The Galmud variations: a stereophonic novel

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The Galmud variations:
A stereophonic novel

by
John Anthony Lane

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)
Major Professor: Neal Bowers

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
1999

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of
John Anthony Lane
has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Major Professor

For The Major Program

For the Graduate College
For my wife, Diana

"I'm very much the anti-hero in real life, you see, but I compensate madly in my dreams."

--Glenn Gould
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THE GALMUD VARIATIONS

It is said that Galmud, after fifty classical recordings and hundreds of piano concerts from Carnegie to Istanbul, is giving up his career. They say things like, "It's true," as if Truth grows wings on its hairy back and flies from ear to ear, "the only thing Galmud enjoys doing now is piecing together bits of overheard conversation on a four-track machine and fiddling with the levels," and things like, "The only reason he ceased recording at all is because his train-line from Manitoba to Manhattan is no longer operational, and the producers can't get him on a plane for love nor money," and the standard, "He'll only do interviews by telephone, if the mood strikes him." And yes, famous as he is, you can find his name in the book.

I call Galmud for the expressed purpose of a phone interview, to be determined at his convenience, and he says, "No wait -- I think this one should be different and momentous somehow. You've heard the news, I assume?"

"Concerning the end of your career?"

"Then you've heard correctly. Splendid. This interview between the two of us should be face-to-face. Bring a photographer, assemble a film crew. Capture every pore and crag in my face, the bitterness of my breath, the sound of hair going gray and teeth crumbling to dust. I yearn to be vacuum-packed in every known medium." I ask if he is certain, and he replies, "No, on second thought, just bring yourself, a notepad, a Polaroid, and that should suffice. Too many people becomes a party, and I'm not very social, as you'll learn in greater detail. Now, do you have pen and paper handy?" I say yes, and he says, "Excellent. Now the
arrangements are as follows: On Wednesday, meet me in practice room 303F at the Peabody Conservatory -- your neck of these cosmic woods -- precisely at 3:03 p.m. Do not enter the room until you've heard me play the third measure of Sibelius' Third Constantine, Op. 67. Is that clear? Now read that back." I do, and he replies, "You must think these are strange requirements, but with my stature, such things are necessary. Without precautions, any crazy fool could barge in and rip the overcoat off my back. So it's settled then?" We agree and hang up.

I show; he doesn't. In frustration, I call him at 3:15 p.m. -- expecting an answering machine -- but he answers, saying, "You disappointed me. Where to begin? You walked into the room five minutes early, where some kid was hammering out a Joplin piece. And my sources also tell me that you had a stack of precisely ten records under your arm, for autographs I assume. No autographs, not anymore. I only spill ink for compositions (a rarity these days), checks for heating and electricity (which are usually rubber-stamped, come to think of it), and occasionally the crossword -- which is what I was doing when you called, and here's a question for you: What's a four-letter word for 'opportunist'?". I tell him that I don't know, and he sighs, "Very well. And as for the matter at hand, you still need a subject for interviewing. Given your numerous mistakes, I'll just chalk it up to a bad day on your part, not mine for I had a fantastic day filled with poetry and feeding of ducks. Now write this down, for this will be our rendezvous point: Wednesday, 3:10 p.m., at The ButterHouse coffeeshop, corner of Charles and Monument, first booth next to the cigarette machine. You will arrive first. Order a cup of coffee, cream, no sugar, and take three sips, and then start humming 'Ave Maria'. That will be my cue." I read it back at his request, we agree,
and hang up.

I show up at the right time, and do everything according to instructions. I give him an hour, in the meantime reading through my notes which detail his instructions, and order another cup of coffee (with sugar this time) and a Spanish omelet. After eating I pay up, go to the payphone at the end of the counter, and call him. His answering service informs me that Galmud is in my city at an undisclosed hotel, and they connect me. He answers with a bored yawn, "Before you start, let me. One: What did I say about autographs? Yes, I know you're not carrying records, but my sources have made me aware of the fact that you stopped by the Rotunda and purchased my cassette The Even-Tempered Harpsichord two hours ago, and the cassette is presently in the right breast pocket of your sportscoat with a gold Cross pen for -- whatever else? -- an autograph. Naughty boy. Two: To put you out of your misery in your unquenchable thirst for my palsied scrawl, I've mailed you ten postcards (one for each record you hauled like an ox last week) with my name emblazoned upon all of them. Satisfied? Now down to brass tacks -- er, let me check my notes. Yes, here we are," and clears his throat, "Why the second cup of coffee? Why the sugar? Why the Spanish omelet which in the end will only make you flatulent, puffy, and too tired to take astute notes during our would-be interview? And lastly, although this might seem nit-picky, you took the wrong booth. Granted, I didn't expect you to ask those two off-duty policemen to move, and I do appreciate that you got the next closest booth, but precision is what I've always aimed for, and anything less is just not worth pursuing. Do I make myself clear?"

Our next three would-be interviews also failed for exact reasons known best by him. The meeting in the back row of The Cabinet, an old x-
rated theater recently converted into an art filmhouse: "You came so close to perfection, and yet your over-indulgence once again betrayed you. I said order the medium Dr. Pepper and a small popcorn. You did just that, but then saw fit to add Milk Duds to your menu. Why? So I can watch you pick your teeth with the tip of a #2 Ticonderoga while I expound eloquently on Mozart and Schoenberg?" The war memorial on Calvert Street: "Do not waste my time by stopping first at the drugstore for a lottery ticket. How vulgar. But given your obvious financial plight and hunger for instantaneous wealth -- Ka-Ching! -- I've mailed you a check for five hundred dollars. If you have in fact won the lottery and the winnings exceed what I gave you, then I hope you'll do the honorable thing and send the check back." Louie's outdoor cafe, the table closest to the fire hydrant: "You passed a street performer on the way and saw fit to throw a mere 83 cents into his guitar case as a donation. I'm flobbergasted, mortified even. Sure, he was murdering the blues, if such a thing is possible, but would it have killed you to give a five dollar bill? This just illustrates my point about why The Arts are in such a shambles these days."

In the week that follows the latest attempt to interview Galmud, I write him an extensive letter in which I pour out my annoyance and frustration concerning his elusiveness, and I tell him that although I've been an ardent fan of his work for years (having seen him perform in Cleveland, Baltimore, and Des Moines), his personality has begun to taint my fondness. Upon receiving the letter he calls me. "In the two months that have lapsed," he says, "I like to think you and I have cultivated a friendship of sorts. Now as your friend, and would-be interviewee, I'm asking -- nay, pleading you: what can I do to facilitate a proper
interview? If it means overlooking your often sloppy methodology, then I will. As only a friend would. And if it means ignoring the gastronomic torture you inflict upon yourself before every would-be encounter, then so be it. I realize now that you only demand a bit of my time, a smattering of rich insight. From a friend. I've been such a selfish lout. How can I make amends?” We agree to meet on Sunday, 1 p.m., at the public radio station, where he promises to broadcast a live thirty-minute interview which, he informs me, will be his last.

I arrive on time. The main-desk security guard looks at his clipboard and checks me in, pointing to the elevator. "Third floor, down the hall past the cubicles, go through the door marked 'Sound Booth', and you're there." The elevator is piping in Galmud's Variations on Bach Toccatas -- a recording, not a live performance. Stepping off the elevator, I make my way into the Sound Booth where a cardigan-rumpled gentleman with headphones introduces himself. Three other people, presumably technicians, are sitting at a console, staring past the thick plate glass at Galmud. The cardigan fellow says, "Please, take a seat. Galmud's been expecting you. I'm the deejay, hired hand, and self-made gofer rolled into one," and to the technicians, "All right, bring the Variations down, and we'll go to Galmud," looks at me and gestures toward a seat, "Please." I shake my head, "No thank you, I'll stand." We're all staring at Galmud, alone in the studio. Round table, one microphone, draped in three overcoats and fingerless gloves, slouch hat to preserve the mind's warmth and tenuous spark. "The man is in his element," giggles a technician and turns a knob on the console to let the voice seep into our booth.

Galmud-the-Nasal-Pitched-Deejay says, "You've been listening to
George Galmud's Variations on Bach Toccatas. Not one of his more passionate pieces -- ah, will you look at those phone lines light up? -- but then again, the man was suffering from a bout of impetigo, hence the gloves which The Body Politic insists represent pure folly. Indeed. Which is why I have Mr. Galmud here today in our studio to discuss his every idiosyncrasy and nervous tic. And maybe even his music, if he will allow me," and to himself, "Mr. Galmud, it is indeed an honor to have you with us, knowing how you tend to despise the interview format as it creates a disparity between the subject and his audience."

Galmud-as-Himself answers, "Yes, you're quite right. Where to begin, for you've opened up so many subjects? The gloves were purchased in Salamanca, sold to me by a kind old woman who mistook me for a famous television star. She insisted I had played a cowboy back in the Sixties, and because I don't own a television set, I hadn't the slightest notion of which she was talking about. Finally the only way to appease her was with an autograph..."

I have my hand on the studio door when the cardigan fellow puts an arm in front of me and whispers, "Hey, you can't go in there now," and I push him back into a chair as the three technicians look aghast, and when I enter the room, standing across from Galmud, I glance at the technicians who are all making gestures and mouthing the word "Improvise" to Galmud.

...Improvise, George Galmud, improvise...

He gives me a warm smile and points to the chair next to himself. Leaning into the microphone and maintaining the same look of absolute serenity, Galmud-As-News-Announcer or someone, since he's changing the timbre of his voice yet again, says, "We interrupt our regular broadcasting
program to announce that the part of The Interviewer will be played by, er, "looking into my eyes, "I'm sorry, your name, kind sir?".

I dig into the pocket of my sportscoat, and toss the ten autographed postcards onto the table. For a moment, Galmud is actually speechless. And I don't wait for a reaction; I leave the building.

It is documented that Galmud's last interview was conducted by himself, with himself. A logical singular undertaking, say his many fans and historians, because he generally hated interviews and would only do them with other people by telephone, if the mood struck him. And no, his name is no longer in the book.
"I like you, too," she said. That was the first time in such a long time I'd heard that, any sort of genuine reaction to who or what I am, aside from all of my recordings and concerts. Self, meet Stalker.

I'd known her as The Stalker in the beginning. Nameless, showing up at the studio -- actually infiltrating her way into the building, past the guard standing inside the kiosk. We, my colleagues and I, never really figured out how she managed the guard -- charm? money? -- but she always managed to bypass him. "That Stalker is on the second floor; somebody get that damn guard." And I never felt my safety was threatened, at least for awhile, because she -- on at least thirty separate occasions -- continued to seek me upstairs, where I was not. There was a part of me, upon being informed of her latest attempt to ferret me out, that always whispered, "I'm in the basement. The basement, you silly woman." And it appeared that after the thirtieth attempt, she managed to find her way downstairs -- a guard and two interns probably about two minutes or less on her trail -- and flattened herself against the thick studio window when she spied me.

"Jesus, The Stalker," mumbled my Producer, then, "Get down, George," as I ducked behind a console and drew my knees up to my chest, tucked my slouch hat over my eyes, and began taking in deep meditative breaths. From the sound of my Producer leaving the room and the muffled scuffle in the hall, I could tell that he was trying to reason with her before showing her the street. "What is it you want?" he asked. And she broke free, just for a moment, and pounded the glass with tiny demanding fists: "Galmud! George Galmud! Please, speak with me!" And the Producer said, "We're in session at the moment, and as you can gather by now, you're not invited. In fact,
nobody is except for myself, an engineer, the piano tuner, and a runner --
that's policy, miss, not a personal vendetta against you or any other fan."
But she screamed out, knowing of my exact coordinates behind that console,
"Have you gotten my letters? Any of them?", and it was then that I poked my
head up -- to the great annoyance of the men trying to assist me -- and
perched up on my knees, said, "Who then are you?". "Alisha," she called
out, just as they were taking her to the stairwell exit, "but they all say
Erika," and then she was gone.

Later, I told the Producer, who also acted as BodyGuard of
Correspondence (that is, at my request, he intercepted all fanmail from the
main office and disposed of it), "Bring me all of those letters," and he
blushed a bit, knowing that I knew he'd read most if not all of them and
perhaps saved a bundle at home, to show his wife for a laugh. The Producer
came back with a sizable box of Alisha-Erika letters, an accumulation of
letters dating as far back as '64 when I gave up concert performing.

Later, I read them all. I flew back West (back is to one of three
points: New York, Canada, or somewhere on the West Coast), to the apartment
with no piano. It's a place of reading and sleeping only. If I want to take
a walk, I pick one of two directions: out the service entrance and up the
street to the zoo, or out the front door to the ocean. That is all I shall
say about that apartment, to maintain a piece of anonymity somewhere, and
besides, I like simplicity of that description. Picture an L, with the
bottom point being my dwelling, and the two arms forking off-- to the zoo,
or to the ocean. I read all of her letters in the pianoless apartment, when
I wasn't reading a backlog of New York Times or suffering through another
crossword or looking at photographs of people who call themselves family.

What I knew about Alisha-who-called-herself-Erika then: Thirty-two
years of age, two children currently residing with their grandmother, an
ex-husband who drinks and smokes too much but still gets promoted within
the ranks of his local Midwestern police department, grew up in Kansas,
excelled at chess and drawing still lifes, was teased mercilessly because
of her thick glasses, blossomed at thirteen and got contacts, first tongue
kiss with a tin-eared Salvation Army trombonist in Wichita, first
intercourse with a yellow-toothed jazz sax player in Minnesota whom she saw
perform with the trombonist, lived with her college professor who ended up
a heroin addict and slapped her around because he was incapable of writing
The Great American Novel and because she refused to hustle quick cash for
him by sleeping with her classmates, dropped out, moved to Chicago and
resumed university courses while waiting tables at night and every other
afternoon working with an experimental dance troupe, moved in with the
choreographer who claimed he wanted to marry her and have a boat-load of
children but he turned out to be gay and dealt with his self-discovery by
throwing her out of his apartment, which is when she discovered my music
because she blindly grabbed a stack of records from his collection and
among those was The Even-Tempered Harpsichord; Time, she wrote, stopped
when she heard that record, and she felt as if she'd become the needle
which laps up the sounds with its minute tongue and dances in intoxicated
whirling devotion; Returned to Kansas, stayed at her parents' house for a
year and watched her father die of lung cancer, inherited a small chunk of
money from the sale of the old man's rusty tractor, moved into the
apartment above the coffee house, met a broad-shouldered Okie who'd just
moved to town in search of a job while lunching in that smoky coffeehouse,
took him upstairs and between one thing and another, she gave him two
children while she watched him change color, dry up, then crack in her
fingers like a gasping autumn leaf and told her that he didn’t love her but
would definitely mind to the kids and his in-laws should they need help,
and he put on his uniform and gargled to mask the smell of whiskey and he was gone, so the only logical thing left to do -- without resorting to cracking up and jumping into a water-filled bathtub with plugged radio in hand -- was listen to my records. In fact, she can place the exact time and location of when she thought this. Just two minutes after the front door closed. She stood before the bathtub, cracked and paint-spattered GE AM radio in her arms like a stillborn, plugged the cord in without turning it on, stepped out of her lime-green flip-flops with calm certainty, and realized then and there that she loved me -- "Was that crazy?" she wrote often when confessing her love for me -- and that I'd never say or said an unkind word to her and that it would be impossible for the same hands that caressed those keys to be capable of stiffening in anger.

