

Academics

In the early nineties, there was a restaurant in Walnut Square in North Berkeley called the Apple Press and Egg Shop (a name I frequently mixed up, calling it the “Egg Press and Apple Shop”). I would go there for breakfast on Sunday after buying a paper at Black Oak Books, in the next block. The restaurant had long single tables at which everyone sat, table d’hôte style. I ordered my usual — two fried eggs sunny side up, potatoes, no sour cream, dry whole wheat toast, and coffee — and then went out to buy a paper. When I came back, a guy was sitting opposite where I had put my usual notebooks and books. He, too, had papers and books, and was completely absorbed in the type-written paper he had in front of him. He seemed to be a young professor. I wanted to take off my jacket, which required putting the newspaper down for a moment. Now Sunday papers are traditionally heavy and so instead of gently, carefully, in academic fashion, placing the paper on the table I, well, let it drop the last half-inch or so. A little breeze was created — a mere transient zephyr. But it was of sufficient strength to cause a sheet of the professor’s papers to be lifted into the air, whence the sheet descended by a quite interesting oscillatory motion, to the floor. With a Herbert Birdsfoot¹ sigh, and not a word, much less any eye contact, he picked it up and replaced it carefully in its former position. Later, as I was finishing my meal, I decided I needed to buy something else at Black Oak, so I left, came back with it. Completely forgetting what had already happened, I allowed it, too, to drop to the table top. Once again a little breeze was created that was sufficient to lift one of the professor’s sheets of paper and send it wafting gently to the floor. And once again, with a Herbert Birdsfoot sigh, he reached down, retrieved it, and put it back.

Such are the ordeals that the young academician must endure when he goes out among the ignorant masses.

A Painless Dentist At Last

In the late eighties, I began hearing, through the hygienists, that Dr. Levin had heart problems. Since my rate of cavity production had dropped considerably as I approached old age, I didn’t see him that often any more: sometimes less than once a year. Then I heard he had had a heart bypass operation. Someone said that during the year or two before, he had been walking around with a box of nitroglycerin pills, popping them throughout the day to combat the pain. (Some of which was due to me!) Another dentist was now occupying the far office, first a woman, then a man. Dr. Levin was thinking of taking on a partner, the story went. The man, whose name was Dr. Clark, seemed to work out, and then, in the early nineties, we patients were told that Dr. Levin was retiring.

Dr. Clark was a handsome man, a little below average height, with glossy black hair and boyish features. He was then in his thirties, I think, and was a third-generation dentist, his father and grandfather both having practiced in Palo Alto. He had a quiet, warmly humorous manner, and he always gave you the impression that he was honored that you were his patient. His wife Janine was his receptionist. She had a sprightly manner, a somewhat squeaky voice, and, it always seemed to me, a not-smooth skin. But that may have been due to the fact that both she and her husband spent a lot of time outdoors, in particular, running marathons and, in his case, competing in the Iron Man competition, which involved not only distance running, but bicycling and swimming.

1. A bored, impatient teacher on *Sesame Street* whom Grover was always trying to please.

Those with an interest in the psychology of the dentist's chair may find it of interest to learn that virtually all of my lifelong anxieties connected with having teeth filled and crowns put on disappeared immediately with Dr. Clark. His approach was like that of Rochelle, my regular hygienist: instead of suggesting, via tone of voice or manner, that he couldn't possibly hurt me, that if I felt any pain it was entirely my fault, he made it clear that he considered it entirely possible that it *might* hurt, and that he was genuinely concerned about this. He would always tell me in advance what he was going to do, even if it was something as truly painless as applying a topical anesthetic to the surface of the gums prior to injecting the Novocaine. Then, before he inserted the needle, while his hand was still several inches from my mouth, he would say, "Now, John you might feel a slight pinch at first. Think good thoughts." And similarly, when he was getting ready to start drilling, he would say, "Now I want you tell me if you feel any discomfort." So that it was as if his sensitivity to my pain was *greater than my own*.

That changed everything. Now I found myself in the position of having to tell the dentist not to be so worried about my pain, for God's sake! Half the time I felt I could have asked for the morning paper to read while he worked on my teeth. And yet there was no sense that he was trying to "apply psychology". He was simply a dentist who was mightily concerned about his patients' comfort.

I then realized that, despite Dr. Levin's self-control, our mutual jokes, his willingness to keep me on as a patient even though I had been the winner of Worst Patient of the Year Award for decades running, his willingness to do everything that technology allowed to alleviate my pain — extra Novocaine, maximum nitrous oxide, earphones with classical music played through white noise — when he had the drill in his hand and was preparing to start work on a tooth, I *felt* he was thinking, "This can't hurt, and if you think it does, then the pain is of your own creation, not mine." Which immediately made it a certain to me that it *was* going to hurt.

Within a few months after becoming Dr. Clark's patient, I decided that I should change my epitaph, and not have it read, "This beats going to the dentist." And when people were amused by my preference for the literature of the past over the best-sellers they read (those few who actually read books), I would often reply, "Hey: I'm a 19th century guy. The only reason I'm here is the dental care is much better."

Janet, Dr. Levin's assistant, left to spend full time managing several apartment buildings that she and her husband owned. Dr. Clark's new assistant, whose name was Lucy, was another very attractive young woman. She had short, black hair, a slim body, and, like Janet, the same ability to carry on a humorous dialogue with a patient. She was a dog lover, had two or three, I think. I made a copy of Robinson Jeffers's beautiful poem, "At the House Dog's Grave", for her, not because one of her dogs had died, but because I thought it expressed the way dogs with loving masters must feel.

Rochelle

Rochelle continued to be my regular hygienist, and I continued to look forward to our hourly conversation three times a year. We had a running gag, which the rest of the staff participated in, though I am sure that it had long since worn thin. There were several premises. One was that they had ordinary nitrous for the masses, but down in the basement they also had top-quality vintage nitrous, which, if I were good, but only then, they would give me. Another premise was my pretended conviction that they were deliberately not giving me enough nitrous — that I was the subject of an ongoing experiment concerning the placebo effect. So, after exaggerated precautionary looks from side to side, I would say, in a half-whisper to Rochelle or Janet or Lucy, "I'll

give you \$10 if you turn it up to 100%!” And then, when the little rubber piece was over my nose, and the inevitable words, “Deep breaths through your nose” had been uttered, and, a while later, the question came, “Are you feeling it?”, I would reply, “No. It’s air as usual — well, OK: it’s air artificially flavored to *smell* like nitrous, but I know the truth: it’s ... *faux*-nitrous.” At the end of each session, she would turn off the nitrous and turn on oxygen to wash the remainder of the gas out of my system. I, when I asked her if I were now getting pure oxygen and she replied yes: “Oxygen is so *boring*”.

Rochelle decided that the only way I was going to keep my gums healthy was by getting an electric tooth brush. I hated the thought of having to go shopping for still more technology, so I kept postponing it. She kept urging me, although, having a good scientific mind, she agreed to let me make one more try with an ordinary toothbrush, I promising to scrub much harder, and not to skip any days. There was not much improvement. Finally, she said that we were reaching the point where she was going to have to utter what she called “the *p* word”, *p* standing for *periodontist*. That meant scraping underneath the gums, an expensive, painful process. I forced myself to buy a Bausch & Lomb Interplak.

I felt that I should send her a card to announce the purchase, so I bought one which had an old photograph of a little kid in diapers attempting to push a thirties Ford (like our old ’36 Ford in Valhalla). I forget the caption, but it clearly got across my intended message that an old car like me sometimes needed a push from a young person like her. Inside I drew a cartoon of me, with my bald head and beard, standing with my arm around a clearly *female* electric toothbrush with nice long hair that I had now married. Rochelle never replied to mail I sent her, but at our next meeting, it was clear that she had gotten a kick out of the card.

