in France, or at least in this part of France, some things are simply not for sale. The land was not being covered with housing tracts and condominums, and there seemed to be an obvious attempt to keep the countryside looking as it always had.

The winery that left a lasting impression on me was the La Milletière vineyard, owned by the Dardeau family, in the village of Montlouis, a few kilometers from Tours. Here appointments were necessary, and they took only a few visitors at a time. This winery had been in existence since 1545 — long before Montaigne (1533-1592) had begun writing his essays, and long before Shakespeare (1564-1616) was born. At the time of our visit, five generations of the family lived there: Anatole Dardeau, then in his nineties, his daughter-in-law Carmen , who took us on the tour of the winery (I don't know if the son, Marius Dardeau, was still alive), his grandson René-Pierre and his wife Danielle, his great grandson Jean-Christophe and his wife Nathalie, and their infant child. (I am writing this based on what I heard during the tour, and what I read in the brochure of the winery, so there may be errors.)

Carmen was a kind woman who gave no sign of boredom at having to guide tourists through her family's ancestral home for the thousandth time. One thing that impressed itself on my mind was the noticeable difference in taste between wines from different parts of the estate. Up till then, I thought that the caricature of the wine sophisticate who can tell you, on the basis of a few sips, which acreage of a given winery a glass of wine had come from was no more than a joke. But even I, who was, and am, definitely not a connoisseur, was able to detect a notable difference.

At the end of our stay, when one of us asked her about sweet wines, she offered us several bottles which hadn't even been labelled yet. They were $10 each. I bought one, Jeff bought two, I think.

In the summer after I returned, a friend of Doug, Dean, and Eva named Melissa had an outdoor dinner in the yard of the first-floor duplex in North Berkeley which she was renting from Doug. There was an interesting collection of gay and straight guests. Lights strung on wires after dark lent a romantic atmosphere. I had told Melissa I would bring a sweet wine for dessert. After each of the guests had received his or her plate of dessert, I opened the bottle and went around, pouring a little for each guest. I told them to savor each sip because it was the only bottle I had. There was a silence as glasses were tilted. And then the silence continued, punctuated with a few "Mmm!s" of surprise and approval. Eva came over to me, and looking up I thought almost with tears in her eyes, said, "John this is the best glass of wine I have ever had." Others seemed to feel the same way. And I couldn't help agreeing. It tasted of summer meadows on golden summer days. I told Eva, "It tastes like frozen bumble-bee breath".

I Almost Lose My Inheritance

" Sept. 23, 1995

"Heim:

"Thanks for your latest. Will reply in detail to it next time. Right now am in great need of communicating with an old friend.

"This afternoon, found out from my mother's bookkeeper that the fucking goddamn lawyer has managed to get her [my mother] to leave him $150,000! He even brought in another lawyer to witness the change and sign a statement that the bitch was of sound mind and body, so that I

wouldn't be able to contest it.

"You have to understand that this was a man who for years led me to believe he was on my side, that I could trust him. Once, several years ago, when the bitch decided to take him out of the will entirely, he asked me to send a letter promising to pay him the amount she had originally promised. I was glad to do it. (Amount was $17,500.) I even promised to give him more.

"And now this. I called him on it, he didn't deny it. Said I would still get "the bulk" of the estate.

"A man I trusted! Still can't believe it. They're all the same, every last one of them in that fucking slimy crooked profession. But when I told him what I was going to do if I didn't get my rightful amount, he seemed to get real nervous. (Among my threats — no, they were promises: kill anyone and their entire family who walks away with more than *I* think they should get.) I also seemed to have scared the bitch with a few promises I made her: that every photo, letter, family memento (except my father's), every stick of furniture, every item of clothing she ever sent me would be burned. That I would make sure that her grave in Switzerland was desecrated, that her ashes would be thrown in the dump and the urn smashed into a thousand pieces. That I would forbid any human being, including my son, from ever mentioning her name or referring to her in any way again. That I would, in effect, erase her memory from the face of the earth. And then I would go on a killing rampage against those who had robbed me of my money that would make all the nation's papers and TV news reports.