When I spoke with my Producer on the phone (he being back in Manhattan, dutifully mixing a brass quartet I'd arranged via long-distance instructions), I asked him if Alisha had visited the studio recently, and he told me that she had but that instead of getting past the guard, she waited by the kiosk, sitting on the stoop and eating a brown-bag lunch and drinking hot chocolate from a thermos, until someone came out and told her that I was presently not in New York but elsewhere and would return at a date yet to be determined. "The next time you see her," I told him, "please give her my address here and tell her it's alright." "But George, do you honestly want that?" he sputtered, and then I went on to tell him that this woman had written more letters than I had musical scores and that she was by no means a threat.

Alisha, within a week, was waiting by the service entrance of my pianoless apartment. It had just rained, leaving a pure and earthy smell in the neighborhood. I didn't expect her there, but liked the fact that for the first time -- for reasons other than business -- someone was waiting
for me. Like a girlfriend or a wife. I stopped within a couple feet of her and smiled, my eyes indicating that it was not lost on me that we were both wearing almost identical overcoats. I touched the fabric of her collar and rubbed it between my thumb and forefinger. "Nice," I said, "this is one of the reasons why I like you already."

"I like you, too," she said.

Once inside, I cast off knee-deep piles of newspapers from the couch and offered her a seat, then made myself and her a couple of salami sandwiches on kaiser rolls, served with a glass of Chablis. I took the stiff wooden parlor chair opposite her, for purposes of safety and scrutiny. She talked as I ate, and yes, she was definitely the woman in the letters, those twenty-to-thirty page accounts of all she'd been through or was currently going through or was about to go through with each anecdote or situation punctuated with "So what do you think, Galmud?". And when she actually asked that question to my face, I was unprepared for I'd been reading her eyes for an explanation of what I would ask her.

"George," I said, correcting her.

"I prefer Galmud, if it's all the same to you. But you didn't answer my question. Do you have anything you'd like to ask me?" and I told her, "There's only something I'd like to tell you, at this point, and please correct me if I'm wildly off-base here. My answer to my unspoken question is as follows: You called yourself Erika in those letters because of the bold Scandinavian connotation of such a name, fearing that I would lose interest in your correspondence from the start. So instead of describing your physical appearance -- which you never, ever did, and which I must say, is quite beautiful -- you decided to let Erika carry the cosmetic baggage. Very good." And she smirked, "Do you want me to thank you for being perceptive?", and I shook my head, "No. I can't really claim acute
perception in this case, for I only read all of your correspondence within the past month." She didn't flinch or gasp, just nodded, "You read fifteen years' worth in the past month, you say? Impressive, very. Although it's not like I wrote *War and Peace*, length-wise I mean, and you're capable of absorbing the written word, so what am I so impressed about?"*, and we both laughed.

After eating, she set the plates in the sink and joined me back in the tiny living room; I hadn't moved from my chair. She flopped onto the couch, kicking off her clogs and lighting a cigarette. We sat there for a moment not talking, just comfortable staring, sizing each other up.

"For such a music lover, you sure don't surround yourself with it. Where's the piano? I mean, I see you've got a decent hi-fi there, but -- oh, please, put something on," she sighed, almost sounding exasperated.

"Glad to," and moved from my chair that once to put on my record she had heard so many years ago. "You remembered," she smiled, and I responded with equal warmth, but shuddered nonetheless. "I love Bach," she whispered, blowing smoke toward the water-stained ceiling, "You didn't think I'd say that, did you? You thought I'd say 'I love you' because it is you on that record, but truth is, I've done a little maturing these past few years -- well, at least did a good bit of maturing on the plane over here, or in the airport by the baggage claim -- but enough to realize that it's Bach who has won my affections and you're the, um -- shit, what's the word?"

"Conduit," I replied. "Yes, exactly," blowing more smoke, and she cast an eye toward the stack of records lined up between her couchside and the cabinet with the stereo; she flipped through the LP's, nodding when she recognized one by another artist and grinning broadly when she came across a disc of mine. She pulled one from the collection and scanned the liner notes on the back, my one and only *Fugue* record. "This," she nodded, "I
know well, though it's not your best effort, correct? I mean, you yourself make disparaging remarks about the compositions therein, so I'm not being completely out-of-line by saying that your performance lacks a certain -- well, what am I going to tell you that some stuffy critic hasn't already said in print?" I didn't respond. I must've appeared annoyed because I was tiring of the cigarette smoke and the editorial, when she said, "Of course, you think I'm being the typical stalker. I should have realized," and she stubbed out the cigarette in a saucer and neatly drew her hand across the record sleeve to show her appreciation still. I lightened up then. "I knew you didn't smoke," she said, a slight twinge of embarrassment in her voice, "but I, um, I forgot. Let's change the subject, shall we? You know what you should call your next album, whatever you plan to record?"

I stiffened, "No. What?" "The Sound of A Man Listening. There, that's your title, appropriate for any collection be it Beethoven or Chopin, although -- oops, I know you dislike Chopin, at least six years ago in Stereo Journal you did, so forget I mentioned Chopin. But that's been a title I've been dying to share with you, because it's," as she struggled for words and spread her arms out, "like angels on the head of a pin. Ouch. Bad example, terribly trite, and not applicable to what I'm saying. The Sound of A Man Listening is George Galmud grabbing the kernel of an idea while taking the subway to midtown Manhattan and placing that seed in his overcoat pocket and thinking, 'I'll come back to that,' then later planting the seed in one of an infinite number of flowerpots in the greenhouse of his mind. Watching the idea grow, letting its vines surround him, until the composition of another is his alone, with the imprints being the leaves. I don't mean to stretch or twist a metaphor beyond recognition, but you get my point." I was touched. Gesturing I said, "It's alright to smoke in here."

Later she said, "You know, I have no desire to sleep with you, not
tonight at least. I do love you and would never rule that option out entirely, but we must take it nice and slow. Like practicing scales. If you think I'm being presumptuous or impertinent, just say the word and I'll hop the next plane out of here." We listened to my recordings through the evening, getting up every so often to use the bathroom or make a fresh pot of coffee, or we'd punctuate the gap between putting records on with little thoughts. "Before," she said," when you met me by the service entrance, you had just come back from the zoo, hadn't you? Except you didn't go inside the zoo, no, you walked along the surrounding gate and saw what you could. Just a guess but a good one, no?" And when morning arrived, she had finally fallen asleep on the couch, and I left a note and key to the pianoless apartment, and took the next plane back to New York.

Because I have a certain measure of clout, I was able to have the Producer, his Engineer, and my faithful Piano Tuner assembled at the studio by two in the afternoon. As the Piano Tuner worked in the next room, I spoke with the other two gentlemen in the recording booth, both looking a bit leery of what I might say.

"Gentlemen, first of all, thank you for coming at a moment's notice," I said with a slight appreciative bow at the waist.

"Of course, George," the Producer replied. I was not quite convinced he meant this, but I let it slide.

"I have to admit that I don't know exactly what I'll record here today, but the record itself should have the following title. Are you ready? The Sound of A Man Listening. What do you think?"

I was going to pause and let this sink in before continuing, but the Producer jumped right in, which he never does unless provoked.

"George, I'll be blunt. I don't see it. Sounds like the title of a jazz record, and it's a bit," he turned to face the Engineer, "what's the
word I'm looking for?" "Obtuse?" squeaked the Engineer. "Yes," smiled the Producer, then to me, "George, perhaps you should sleep on this one. Now what if anything would you like to record today?"

I clasped my hands together, putting my fingers to my lips for dramatic emphasis to let them think about the wild consequences of their answers. They both looked guilty, and I chuckled in some forgotten bright corner of my mind. "Gentlemen, I shall play now, and we'll discuss this later."

The melody was foreign even to myself, but I warned the Producer and Engineer that this piece would be impromptu and to not cut the tape until I gave the signal. I could include the score in between this text, but only musicians would be able to read it, thus meaning little to anybody else. The Sound of A Man Listening, I understand now, is a man looking up from the bottom of a well; A Man painting four white stucco walls with black paint and drawing bars and notes until even the windows are scripted with musical notation; The Sound of A Man Listening is the sound of a man looking around and realizing that he does indeed have windows and that it's alright if not necessary to throw them open; A Man cobbles a bridge from Pauses and steps lightly, discovering that he has bridged two islands together; A Man Listening swallows The Sound whole, and he is disappointed to discover that what he mistook for melody was merely The Sound of his own methodical and panicked breathing; A Man looking for a meaning in 4/4 time is falling out of time and waiting for someone to catch him, drifting past father and mother, and hurling beyond familiar comforts and locations; A Man being told that he is liked; I like you, too; A Man wanting to hear it all over again.

"George? We got the take," the Producer called over the intercom, and I snapped back, "No. You didn't, because I didn't give you the cue that I
was finished! How many years have we worked together, and how many times have I emphasized the importance of the well-placed pause?"

***

After two months of recording sessions and during an afternoon break, I received a phone call from Alisha at the studio. I could tell that I was losing her to someone else -- meaning, she would no longer be satisfied with being Alisha, or even Erika, and that the change would be occurring very soon, with nothing for me to do about it except watch or perhaps protest a little bit and allow her to rejoin this dream I've been enjoying, and -- to Alisha, in my mind, I whisper -- I thought you were enjoying this, too, weren't you?

"Please," I told her, "please, don't come to New York."

Her voice is coming from a mountaintop, and I fight the urge to cup my ear and ask WHAT or WHY. She told me that she can't reveal where she's calling from, except to say that it's definitely not from the kitchen of the pianoless apartment. How long did I expect her to wait there? I mean, once a guest has spun all the records, done each crossword, maybe taken the zoo and ocean walks, and even tidied up a bit if they deemed it necessary -- so how long?

I heard myself telling her, "Don't go, Alisha. You can't, just yet. There's a gift. On the way. For you," and I always recognize the sound of my own staccato lies, don't I, "A piano. Steinway, built 'specially for you. On the moving van, now, as we speak."

I could hear -- even from the distance between us, a gulf, her mountain-top, my foothill -- that she was lighting a cigarette with complimentary matches. I said, "I know exactly where you are. The kind of
place that all jilted women seek shelter. A location of utmost sterility, with a gift shop downstairs. Some place where you can smell little soaps and candles and things that bear no thumbprints of a man who may have -- God forbid -- accidentally mis...under...stood you. You've removed the germ-free wrapping paper from a drinking glass, and you're pouring in a dark, moody wine. Even inarticulate angels such as yourself are allowed a little brooding space. Tell me if I'm right. Am I close?" And her reply might as well have come via a series of running messengers from as far away as the Andes. She had to go to New York for two reasons: one, for unfinished and none-of-my-business business somewhere in Brooklyn, and two, if I had to know, because she'd always wanted to visit Great Neck -- or Little? or Middle? -- and see the houses and stomping grounds of Truly Brilliant People like Errol Flynn, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Harpo Marx -- "people of their time," she kept repeating, who drew others in and never minded admiration or attention. And I replied, (running after the words as they skittered from my lips) "I didn't know you were friends with Harpo Marx. Well, give him my best," and I immediately drew in my breath because I was worried that she'd hang up the phone and all I'd be left with would be two months' worth of Sounds I didn't understand. Fortunately, for the moment, she was the bigger person.

It seemed as if Alisha put on goggles, flying helmet, and silk scarf, then spun the propeller, hopped into the plane, took off, and wrote in the sky, "But I don't play piano. You knew that. And I have no desire to learn. Life's too -- dare I say it? I barely have enough time to read all of the books I've been collecting through the years. My bedroom back in Sheboygan looks like -- well, have you ever done something like purchase a stack of used books and then never crack the spines? I keep doing stuff like that all my life, every day. Don't get me wrong. Your apartment, your background
music was the ideal launching pad -- a fantastic intellectual incubator
where I could assess my next move, you know, my next adult decision -- or
my first one in a really long time. Visiting you to begin with didn't
count, sorry. But have you ever noticed they're always giving prisoners and
terminal cases a chance to do something because it's too late? Last suppers
and bedside visits by athletes bearing autographed basket-foot-or-base
balls, or even -- and this is the part that made my eyes twinkle -- a
meaningful trip to somewhere. I just think, and correct me if I'm wrong,
that people should not spend their entire lives driving past a place and
saying to their partner or themselves, Y'see that hill? That's where I want
to be buried, because it implies you'll never ever get to sit upon that
hill until you're incapable of drawing another breath. Sad? Maybe. Stupid?
You bet. Which is why it's time for me to play the pioneer, just as you did
back in 1957 or whenever -- I like your music, it doesn't make me a
historian, and more over, it doesn't make me a pianist by default, am I
getting through to you?"

I answered, "Yes," as I told her that I'd taken her suggestion and
decided to go ahead and mastermind an entire album built upon her phrase.
She laughed, "Really? God, if I had a buck for everytime I suggested that
phrase to a writer or musician, I'd be able to buy Harpo Marx's estate!
Really, though? I'm flattered, very. One of my ideas has actually hit the
big-time, amazing. Give the gal a Kewpie doll. What kind of music did you
pick? Brahms? I'm curious," and I told her that in fact this album would be
the first containing all original compositions, which made her laugh again,
"I'm a muse, am I? I tol' ya I'd make good, muddah. This is -- this is good
news. It still doesn't make me a pianist, but -- "

I interrupted, "You keep saying that."

"Because I can. There was and is no piano on its way, let's just
clear the air about that. If I actually swallowed that bull, I'd be waiting in front of your apartment with the cash for C.O.D. charges. What do you take me for? I'm a lot more on top of things than you'll ever realize, Mr. Galmud. I've mapped out the next six months of my life very neatly and precisely while waiting for you to call me. Interested? The Plan: I take the cross-country train to New York, and I visit all of those places I mentioned, even the Algonquin Round Table, or -- "

"You can't. They've chopped it into firewood."