Around 1997, she and her husband had a son, whom they named Avery. In succeeding years, as she told me about him, I began to realize that she was an absolutely superb mother. I will begin with the incident of the Kicked Water Pipe. Apparently when Avery was about four, he and a friend were playing outside at his pre-school, and one thing led to another, and they thought it might be fun to kick a water pipe, and they did, and it broke, sending water all over the school yard. Teachers appeared, the boys were hauled into the principal’s office, their parents were called.

Rochelle made it clear to Avery that he and his friend had done a very bad thing, and that therefore there would have to be penalties. First of all, he would have to take all the money out of his piggy bank and give it to the teacher in charge by way of partially paying to repair the pipe. And then there would be no TV for several weeks, I forget how many. The poor guy had never seen his mother this serious, this angry at him, and so, after he had gone to the teacher, with his mother, and all his piggy bank money in hand, and they had come home, he said, with the expression of a very deeply troubled young man, “Mom...do you still...love me?” She was a little taken aback at the thought that the punishments had elicited such a profound doubt, and so, she immediately reassured him: “Yes, Avery, of course I still love you. I am angry at what you did, not at you.” (Which may have been a little abstract for such a young man, but in any case, he seemed to be able to continue with his life.)

Then a year or two later we had the Kissing-All-the-Girls-Problem. It seems that Avery liked to begin each day by kissing each of the girls in his class, and then repeat that once or twice during the day. Since such an outpouring of affection tended to disrupt the flow of class activities, the teacher asked him to please stop, and thought she had better notify Rochelle. Once again Rochelle did exactly the right thing. She took Avery aside one evening after supper and explained that, even though it is very nice of him to express his liking for all the girls by giving each of them a

kiss, the question was: suppose one of the girls had a cold, or he had a cold. Then he would be spreading it to all the girls, and then they would each get a cold, and no one would like that. So she would have to ask him to refrain from kissing all the girls. But, when Kelley — a girl in his class — came over to play, it would be all right if he gave her a kiss when she arrived and when she left.

He and Kelley soon developed a special bond. After hearing a few stories about them I told Rochelle that I unhesitatingly predicted an early marriage in which they would be uniquely happy for the rest of their lives. And so, at each visit to have my teeth cleaned, the first thing I would say, as I settled down in the chair, and she tied the bib around my neck, was “And how is Young Avery?” And then she would tell me the latest, and the time would be as nothing despite the fact that I had a mirror and a sharp metal tool inside my mouth most of the time, and was often being reprimanded for obviously not having used the electric brush twice a day, and not having flossed once a day.

She told me that she asked him what he would like to do for his seventh birthday. He replied, “Have Kelley sleep over.” For a few moments, she didn’t quite know what to say, but then she said that Kelley could come over, they could each have one of the twin beds in his room, they could talk together and cuddle their furry animals before lights out, but that once they were both asleep, he would be gently carried (without being awakened) into his Dad’s room and Mom would sleep in his bed, with Kelley in the other bed.

For second grade, Avery and Kelley were going to be in the same classroom together. Avery, of course, was delighted. But Rochelle, not wanting his expectations to soar too high, gently explained to him that he could not assume that she would want to play with him all the time. She might find other friends. She even might not want to see him very much at all. To which her son, already experienced beyond his years, replied, “Mom, if Kelley and I were ever not to be together any more...my heart would be broken.”

But a year or so later Avery reported that Kelley had expressed an indifference to hugs, although according to Rochelle she and Avery continued to be “as thick as thieves”. And now a new problem emerged: Avery began showing a marked indifference to all schoolwork except sociology (I’m not sure what the subject involved at that grade level) and math. (He had already demonstrated genuine talent at singing and dancing, doing both spontaneously as the spirit moved him, and participating in music programs at school.)

He also seemed to become indifferent to punishments such as being deprived of TV for not doing well in his other courses. Furthermore, his reading dropped below standard. Rochelle had him tested twice. No obvious deficiencies in intelligence were found. Given what she had told me about his natural curiosity, I couldn’t help remarking to her that his reading might be below par because he was bored stiff with what he was given to read.

When he was nine, Kelley’s parents, who were both Stanford graduates and who didn’t want to spend one moment longer than they had to in the middle-class neighborhood of Mountain View where they lived, decided to move. (Rochelle had nothing but contempt for the hauteur of Kelley’s parents, and for other Stanford graduates who behaved similarly.) Kelley became more distant, didn’t respond to Avery’s phone message inviting her to his birthday party. After she moved away, the two youngsters had no further contact — until February of 2006, when Kelley sent Avery a picture of herself!

I to Rochelle: “Can it be that true love is triumphing over class?”

But our conversation wasn’t exclusively about Young Avery. More often than I care to admit, after she had taken her first look around the interior of my mouth with her always ready, sharp,

pointy instrument (freshly cleaned), she would step back, holding the instrument before my eyes, with a fragment of the morning's egg white on the end, and in mock schoolmarm severity ask: "What's this?"

I would pretend to study it closely for a few moments, then settle back in my chair with an expression of smug assurance: "It's not mine."

She, trying hard to suppress her laughter through her schoolmarm manner: "Then whose is it?"

"Must be your previous patient's. Really, Rochelle, you must do a better job of cleaning your instruments between patients. Whatever happened to the autoclave, for God's sake?"

But I often felt guilty at the amount of time we consumed in conversation, especially when I knew that more than once she had had to keep her next patient waiting. So one morning I removed a leaf from a bush outside the door to the office, and after she had tucked me in, I held it up, and asked her, "What is this?"

She, in a voice that made clear she was preparing for the completely unpredictable: "A leaf."

I: "I know, but what kind of a leaf?"

She: "A green leaf."

I, prompting her: "Yes, OK, but what kind of a green leaf? An old leaf or a ...?"

She: "A new leaf."

I: "Exactly." I now rotated it slowly by the stem: "Now what am I doing?"

She: "Rotating...twirling..."

I: "Turning?"

She: "Yes. Turning...turning the leaf over."

I: "Or in other words, turning over a new leaf?"

She: "Yes."

I: "And that's what I am going to do today. I have decided I take up too much of your time with my endless banter. So, as of now, I shall talk no more. You may begin your prophylactic task. I am now embarked on The New Taciturnity."

She laughed, gave me one of her skeptical looks, the same one she gave me when I promised to use the electric toothbrush twice a day, and, needless to say, within five minutes we were talking as much as before, except that I was doing so with more guilt, which made it all right.

An ongoing problem, throughout my entire dental career, was a tendency to stiffen my tongue and tighten my lips (anxiety produced by being in a dental chair, even Rochelle's, was always present in my body, if not in my mind), thus making it difficult for Rochelle to perform her task.

She: "Relax that tongue!"

I: "It's completely relaxed!"

She would laugh and attempt to resume her work. At the next opportunity I got, I would tell her, "It's the most completely relaxed tongue in the entire universe!" She would suppress a laugh and resume her work in a way that said she was thinking, "God help the universe!" When she had again removed her tools from my mouth for a moment, I would continue:

"In fact — although I didn't want to tell you — but I know it's relaxed because you are working on a Zen master."

She: "OK, open, Mr. Zen Master."

Later, when she had again commanded me to relax tongue and lips, I would say: "They're so relaxed that there's a real risk of gangrene! In fact, if they were any more relaxed, you'd have to call 911¹."

She, again suppressing a laugh: “I didn’t know relaxation caused gangrene.”