"I then and there broke off all communication until she changes the will the way I want it. I will hang up if she calls, will return all letters unopened.

"All this on the heels of the boss telling me that, yes, everyone thinks I did an outstanding job on the manual so far, but since I might have to spend a few days learning the new software I bought for the online help version, he is thinking of bringing in an expert on that software. This despite the fact that I paid for all the software plus all the consultant's fees out of my own pocket!

"A great and horrible bloodbath is in the making.

"F."

I realized after I hung up the phone that my shouts of rage on the phone to my mother and to Hoolihan were certainly heard by my renter, Carrie, in the next room, so I wrote her a note and left it on the hall table.

"Carrie — I deeply apologize for the loud conversation this evening. At stake was the potential loss of a large amount of my money.

"If the occasion should arise again, I will warn you, so that you can step outside if you wish. (Or if necessary I will reschedule the conversation for some time when you're in school or elsewhere.)

"Again, my apologies.
"— J."

Her reply on the bottom of the note:

"John — I really didn't hear a thing.
"Hope things work out all right.
"— C"

At one point in the phone conversation with Hoolihan, my mother's lawyer, he said in so many words that I should be thankful to him, because my mother had offered him $250,000 and he had turned it down. He implied he did this for my sake. I said words to the effect, with friends like this, who needs enemies? I had no reason to believe she ever offered him $250,000. If that had been in the air, Maureen, the bookkeeper, would have said something.

The next day I wrote the following letter to my mother.

"Sept. 24, 1995

"Dear Mother:

"I got no sleep last night, I am still that shocked and outraged by what you did. You left $150,000 to a man with more than enough money — a doctor's [his wife's] and a lawyer's income, plus a house in Marin County — while your own flesh and blood, *your own son*, *can hardly afford two meals a day!* And on top of that you have the unmitigated gall to demand that this same son pay more attention to you! Shame on you! *Shame, shame, shame!* If Jeff hears about this, he may never speak to you again.

" I told you yesterday what the conditions are for any hope of reconciliation between us. The first step is for you to write me a dated letter — on a separate piece of paper — saying, 'Dear John, I have decided to change my will and leave Mr. Hoolihan $40,000 in total. Signed, your mother, ...' Then you sign it and have Kay sign it as witness and send the original to me. Keep a copy in your records, of course. This will ensure that, if something happens to you before we can find a new lawyer, that Mr. Hoolihan won't get the $150,000. Do not tell Mr. Hoolihan about this until we can meet with him and the new lawyer.

"There will be no communication between you and me until I receive that letter. Until then, I will not return phone calls. All your letters will be returned unopened.

"The clock is ticking. You heard yesterday from me what will happen if you continue to try to deprive me of my rightful inheritance. I want that letter by this Friday.

"Meantime, I will do whatever I can to try to find a new lawyer.

" Love,

"John"

A few days later, I did what long experience had taught me was the best thing to do when the inheritance was in jeopardy:

" Sept. 27, 1995

"Dear Mother:

" I just had a long talk with Mr. Hoolihan. I assured him that I intend no harm to you. What I said in my phone call to you, and in the letter I wrote afterward, was just an emotional reaction to the shocking news I had received.

"Mr. Hoolihan said you had gone to the hospital for tests in connection with a stomach prob-

lem. I hope these are over now, and that the results were good.

"When you feel up to it, I will be glad to meet with you to discuss the possibility of our having a better relationship in the future. However, I must be honest with you and tell you that, if you expect me to behave more responsibly in the future, then I will expect the same from you.

"With love,

"John"

I Get My Mother a New Lawyer

Through superhuman effort lasting weeks, I was eventually able to convince her that she should get a new lawyer. I think someone in the family, possibly Fred, recommended Charlie Jonas, and I was able to convince my mother that he would do a much better job than Hoolihan had done. The will was changed to leave Hoolihan only $50,000, which Mr. Jonas felt would be enough to defeat any chance of his trying to break the will after my mother's death

But now my mother had a new weapon of torture for use during my visits. There would often come a point when, rubbing her thumb against the side of her index finger, and not looking at me, she would say, "There is something — I know you don't want me to talk about it..."