She chuckled, "Good, mock me. Get it out of your system. As I was saying: I really do New York, then I go back to Sheboygan and get my kids from my aunt's house, and we go to Chicago where I can easily get a grant for -- you never really asked me what I was good at, did you? You just assumed that I'd sit around your flat, spin your records, and eat your food? And what? And then what? You'd eventually return, we'd marry, and you'd credit me for opening up your mind and heart to new ideas and different sounds, that it?", as she lit another cigarette off a dying one, "Behind every great man there's a woman filing his sheet music, am I right? There's a woman pointing out the genius of every goddamned thing he ever touched -- that tea bag, this cushion, those dirty dishes, those coffee grounds. I never thought I'd say this, but you make me sick, Galmud, you really do. Your sense of expectation, or what you require from someone just to be able to stand in the so-called glow of your teflon-like, anesthetic personality, sickens me. I'd end up being someone that even I or you would not be able to respect, not that you ever did. Respect to you is: Of course, my dear, it's alright to smoke in here, if you simply must.

Which beggars the question of what love could possibly be then. Letting someone else read the front page first perhaps?"

"Alisha, I don't know if I've emphasized yet the importance of you
upon my current work. You've got me thinking, the metaphoric wheels are spinning. What else do you want me to say? I am the Man Listening. You are The Sound."

"And good for you. What bearing does this have on my life, aside from the fact that in six months I'll be able to walk into a record store and pick up your album and say to The Current Love of My Life (not you), 'I inspired this title', to which he'll say, 'Oh really?', and most likely we'll leave it at that, which is all one can do. So there. So let me ask you a question: Do you think Mona Lisa was thrilled when she first saw herself on canvas? I doubt it, because it would've reminded her of countless days of enduring leers, comments and put-downs from the artist. *Smile, Mona; Close your mouth, Mona, your choppers are too big; Sit up straight, Mona; Will you sleep with me, Mona?* And never once did the artist ask her what she thought, when in truth, Mona was probably a really sharp gal who kept her female friends in stitches with an endless series of one-liners, but most importantly, Mona was a good listener, and the only one who ever dared exploit that quality was the artist. Look at that painting again sometime, Galmud. Her arms are crossed, she's got a pasted-on smile which suggests attentiveness, and inside she's wishing that the guy sitting across from her would just shut the hell up. I know this woman, Galmud. Or more precisely, I am this woman," and she took a deep breath and said for the last time, "What do you think, Galmud?" without even realizing she'd done it or in what context.

I kept my voice to a whisper, for anything louder would've made me begin crying. "I think ... what do I think? I suppose you will eventually get that grant, and because you are who you are, you'll be able to find that Love of Your Life who will turn out to be a handsome, sympathetic listener who wins you over with his attentive eyes. His hands might vaguely
remind you of mine, but that will pass, and you’ll eventually find a certain musical timbre in his voice that’s far more attractive than any note I ever played. And you’ll be amazed at how he scoops your two children in a comforting sweep that their real father never could perform. And this man, not me I know now," as I paused to press Rewind on the console to begin erasing The Sound, "is artistic in his own way. He builds you a greenhouse, that thing you only imagined to be a metaphor, and the four of you -- him, you, the two children -- will spend quiet lifetimes cultivating pockets of beauty in the suburbs. So happy it makes everything pale in comparison. And he inspires you, and vice versa, and you find yourself standing on a piece of gentle land with your loved one listening only to you and telling you to please continue. Improvise, Alisha, please. And the woman you look at in the mirror will be a bit older, with shorter hair perhaps and a few unavoidable physical flaws that come with age, but you’ll find yourself happier than you ever imagined."

And as I broke down in tears to emphasize my sincerity or something like that, she said, "You are so full of it," and hung up on me.
I remember distinctly. George had waited at least two years to tell what had happened, and of course, by then it was too late to do anything about it. But he told me about a concert he'd done in some city -- a very sunny, spring day for all purposes -- and that at the end of the performance, he did what he always does, which is to return to the dressing room and unwind. The act of relaxation for George is one of those things he'd rather not be observed doing or in the company of others -- not that there's anything lurid going on. The man simply takes a seat on a couch and puts his face in his hands, which looks like he's praying -- he's not, by the way, for he's been a devout agnostic for as long as I've known him. After a good fifteen minutes, he'll pop a mood stabilizer with a glass of water, and then emerge from the dressing room, and go to dinner with his tour manager and several distinguished patrons. This is routine, he's told me, almost like second nature so that he doesn't always have to "be there," sotospeak. Well, the one time that he loses track of time and leaves the dressing room fifteen minutes later than usual, his tour manager is nowhere to be seen; the man's usually outside the door having a cigarette and chatting with audience members, but this time, he's elsewhere -- George wasn't too specific about that. So at this point, there's a first-time break in the routine, and of course George is quietly frantic, because anyone who knows him can testify to the fact that the man has his little regimens and disciplines -- in short, he makes Poor Richard look like a slacker. George goes to the auditorium -- nobody there; then he goes to
the alley exit, thinking that the entourage is waiting in a limo patiently. He steps outside. Nobody in the alley. Except this art-school punk, probably no bigger than George and skinnier, who just seems to appear out of thin air and grabs George by the lapels of his suit (George never wore the standard recital gear, a tux), and slams him against the exit door which clicks shut. George is locked out, as there's no way of opening it from the outside unless you got a key. The kid -- pimply, thick glasses, middle-class-looking -- gets right up into George's face; I mean, as close as two people would get before kissing. And the kid says something to this effect: "You are not Bach...You are not Beethoven." Practically spits in his face. And at this point, George is half-squinting, half-waiting for the kid to stick a knife in his chest or pop him, y'know, with a gun. But that was it. The kid took off. And George just watches him turn the corner. Then after ten minutes of waiting, making sure that the kid's not going to return and jump him, George tries the alley door again, sees it's locked, and cuts through the front door. He never said anything about the encounter to the tour manager or anybody else. Not a word. So remember now, two years lapse, and George and I are riding through the Upper West Side, when George calmly points to the window and says, "That's him. Get a good look." And I say, "That's who? What are you talking about?", so he tells me the same story I just told you, and afterwards -- we're already six blocks away from where we saw the kid -- really a young man, clean-cut, standing in front of a movie theater with a group of friends all laughing and joking and probably trying to figure out where to go for coffee since the film's over -- I ask George, "Do you want to turn back? Or call the cops? Or something?", and he says, "After all is said and done, despite how jarred I probably was, at least he's familiar with the music."
II. Ilya Vokabak: Artist, Friend, and Sometimes Nemesis

George Galmud performed in the Eastern bloc on several separate occasions — and remarkably, during times of vast change. Meaning: Galmud and I changed physically and perhaps were maturing in an artistic sense, but it was as if the World-at-Large was transforming at a much quicker pace. Perhaps that influenced how we communicated with each other. The first time we met? A group of artists, musicians, and poets all met at someone's apartment, and we all possessed that sort of shaggy bohemian quality — so Galmud blended in quite nicely, physically indistinguishable and it helped that he had Slavic features. But my first encounter with Galmud: I had the gall to take his record off the phonograph (which we’d only heard fifteen times since he’d arrived at the party) and put on a bootlegged American jazz recording. The look of absolute — well, Galmud quickly emerged from the smoke and shadows, and went right up to me, sort of challenging me, and asked me who I was. I told him my name, explained I was an artist who worked in many different mediums (whatever I could get my hands on), and I was saying all of this with a warm smile to put him at ease — and it occurred to me, after fifteen minutes and his expression not changing from serious, that this man was just letting me ramble on and on. Nobody had ever made me feel like more of a peasant — in your language, a hick — than he had. And he was a foreigner, and I'm surrounded by my own people at that; a very strange sensation to feel reduced without a word being said. He had that effect, I think, on people — well, specifically, artists like myself who had not developed a thick skin yet about their craft and were very insecure about everyone's opinion. I think he possessed the ability to
look into people's eyes and stare directly into the heart of your vulnerability, your doubt, and use that in his favor. And perhaps I'm embellishing, but I swear I remember him saying, "Never heard of you," when I started telling him about my work. Out of sheer embarrassment, I found myself removing the jazz record and replacing it with a Galmud record. It wasn't until later, when Galmud had returned to the States, that I realized fully how I'd been humiliated, and I vowed that would never happen again at the hands of any other artist, and that if given the chance, I'd get restitution in one form or another from George Galmud. Yes, I understand on a practical level that he and I are operating from two different fields of art -- but it's the fact that we're both approaching the world from a creative standpoint which is difficult to get around, at times. I don't think I've ever completely rebounded from that experience -- for I still enjoy a Coltrane record a lot more than anything by Galmud. Anyway, the next time I saw Galmud was about 18 years later, in the state of California where I was exhibiting work. Mind you, he's the one who seeks me out. Says, "Let's meet at Fisherman's Wharf, my treat," and over a dinner of undercooked lobster and plenty of wine he proceeds to tell me, in that aren't-I-lucky voice of his, "You won't believe what's happened to me, my dear Ilya. NASA -- the space scientists, you know -- wrote to me three months ago and requested a recording of mine (no longer than five minutes) for their next time capsule launch into space." He goes on, tells me that he thought the skies had enough junk clogging up the heavens and accidentally snuffing out stars, and isn't it ridiculous, a bunch of bureaucrats in lab coats, and he had half a mind to tell them to ask a rock group for one of their records instead. But no, Galmud said, he found himself writing back, "Which piece of music do you want?"; NASA replies, "Your pick, Mr. Galmud. We trust your
taste implicitly." Now I can feel it coming, what will come next, and I'm steeling myself with another swallow or two of wine, and sure enough, Galmud asks me, "What piece do you think I should contribute?". First and foremost, I have a very primitive layman's perception of classical music, and Galmud knew that to a certain degree. I mean, I may be familiar with one or two musicians and a few signature pieces, but most of it is foreign to me. I suggested something, and Galmud of course went with something else, NASA shot the rocket containing the music, front page story everywhere, and where am I but on the fringes of the history books getting several grants pulled in the span of two years. I sunk into a deep depression after that, all the while still working and creating, but it was a personal trough perceptible to my wife and close friends. I only felt a little bit better when I discovered some country had shot another chimpanzee into space, and then that put some things into perspective for me. Plus who's to say that Galmud's recording (a digital device which would have the power to run for years as it didn't rely on a battery-powered support) didn't crash into a fiery planet and molt into cosmic lava? It was something to think about it. That's when I created The Man Who Walked Off The Roof And On To The Hemisphere, which helped stake a reputation for myself in the United States after twenty-some odd years of trying to break through. The piece itself is probably my second-most popular of every work I've done, and for those of you who haven't seen it, The Man Who... is part of a series of Tenement works, I call them, in which the spectator becomes a participant. In this case, the spectator walks into the work, a small room no bigger than a vestibule, and discovers that he or she is actually standing on a run-down Russian tenement roof. There's gravel, empty cigarette packets, smashed bottles, bird droppings, shredded newspaper, and
actual tar paper underneath one's feet. The sensation, in that respect, is particularly authentic. And as for the four walls, they become sky and hemisphere, or horizon, and there is actually a dizzying feeling one gets standing in the center of that piece -- if that's any indication of how hard I worked to duplicate depth and height. I've had prime ministers and diplomats all enter that work and then emerge with that same look. Too real, most would say and then clap me on the back although most really missed the whole point of the piece. I'm quite proud of that one. But the one work which involves Galmud, and serves as the peak of our relationship as colleagues or friends is titled Take a Bow, Take a Number. He was in town one weekend (shortly after I'd moved here), and decided to pay me a visit at the loft. After several vodka and tonics, he said, "I know how hard it must've been after the NASA event," and proceeded to tell me that he knew about my depression and that "everyone" had been quite worried for me; how he knew, I never found out, but Galmud apologized over and over for being a pompous, self-righteous artist all these years and said that he'd like to make it up to me somehow, in his own way. We continue drinking, and he keeps emphasizing the fact that whatever penance he performs must somehow be connected with the sacrifice of his "hideous ego," and I tell him to stop being silly, and before the evening is over, George Galmud and I are collaborating on a piece of art, which would be titled as the sun started to break. What is it, you ask? Well, I told Galmud that I'd never betray his secret, but I think even he'd get a laugh out of it now. The piece, Take a Bow, Take a Number, is composed of thirty life-size paper-mache models of humans, all painted the same shade of green (for envy), standing before thirty music stands, and upon each music stand is a different set of sheet music ranging from Sousa on one, to Oscar Peterson
on another, and so forth. The idea is that the spectator becomes a participant and has to awkwardly maneuver himself around each hollow dummy in order to see the music on each stand. Except one of those dummies was not hollow; one contained a very famous musician, for a day. Or at best, really, for a few hours.

III. Central Park West Witch Doctor

The minute one begins throwing words around like "witch doctor", people tend to get a bit nervous. So you can either use that particular phrase to identify me, or the more acceptable and less threatening herbalist. The label tends to change with the cultural winds or according to whom I'm dealing with at any given moment, or where I am, for that matter. Good example: At a cocktail party (where the acquaintances outnumber the actual friends) I'm a doctor -- which is the truth; Ivy League credentials available upon request. And in such circumstances, the conversation can get, shall we say, very interesting, for if people are anxious to pry into what it is I exactly do, then I will always be willing to tell them. It's not an honesty hang-up with me; it's just that I see no point in dancing around the subject. For those who are thrown by the truth, well, tough.

George Galmud happened to be one of those cocktail faces that was not flustered by my trade. In fact, when he cornered me (and I at first didn't recognize him, not really being a classical music lover), I was quite surprised by his enthusiasm. He introduced himself -- this is at one of these penthouse affairs overlooking the Hudson, mind you -- and said, "I heard about you from a famous English rock star, a guy who's apparently the
20th Century's answer to Lord Byron. Well, immediately I knew who he was talking about, for I'd treated this rock star numerous times and never for the same exact thing twice. Requests like: "Give me something that will make LSD look like aspirin; give me a formula that will allow me to sustain an erection for four straight hours; give me a concoction that will stimulate my creativity in the studio." And then there was a variety of body-purifying applications. My point is, although Galmud was criticized as being a stuffy purist (and he often proved himself to be one), he was at least familiar with what was happening in alternative or underground circles, and also curious enough to approach me instead of giving me strange looks from across the room, like a lot of people would.