I: “It’s a well-known fact! Check the literature! It wouldn’t look good on your record, Rochelle: ‘Ms. H — is a thoroughly competent hygienist who has always enjoyed a special rapport with her patients, except for several who contracted gangrene of lips and tongue as a result of her excessive insistence on their relaxing these organs.’” Even though she, unlike me, didn’t spend time trying to be funny, she had a clever wit, as revealed when, during an appointment in October 2006, she said that sometimes she had arguments with her sister, who was also a hygienist, but much more high-strung than she. One of these concerned the question of when the patient should be allowed to spit. Her sister apparently felt it should be far less often than Rochelle was willing to allow. Rochelle, shrugging: “I told her, ‘Hey, spit happens’.”¹

After Dr. Levin’s retirement in the early nineties, he and his wife moved to Lake Tahoe, something he had always wanted to do, since he was a skier. Then, years later, they moved to Grass Valley, near the foot of the Sierras. Rochelle remarked at one point that they were thinking of moving back to Palo Alto because they missed the cultural activities. But they decided not to. He took up golf. And one day out on the course, someone forgot to shout “Fore!”, or he didn’t hear it, but in any case he was struck in the eye by a golf ball, and lost the sight in that eye.

Gere

In May, 1990, I responded to the following ad in the *Bay Guardian*:

Gorgeous, Elegant & Funny

I am a 5’8”, slender, charming, youthful 50, single WF, who enjoys long walks, hand holding, movies, dinners and lots of conversation. I’m looking for one very special man who may not be wealthy, perhaps is not handsome, but is healthy, intelligent, communicative, sincere, flexible and a non-smoker, non-drinker. East Bay preferred. Guardian Box #30322F.

She lived in the Watergate Apts. at the edge of the Bay in Emeryville, about ten miles from my house, and was the Supervisor of Operations at Imperial Bank in San Francisco. On our first date, which was dinner at a dusty little non-descript restaurant called Carrara’s in Emeryville, I asked her what kind of classical music she liked. “Oh, all kinds.” I: “I see. What are some of your favorite works?” She: “Oh, there are so many. I love them all.” I: “Well, who are your favorite composers?” She: “Oh, I can’t remember all the names. There are so many.” And on it went.

She was blonde, moderately attractive, and, it soon became clear, she was interested in me. Her little apartment in the Watergate overlooked the Bay, and because she seemed to feel that anything I did was just fine, she turned out to be the only woman in my life with whom sex was free of anxieties. When I arrived at her apartment (usually once in mid-week, and once on the weekend), she always put on an LP with some title like “Classical Favorites”, and which contained selections from Pachelbel’s *Canon in D*, Vivaldi’s *Four Season’s*, the first movement of Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony*, Rossini’s *William Tell Overture*, etc. And then, after a little conversation, she led me to her bedroom and we made love. I was not impotent, but I was still unable to

1. The emergency phone number

1. A saying at the time, usually heard following a report of some calamity or other, and expressing cynical resignation, was “Shit happens”.

have an orgasm. It didn't bother her a bit. The truth is, she was the best to play with that I ever found. She had gorgeous legs, and she let me try something I had always wanted to try with women who had legs like hers, namely, have intercourse between her crossed legs.

But it was all too easy, and hence couldn't be worth anything.

And the truth is that I felt unfulfilled in our conversations, which were about her work at the bank, her gay boss, her estrangement from her daughter, her son's failure to make headway in a career. Never about books or music. But she had a good sense of humor. Once I asked her what she did when she heard a noise in her car engine. She: "Turn up the radio!"

Sometimes, when she answered the phone, I would say, in a deliberately forlorn voice, "It's only me."

She: "We don't say *only*."

I: "It's *me!*"

She: "There, that's much better."

I: "In other words, it's supposed to be kind of perky and uptilting."

She, laughing: "Yes!"

She had been married six times. One of the marriages had been simply to provide a friend of hers who had cancer and no medical insurance (and no job, I think) with insurance coverage.

Ginny

In September, 1990, I responded to an ad in the Bay Guardian:

Living in Marin

Lively, attractive, trim, professional woman, nonsmoker, published author with interests in photography, the out-of-doors, music, and a host of other things, both trivial and profound. Looking for a long term relationship with an intelligent, educated, psychologically minded, physically fit man age 50 - 62, who is interested in ideas. I love to laugh, feel life is infinitely more fun in the company of an attractive man, and am willing to explore with him the many ways mutually flawed people can consume life. Photo appreciated. Guardian Box # — .

Our first meeting was at A Clean Well-Lighted Place for Books in Larkspur Landing, across the San Rafael Bridge in Marin County. She was what inarticulate males describe as "cute". There was instant chemistry on both sides. Coffee and conversation lasted till 10. I began keeping a record, probably because I knew this wasn't going to last, or just in case I didn't have enough material for this autobiography.

She was divorced following a 16-year marriage to a Freudian psychoanalyst whose idea of a good time at parties was to verbally abuse her in full hearing of the others present. Previously, she had had another 16-year marriage. She had three kids, all grown: a daughter 31, Suzanne, another daughter, and a son. One of the daughters was in marketing. She was a psychologist, with an office in Greenbrae. I think she specialized in helping high-school students.

She liked photography (Annie Liebowitz, Ansel Adams), the cartoonists Gary Larson and Gary Trudeau; children's illustrator Maurice Sendak; the writer Ellen Gilchrist, the Ashland, Ore., Shakespeare festival, which she attended with her daughter, Suzanne, and shopping at Crate & Barrel, Cost Plus, and Whole Earth, and book stores.

Our next date was two weeks later, when we took a Sunday walk in South Berkeley, with cof-

fee afterward at Le Bateau Ivre. The following Saturday, we had dinner at Cafe Pastoral in Berkeley. On parting, we exchanged two chaste kisses. I assumed she was interested in friendship-only. But in a phone call a few days later, she said that her kisses didn't mean friendship-only. That Saturday we had dinner at the Pacific Heights Bar and Grill in San Francisco. The next day we took an afternoon walk on Mt. Tamalpais, had wine afterward at a local inn. The next Saturday we saw Jean Renoir's *Rules of the Game* at the Pacific Film Archive, UC Berkeley.

Monday or Tuesday we we slept together for the first time.

Her house was beautiful, with views of the Bay and of Mt. Tamalpais. She had classical music playing 24 hours a day in all the rooms, yet she never remarked on a piece. She revealed more about herself. She liked hiking, camping, baseball. Also books, lectures, plays, jazz, saki, and chocolate.

The next Saturday, Nov. 3, we had dinner at the Avenue Grill in Mill Valley, then saw a play, *Passion*, in the same city. The next morning, breakfast in Mill Valley.

Sometimes, when we were in bed together, the phone would ring and her previous lover would call. (He was a high-ranking administration official at Harvard; the only reason they had broken up was that his children had said they would never speak to him again if he continued the relationship.) I, wanting to show how modern and sophisticated I was, would climb out of bed and go downstairs while they talked.

The following week, she went to Denver, returning on Sunday. I picked her up at the airport, spent the afternoon at her house. That evening we saw the film, *Reversal of Fortune*.

The next Wednesday in Herbst Auditorium, UC San Francisco, we attended a talk by Jan Morris, the British travel writer and historian who had undergone a sex-change operation (male to female). On Friday, we listened to jazz at Yoshi's, Berkeley.

At some point, I met her son — I only recall talking to him in the spacious garage of Ginny's house. He was in his late twenties, strikingly handsome, and working on becoming a composer. I thought him shallow.

Although she had classical music playing in all the rooms of her house throughout the day and night, the only time I heard her remark on a piece was during the during the playing of the Adagio of Mahler's Fifth Symphony at a concert of the San Francisco Symphony at the end of November.