I: "Then why talk about it?"

She, with a that's-easy-for-you-to-say nod: "I am not satisfied with Mr. Jonas. Oh no. He is not a good lawyer at all."

I: "Why?"

He: "He sends me bills. I told him, 'I am not going to pay these, Mr. Jonas.' He always overcharges me."

I: "I told you that I checked with him. He charges you $175 an hour. That is very reasonable for a San Francisco lawyer! Some of these guys charge well over $200! He is not cheating you. But if you call him, he is going to charge you for his time. That is his perfect right. He has to make a living, too." The truth is that Mr. Jonas had hit upon an obvious trick for stopping the endless phone calls he knew she had made to Mr. Hoolihan, namely, simply charge her for every minute she spent on the phone with him. No charity. She, drumming thumb and forefinger lightly on the table: "No, I don't like him. I know you don't like me to say this, but I never should have changed from..." she teases me by not saying Mr. Hoolihan's name. "I should never have listened to you and Mr. Jonas. I was wrong about Mr. Hoolihan. He is a good man."

I: "He made you fall down the stairs, don't you remember?" She nodded with a *perhaps* expression on her face. "How many times do I have to remind you?" But she kept it up, often for an hour or two: how nice Hoolihan always was, how he never asked her for money.

On Sept. 13, 1996, a package arrived from England. It was from my son, with a note: "Pssst, A little something to hopefully make your birthday that much more pleasant. Happy 60th mon père. Love, Your Son, Jeffoire P.S. You should find silver pewter cigar case, two nice Cuban cigars & fancy schmancy cigar cutter."

The next day, Saturday, Sept. 14, 1996, my 60th birthday, at 2:00 p.m. — I wrote it down afterward — by some coincidence, Mr. Hoolihan called while I was at my mother's. Kay answered the phone, said he wanted to come over and see my mother in forty-five minutes; he and

his family were leaving for a long vacation the next day. She was in a quandary and so was I. But I was unable to bear any more humiliation, so I told her that if he came, I would leave. My mother limped to the phone in the kitchen, talked to him for twenty minutes, leaving me to sit and wait. When she came back, she resumed her lament about changing lawyers. I pleaded with her to stop talking about him. She kept it up.

Suddenly, the flat of my hand slammed the table. "*Stop it! Stop it now!*" I picked up my tea cup, threw it through the kitchen doorway. Then the saucer. Then the silverware. Then the place mat. All this while, I was screaming at the top of my lungs, "*You fucking bitch, I've had enough, you fucking goddamn bitch*, ...", etc. It felt enormously good. I went over to her and squeezed her forehead as hard as I could. Then I started slapping her, not by any means as hard as I could. (Soft dead sound of my hand against her puffy, wrinkled skin.) She covered her face with her hands. I threw everything in sight. Kay was hiding in the kitchen, but already starting to pick up the pieces. At one point, after several slaps, my mother said, in a little baby voice, as she looked up at me with beseeching eyes, "I have no legal dealings with him..." At another point, she said, in that same baby voice, "...you said you had turned a new leaf." I screamed, "*You fucking goddamn bitch, I have tried as hard as I could for months to do what you want, I have done everything you want, you fucking goddamn piece of shit, and still you torture me. I'm a human being too, you goddamn bitch*..." Then, I stormed out. As I was closing the front door behind me, I heard her say, from the depths of the dining room, in that same small, mousey voice, "...happy birthday...".

At last she got what she had been craving the most: emotional attention of the highest intensity. Far better to be the target of violent rage, with filthy language and crockery flying, than to have no emotion whatever directed at you. There was not a trace of anger in her voice throughout the whole episode. Only a small girl who was welcoming all this attention. Toward the end, there was even a trace of beauty in her face, a glow, as though she had just had a good fuck.