Galmud had this way of cornering you, even though he wasn't a huge man by any stretch; it was in the way he'd slouch, sort of fencing you in with the angles (invisible or physical) of this otherwise innocuous positioning. Perhaps he just had terrible posture and I'm really reading too much into it, so I'll leave it at that. While talking, he crunched his ice -- a shameless cube-cruncher -- and said, with an odd air of confidentiality, "Well, I realize that the present counter-culture is very much reliant upon little pills and leaves that make them. The Youth or Almost Out-of-Youth, giggle at or paw each other. But frankly, I'm interested in knowing whether or not a mild antithesis -- either herbal or chemical -- has been discovered by you people in the know. Not something head-rippingly awful like PCP, but something which can be burned in an ashtray and prayed over to make events or conditions change according to one's wishes." I said to him, "Oh, then you're sort of treading the surface of occult. Witchcraft. I don't exactly do that, although I am a witch doctor." And because he didn't flinch or bat an eye at those words,
I decided to schedule an appointment with him at my midtown office for the following week.

Initially I thought he'd end up canceling the appointment and never rescheduling, out of fear or nervousness, but sure enough, he showed up fifteen minutes early. I told him what I tell everyone, and that is, in order to tailor-make the substance, I request that the client fill out a questionnaire of 100 yes-or-no and true-or-false questions. And here's what jarred me: Galmud refused. Instead he handed me a record of his (a homemade acetate of various recordings he'd put together the night before) and said, "No, I think you'll get a far more accurate reading of me and subsequently make a more suitable concoction for me if you listen to this record," and I of course took the record, a disk in large plain brown paper. He was very insistent, adding, "After all, I've done my homework and read a stack of your scholarly articles, and now it's your turn. I've always felt that the patient-doctor relationship should maintain some degree of reciprocity, in order to establish a more egalitarian society." By the time I'd managed to decipher his bullshit in my head (with the sum total of his pontifications amounting to zilch), he was gone. I looked at my watch; the entire appointment had lasted less than five minutes.

A month later he returned, and I had a small vial of pills (quantity, 250) waiting for him. (Prices are a matter of privacy.) He said, "Great, but don't you want to know why I requested these in the first place? I'm a little worried about the risk of overdose," and I told him that overdose was impossible if he just followed these two pages of instructions and potential side effects, and he asked with the same perplexed look, "But don't you want to know the why of this medication?", and I said, "Look, George, I make medications, potions, and cure-alls based upon the specific
profile of a person; that is all I need to know, and it's all I've ever 
needed to know, and so far I've catered to hundreds of wealthy people like 
yourself who have never suffered any adverse affects from their own tailor-
made brews. Now yes, if you foolishly share these pills with other people, 
they might encounter difficulties, or if you mix meds and booze, then 
you're practically begging for trouble, but otherwise I swear you're going 
to get the affect that you desire. Read the instructions."

George removed one of the capsules from the vial and put it to his 
nose, sniffed. "There must be nutmeg in these," he said, and I shook my 
head, no, and he left.

Five days went by, and he showed up at my office without making an 
appointment in advance. Apparently he was very upset. "I've been taking 
these things for exactly five days and so far nothing has happened, and 
what's worse," he said, "is that I can't tell you what results I'm trying 
to yield, because that would somehow disrupt, dilute, poison, or break down 
the alleged components of these pills. What am I to do?" And I told him 
flat-out, "George, if what you're saying is true and you're being 
methodical about the dosage, then I swear to you that you'll get the 
desired results," and I reminded him that I always insist upon a moneyback 
guarantee and I've never once had to do that. "Well, all right," he said, 
and off he went.

A month later, out of the blue, I got a phonecall in the middle of 
the night at my apartment. It was George, speaking in an even yet 
distinctly petrified tone of voice. Fast, panicked, yet crisp. And what he 
had to say shocked me: "I know what you're going to say about sharing 
medicine, and so I'll just skip to the endpoint and say by way of beginning 
that you were right -- OK? -- and I was wrong and pathetic. Whatever
judgments of me you might have, just put them aside for the next hour or so -- can you do that?" Sure, I said, and he continued as if he hadn't heard me, "Are you familiar with Gary Petsquak, the music columnist for The Times? Of course you are. Balding, short, arrogant as hell, thinks he's the cultural barometer for the world, has the perverse power of being able to shut down a Broadway run with just three slanderous and unoriginal phrases, is able to eat tall buildings in a single round, and can make one's record company execs and bosses play against you at quarterly meetings by the strength of his position as critic. Know him now? Fine. Here's what happened, as God as my witness: We were dining in an off-the-map French restaurant in the city, and I was, yes, trying to shmooze him and prevent a bad write-up of my upcoming record from appearing in the paper -- and I do know, don't ask me why, that he'll loathe my next record because of the composers I've covered -- but that isn't the point; I put two of my capsules into his wine when he wasn't looking, and then in the midst of discussing some ice-skating musical that he's keen on destroying in his next column, he begins to change! The sonuvabitch physically becomes me, and then passes out!" I interrupted, "You're raising your voice, George. Please try to remain calm. Where is he now?" "He's in the back of a cab, parked by this booth, with a tablecloth over his head. I made a terrible scene at the restaurant -- tearing the tablecloth out from under a perfectly wasted and expensive meal, and dragging him out. He's still unconscious, which I assume is a side effect of this drug. I just dread the thought of him waking up." I asked him how fast he could get to my office, he said five minutes, and I said to make it three.

I should interject here that I am familiar with Gary Petsquak, as he unfortunately tends to run in the same intellectual circles as I do, and
that his writing is indeed pompous and overblown and that at the core of his prosy criticisms one finds stale, lukewarm air. Petsquak is the kind of cultural fop and poseur who pictures himself as being James Joyce after spending a week on a sight-seeing tourbus in Ireland. Still, I would not wish that kind of bad fortune on anyone.

After strapping Mr. Petsquak down to my office couch, I told Galmud to relax in the waiting room and he complied. I injected a stimulant into Petsquak's forearm and he was revived, albeit still groggy. I introduced myself (stressing my title of Ivy-League-educated doctor -- no time to argue about semantics at this point -- to put him at ease), and asked him if he remembered what had happened within the past hour. "Sure," Petsquak said, "I was having dinner with my friend, the classical pianist George Galmud, and then I passed out, probably from mixing alcohol as I had a scotch before dinner and then a Chablis during, which is when I --,"] I interrupted, "On the contrary, and this will come as a shock, you turned into George Galmud. At least physically. Unbeknownst to you, Mr. Galmud was carrying around a prescription drug which he, er, accidentally dropped into your water glass, thinking it was his." Petsquak barked for a mirror, and I showed him, and there was a gasp. "I look...just like him," Petsquak whispered, stunned and glassy-eyed.

I won't reveal just what I did to change Gary Petsquak back into his original self, but suffice it to say, it did involve six long hours of injecting different combinations of compounds into his blood stream until the right one clicked. When Petsquak awoke from the procedure, Galmud and I were standing over him, and Galmud immediately started begging his forgiveness and saying, "You're not going to hold this against me, are you? For I'd hate it if you wrote a negative review on the basis of one evening
of accidental transmutation instead of on the basis of the music therein," and I whispered for Galmud to be quiet and let Mr. Petsquak be. I was surprised, to be honest, because Petsquak handled the situation well. He called me a fine doctor and asked for my card because he wanted to set up an appointment in the future for a general check-up; he clapped Galmud on the back and told him not to worry, that the worst thing which had ever happened to him was when some famous opera singer broke into his office at The Times building and poured motor oil into his file cabinets because of a bad review; and having gathered his keys and wallet from the table, the critic left with Galmud in tow to split a cab.

A week later, Petsquak called me and complained of the chronic and pervasive taste of nutmeg on his tongue. And of course I gave him a prescription for that. Galmud, on the other hand, never called back.

1/3. A Woman's Voice On His Answering Machine

...like three weeks now, and you still haven't returned my calls, and I'm beginning to wonder whether or not this is really a legit number or if this is your agent's or publicist's number and you gave it to me in order to escape me. Well, one way or the other, you're bound to find out it was me. I'm not going to even bother leaving my number -- a waste of time and breath. Call, don't call, it's in your corner now. My original intention, as you well know, was to interview you and treat you to a royal dinner on my office expense account, but apparently that offer bores you, and so I won't call anymore. This is it, really. But remember one thing, just so we have the facts straight here, it was you who called me first at four o'clock in the morning. I was thrilled, elated, and I was more than happy
to be an audience, still am. You know I think the world of you, and I have an affection for you bordering on school-girl hero-worship, but this is getting ridiculous. No more crap. I listened; now where are you? At the risk of sounding like the proverbial broken record -- and mind you, I am hating myself as I speak for even doing this -- here's my number again in case you want to reach me...
Monday, 12 noon to ?:

Leopold Stekastik, the great maestro, and I meet for lunch at _______ once a month to discuss everything and anything -- a habit we've maintained for close to ten years now, ever since we concluded our brief recording partnership on my A Night In Leipzig collection (a 3-disc set). As ___ is on the top floor of a rather posh and pompous hotel, we are always allowed to talk in relative privacy, with little or no interruption during the course of an average two-to-three hour meeting. During cocktails Leopold and I banter about the weather and stocks, even discuss so-and-so's latest miserable recording (Any so-and-so is a competitor or upstart, in case you were wondering).

But on this occasion, probably right before spring rushed in, and more precisely right before the meals arrived, Leopold clasped his hands and leaned toward me, "Now, George, we could go on for another hour chatting about the high temperature in Jersey, or we could get down to what's truly bothering you."

I of course denied any sign of upset, but he had seen through me, and I broke down very quickly in telling him, "Leo, this is going to sound -- well, I don't care how it sounds," and I removed a crinkled newspaper clipping from my wallet, smoothed it out, and put it right-side-up in front of Leopold. "An old review?" he asked, raising eyebrows, making no effort to actually pick it up and get a closer look.

"Yes, probably about a nine months-to-a year old now. The Petsquak review. Remember now? The one that the -- ," and I was about to use a vulgar word but at that moment the waitress set our plates down and we
smiled and thanked her, and I then put on my same grimace, "The bastard, as I was saying, was apparently drinking and freelancing that week, and lo and behold, the Times decides to run it in their Sunday edition. Ah! What is that I feel upon my cheek? Why, the kiss of Death! Funny, Death, you also have Petsquak's beery breath. My point is, and feel free to jump in anytime here, is that I have never gotten over this. I meet with my manager and the record execs over at CTG and we sometimes go over sales figures, and guess which one limps along like a three-legged mutt?"

Leopold gestured toward my plate with his knife, pausing from buttering a roll. "Your food, it's going to get cold," he chuckled. "Really, George, you take all of this much too seriously. You act as if there aren't ways too prevent Petsquak's squawking, pun very much intended."

"How do you mean? A little muscle? I send over Guapo The Hitman to set him straight?", and I found myself laughing now.

Leopold's face took on a sickly grayish tint as he looked me flush in the eyes, clasping his hands once again; I have to admit, I was a bit startled. "The archaic word, George, is 'muscle' but we in The Arts prefer a more benign term. We call our contingency 'Persuaders', and as you can quite easily gather from the name, they persuade. Persuasion is all important in our line of work, you would have to agree with me on this point. Everytime we create something -- be it poem, song, painting, what have you -- we are busy trying to persuade someone to (a) at least listen and perk up their dog-eaten doggy ears, and then perhaps (b) subscribe to our tastes, either for five minutes or fifty years or more. If our creation misses its mark -- and the assumption is that we are not wrong in our motives and methods -- then we have not persuaded. We have failed. Then Persuaders enter. Persuaders have the responsibility of meeting face-to-
face with the would-be demigods, critics, whom we refer to as Latecomers. Why? Latecomers at first miss the point of the Artist's piece, but with the help of Persuaders, they eventually come 'round. Yes, they all get a better insight in the end," and he popped the last bit of a roll into his mouth, wiping the corners of his mouth as he chewed.

I sat back, crossing my legs. "This, and pardon me if I'm wrong, Leopold, all carries with it a strong scent of violence."

He looked incredulous. "Please, George," he said, gesturing to the waitress, "we are Artists, after all, and rise above our base emotions at the moment we pick up a paint brush or play a few notes. And don't look so skeptically at me like that. I've done film scores for cartoons, for Christ's sakes; do I look like some kind of roughneck to you?"

The waitress interrupted, "Would you care for another bottle of wine, gentlemen?", and we looked at the bottle standing with mock attention at the center of the table, and couldn't believe the damn thing had been drained already.

Maestro Leopold Stekastik does not get drunk, it should be noted. He works diligently at perfecting The Art of The Buzz, a process that takes the entire two-to-three hour meeting to complete. He knows that I only drink in his company, and I've told him as much, that I otherwise hate alcohol and what it does to people. But for Leopold, I don't mind sitting there and waterlogging my brain and saturating the synapses, for I consider it the nominal fee of admission to sit in his brilliant company. As usual, we would stroll up to the curbside in front of _____'s impressive awning, and Leopold would sort of pull me together by drawing the lapels of my overcoat up and straightening the knot in my tie. He, on the other hand, never needed or got or even expected, I think, the same treatment.

"Thank you, kind sir," I told him. He'd turned away for a second to
hail a cab. "Always a pleasure, George. Are you sure you won't split a cab with me back uptown?" "Do I ever?" I replied. "No," he said, picking a crumb off me, "you never do. You're consistent. And your eccentricism -- those things which make you so interesting -- probably keeps you healthy in an ersatz fitness regimen; just how many blocks is it back to your flat anyway?" I shrugged my shoulders, "Don't know. Never bothered to count." He looked genuinely surprised, "My, well, I had you pegged wrong then. Meticulous in most things still." A cab pulled up, he got in, rolled the window down, and first told the driver not to pull away yet, then told me, "Are you sure now?" "About what?" I asked, the threads of unraveled conversations in my mind like so many stalks and bits, and the cab drove off.

5:45 p.m. to ?:

I like Horn and Hergot's cafeteria on Read Street. It always strikes a calming balance between filth and sanctity, at least for me. I take my business there when my moods are swinging towards dark, perhaps on purpose or just by coincidence, and always leave feeling a little bit better. Tina, a college sophomore, is walking around and offering warm-ups. This place, according to current gossip and urban hearsay, will eventually succumb to the automat craze. Already Tina's job has been reduced to warm-ups and changing the food from the machines and breaking and making change. I should mention that at the moment Tina is the Love of My Life, although (a) she doesn't know it (or maybe does and ignores me) and (b) more importantly she's not interested in Art Itself but rather the Surface Appearance of Things which sometimes look like Art. So she walks around with dyed-red hair and smokes cigarettes that make her cough and makes conversation with every last person in that room (with me usually being the
last) and -- well, right here is when I realize that I have no special insight into her -- she tells these people everything because privacy is a cheap commodity when you're a young lady being eyeballed and propositioned, and perhaps she feels it's better to be a rough-edged open book than a frail slip of paper.