One day we went bike riding. As we were walking our bikes along Sir. Francis Drake Blvd., we stopped at a side street, either to wait for the light to change, or because there was a stop sign for traffic on the street. We decided it was safe to cross at the exact moment when the driver who had been waiting decided it was safe to turn right onto the Blvd. He hit the front of Ginny's bike. She had both hands underneath the brake levers on the handlebars, and the force of the impact forced both of her thumbs back toward her wrist. She gave a cry and I saw them, bent back grotesquely. She said there was a hospital not far from there, and so somehow we half walked, half rode thre, she being a brave girl throughout. They took her in, put her to bed, reset the thumbs, or in any case restored them to their proper position and gave her appropriate drugs. I was throughout doing my best to be the protective, sympathetic male.

I continued to wine and dine her. The notes show that on Thurs. (Dec. 20) we saw *Mr. Hulot's Holiday* at the UC Theater in Berkeley. Later we saw the video tape of *The Horse's Mouth*, the British comedy that I loved, starring Alec Guinness. Then there was the Christmas party at Jonathan's house in Canyon, then *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in which Stephanie, the daughter of Yolanda, was acting.

And yet, she had the naiveté of the upper class Marin woman. Once, when we were discuss-

ing problems of the minorities, she said that she was actively involved in helping blacks. I was impressed, since I imagined her devoting a few hours each month to work in the Oakland ghetto. But she went on to explain that a black couple had asked her to help their son, who was having a little trouble with his high school courses. I thought: if one of the three or four black families in Marin County call on you to help their son, and if you receive your standard fee from the family or from the school (which I am sure she did), that is only literally “being actively involved in helping blacks”.

On several occasions, she made it clear that her rule in life was, “If it makes me feel good, then it must be true”, a rule that before and since I have always associated with the Marin mentality and that for me is proof of the worthlessness of public education and of an education in the humanities.

It was clear by January, 1991, that she was losing interest. I’m sure that the main reason was that it had become clear to her that I was nowhere near as wealthy as she required for a long-term relationship. What made it clear was a minor incident: the brown leather jacket I usual wore on dates, was stolen. I had put it on the roof of my car and gone inside to get something. When I returned fifteen minutes later, it was gone. I began wearing an old jacket of imitation leather on dates and I am sure this bothered her, although she didn’t say anything. We saw each other less and less. Then, at one of Egl’s parties, Uncle Steve, one of the regulars, revealed that he had met her, or had known her, and that he got together with her on occasion. I began to suspect something was going on. I challenged him, he denied it.

I didn’t call her for a month or more. Then, toward summer, I made one more try. The conversation was courteous and distant. When I asked if she would like to meet for a cup of coffee or dinner, she said she had met someone, and that they were going away on a yachting vacation, in his boat, on the Aegean.

So I cheated on Gere, a loving, even adoring, woman until I was dumped by a woman who decided I wasn’t rich enough for her.

“Afraid of losing her, we forget all the others. Sure of keeping her, we compare her with those others whom at once we prefer to her.”¹

Gere and I remained friends. One weekend she showed up on my doorstep and said that I had two days to decide to marry her or else she was moving to Oregon. I tried to make a joke out of such an ultimatum and true to her word, she left. She later wrote that she had met a man who claimed to be a former spy for the British intelligence agency MI 5 who had been wounded after being parachuted into China. He said he owned a castle in Scotland. There was talk of marriage, until she began to have grounds for believing most of what he told her was fiction. She then met a man who worked for the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and soon they married. He turned out to be a cold, uncaring husband. (He was a far-right-wing Republican who hated Berkeley liberals. But she was also a Republican and always thought that George W. Bush was a great president.) She was reluctant to divorce him because they owned a house and financially she would be worse off than if she stayed. Eventually, however, they divorced. A year or so later, they decided to try again, and so they were remarried. (It was her eighth marriage.) Things were

1. — Proust, Marcel, *The Captive*, vol. 5 of *Remembrance of Things Past*, Modern Library, N.Y., 1956, p.

soon back to where they had been, but this time she was determined to stay until he died. Eventually he had a quadruple bypass heart operation and her hopes soared. But he fully recovered. Then she had another glimmer of hope when he took up flying and then bought a kit for a single-engine plane. He built the plane, and we both felt it was only a matter of time before the engine failed or he had a heart attack during a flight. But it didn't happen.

In June, 2009, I wrote her saying I had been looking at photographs of me during our time together, and was appalled at my ugliness. I asked her what in God's name made her even consider seeing me after our first date? Her reply:

Well, I loved your intellect. I loved your urbaneness (is that a word?), I loved your sexiness. And it grew from there. I always felt badly because you didn't seem to think that I was in the same intellectual class as your other friends, but I loved you anyway. The sex was great! It was playful and fun. Do you remember going to a birthday picnic at the home of some famous artist? What was his name anyway? Do you remember playing and necking in the little "house" on his property? Do you remember how HORRIBLE his house was? Do you remember the Berkeley architectural tour - and the time I had to go to the bathroom and you guarded the door - and then I found that people could look right through the window and watch me anyway! Do you remember breakfast at Rick & Ann's? I remember all these things and think of them very fondly.

You are still loved - by me,

...

She may not have been a writer when she responded to my ad, but in 2009, she suddenly started producing novels: four by October. She got herself a web site and published them through one of the new publishing services that took manuscripts and created very presentable-looking printed editions on demand.

Chantal

In January of 1992, I got a call from a woman in Perfect Strings, the dating service catering to classical music lovers. God knows why I decided not to follow up on it, since the voice was right, having that musical quality that always attracts me. Perhaps the reason was that she lived in Moraga, a wealthy suburb on the other side of the Caldecott Tunnel, perhaps it was that she sounded too attractive. Three months later, on April 3, I got another call from the same woman. This time I decided to give her a try.

We met in the evening in the Bateau Ivre. It was crowded, so we had to sit in back, at a table with soft, low, living-room-style armchairs that always made me feel at a disadvantage when first meeting a woman. She was in her forties, not beautiful, but very sexy. She had been born in France but had come to this country as a girl. She spoke English and, of course, French, without an accent. Her name was Chantal, a name I soon found I loved to repeat to myself.

Her Recent Experiences As A Teacher

She had been teaching in private school for many years, but had decided to do something for the less fortunate, and so, the previous fall, had started teaching at a public school in Benicia, even though it meant taking a \$10,000 a year pay cut. From the samples of some of the homework she assigned that she later showed me, I concluded that she was a good teacher.

Two experiences she had during her first weeks at the Benicia school reinforced my growing opinion about the near-hopelessness of trying to educate ghetto blacks. The first occurred when she was explaining the rules that she expected her class to obey. One of these was that homework had to be handed in on the day it was due. A black kid immediately got up and shouted, “Demanding homework is racism!” She apparently was able to get him to sit down. The rest of the class didn’t seem to have a problem with the prospect of following this rule. She didn’t tell me if the black kid eventually consented to follow it also.

The second experience occurred after she had read to her class O. Henry’s short story, “The Gift of the Magi”, in which a husband and wife each secretly sell their most treasured possessions to buy Christmas gifts for the other. The wife, unknown to her husband, sells her hair in order to buy a chain for his watch, and the husband secretly sells the watch to buy her a pair of combs for her hair. The story concludes, “Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are the wisest...They are the magi...” When she had finished reading the story, a black kid got up, walked to the front of the room, and hit her. She was not badly hurt. Eventually, from talking to the kid, she was able to figure out that the reason for the attack was that he had become so overwhelmed by a story of such love between adults, in particular, parental adults, that he thought she had read it in order to deliberately torment him. She didn’t turn the kid in to the principal, and now, she said, he was working very hard for her.

Nevertheless, as a result of these and other similar experiences, she had decided to go back to private school the following fall.