Stekastik, God bless him, had it wrong; these people here are really the original Latecomers, through no fault of their own. The cadences and rhythms are all pouring from their speech and actions (stirring cups of coffee, looking sadly out of a rain-streaked window, lighting old cigarette butts), and they don't even know it.

"I know who you are, okay? Is that what you've been dying for me to say?", as she takes a seat across from me. I ask her to tell me all of the things about herself that I may have missed since the last time I was in here (approximately a month to the day, last lunch meeting with Stekastik). "I don't know what you may have missed, but," and Tina is, in no particular order, the following things: 1) Dying to break into the circus. (She's always "dying" to do this or that.) She will take the first circus that will accept her, but so far there have been rejections from Barnum & Bailey and White Beard's Freak Show. She admits freely that she always blows it in the interview when asked what she's good at, and she will tell the Interviewer that she doesn't know but would be willing to try, except for sword-swallowing (fire's ok), and then it seems the Interviewer says he was looking for someone with a bit of experience. "Imagine," she says, "experience necessary for a circus."

2) The mother of one -- one what? she won't say -- that her mother tends to many miles away in the state of Pennsylvania. "It's better that way, it really is; does it make any sense to drag your child into a polluted world with you? Fuck no," she says. 3) Eager to try something new and different.
"Lately grass has been getting real boring," but her downtown friends have apparently just connected her to an upscale kick. "Pills?" I ask, and she answers, "Sorta."

And when she finishes with that tiny litany, she says, "There you go, there's three big things about me I bet you didn't know before, and you know what else? I'm not revealing anymore; I'm not a friggin' Information Booth. Oh, and you know what else? I was lying before when I said I knew who you are, although I haven't been lying about myself; I don't know you at all, I just thought you were some writer or something looking for material or a good time. But now that I think about it, you're the only fella in here who's never said one raunchy word to me, and I'm kind of glad and worried at the same time. You're not, um, you know, are you?"

"Can I get a re-fill over here, kid?" a snaggle-toothed witch of a woman calls.

11-something p.m. to ?:

We are drunk; we discuss Ground Rules, quite comfortably so, back at my apartment. In the kitchen. Coffee, or rather fumbling through the act of making coffee. I say, "This is going to probably ring a bit -- well, chicken is the word -- but it's the honest-to-God truth. I cannot under any circumstances make love to you, and not because I'm homosexual (I'm not) or because I find you unattractive (I think you're beautiful), but because I fear that I would crack somehow. You're looking at me with confusion, so I'll give you two versions of the same outcome: one, the poetic high-fallutin' abstract picture, my skin would turn to brittle porcelain and I'd crack, and two, the more earthly version, I'd panic and suffer a heart attack from the excitement. Besides I am thirty-three, and you're, well, considerably younger. Does that sound too, too -- ?"
She says, "No, it sounds fine, I mean I understand what you're saying, even though what you're saying is kinda slurred, and speaking of alcohol, did you enjoy that little place?", and I answer, "Dee's Place? Yes, immensely, and thank you for taking me there. I'm not the world's biggest jazz fan, although Oscar Peterson always manages to -- I'm sorry what were you saying?", and she pours me a second cup of coffee and says, "It's all right, George. I feel the same way; I do think that it's for the best if we don't, you know, because the worst thing I ever did was get involved with a twenty-seven-year old guy once (not the father of my baby) and he was the most abusive sick -- you know the kind of guy I'm talking about. Would drink and smoke grass while driving, and it's like, 'Kill yourself, buster, but not me.' But please, you never got around to telling me about you. You, dammit, you keeping dodging my questions about you!", and she's beginning to take on a piercing whistle sound that I don't find too soothing but I won't say anything about it.

She takes the floor; I take the couch; we look up at the ceiling.

Now, since the question was put to me: I remember being born -- that is I remember being told that when I was born, I suffered from some form of muscular atrophy that afflicted my entire body. My mother, though not distinctly in the picture until I became A Budding Genius, said I was like crab with my hands cupped and clawed and snapping at the air when I wanted to get someone's attention. I moved around on my back, pushing myself along by the heels of my feet and lifting off from my derriere, when I could; most times I was incapable of any movement, so they kept me in a baby's crib for the longest time.

She's raising her voice beyond all expectation and I put my finger to her lips, as she whispers then, "But you're lying. I heard you -- I read you -- You were a Prodigy. How could you learn piano if you were a crab?"
Answer me, please, because this is very disturbing, unless you're not telling the truth, in which case I think...

I continue with a shush: My world changed on July 4th, 1933, when my parents wheeled me to -- and when I say "wheeled", I mean a buggy -- to Druid Hill Park, and it was there that we watched the fireworks. Sound would prove crucial, and I'm not referring to the poppity-pop-pows in the sky, did you think I was? No. What turned me around was an organ grinder, the melody long forgotten, sans chimp. The ears were filled with this wheezy sound, and before long my entire body, and it was as if my body had received a transfusion of sorts. You can imagine the reactions of my parents, their son is a crab no more, complete elation and giddiness and everyone around them smiling and applauding. This is what they tell me anyway.

A knock at the door. Mr. Gyoto, next-door-neighbor (down the hall really) and struggling scientist, peeks at me from behind the chain I refuse to unlatch. Yes? "Mr. Galmud, I'm terribly sorry to knock at this hour, but I heard you were up, and I was wondering if you might have a spare candle I might use?" Candle, why? I mean certainly. Why? "The electricity has gone out; there's a temporary black-out in the city because of the storm." I hand him a stubby candle and a book of matches. "I didn't know," I keep repeating, then wish him goodnight and close the door.

When I take my place back on the couch in the dark living room; Tina's voice comes from the floor, "I like that guy, that Oriental fellow you were talking to. Who is he?" "Mr. Gyoto," I say, feeling another wave washing over me, becoming temporarily submerged. "You should invite him in," she says, "I mean, go back and say we have another pill and he might be able to -- "

Please. Be. Quiet.
She says, "This room is my favorite one in the whole place. All of these fortune-teller machines, where ever did you get them? Do you purchase them from carnivals? Do they work -- I mean if I put a dime in, would it start talking?" And I inform her that there is not one thin dime in the whole apartment, and strongly suggest leaving this room before I scream.

The Persuaders in this building have begun to tell us to pipe down. The Latecomers below, outside, have no idea how bad I've got it right now, and I wouldn't mind telling them except that Tina -- yes, that's right, I'd almost forgotten her name; and my name is? -- told me to keep away from the windows. I've got to call somebody, haven't I? Somebody should know. Someone says, "I'm hanging up the phone now, Mr. Galmud. You're obviously delirious from too much cold medicine." "Who is this?" I ask, for I've been talking to someone for a long time, the ear piece is quite warm. "Thanks for the advice, but I assure you I am not what you call a 'latecomer'. Good evening, Mr. Galmud," and he hangs up on me.

Please Be. Quiet.

Tuesday, 9:30 a.m. to ?:

A few notes to myself.

"Palpitations"

"Numbness in left arm, upper part"

"Discomfort, indigestion-type pains in lower chest"

"High pulse in throat, low pulse in wrist"

"Itchy tongue -- shivers -- itchy heart as well..."

10:57 a.m. to ?:

"Well, let me put the question to you another way then," I begin.

(Does Horn and Hergot's ever close? When did you leave my apartment?) Tina
takes a seat across from me and glares, "Look, no more questions. Do you see what I'm trying to do here? I'm working, I'm trying to work. If I don't, then I don't eat or pay rent; it's a pretty simple concept. Some of us don't have the time and opportunity to spend their days kicking back in a cafeteria, ogling people -- am I getting through to you?" I think she can't be that bad if she just gave me a warm-up while saying all that.

"Truth is, Tina, I'm not all that -- "

"My name is NOT Tina!", as she starts to get up and I grab her wrist. She's much stronger than me; I can tell by the way she resists easily.

"Then what is it?"

"You think I'm going to tell you? Dream on, bright eyes." She leaves my table to freshen up the cup of a Santa-Claus look-alike, save for the smudged tattoos wrapped tight around his meaty arms, the dim color of bratwurst.

I get up for a moment. Dig for a quarter in both pants pockets, then find change in my overcoat breast pocket, put it in for a cold cherry danish, and take my seat again. When she comes my way again, I take her by the wrist -- lightly this time -- and she grits her teeth. "Let go, or the coffee's going in your lap." I whisper, "Please, Ti -- please, miss, you've got to understand." "I've got to understand nothing, you got it? What you want to tell me? That you're a faggot, that it? That you like boys, and you're queer, and that's why you didn't even kiss me last night? No skin off my nose, because I got plenty of boyfriends, and I don't need some faggoty artist-type hangin' off me and trying to be my goddamned friend." With that, another warm-up. And she walks away.
1 p.m. to ?:

After a thorough search of my apartment, the dusting of fingerprints, taking of questions and notes, and the softening of my heart, the policeman said, "If that's it then, I mean if you're not going to press charges, then we'll leave."

"That's it?" Leopold huffed, looking with imploring determination into my face and then the policeman's. "If Mr. Galmud says so, then it is. The best we can do is sort of keep an eye on her, but since she's apparently a first-time offender, there's nothing we can do. And also we have no proof, aside from your word -- which I'm not disputing -- that she was the one who actually stole your personal belongings," and he flipped his notepad shut and shoved it into his back pocket and left with a nod.

Leopold poured me another brandy, while his wife Gerta prepared a soup for an impromptu dinner for the three of us. I collapsed further into my easy chair; I'd cried already, long before anybody had gotten here, even before I'd called the police. Leopold was taking notes of his own, ever dubious of the police force's efforts in this city. "Now as painful as it is, let's go over this one more time -- " "Do we have to?" I interrupted. "Yes," he said, "it's imperative." "Not if I'm not pursuing the case," I said. He tsk-tsk'ed and sipped his brandy, "George. Please. Work with me here." His pen-hand was poised to write, so I obliged.

1) A framed watercolor, which had hung above the toilet, depicting the Chinese spelling for the word 'Perfection'; 2) One of my scuffed black wingtips, the right one to be specific; 3) A small half-filled box of arrowroot biscuits; 4) Gold fountain pen, inscribed from the great composer Klibinov ("Priceless, that one," I confessed); 5) A box of unfinished musical compositions, ranging from one page to six pages in completion for each score, and probably a total of 156 pages in all; material dating back
about 17 years, I'd say.

We joined Gerta at the table and ate fresh baked bread and onion soup. Leopold and his wife are mentors, friends, parents, and uncle and aunt rolled into one for me. Leopold, out of everyone, understands me best, as he was also made very famous at a tender age. If there's one shared, understood and unspoken shortcoming between us as Artists, it's in the fact that we're both incapable of composing music; perhaps it's this creative handicap that makes us such close friends, like GIs sharing foxholes during wartime.

6:35 p.m. to ?:

I call her at Horn and Hergot's, and she answers on the 32nd ring with a gruff, annoyed hello. "It's me, and here's my proposition: join me here with your child and suffer no more. Everything will be taken care of, you'll want for nothing, and I will make love to you. Would that make you happy?" "What would make me happy," she says, "is if you'd stop bothering me. This is a peak dining time right now, and if my boss happens to stop in and check out business and sees me on the blower, then I'm going to catch hell. You got that, Gary?" "George, it's George." "Fine. I don't know your name, and you don't know mine. Done deal," she says and hangs up.

I call back. "Why?" I ask. "Because I can't be tied down to one man, mainly an unpredictable, unstable artist-type like you who probably swings either way, and I'm not saying that to hurt you, but let's just be honest with each other. And besides, I told you this already, I want to join the first circus that will snap me up." "You're running out of circuses, my dear. I mean, doesn't it tell you something when Barnum & Bailey won't take you? You need a specific talent, something that separates you from the rest of the clowns and tight-rope walkers. Have you thought of what that might
She paused to think, then, "No, but why am I discussing this with you? I got mugs to fill; call back in five."

Five minutes later, per her instructions. I kid her about the way she answered the phone, "'H and H'? What would your boss think about the abbreviation, eh?" We joke, talk about the Pope's impending visit to the city within the next few weeks ("I'm not Catholic," she says, "but I wouldn't mind seeing him just so I could tell my kid I did"), and then she starts talking dirty, and she agrees to take the subway over to my apartment as soon as she hands the shift over to someone else at midnight. "You want me to score some grass on the way?" she asks. "No, don't do that, Tina," I say. "Okee-dokes, Gary," she giggles and says she has to go now because someone just dropped cuppa-noodle-soup all over the floor.

8 p.m. to ?:

Thoughts. Forget about the 5 items, put them out of your mind. If they were that necessary, then you should have put them under lock and key. Do not ask her about them, for she doesn't even know your name and from her voice it sounds as if she's not lying or faking. What were those 5 things again? A pen, the one from who? I have so many inscribed pens, from pals to presidents to kings to well-intentioned fans who all actually share the dream that I'll one day sit down and write an earth-shaking composition with their pen. So silly. But if Tina gave me a pen, I think I'd give it a try; I know I would.

I have changed neckties eight times already; sit down.

3:38 a.m. to ?:

Notes. "Tongue feels swollen, riddled with stinging bumps

"Sporadic sharp pains below the knuckles"
"Same itchiness in the heart, accompanied by five second numbness of the left-hand side extremities
"Right eyeball more bloodshot than left one
"Arches of feet throbbing
"Rapid electric pin-prick pains at the point where cranium joins to spine
"Temperature 99.7
"More frequent yawns."

Wednesday, 9:12 a.m. to ?:

Skinny Chicano floor-mopper at Horn & Hergot's tells me, "You mean that red head? Yeah, she say she quit, something about a circus. You know anything about that?"

"Er, what time does your manager come in? Perhaps she gave him more specific information about her whereabouts. After all, she does have one more check coming to her, correct?"

The kid shrugged his shoulders, leaning his chin on the handle.
"Don't know. All's I know is she leave late, talk on the phone for a long time, and then kiss me good-bye right here," pointing to a pimpled spot on his left cheek.

Wednesday, 12 noon exactly:

Newspaper, over coffee, at Louie's Cafe. The Metro Section runs the story of a young lady named Joyce Thompson, who had been stabbed twice last night. They found her body in the shallow part of the bay, where the tourists usually walk by on the promenade and feed seagulls. So that was her real name.

Phone call to Gerta two hours later, "I've just been downtown to
identify the body."

"I'm sorry you're going to have to speak up, I can barely hear you."