Her Ex-husband

Her husband, she revealed after we had had a few meetings and phone conversations, was the son of a famous physicist, Edward —. The old man was then in his eighties and meaner than ever. She told me some personal details about him, for example, that he had dandruff in his bushy eyebrows, that he lost a foot at the age of 20 in a tram accident, that he now had severe heart problems, that his wife, her ex-husband’s mother, was schizophrenic and had been so throughout her ex-husband’s childhood, that the old man wouldn’t allow her to be committed to an institution, and that as a result it had not been unusual for the woman to call at five in the morning and start haranguing her son. She said the old man made no secret of his disappointment, in fact anger, that his son had gone in for a loser’s field like philosophy of science (her ex was a professor of the subject at the University of California at Davis).

The son apparently had developed two obsessions in life: sex and marijuana. Although he was a professor, he smoked pot every day, and thought nothing of having affairs with his female students despite the fact that he was married and the father of two sons. In fact, he thought nothing of bringing the woman, or women, he was currently having sex with home for dinner, expecting his wife to suppress her suspicions (or knowledge) of what was going on, and cook dinner for them all.

On one occasion, when I complained about my baldness, she tried to soothe me by saying it didn’t necessarily make a man unattractive, that, in fact, I looked like her ex-husband. The truth was, as she admitted more than once through tears, she still loved him, despite twenty-three years of misery in her marriage. Understandably, she had been in therapy for most of that time. (She said there had been several suicides in her family.)

I had to admire her courage in getting out of the marriage, since the old man had warned her in advance that he would do everything in his power to make sure she received not a dime of his money or the money of anyone else in the family. Until then it was understood that she, with her

husband, would inherit a sizable amount indeed. As it was, she wound up with enough for a down payment on her condo and nothing more. I wasn't surprised when she told me that she was working on a book which proposed an alternative to the typical model of male leadership and that she was leading a woman's group on the subject.

Her Sons

She had two sons, both geniuses. Both were academic superstars — that was her description, but one I felt was not an exaggeration. During the course of our relationship, I had a chance to see what the offspring of these best-of-the-best families are like. Both of them were insufferable egotists, doubting not for a moment they were among the most brilliant two or three students at Stanford. Both had always found school so easy as to be boring. Once, at a dinner at Chantal's condo, one of the sons commented that 99% of all computer science papers were shit, a remark that I felt confirmed my feelings about the vast majority of papers I had read while at HP Labs.

Her Condo

Her condo was on the side of a hill in Moraga. I remember very clearly her smile as she came down the walk to greet me the first time I drove to her place.

When you walked out onto the balcony, you were at mid-level in the trees. She had completely redone the place, tearing down walls, reconstructing, painting. It had a strangely abstract, barren look: gray and white, although her bed was a four-poster, with diaphanous curtain around it. Of course, I praised it to the heavens. She rented one room out to a bisexual woman who had two steady lovers, one male, one female, so that, on any given morning, you never knew the sex of the partner that would emerge for morning coffee. The female lover was a strikingly attractive young blonde with short hair and a business-like manner. She did training for her company, and on the day I was introduced to her was about to fly to Buenos Aires to conduct a series of courses.

Her Childhood

She had moved to this country when she was a young girl. We discovered that it was *possible* we had been on the Île de France together, in the summer of 1949, I returning home, she traveling to the U.S. with her parents to live here. Her father, she said, had always been remote, always with his books, obsessed with career, and, in fact, there are not one but two famous fathers in this story, because Chantal's father was a professor of economics emeritus at UC Berkeley, and had won a Nobel Prize in the eighties. I met him at one of the family gatherings at the condo. He turned his eyes away when she introduced him to me, barely shook hands. Throughout dinner and the rest of the evening, he said nothing to me, made no eye contact.¹ When I complained to Chantal about this afterward, she said it was the French way, they don't welcome strangers easily into their homes. Her mother seemed to be one of the those women who was more than content to serve. She seemed determined to make it clear to Fortune how much she appreciated the stroke of

1. And yet this great mind in economics, who couldn't bring himself to talk to an outsider who didn't have a PhD, didn't even have the financial insight of the outsider. As Chantal told me, he somehow believed that, in the sixties and seventies, renting an apartment in the Berkeley area was a wiser financial move than buying a house. It only dawned on him in the eighties, as he watched the prices of houses steadily increase, that he might have been wrong. Presumably he was incapable of doing the basic calculations, or didn't think them worthwhile, to compare (1) the advantages of owning a house, including the income tax deduction on interest paid, and the saving in rent (since a house is an investment you can live in), and (2) the advantages of renting an apartment.

luck that had given her a Nobel Prize winner for a husband. One of the sons was there that evening. He was very affectionate toward his mother, sitting next to her, caressing her sometimes. He too didn't so much as acknowledge my existence.

The fact that we both felt that we were at heart Europeans meant a lot to each of us. A couple of weeks after we met, we had arranged to meet in Au Coquelet for lunch, since it was just across the street from Franz, where I was working then (it was a company that sold software for programming in LISP). She arrived in the sexiest, short, denim skirt, red shoes (or so it seems in memory), tight sweater, ravishing perfume (not too much but just enough so that I would want to keep smelling more of it), and handed me the following letter.

Her Letter

“April 23, 1992

“Dear John,

“Like you I want to sit down and write when I have a great deal on my mind. Today it's a great deal of happiness — it feels like the present, past, and future are really well integrated for me right now, and you have a major part to play in that, so this is a love letter (scary stuff!).

“Our mutual trip on the Île de France has an importance for me I cannot emphasize enough. Ever since that trip and my arrival to the U.S. I have felt that my life had been broken in two. Actually the image is bloodier than that — my life has always felt like an organic entity that had become torn, dismembered — that wound, that loss of my country, my language, my home, my grandmother/mother, my family, the familiar smells, sounds, and sights of Meulan, the row boats and flat bottomed barges on the river Seine, the extraordinary walled garden (my Garden of Eden) that was the 2 acres around my home (there were apricot trees, apple trees, roses, currants, raspberries, herbs and vegetables of all kinds, linden trees and horse chestnut trees, maple trees of enormous height and girth, secret mazes of walkways shaded by ivy covered trellises, mossy lawns the size of football fields, a swing set up just for me, and [a] sandbox where the slow snails and the fuzzy bees would come and visit me. I played in that garden day after day with nothing on but a little white bonnet. This was my kingdom, my safe haven.) Then all was lost in the arbitrary decision of adults I hardly knew: my parents, I was told. For all the years since then I have struggled to stop the bleeding of this wound and to put the two pieces of my life back together: the French and the American, the Before and After. After a fashion, I have been successful, but often it feels like I have simply grown scar tissue over a still unhealed place. Now the fact that you were probably on that fateful trip, on that self same ship, which could be love, a link, a bridge between the pieces so violently torn asunder in 1950. It feels like the wound now has a chance to really heal, not just grow callous — and this when after all this time I had really convinced myself that it was just going to have to be a lifelong ache. I am in a state of wonder and excitement. The changes and joys we are uniquely positioned to bring to each other's lives seem limitless. I think hope and healing are among the most powerful sources of happiness, just the way despair and hurting are among the most powerful sources of unhappiness. With you I am finding hope and healing. I am beginning to see a vision of a relationship, of a life, in which I can be *all* parts of myself and have each part accepted, and to some measure understood. This goes beyond my wildest dreams of what I could share with the man I love. I believe I got together with Paul because we both had experienced much similar pain and loss (the world-famous, ultra-demanding father, the constant moving and loss of homes and friends, the rarified elitist childhood, the unsupportive mother, the absurdly high and unattainable expectations) and so had a good deal in

common. But now being somewhat older and wiser and luckier I have met you and the bond is healing, hope, and reintegration. The fascinating part is that without the trip on the Dark Side that you and I have each taken in our own way the dazzling brilliance of this new phase might escape us — we might take it for granted, not recognize its startling and wondrous qualities. Just as in a great painting the shadows bring the shapes of light to life, so our shadows can bring our joys to life. The investment in the Dark Side was not in vain after all, it serves as a counterpoint that enriches our appreciation of what we can have now.