"All right, how's this? Better? Good, now could you tell Leopold to meet me at ___'s? Thank you, Gerta."

5 p.m. to ?:

I refused all kinds of liquor; ice water somehow seemed to do the trick. Leopold indulged in a cigar and scotch. There was little discussion between us, as I sat there looking past him, eyes focused upon a coffee urn with a metallic angel atop its lid.

"It must've come as a dreadful blow," Leopold said.

"That's one word for it...I've asked them to bury her in the Druid Hill cemetery, and I'm hoping that the detectives can trace her baby. I'll raise the child myself."

Leopold nodded. "In turn for your charity, I hope you realize that you'll be giving up certain professional duties. You'll be sacrificing a lot more than you think."

"I have no other alternative...would you like to accompany me sometime to Horn & Hergot's? If memory serves, she has one more paycheck coming to her."

"I don't think that would be a good idea," he said. "Besides, you weren't her husband, nor were you the father of her child. I'm sure someone else will step forward."

"Mm. You know she wanted to be a performer in the circus, did I tell you that?"

"Really? Any particular specialty?"

"No," I began laughing until tears came. "No specialty at all. Just the sheer love of the sawdust on the floor and the bark of the ringmaster."
But she said she'd try her hand at anything. A most remarkable, ambitious woman."

Leopold snorted, a slight snort but still obvious to me nonetheless. "Everyone at that age has an unrealistic ambition like that whose potential never even makes it to the light of day."

"What was yours then?"

He winked at me. "Composer of intoxicating symphonies. And you?"

9 p.m. to ?:

The six o'clock news identified the killer of Ms. Joyce Thompson of 1301 Preston as being her ex-boyfriend, a something-something (I didn't catch the name). Enraged by her self-induced abortion six months ago, the young man had spent the better part of six months looking for Ms. Thompson. "You can't tell me that what she did was right. I was the father, don't I have a say?" he was quoted as commenting at the time of arrest. "Sad thing is, I would've made a damn fine father, I really would've."

Notes to myself. "Ringing in right ear, giving way to low buzz

"Body temperature fluctuating to both extremes

"1000 milligrams of Vitamin C every four hours should set me right."

12 midnight exactly:

A young fellow, with the hardened look of an ex-Army sergeant, knocked at my door. He took off his hat and then presented me with a calling card bearing Leopold's name. "I'm sorry to be disturbing you at this hour, Mr. Galmud, and doubly sorry for responding to your request vis-a-vis Mr. Stekastik in such a tardy manner. May I come in for a moment?"

"Hm? Yes, certainly," and showed him to the living room where we both
took a seat on the couch. "You'll have to forgive me," handing the card back, "but what is this in reference to?"

His eyes strayed around the room, and he appeared a bit embarrassed. "I'm a Persuader. Mr. Stekastik said you needed a Persuader, and -- ," he began coughing, an inexplicable scratch in his throat. "Water?" he asked in between chokes, and I went to the kitchen with him following behind and poured him a glass from the tap.

"I'm sorry," I said, handing him the glass, "you said something about being a Persuader?"

He took a swallow, looked relieved, and nodded. "Yes. You, uh, do know about the Persuaders, I assume, from Mr. Stekastik, no? Because if not, then we should end this conversation right -- "

"No, no, I do know of the Persuaders, of you, yes."

He smiled, not the smile of a killer, and removed a too small notepad from his suitcoat pocket. "Ok, now we're in business. If I heard right, you request the persuasion of one Latecomer named Mr. Gary Petsquak, critic for the Times, correct?"

I put a hand on his arm, "Two things: I'm afraid I've decided to change my mind regarding the persuasion -- well, I never actually rang for your services in the first place or asked Leopold, but that's beside the point; let's just say no, and I'll pay you for gas or subway money. How did you get here in the first place?"

I gave him a ten-dollar bill from my wallet. "Light Rail," he answered, "I got off right at the Mount Royal Station. Say, thanks. I don't have change, but we'll call it even."

"I wouldn't consider paying you a cent less for your having gone to this trouble at this hour," as I showed him to the door. Just as he had stepped past the doorjamb, he turned around and said, "Hey, what was the
other thing you meant to ask me? You said you had two things."

"Right," and snapped my fingers, "you don't happen to be Theodore Slutz from P.S. 824, do you?"

A smile came across his face, and he held out both palms of his hands as if to indicate I'd revealed his identity. "You caught me. What can I say? What a memory. I was wondering if you were ever gonna figure me out," and he chucked me on the shoulder, "So what line of work did you end up in?"

"I play a little piano."

He sighed, the kind of sigh that a man heaves when he sees a lost ambition pass just within eyesight on the horizon and realizes that he still can't catch up with the Idea. "A maestro, you always were an artsy kid, weren't you? I remember you being a drawer, you know, with colored pencils. As for me, I always wanted to run away and join the circus, me being the class clown," although he was really the class bully. He looked at his watch, "Look, I gotta go, but say hello to your wife -- if you got one -- and kids -- if you got 'em." He began making his way down the hall.

"Right. I will."

"Tell 'em Teddy Slutz from P.S. 824 says hi."

"I'll give 'em your love," I said. Then closed and latched the door.
THE IDEA OF INTERNAL GEOGRAPHY

Sunday Tribune Post Review
Roger Pinot, staff columnist

*7 p.m. on PBS, world-wide premiere

What is perhaps most disturbing about George Galmud's first world-broadcast documentary offering titled Internal Geography is the fact that he actually thinks this medium works just as well for him as recording (of which he's a master) and concert-performances (which he unfortunately abandoned in the early 1960's). Internal Geography is indeed an interior and predominantly self-indulgent exploration into the "world" of classical pianist George Galmud. Serving as an after-hours tour guide and ruminator, Galmud takes his viewers to different locations of personal significance. This Long Journey Into Night would be a lot more tolerable on two conditions: 1) If someone else were narrating, as his reflections border on grotesque narcissism, and 2) If other people were brought into the picture -- a difficult request since he filmed most of these sequences at night or in early morning and the only ones up at that hour were Galmud himself and the film crew. There is one scene of social encounter (at the Walter's Art Gallery) in which Galmud comes across as the genuine recluse he professes to be; very painful to witness. This embarrassing scene among others goes a long way in explaining why the final scene (25 minutes of Galmud performing alone at the piano in an unidentified studio) is the most personal and exposing moment of the film. In short, one has to be a die-hard fan of George Galmud in order to tolerate close to 3 hours of stream-of-
consciousness reflections. Surely there must have been someone besides Galmud directing this project, and if so, one wonders where the scissors were.

The Penultimate Producer

There are several memories I have concerning Internal Geography, and I guess I'm still trying to figure out why he did this, why he invested time into this project which he knew would probably be scorned in the end. My main feeling is that he probably just enjoyed tweaking the critics, just riling them up. [laughs] He liked doing that to me, so I assume he liked doing that to everyone else. His mind...well, he was one of those people who could think on about 20 levels at one time; I think most of us, most normal people, think on perhaps 3-5 levels and mostly subconsciously at that. Work, Wife, Children, Bills, and then I guess you have ongoing dreams and aspirations somewhere on the periphery, out there. For Galmud, although you could discount the wife and children aspect, it was just more...and so I think he tried to engage everyone in a kind of challenge, a sort of mental gymnastics, and if you passed -- that is, if you succeeded in seeing him (his idea, I mean) through to the end, then I guess he rewarded you by continuing to be your friend and conversing with you and prying ideas out of you. Which is why, almost up to the end, that he switched producers, in a very cold scientific manner. Never mind 15 years' worth of experience and friendship together, you know, because once you stopped paying attention -- just for a second -- then he'd drop you. It was more of an issue of making sure that he'd lose interest in you before you did with him. Of course I was never bored, so whatever was happening was all in his mind. Sad, really.
The idea behind *Internal Geography* was this: The CTTC corporation, a PBS-affiliated artistic division, came to him and said, "Mr. Galmud, we've got x-amount of dollars in our budget, and we've always wanted to do a project with you. Do you have any ideas?". George was never short of ideas, particularly -- and I say this completely without malice -- ideas which meshed into the area of self-promotion. Makes sense; sells more records. Well, just as George did with everyone else, he began to sort of do that coy two-step with the CTTC people, saying to them, "Do you have any ideas in mind?", and of course naturally they gush, "Why yes, Mr. Galmud, now that you mention it, we're really fired up about the prospect of you doing a performance of some Beethoven and we could film it in front of the Mt. Vernon Washington monument near the conservatory and then...". He listened a bit longer, drawing them out to see how loyal they were and enthusiastic, and after a fifteen minute spiel, he interrupts, "I haven't performed since 1964 and I don't intend to start now. Is there anything else on your drawing board?". Now keep in mind that then CTTC was comprised of enterprising, artistic kids just graduated from university receiving substantial endowments and grants, but I guess what I'm trying to say is, the enthusiasm sometimes outdistanced the actual field of ideas and projects at work. Which explains why CTTC was eventually absorbed by another company in the early 1980s...but I think they usually came at their subjects (be it Galmud or an astrophysicist) with a certain amount of deference -- like, "What would you like to talk about, sir? Your paperclip collection? Wonderful!", and then they'd go and spend a small fortune on a brilliant mind talking for 2 hours not-so-brilliantly about paperclips.

I should pause here for a second and clarify something, lest I upset some
of these rather nice and intelligent people: The CTTC folks were not completely green. In fact, to my recollection, they did 2 documentary films which absolutely knocked me out, knocked everyone out who saw them. There was one -- I don't remember the titles of either of these, I apologize -- on an obscure Surrealist painter who had died not too long ago. They went down to his ranch house in Albuquerque and spoke at length with his widow, a great artist herself, and suddenly all of these fantastic stories and paintings came out. Tales about hobnobbing with Tristan Tzara and Max Ernst, and then of course the paintings were -- thanks to this film -- then snatched up by big East Coast galleries (Guggenheim, MOMA, and others) and private collectors. So CTTC, when push came to shove, could really...enshrine, I guess that's the word, their subjects quite fittingly. The other film was about this rather independent Thoreau-type, a robust middle-aged man who was running a ramshackle bed-and-breakfast for artists somewhere in Nantucket. The place was depicted as a sty, which it was: weathered shingles falling off, leaky roof, splintered floors, the works. What happens? The CTTC gang comes in, films the whole scene in the space of a week, and overnight, this fellow becomes a sort of folk hero and hotel mogul. A folk hero for the first wave of drop-outs who saw the documentary in campus coffeehouses, and then a hotel mogul for those who watched on television, for those who wanted to "rough it," as they say. I think I was more impressed by the painter documentary than the other.

So when it came to Galmud and the performance idea was shot down, they immediately deferred to him. He said, "Yes, I have a few loose threads," which meant that he had definite visions of what he'd like filmed. He pitched the first idea of taking a cruise boat to Norway, right into the
heart of the Fjords; he wanted this to be a Celebration of Cold. They of course didn't know what he meant, but tried to play it cool -- pardon the pun. "What do you mean by that?", and he went on for about 45 minutes on his whole idea (which he expressed in interviews and essays here and there) that people need isolation in order to be productive, personally productive, and that the most conducive climate is the North, because the Cold forces you indoors, and indoors equals Internal, and then you enter into this intellectual incubator (your mind) and you develop ideas and think, and so forth. This is Galmud's personal philosophy in a nutshell, and I'm obviously not articulating it as well as he did, or at the same length, but you get the general idea. The Cold, or Winter, was like a fresh state of Spring for him, quite the opposite of popular thinking. The CTTC people listened politely, hands folded and nodding, and then told him, "But Mr. Galmud, we don't have enough money in our budget to film in those climates, nor can we pay for everyone to lodge on a ship. Anything else?".

Galmud then launched into about six more ideas -- all of them related to The Cold, still. He knew what he was doing, by handing them ideas which were beyond their budgets and abilities. It was as if he was administering some sort of initiation rite to this small group. (And like I said, he did the exact same thing to myself and the other recording assistants back in '64.) "Testing one's mettle" is the expression, I think; the problem with that is it's not very pleasant to be on the receiving end, and the person putting you to the test doesn't end up reciprocating anyway, so it's doomed to be a one-way relationship even if you do "pass the test". CTTC ended up passing the test just by sitting there and allowing him to ramble without complaint or contradiction. At the end, again, they figuratively got on their knees and apologized for not having the resources to 1) take a train
trip to The North Pole, 2) take a train trip to Alaska, 3) film at the top of Mt. Everest, 4) film in a small town in Iceland, and whatever else he had in mind. He knew this beforehand, he knew it. Meanwhile they're sweating, thinking that they've just denied The Great George Galmud six times and that they've lost him and he's going to turn them down, period. I'm sure there were several nauseous and sweaty members of CTTC present, worried where their next subject was going to come from if Galmud were to walk away.

Mind you: He would've never, and I mean never, denied anyone the so-called privilege of interviewing, photographing, recording, or filming him. If he made it seem like he had the upper hand, it was only because he wanted to remind you that it was because of him, his persona, that you were drawing a paycheck.

He was disappointed for all of 2 seconds, and no doubt made a bigger show if it in front of them, but then bounced back with the idea of Internal Geography. He said, "Tell you what, here's a great way to get across my music and thoughts, and in the end, save you all a lot of money." And so he pitched the idea of taking the viewer through what amounted to a tour of George Galmud's world -- past, present, and maybe future. The big proviso was of course classic Galmud. He told them flat-out, "My only stipulation is that we do all of the filming either afterdark or in the wee hours of the morning before the nine-to-five workday begins." I wasn't there, but I'm sure there were a lot of strange furtive looks back and forth. Still, seeing that it's better to follow a man through the streets of a city than to assemble film equipment on the deck of a ship, they agreed to start at Galmud's earliest convenience.
This is where I fit in: Two places. He called me up, probably the next day at 4 a.m. (we were due to record a Brahms record in the upcoming month), and told me that he'd charmed (his word, "charmed") the CTTC people and that they were going to be filming him around the city, with him indicating points of personal interest. I said, "Wonderful." He said, "Well, I was sort of hoping you'd want to come along and watch on the sidelines, and perhaps figure out how we can weave my music into this whole thing when it's time." And this time I had to be upfront with him -- as I do have a family, you know, and I couldn't be there always at the drop of a hat -- and told him, "Look, George, nobody else except night watchmen and janitors keeps hours like you. I'm sorry, but I can't do it. I'll be glad to discuss any soundtrack ideas with you during normal waking hours, but I'm going to have to decline your offer. You can even show me the rushes, if you want." And he said, "Well, I appreciate your honesty, and you're right," and so forth, but I knew he was upset that I had the gall to actually turn him down. When he said things like "I appreciate your honesty," it really meant that he detested what you'd just said. Sort of like when he'd call someone a "kind soul," it meant that this person was the lowest of the low and beyond contempt. His way of putting a smile on things that had a current of negativity running underneath them. [pauses] I think that exchange really set the tone for our relations after that. [pauses]

The last time we discussed Internal Geography was through another early-morning phonecall, about a week after the world-wide broadcast. This time he called me at the studio, during a break in a long mixing session for another artist. He wasn't going to come right out and mention the film, but I could tell he was really dancing around it and trying to get me to
mention it, so finally I did...after ten minutes, which were ten long and excruciating minutes for him awaiting my reaction -- so sometimes I did have the upperhand after all. [laughs]

"I saw you on television the other night," with a tone that I was also doing something else at the same moment, that my attention was indeed divided. "Really? What did you think?" he jumped in, "What was your favorite part?". Yes, sometimes he just wasn't very subtle, but that's all right, because you could forgive him. The oft-used word is "child-like", which is sometimes not always appropriate to the occasion because it implies that the person has somehow regressed. Galmud never actually regressed, he just leveled out in certain areas of social etiquette.