“God help us and the world as we come into our own. It’s not pain that made us unique; everyone, from the ghetto to the Pacific Heights mansion, suffers. They often suffer far more than we ever have, and so, on that scale or more unique? No, it is joy, contentment, integration, success, fulfillment, that are unique, that will make us special. Wait till you see how surprised, dazzled and jealous the world will be by the aura we each project. It’s already beginning to happen to me! We will have to be generous and humble with others in order to handle the great gifts we have been given with grace.

“Love,

“Chantal”

Not bad, I thought, an old bald guy getting a letter like that from a sexy French lady.

First Love-making

One evening soon after we met we went running and walking up an abandoned road near her house, passing new houses being constructed overlooking a beautiful green valley. We held hands. I kissed her. When we got back to her place, I kissed her some more. No, she said, it was too soon. But the next time, we were in bed.

But the old anxieties returned, as before.

Soon after our love-making began, she said that one thing she liked to do was to have “a jar” in which each person puts slips of paper describing sexual things they would like to do. Then we would take turns selecting, at random, one of the slips, the other person having to go along with whatever the slip said.

She never put any slips in the jar. Mine I kept in an envelope.

Sex with her grew more and more difficult, and she was becoming more and more impatient at my inability to meet her needs. I felt the list of requirements was more than I could ever meet: bring satisfaction to a woman who was French and had two Nobel Prize winners in her immediate family and who expected a good, half-the-night screwing at least two or three times a week. It didn’t help, either, when she said that since the divorce, she had done a lot of reading and thinking and had decided that she was in reality a 3000-year old witch. She liked to be made love to in the woods at night. (I had no time for that!)

As always, I kept notes on Chantal’s history and preferences because I knew it always impressed women if I remembered something they had said. It showed I was “sensitive”. I see from the notes that, for example, her favorite perfumes were Shalimar, Opium, and Poison.

A couple of weeks later, I wrote her a long letter about my anxiety during love-making, and ways that we might overcome it. It didn’t seem to make much of an impression, although she did say later, while reflecting aloud on my good and bad points, “You’re a world-class kisser.”

Beginning of the End

Despite the Problem, I felt sufficiently optimistic to introduce her to my mother. The visit went remarkably well. Then we drove to Palo Alto for a sushi dinner (first I had ever had) at Mikayo with Eric, her son, and Betsey, his girlfriend, the two of them having just become engaged. Then we went to see her other son, Alex, performing in a minor role in *All's Well that Ends Well* at Stanford. He had no acting talent that I could discern, merely reciting lines and adding expression and gesture as though following instructions. Afterward, at Cafe Verona in Palo Alto, he and his mother had a long argument about his wanting to make acting a career. She emphasized his talent in physics, and what a shame it would be to waste it. I merely sat by, trying to say as little as possible, but I kept thinking, "You may be a genius in school, kid, but you get an F in self-knowledge." He said he didn't want to spend his life studying some tiny piece of the universe. Drama, he felt, deals with the whole of life. Besides, drama was the only thing he had ever found that wasn't easy for him, and, based on what Chantal had told me, this was probably true. She said that he had a photographic memory. The only grade other than A that he had ever received was in response to a bet with her that he couldn't bring himself to get anything less. So, after getting all the answers on a final exam right (as always), he carefully calculated what problems he would need to get wrong in order to get a B, then deliberately changed the answers on those to wrong ones. It cost him the valedictorianship (I assume of his high school graduating class), but he didn't mind. She said he was often sullen, cold.

He, his girlfriend, Eric, and Betsey were to leave in June for a three-month tour of the world which would be paid for out of trust given them by their paternal grandfather, Edward.

The next day we went on a Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association (BAHA) tour of houses that were built after the 1923 Berkeley Fire. A couple of the mansions on the tour belonged to people she knew through her father (one was a financier). I asked some of the monitors how much the places were worth: the typical reply: \$700,000.

During the tour, she asked if afterward we could also look at houses for sale, and I said of course. The afternoon was one of the happiest of my life. I knew for the first time in my life what it means to want to share the rest of your life with someone. I got a glimpse of what life must be for at least some of those living in the Hills — the glowing sense of living well, of being surrounded by beautiful things, of living in a house which is itself a beloved member of the family, of knowing every minute of the day that this is how you were meant to live, namely, in the presence of the best.

She held my hand, fairly danced up the pathways between the houses, eyes sparkling, talking in that lovely voice of hers about how we would have to buy a place big enough so that our kids could visit us with their families. A place at 15 Maybeck captivated her — two stories, modern all-wood interior, large deck. She fantasized how our grandchildren would play in the sunny breakfast/sitting area near the kitchen. I worried (for some reason) about the placement of furniture in the living room.

She invited me to a light supper at Fat Apple's. She made it clear she was willing to work with me at wresting some control back from my mother.

I invited Jason to have coffee with us the following Wednesday. We would meet at my place, then go to the Bateau. She arrived first, wearing an outfit I had described to her: short denim skirt, stockings, red high-heeled shoes, red blouse with scalloped bodice, red lipstick to match her shoes. It was such a knockout, I laughed aloud, kept circling around her, looking at it. Jason arrived, we drove to the Bateau. She took my arm as we crossed Telegraph Ave. Never had she

been more sexy, more interested in me. As the three of us sat at a table talking, I sitting with my hands folded, her hand suddenly moved across the table and she snaked her finger in among mine.

Later, when she was in the rest room, I asked Jason, "So, what do you think of her?" He shrugged. "Don't you find her maddeningly sexy?" He didn't. I couldn't understand it.

So, as of that evening around we had a relationship that by all signs was everything I wanted it to be. We went back to my place, went up to the bedroom. I: "I'm so incredibly hot for you..." She went to the bathroom, came back, sat as she had once before, with her legs up. Without my glasses, I wasn't sure if she was wearing panties or not, but in our ensuing love talk, she revealed that not only wasn't she wearing them now, but she hadn't worn any throughout the evening.

The old anxiety set in. I thought to myself: there is no excuse now — none — for failing to have an orgasm with her. As a result, it was one of our worst sessions. I keep us talking because it was the only hope for me. At one point, we discussed masturbation. She said that it could be a form of loving yourself. I: "Well, I don't know about you, but when I masturbate, I'm not making love to myself, I'm making love to an image in my mind." She was surprised, said that she often masturbated in front of a mirror, thinking to herself, "Now that's a sexy lady there..." I: "Well, I could never do that." She: "Why?" I: "Because I can't imagine anyone wanting to make love with me." She sat back on her heels: "Whoa! Now maybe we'd better take a look at that."

We talked some more, then, finally, fell asleep together. Around two or three, I woke up. As always, I couldn't hear, or otherwise detect, her breathing. I began to play with my cock, soon had an erection. She rolled over toward me, still half asleep. I said something about having an erection, she reached down, said, with pleasant surprise, "Oh!" After very little petting, I got on top, cock still erect, got it in. As I thrust into her, I said that sometimes I just needed to say "I love you" when I was inside a woman. She said — it seemed a little dutifully — "I love you". My erection was still strong but I was worried about losing it so I pumped faster, listening to and feeling her growing excitement. "Oh, baby, oh, baby!" she called out, then had her usual screaming orgasm.

Afterward, she said I misunderstood her in our previous conversation: it was perfectly OK if I said I love you, she just didn't want to feel that she was forced to say it in reply.

As we lay there in the dead of night, she with her cunt pressed against my thigh, I started to masturbate, talking out fantasies at times. Eventually, I was able to come. It was the second orgasm I had had in her presence. She had a second, mild orgasm from pressing against my leg.

The next evening, at her place, despite the fact she was very tired from lack of sleep the night before, we discussed buying a house in North Berkeley, and began going over our income and assets. I remarked on how little she got out of her marriage settlement (her net worth was not much over \$200,000). She suddenly broke into tears, had to go into the other room for a while. She emerged clearly depressed, but we finished going over the figures. Then she asked me to play the tape of readings of Yeats' poetry that I had spoken about, and which I apparently had brought, or left at her place. I tucked her in, lay awkwardly on the white bedspread next to her, then sat up to take off my shoes. But my feet smelled, and so I apologized and put the shoes back on, lay down with my feet hanging over the edge of the bed. She told me to stop apologizing: she liked the smell of feet as well as the smell of a man's sweat.

The following afternoon there was an engagement party for Eric and Betsey at a restaurant on Berkeley Pier, then a post-party at Chantal's. (I was not at either one.) At the latter party, she told me the next morning (Saturday) her ex-husband made a point of taking her mother's hands in his, holding them for several minutes, apparently in an effort to say to her parents, "See what a won-

derful man I am? The divorce was all her fault.” This and other behavior of his made her cry. Eric took her hand under the table to comfort her. There was an extraordinary affection between her and Eric. On Mother's Day, he repeatedly told her what a terrific mother she was, the best in the world, the two of them almost smooching. She told me once that when both kids were little, she went to take a pee at night, and was sitting on the toilet when Alex (I think he was the one) got up to do same, came into bathroom half-asleep and peed into the toilet between her legs; this was extraordinarily erotic for her. She told me another time that one of the most exciting sexual fantasies for her is that of an older woman seducing an inexperienced young man or teenage boy. But my pornography book, John Lewis's *The High School Teacher*, didn't wildly excite her, she said after reading it.

The next day, Saturday, I awoke feeling so good that I called her at eight to tell her so. This was in accordance with one of our agreements, aimed at helping me out of my habit of depression, namely, that whenever I was feeling good, I should call her and tell her so. (Her joke, early on, when I said I had a very heavy stock investment in misery and despair: “It's time to sell!”) We decided that she would drive over to Berkeley and we would see a movie together.

I left the front door half open because I was working upstairs in my study and had music playing, and so might not hear her knock. I was standing at my worktable, absorbed, when suddenly she was standing in the doorway of the study. Her sudden appearance startled me so much that I said *Oh!* She made no apology. She saw, on a box near the door, several of her books and a tape measure she had left on a previous day. She asked if I was finished with them, said she'd like to take them back. I was a little surprised at this sudden concern about it, but pushed any further questions out of my mind.

She was wearing a pink blouse, a full skirt, and looked delicious. I felt magnificent. We decided to walk to the theater. I took her on a small detour to the white, round-tower house on Blake St., then we walked down Milvia to Au Coquelet. She said she wasn't hungry, merely wanted something to drink (normally, she would have had at least a salad). We sat in the dining room, she making her usual eye-contact with those bright eyes. As often in the past, I leaned across the table to give her a kiss, but this time she turned her mouth aside, so I wound up kissing her on her cheek. I assumed it was just because she was a little shy.

We went to see *My Mother's Castle*. I bought a bag of popcorn, which we shared. Her conversation was as lively as ever. But when the film started, she didn't reach for my hand as she had at the start of *All's Well...* So I took hers. Limp, dead, meat. Well, maybe she was preoccupied with the film. At the end, I cried, and let her see it as the lights came up. She seemed interested, *curious*, as to why I would do that, but in a kind of detached way. I said, in so many words, it was because of how loving the family in the film was, how different from anything I ever knew. She said I should remember it was only a fantasy. I replied that it was Pagnol's autobiography. She says, yes, but it is natural that he would only remember the good times.

We went back to Au Coquelet. At 9:45 she said “There's something I have to bring up, even though it hurts me to do it.” I: “Go ahead, I can take anything.” She asked if I would be able to handle her working at Franz if she decided not to continue the relationship. (I had put her name in for a two-month editing and proofreading job and she was about to have an interview.) I looked at my watch, suggested we go. We walked more than a block before I said anything. I can no longer remember my words. We got to my house, sat on the front steps. She, after some struggle or pretense at struggle, said that she was feeling pressured: if I went through with this superhuman effort to overcome my sex problems (I was scheduled to see a hypnotherapist on Tuesday), and I actually succeeded, then she felt she would have no choice but to accept a permanent relation-

ship. She felt boxed in.

In the ensuing conversation, I asked her what had changed her mind about us. She said my remark about my not being able to imagine anyone wanting to make love to me, and my always apologizing, for example, about having my feet on the coverlet, and my not being selfish enough during love-making. Her schoolteacher manner was in full force. Not a tear, not a trace of emotion, not even over the prospect of losing the *non*-sexual intimacy we had. I extended my hand to say goodbye. She: "Only a handshake? Not even a hug?" I give her a perfunctory hug. She wished me happiness. I did not respond. She asked about returning my books. I told her to put them under the rear porch some afternoon on her way home from school and leave a note in my mailbox. I walked up the front steps, across the porch, opened the door, stepped inside, and then slammed the door so hard a couple of small pieces of plaster fell to the floor.

The next day was one of the worst of my life. I lay in bed drinking Cognac and writing a long letter to her in my head. Then I began calling friends: Kathy, Jason, Ed, Heim, Yolanda. That got me through. I canceled the appointment with the hypnotherapist.

Monday, May 25, 1992:

She calls, ostensibly to ask if I still want the leather jacket she ordered for me from a mail order house. I say yes: when it arrives, she can leave it under my back porch. She says she is uncomfortable doing that. I say well, then, we can make other arrangements; I can pick it up at her place. Long pause. I deliberately say nothing. She obviously wants me to say something. We start talking again. I tell her how angry I was at the way she ended our relationship Saturday evening, that to reject me for the low self-esteem remark is a betrayal of our bond of intimacy. I tell her that I did my homework on this, that the only reason you can reject someone with whom you have this bond, this pledge, is if they are abusive. She doesn't respond.

I tell her how unfair she is, saying words to the effect: When you worried aloud about your being overweight, or about Larry's repeatedly telling you that you were unattractive to him (she said he would do this while standing there with an erection), the thought never occurred to me that I should back away from you because this revealed a grave lack of self-esteem. If *any* middle-aged woman worries aloud to her husband or lover about no longer being sexually desirable, we take it for granted that her husband or lover will attempt to comfort her and console her. For him to hold up his hand and say, "Stop! I'm not sure I can continue a relationship with a woman who has so little self-esteem", would be considered an outrage by every enlightened woman. Yet that is exactly the equivalent of what you did.

I tell her, When you were suddenly depressed by the memory of something that Paul did to you, I did what any decent, loving human being would do, namely, tried to console you and comfort you. But when I became suddenly depressed over a failure at sexual performance, you withdrew into yourself and made it clear to me that such behavior threatened our very relationship.

I ask her how she hoped I would have handled it. No answer.

In the evening, I figure I might as well see what I can learn with the therapist, so I reschedule the appointment.

Tuesday, May 26, 1992:

I see the therapist, Neil Dickman, Pacific Applied Psychology Associates. He seems a good man. I suddenly cry when I start talking about Gere¹. He says that, in his opinion, the Chantal episode was superficial. She has an agenda that no one will be able to fulfill. I ought to consider continuing alone or letting Gere move in.

Freelancing, and Working at Sybase

Saturday, May 30, 1992:

She calls at 7:40 a.m., with that cheery, morning, bedroom voice, and says my jacket has arrived. She will be in Berkeley in the morning to pick up some Peet's Coffee, and is wondering if she could stop by. I tell her I'm having breakfast with Jason, we have to talk about a business possibility, so how about 1 p.m.? She says fine.