I told him, after a show of considering one scene over another, "I think the best one, for my money, was really the final scene with you at the piano, just playing your heart out." He paused, and one could almost hear him pouting, then replied with a twinge of disappointment in his voice, "Yes, I thought you'd say that. That's everyone's favorite scene." As if sharing a popular opinion was a glaring sign of complete weakness or incompetence, and so, you know, I felt a bit put-off. He was passing judgment on my compliment, one that he'd fished out of me in the first place. So I sighed, "Then which scene do you think worked best?", and he didn't even take a breath or ponder the choice. He said, "You know the scene where I'm sitting at the kitchen table in my parents' cottage at Lake Roland?" "Yes." "If you listen closely, then you can hear me reveal one of my greatest dreams, and I never usually do that kind of confession." So I say, confused, "It scared you?"; I'd forgotten what he'd said myself, and I was trying to get him to repeat it. "Of course it scared me," he said. "I was downright petrified. It made me realize how naked I'd been during the
entire course of my performing career, that everytime I sat down on that bench I was being scrutinized and that people attend performances for the same reason they attend auto races: they're waiting for someone to crash." What could I say to that? Nothing, absolutely nothing. And then the talk turned to weather, we hung up shortly after that, and that was probably one of the last times I ever talked with him.

Alan Gregh, Film-Maker

...CTTC brought me on in the Spring of that year, with an air of rush-rush-rush about them. That's one thing I'm still trying to figure out, why they were feeling so rushed and then consequently putting an immediate sense of hurried obligation upon me. Still they were a sharp, educated group of young men and women who were passionate about the creative package, and I think they might've been up against an arbitrary deadline from the powers-that-be at the time. I think, too, that George Galmud had no doubt offered up pages and pages of ideas and I can imagine that he made it clear that he wanted to begin the filming process as soon as possible. Some say "pushy", others just attribute his attitude to "enthusiasm" and I tend to side with those who saw George Galmud's "spirited" side as being just an innocent and vibrant extension of himself. I for one was never annoyed or insulted by this gregarious self, for I knew it was a direct healthy contrast to his rather sickly physical self. To deny his enthusiasm would have been to cast him entirely into a sickly realm, and that would've made us mean-spirited.

My fondness for George Galmud's work extends back to 1959, which I think was the year after he became the first Western pianist to perform in the Soviet Union. His record -- the record, if you will -- was being circulated
among Our Crowd at the time, with the general feeling that this was classical music that anyone could appreciate, and I don't mean to infer that it therefore was a sell-out or a cheapening in a commercial sense. Quite the contrary. His record opened up a lot of eyes to those of us in the dark-clothes-beatnik set, that these rhythms were not so far from, oh, what Thelonious Monk was doing to standards. Oldies, as they say, were made fresh, and to do that with Bach! Well! And to a young man such as myself, just tasting many things of freedom for the first time, these sounds were freedom refined. To see someone as young as myself do that, then there was no room for criticism from our elders, because there was actually someone who looked like Our Crowd and who seemed to be just as [laughs] tortured, and yet you can't deny him praise, can you? Is it so easy to shunt him aside as a good-for-nothing ne'er-do-well? Of course not. His presence and the music as his shield legitimized our own youthful ambitions, regardless of how impractical we might have been -- at least we could point to someone who was doing it.

My own misguided and brief interest in journalism, as I was working for a short-lived newspaper then, drew me to his recital. There was an intimacy about this small hall, filled to capacity. It was more like a dusty run-down church, with antique wood desperately in need of a polish. In fact, yes, there were pews in the balcony (tiny, at best fitting 20 people up there), and the rest were a bad mix-and-match of fold-out chairs, stools, and rickety ones that you usually see cast out, broken up, on the sidewalk after they've lost their use, their function. Now remember: we had seen his face in the pages of LIFE -- not on the cover, mind you, for the younger upstart Van Kilborn took that honor; we'd watched him shake hands with the very important assistant to the assistant aide to the assistant aide of
Nikita Kruschev on those newsreels; and we'd also purchased that magnificent debut record...and this is all a long way of trying to tell you that we were a bit braced for an explosion of star power to grab us and shake us and catapult us across the room in a wave of awe.

[takes off glasses, overcome with emotion, wipes eyes, places glasses back]

Instead, what we got was...very unassuming. Beautiful, quiet. The whole audience, maybe 100 maximum, was trying to really mold the experience -- that is, before George Galmud appeared -- they were (myself included) falling into the role of the conservative, stiff observer, all 100 of us. And because this was an afternoon performance, which makes this picture all the more bright and probably increasingly more brilliant than it was, we were in awe with the absolute reality of the man that appeared in the center of the room. The sun came in from these tall windows to the right, a lot like church windows without the stained glass, and George Galmud -- it struck us, or me -- he was human to a heartbreaking degree. [pauses] An almost rumpled brown suit (no standard tuxedo), jaundiced shirt, coal-black necktie...I remember thinking at the time that the neatest, most organized physical feature of this gentleman was the small knot in his necktie...and now, I can only say in hindsight and romantic reflection, which I appreciate more [chuckles] each time I tell this story, that everything else about him looked hinged on the precipice of falling apart. Physically-speaking, that is. One was under the impression that George Galmud was trying to keep his physical shell together -- with a pill here, a bandaid there, a stitch there -- but trying to keep the pieces together with just the weakest thread, in a figurative sense...and if he could hold it all taped or glued for just another minute, hour, second, then he would be able
to make one more record or perform one more recital. So we felt very fortunate, perhaps in a subconscious way, that we were able to see George Galmud put the loose pieces together and make his way to the piano, in front of us. Perhaps all performers, athletes and teachers included, are like this; maybe that's what makes the rest of us observers.

I don't need to understate things by saying the performance was, of course, brilliant. One hour was gone like three minutes. We had watched him grunt and sing along to his own playing; we had witnessed a frenetic activity of gesticulating while playing; sometimes his left hand or right drifting upwards, as if going into a stray orbit, and then directing himself; a whole range of expressions, eyes closed, rocking back and forth as if a possessed blues guitarist from the Delta. And at the end of it all, when we didn't know how to respond -- for there was nothing then, maybe just a cough or even a ricocheting giggle -- he shut his eyes...set his palms on his knees, pushed himself straight up (the first time he actually exhibited any sign of physical strength), walked three steps to the center, and said in a soft almost supplicating voice, "I apologize for the lack of programs this evening. You were listening to the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, and I enjoyed playing for you. Thank you." And it was quite obvious that, yes, he had enjoyed playing Bach, but no, he did not enjoy waking up from the reverie and finding himself in front of a roomful of people who were stunned by his ersatz-sleepwalking. The applause, lengthy but somehow forced, did follow; George Galmud gave an awkward bow at the waist, as if weary and beaten, and walked off. And [laughs] we were too afraid or stunned to clap him back for an encore, perhaps sensing his discomfort.

The review I wrote, as only a young floundering "journalist" (in quotes)
could write, was bombastic; I don't have the damn thing in my archives -- I don't think anybody does, thank heavens, as that's how obscure this rag was -- but I do know that I failed to give George Galmud the proper praise he was due. It wasn't until after the piece had appeared in the paper (which few people read) and I'd heard George Galmud's record again in the privacy of my own decaying apartment that I realized my most ignorant mistake. It was over-analytical bastards like myself who drove George Galmud off the stage in the first place, I'm convinced of it. Bit by bit, relentlessly, we just wore him down to the point that he recognized the safest environment was in the recording studio...and then we spent the next 30-odd years trying to coax him out. When I say "we" I mean we, everyone.

I just remembered, too, the awful competitiveness of those times, and how he had suffered through the past two years' publicity ('58 and/or '59?) of the press constantly asking the question: Who will play behind the Iron Curtain first -- George Galmud or Van Kilborn? This prefabricated, painful match-up, as if they were boxers instead of musicians. That was the beginning of the end of George Galmud's so-called "love" of performing, I think. If you had to point to something specific.

I saw him next at The Fader's Film Awards in London, about 15 years later. My film (titled Diem, chronicling 6 weeks in the life of a Vietnamese child who has moved with her family to the United States) was nominated for a Fader, and so my wife and myself and a small entourage representing the under-budgeted film company found ourselves seated at a roundtable and wrapped in stiff clothing and sipping liquors that we would not have been able to touch outside this room. This was the dinner phase, the pre-awards segment of the evening in which they ply the future losers with enough
alcohol to blot out the sting of the impending defeat. Halfway through the meal, the assistant producer sitting across from me gives me a surprised look and mouths something about someone coming over. I assumed it was an obscure movie-type, perhaps a businessman, and I turn around to acknowledge the presence of this stranger, and it's George Galmud. He takes an available seat next to me, and of course I'm shaking so badly that I must put my fork down, lest I spray him with the contents. As my wife also remembers, he purposefully talked *beneath* the din of the noise level in the banquet hall, such that the conversation was just between the two of us, leaving everyone else at the table to see two men almost whispering to each other -- one doing it to defy the intense noise, and the other doing it to appease him.

This may have been odd, but he never mentioned my work. Not one word, although he could tell I was acutely aware of his output. There was a definite fan-to-hero relationship already erected. [pauses] Whenever I tell this story in the company of my wife, she tends to remind me that George Galmud and I did not exactly speak volumes between us that night. In fact, she lets me know that George Galmud's introduction was moody and self-promoting [laughs with a shrug]. "I heard the violinist on your soundtrack," he noted, "and I think we really must do a film sometime, some sort of joint effort in which I do the music, because you seem to have good insight." My wife is always quick to point out the superficial degree of arrogance in those words, and perhaps, you know, I agree to a certain extent, but it runs a bit deeper. You see, during that year, George Galmud had just contributed some 3 hours of harpsichord music to a major Hollywood film, only to discover upon the film's release that the soundtrack had been whittled down to only include 25 minutes of the original large offering,
and he was understandably distressed by what had happened. As a result, he spent a considerable amount of time denigrating the film, the original book upon which the screenplay was based, and the actors -- never the director, which still seems strange to me, because that was the root of his contention. Perhaps he thought that method of revenge to be more effective, and can you blame him? Anyway he leaves our table, and I look at everyone and say, "Did you know who that wa-?", and someone says (Oh, how I wish I could remember who!), "And I bet you'll never exchange another word with him ever again." Again, my wife says that I've manufactured this quote to connect events in a neat fashion, but I tend to disagree.

I could be wrong, yes, but it makes the next unexpected surprise that much sweeter to recall if I have one moment joined to the next. Seems like a good argument, depending on one's viewpoint, for Fate or sense of purpose.

CTTC's phonecall to me during that spring came at a perfect time. I had just premiered Lee's Way in the winter and was met with extremely hostile reviews, nobody wanted to touch it, and I was feeling doubtful and distrustful about my abilities to ever do anything remotely worthwhile and significant again as a film-maker. I really honestly believed that I'd been kicked to the ground, because I'd found myself situated -- finally! -- on the invisible rung of commercial potential, that I was no longer just making films for myself or a select group of friends. And I thought Lee's Way would be the perfect union of commercial and art, I really did. (Looking back, I took myself too damned seriously.) (For the uninitiated, Lee's Way is an epic story of a family consumed by alcoholism, following the course of a man's life; I used Homer's Odyssey as the skeletal frame, and I got destroyed by the critics.) So, fresh from being brutalized by
bombastic cultural arbiters, I told my wife, "Perhaps it's time we took an extended vacation to Easter Island; we pack the kids, passports, and several trunks of earthly possessions, and we just change the scenery." We had just moved to the United States three years before, and I was still suffering from the doubt that I would actually thrive here. My wife's answer, "No, a vacation won't sort you out, won't help. Stay and work it out. Something will justify your original thoughts or you might change, but you'll never know if you just leave town like the circus," and great rows followed, and I was becoming evermore this middle-aged teenager with [laughs] mood swings and prolonged sulking and navel-picking, until -- at last -- I get this phonecall, like a reprieve from the Governor, from CTTC.

"Would you be interested in making a documentary on the famous classical pianist, George Galmud?" Yes.
"When would you be available to begin filming?" When do you need me? "Immediately." That sounds perfect.
"Would you be against sharing co-director's credits with George Galmud, as he seems to have an endless supply of ideas and he has expressed the need to apply a certain amount of hands-on direction?" I'm fine with the possibility of a partnership, yes. I don't foresee any problems; after all, the film is about him, on him.
"Good. Well, we just want you to know, Mr. Gregh, that you were our first choice for directing this film, and --" [laughs] Ok, ok, sure.

Phil Charcoat, Biographer

First of all, before I sound too cynical, I just want to say that I have enormous respect for Alan Gregh. He's a harsher critic of himself and his
work than anyone ever could be. You will never get a dispute from me about how incredibly talented this man is, but -- and I say this with the full knowledge that much of the blame falls on Galmud's shoulders -- he had no business filming George Galmud. I think that -- well, I don't want to jump ahead of myself here, but I think it was a mutually-destructive venture between Galmud and Gregh. One, Galmud knew that Gregh would be very malleable and pliable to any direction, and so he used this to get Gregh to cater to every whim. And so that's what Internal Geography ends up being: a series of whims. And I'll even go so far as to say that the heralded final 25 minutes of Galmud's performance is pure unadulterated garbage, and does not show Galmud at the top of his game. Does that sound vicious? I don't mean it to be, really. I stress again, for the umpteenth time, that I have tremendous affection for both men's works. But it is a terrible thing when self-obsessed artists join forces, because who's around to offer an ongoing evaluation? Nobody. Gregh would just let the cameras roll indefinitely, on and on, hoping that Galmud would do something for History's sake, and in the process he not only drove CTTC into the ground with the amount of money he spent on watching Galmud stare into space but he also demonstrated how a film-maker and his subject can turn into lazy bastards. [laughs] And just for the record, I am not telling tales out of school here; I voiced my thoughts to both guys when I first saw the film on television, so they know where I stand, and there's no hurt feelings.