When I come back from breakfast, there is a message on my machine: she has been sick, throwing up all morning; we will have to reschedule.

In fairness to her: for women who are very attractive and revel in their own sexuality, there is something off-putting about a nervous, eager-to-please lover with low-esteem. For such women, it isn't so much a man's looks that count, as his *power* — intellectual, financial, political, whatever, as well as *personal*; such women want to be made love to by a man who has that aura of self-confidence, command, being on top, which tells them that they are special because they are being made love to by such a man. (In the car once in Palo Alto, she in a discussion with one of her sons made a point of what a sexual turn-on a very intelligent man is to her. This part of me, which I never revealed any doubts about to her, was probably one of the things that kept her coming back after sexual failures.)

Sunday, May 31, 1992

5:55 p.m.

She here, unannounced, around 11 a.m. (I hear her light, quick steps on the front porch), to return my stuff (but she forgets my Masters and Johnson book — "I forgot it was on another shelf"). She looks gray and washed-out (see letter). Even after more talk, I don't understand why she was so suddenly eager to end it — she says words to the effect that, after I lost my temper (over her saying that maybe the relationship wouldn't work out even if conquered the Problem), that then she knew it wouldn't work out.

We saw each other once more after that, when she came to my place to bring a leather jacket she had got me to order from some mailorder house whose catalog she had. She handed the jacket to me in my front parlor. I was taken aback at how gray and empty she looked, but my impression was she said that her sadness was not over the loss of me, but rather of seeing someone who had looked so promising on her check-list, turn out to be a failure after all.

“ May 31, 1992

“Sweetheart:

“This is written at 1:10 p.m. Sunday. There are a few things I just feel I have to say, the first being how sad I was at the way you looked: so pale and exhausted, with a little fever sore under your lip, no lipstick — you looked like there had just been a death in the family, and all I wanted to do was to take you in my arms and hold you and tell you everything will be all right, my poor,

1. A woman I had had a brief, sexually satisfying relationship with a few months before. I say “sexually satisfying” because even though orgasm still remained impossible for me, she put no pressure on me, and always seemed delighted with my performance. I ended the sexual relationship because we shared almost nothing besides a good sense of humor. She had no particular interest in classical music but always tried to have a classical work playing on her stereo when I arrived.

sweet girl, and kiss you on your forehead and your eyes and your lips.

“There are a few things I regret I did during our time together, but loving you is not one of them, despite the fact that I thought several times, maybe she is uncomfortable about love (between adults, I mean: not toward your kids). Maybe that’s why she said she didn’t like to feel ‘forced’ to say I love you when a man said it to her. Maybe that’s why she became so wary when I spoke of doing something because I loved her.

“What a bundle of paradoxes you are! You were bothered that I didn’t behave more selfishly in love-making, yet the two most important males in your life were nothing but selfish when it came to sex, with all-too-devastating consequences for you. I behaved selfishly when I did verbal fantasies and masturbated myself (and sometimes you) to orgasm, but by your own testimony this left you frustrated. I behaved selfishly when we just lay together and talked and I caressed you. Twice in my life, I have had women who did, in fact, want me to behave selfishly — women whose entire response in bed said, ‘Whatever you want to do will please me.’ And I have to tell you, that was anxiety-free love-making for me, with never any problem with erections. So maybe my body was speaking the truth about a certain yes-but-no it felt when we made love.

“You cannot know how difficult it is for me to think that I will not be hearing the sound of your voice any more — a beautiful voice, ‘perky and uptilting’ I described it once to Heim. Or see those lovely eyes looking at me in the way they so often did.

“I think again of how pale and sad you looked today. But then I think, This came about because she said she was unsure about our relationship even if I solved what we shouldn’t call My Problem. And presumably it would have come about if I didn’t solve it.

“Well, for a few moments, we both knew what real happiness is.

“With all my love,

“John”

I never called her or wrote to her after that. When I think what life with her would have been like — the incessant fucking, the demands, the atmosphere, as with Marcella, of the always impending we-are-not-pleased — I thanked God for getting me out when he did. But, oh, how I missed the music of her voice.

And with that, dear reader, I resolved to end my campaign to find a woman. Seventeen years had earned me a rest. I suddenly lost all interest in answering ads or going out of my way to meet a woman. I declared myself, privately and publicly, to be Retired from Women. Sex was for Americans, not for me.

“Proust, certainly as an artist, sought always to extract from his observations a psychological law. He sought, moreover, to re-create human life in temporal rather than spatial dimensions. Lest this sound like so much nonsense, let me illustrate my meaning. A psychological law of which his inquiries convinced him was that we do not profit by experience; we learn only that to a given stimulus we will react in a predictable way, and this repeatedly. Another law: each time that a man is deceived or abandoned by a woman, the same spiritual or physical lapse in him is the cause of the desertion, whoever the woman.” — Galantière, Lewis, “Introduction”, Proust, Marcel, *Swann’s Way*, Modern Library, N.Y., 1928, pp. x-xi.

“...certain victims of neurasthenia...who present without modification, year after year, the spectacle of their odd and unaccountable habits, which they always imagine themselves to be on the point of shaking off, but which they always retain to the end; caught in the treadmill of their own maladies and eccentricities, their futile endeavors to escape serve only to actuate its mechanism, to keep in motion the clockwork of their strange, ineluctable, fatal daily round.” — Proust, Marcel, *Swann's Way*, Modern Library, N.Y., 1928, p. 217.

“...a woman is of greater service to our life if she is in it, instead of being an element of happiness, an instrument of sorrow, and there is not a woman in the world the possession of whom is as precious as that of the truths she reveals to us by making us suffer.” — Proust, Marcel, *The Sweet Cheat Gone*, tr. C. K., Scott Moncrieff, vol. 6 of *Remembrance of Things Past*, Vintage Books, N.Y., 1957, p. 59.

“However disillusioned we may be about women, however we may regard the possession of even the most divergent types as an invariable and monotonous experience, every detail of which is known and can be described in advance, it still becomes a fresh and stimulating pleasure if the women concerned be — or be thought to be — so difficult as to oblige us to base our attack upon unrehearsed incident in our relations with them...” — Proust, Marcel, *Swann's Way*, tr. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, Modern Library, N.Y., 1928, p. 303.

I had run out of unrehearsed incidents.

“...these painful dilemmas which love continually presents instruct us and gradually disclose to us the substance of which we are made.” — *The Past Recaptured*, tr. Frederick A. Blossom, vol. 7 of *Remembrance of Things Past*, The Modern Library, N.Y., 1932, p. 240.

Gail

But the search went on, in spite of myself. “The most frightening is not wanting love from anyone, or ever again.”¹, and I continued to demonstrate my capacity for behavior I despised. Somehow, I think through one of the singles's groups, I met a woman named Gail. She was short, slim to the point of being skinny, with no figure. She had neck-length black hair and clearly had once been attractive. The trouble was, she was addicted to sunbathing, especially at Stinson Beach, a little seaside community in Marin County, about 20 miles north of San Francisco. Although she was only fifty, her years of lying in the sun had given her face the wrinkled skin of an eighty-year-old. She knew what her addiction was doing to her looks, but she simply shrugged, and said she couldn't live without the beach.

She worked at Divali's, a little specialty clothing store for women, located on Telegraph Ave., about five blocks south of the UC campus. She always wore plain but stylish black dresses which I assumed she got through the store.

I was not sexually attracted to her, and so we would meet for coffee or go out to dinner and talk about whether we should have sex or not. She soon got tired of this and told me so. In subsequent years, I ran into her once or twice, including one time at a store where I had gone to ask directions. She was being waited on, and provided the information I was seeking, but either

1. Fowles, John, “The Cloud”, in *The Ebony Tower*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1974, p. 261.

didn't recognize me or didn't want to acknowledge that she had.