History, I think, was maybe a little kinder to Gregh in the end, because the critics mistook this effort for a home movie, thinking that Galmud had turned the camera on himself, and so they just tore Galmud up. I mean, if you read the reviews of that time, hardly anyone mentions Gregh. And besides, anybody who was familiar with Galmud knew that it would not have
been beyond the realm of possibility for him to film himself and then make up a list of phony credits. He did that kind of thing on radio all the time -- except with radio it was more apparent because his imitations or impressions were flimsy at best; you could tell it was him is what I'm saying.

I say all of this stuff, by the way, with a clear conscious because of the fact that I have a distinct memory of Galmud calling me up at some insane hour of the morning and telling me that he was in the throes of filming this and here's the whole thinking behind it and what did I think. I said, "You really want my honest opinion?" He said, Yes please, polite as ever and always giving the illusion of being a fantastic listener. I told him that he should have other people in it besides himself, because any 2-3 film gets a bit dull after awhile when it stars one person. He said he'd think that over -- or "Good point," which was his cloaked way of saying "No way, that's a rotten idea." So, the only crowd scene in the whole movie -- and what does it show? -- Galmud's feeling of mutual antagonism with people!

Do you know which scene I'm referring to? It's the one where he's in the museum, the Egyptian wing, and he goes into this little off-to-the-corner room where there are three sarcophagi and a couple mummies, and George is tucked in there pretty good with a film crew and he's trying to hammer some point across about mortality and how [laughs] these mummies are us someday and then [laughs] people naturally start trickling into the same room, and Galmud thinks, "Ah, they've spotted me," when in truth they probably just think it's some strange guy and a film crew; people can't help but flock to film crews; you see it all the time on local news, right,
when they get an anchor person in the eye of a hurricane and lo and behold 50 people appear in the background waving and holding up banners that say "Hi ma! We're #1!"; but of course Galmud's monumental ego made him think that he was dealing with a roomful of music lovers, this being a museum after all, an aesthetic sanctuary. [laughs]

So when the film previewed for a select group of friends and colleagues, naturally he summoned me and of course at the end, during the little post-viewing party, he wanted my reaction. "Please, Phil, give it to me straight," and you know, I thought right then, "I really have the potential to do something with this moment and just lay it on him and then see if he's listening," you see. But one never did that with Galmud, as I'm sure others have told you, lest you wanted to be dropped like the proverbial hot potato and never speak with him again.

I took a kind of middle road in my approach. "George, what do you want me to say? I'm your hired help, your living biographer, for God's sake. I don't think what I have to say would jeopardize our friendship, but I just have a feeling it's not what you want to hear right now, so why not wait a few days and then call me and we'll both have our thoughts collected." He laughed and said that answer wouldn't do, try again. (That's why I was picked for the job, because I was even open to the suggestion that my thoughts be revised.) I put my drink down, and gave him the full benefit of my gesticulations to prove that I meant every word:

"Look, this is not your first venture into documentaries. You've done -- well, I can tick off at least 8 films on you easily. But I think, if you observe those other films, you can see that they worked because you
relinquished a bit of control, you enabled the film-makers to exert a bit of their own influence onto the production and direction. There's nothing wrong with that. But what you have here, regarding this new thing, is just you. All you. In fact, if you're working with a six-member film crew, I'd go so far as to say that six people behind that camera were too many. You only needed one, and that's just to turn the damn thing on. Now you can't tell me that these kids didn't have a few ideas of their own rolling around, no? So go back and tell them that you want them to control the wheel for awhile; have fun with it; see what they come up with."

He said, "Interesting thoughts," patted my arm, and walked off.

I thought, "Right. Now you've done it. Might as well hand over everything you've written so far and pack it in," because I'd already been drawing a supplementary income for the past three years by working on this bio of Galmud, and after all I'd said, I figured I had unwittingly handed in my letter of resignation. But no. A year later, I was still under his supervision during the writing process, and the film never came up again in conversation until he called me -- he'd been reading the section on what he'd termed his "extracurricular activities" (radio monologues, film soundtracks, and documentaries). He said, "When you get to the part about Internal Geography, Phil, I have just one request and that is, please be merciful in your criticism. A few lines, perhaps, and not much more." And the whole analysis ended up being just that -- a paragraph the size of three fingers, in which I quote a negative review, a noncommittal review, and a glowing review (hard to find). Galmud was positively thrilled when he read the copy, and said, "Now that's history as it's meant to be written," which meant he felt spared from embarrassment. When the book came out --
well, let's just say that I take about as much credit for that biography as CTTC does for that film.

Elaine Montag, Essayist

Apparently I have the dubious distinction of being the one person that he offered to share the spotlight with in that epic documentary, Internal Geography. It's not that we were best friends, far from it, but he had felt -- like a lot of strange men did -- that he had somehow "discovered" a "worthy intellectual competitor" in a member of the opposite sex. The story goes that he'd read that essay of mine Within Confinement in '64 and he declared to a small circle of friends that he was taken with me. In retrospect, the essay (on contemporary gender-connected symbols) is hopelessly dated and arrogant; I used to paint, so to speak, in long brush strokes -- and coming from a woman, well, this made the literary critics and historians and whoever else emerge from the woodwork and dissect every sentence or phrase. And, for what it's worth, George Galmud was one of those people. I think that by the time he got a hold of Within Confinement, the whole discussion was rather passé and dried up, but I was still flattered that he'd taken notice nonetheless. I wasn't going to exactly turn him away and say, "Sorry, case closed, too late." Now usually when a strange man shows up at your door and says they want to "talk," you don't believe him; but that's just what he did. Showed up at my doorstep on West Eighty-First, doorman let him upstairs, knocked, and he was standing there with the book under his arm; "Let's go now," he said, and we spent a good four hours in a coffee shop down the street just talking and talking, and when we were done, that was it; I didn't see or hear from the man for another 15 years or so.
Then the phonecall from out-of-the-blue. Tells me he would really like me to appear in it as a sort of Greek Chorus, except a one-person chorus, and I can approach the role in any way I choose, and he kept reassuring me that this was not going to be a loosey-goosey Warholesque movie, and he kept peppering his thoughts with "Well?" and "Right?" -- "So you'd be this kind of omnipresent physical spirit in the film -- Well? -- and whenever I spend 15 minutes on a topic and then leave, you somehow appear as if you've been overlooking everything and then comment or add to it -- Right?". I enjoyed hearing this uncharacteristic giddiness in his voice, really, but in the end I had to turn him down. I was -- I'm not an actress, that's what it comes down to.

I've seen Internal Geography twice. Once on PBS, when it first premiered, and then not too long ago on video. I have to say, I feel both glad and guilty about the whole thing. Glad, because if I'd appeared in it, I would've been absolutely hated and I feel lucky that I didn't fall prey to that trademark persuasion of his. Guilty, because it was just him alone and I think he could've benefited from having a partner to either buoy or tone down his ego depending on the circumstances. All in all, however, the film is a self-portrait and it's always so easy to criticize a self-portrait on the basis of egotism -- but the same goes for any artistic/creative undertaking. It's just a lot easier to shoot down if it's one person stumbling around in your line of fire.
Excerpted Transcript from *Internal Geography*

(Scene: George Galmud, stirring a cup of English Breakfast tea, sits at kitchen table in the cottage house overlooking Lake Roland and the surrounding woods. Time of day is 4 a.m., on the brink of sunrise, when the sky is still colored in hues of shimmering blue. There are no indoor lights on. In a medium shot, we see that G.G. is illuminated only by the weak pale light from the uncurtained kitchen window behind him.)

G.G.: My parents no longer live here.

(cut to shot of G.G. standing by the sink, looking out the window, occasionally sipping from tea cup)

G.G.: I have been telling my associates for the past ten years that I will eventually sell this house and the surrounding property and simply move to the North Pole and start my very own puppy farm -- to breed happy and healthy dogs which will someday pull sleds. Even if they don't end up being purchased, that's fine too. [pauses] My associates of course don't believe me. They say, "You're a musician, why would you ever--?", and I would one day like to have the satisfaction in telling them via a long-distanced phonecall in which my voice is barely audible and cloaked by echo: "You see. You didn't know me all that well after all, did you?", and I'd tell them where I am, what I'd done, how long I'd be doing this...

...And then of course extend an invitation to anyone who might be interested in vacationing at the North Pole. [pauses]
GRATUITOUS VIOLENCE

A reporter called, not even two hours after it happened, at my room in the Hotel Dominico and said, "We just got the police report, Mr. Galmud, and I was wondering if you might care to comment? I mean, I realize it must have been a harrowing experience, and maybe, you know, a quote could help emphasize this?" I replied, "What to say? Off the record: I have received more telegrams and fruit baskets in the past hour than I ever have after one single performance. It's disgusting, I don't know how you people can tolerate this city -- me, barely. But nonetheless, as is my habit, I still enjoy a brisk walk after a performance, like tonight's, just walking past Antique Row and then over by the Monument. I used to think it calmed me down, but now I'm not so sure."

He said, "Well, given the fact that you had to kill him --," and I interrupted, "Excuse me, before this conversation continues -- and this is off the record again -- I don't want to hear the words 'you' and 'kill' in the same sentence again. The police confirmed it was self-defense, remember that. On the record: I was mugged, the fellow pulled a gun, I panicked, grabbed him, tried wrestling him to the ground while he tried pointing the gun at my ribs, and amidst the struggle I accidentally snapped his neck -- don't know how, but I did." "If we're speaking on the record again," he replied, "then I'd like to bring up the fact that you have mentioned your performance career is drawing to a close and you've made no attempt to really veil your disgust for the audience-performer relationship, and I'm wondering if somehow this disgust or anger might have manifested or concentrated itself in the act of, er, defending yourself against that stranger?"
"We're speaking off the record," I reminded him. "Off: what do you want me to tell you? That I enjoyed it? That I went too far? Let me ask you a question, if I may. How did you get this direct extension without going through the front desk, for they had specific instructions only to forward calls from family and business associates?" With a twinge of embarrassment, he said, "All right, please don't be upset, but I know this hotel pretty well, and having covered stories on celebrities who've stayed there, I happen to know that's the one room where they always house the VIPs, and I assumed they hadn't changed the extension since Juan Aguas -- y'know, the weird film director -- had stayed there, and as it turns out, they didn't. So that's how. Now if you want to end this discussion, or you don't feel you have anything to offer or add, then that's fine too, because I have a deadline to meet in under an hour." I paused. "Well?" he asked. "On the record, I am shaken up and disturbed by the event that transpired," I said. "But off the record, I rather enjoyed it," then hung up, and pulled the cord from the wall.

In the morning, after coffee, biscuits, and quick glances at the newspapers, I read through a stack of telegrams and letters (already!) that the bellboy had delivered at my request. Here are a few, just to give you an example of the kind of people that live next-door to you:

Mr. A from Staten Island, New York wrote on company letterhead, "Dear Mr. Galmud, on behalf of The Angry Citizens of Tomorrow (TACT), I would like to extend my hearty approvell [sic] of the actions you took. Even though the newspapers did not releese [sic] the race of your assailant, we are farely [sic] sertin [sic] that it had to be either a crazy nigger or spic, or some grubby yid looking for easy rent money. They obviussly [sic] picked the
wrong guy to screw with. We need to send a message, and I think the sickos and screwballs and nutjobs of the world heard you loud and clear last night. If you are ever in town, we would be honored if you would speak [sic] at our next TACT meeting, and here's my phone number, so feel free to call anytime day or night...," and signed with 25 ragged and indecipherable members' signatures.

Allen P, serving twenty-to-life for rape and murder, managed to get a missive out: "Watch your back, friend. We will not be silenced. We are reading Keats, Socrates, Nietzsche, Jung, and the Bible behind these walls, as well as lifting weights. And when we're released, watch out." All on a postcard, with a front illustration bearing the photographic image of a sun-baked woman peeling off her too-skimpy bikini, with an embossed glitter-and-red-lipstick kiss in the upper left-hand corner.

A mango producer and his wife from North Palm Beach, Florida wrote, "Dear Mr. George Galmud, we too have experienced similar hardship this past year, when our third-biggest country house was broken into. On that fateful night, in the pursuit of justice and fairplay, we accidentally shot our youngest son, Cleetus, who had awoken two minutes earlier than the robber and had already shot the robber when we came downstairs and that's when we accidentally shot our boy -- mistaking him for the robber, who was lying at his feet. It has been a trying year for everyone. Our teen-aged Merit Scholar and Honor Roll daughter, Candy, is also pregnant on account of a migrant worker. Please accept our humble offerings." A crate of mangos was included.

Respectively, the Governor, Mayor, and State Senator all sent their "best
wishes and support," along with over-done, hideous flower arrangements. I sent them back a telegram each which read, "Sir, Thank you, but I did not deliver a child in the back of a taxicab nor did I die yet. Nonetheless thanks for your generosity."

On the plane to Baltimore that afternoon, I confided in my Road Manager (I only have a road manager, not an actual manager -- save for accountants, stockbrokers, and the like), a young man barely graduated from his local Podunk music school and whom I pulled out of obscurity, "I guess there is a measure of truth in what that reporter said, but I wouldn't give him the satisfaction. One of my many recurring fantasies is this: I fill up the Royal Albert Hall, standing room only. Everyone is dressed in their best finery, opera glasses, foppish expressions, the whole bit. As they enter the venue, after pre-performance drinks which are laced heavily with some kind of mild sedative, the usher hands each person a stick of dynamite. Well, it doesn't look like dynamite -- it's much more fanciful, with ribbons and colors, perhaps striped like a roman candle or candy cane. There are holes cut into the armrests of the chairs, and attached to these holes is a complex maze of circuitry that leads to one big super-charged button. The patrons are instructed by the ushers, and then perhaps reminded gently in the program, to insert these sticks into the holes of the arm rests. Drunk and drugged, they happily oblige, thinking this is somehow performance art or a subtle form of experimental theater as invented by yours truly. I begin my performance as usual at the piano. Straight through, no chit-chat and fireside patter, just give them what they asked for, with no intermission. I get to the very end of the last piece -- literally the last bar -- and it's then that I purposefully flub a passage. I pause. The audience gasps. They've never seen or heard me make such a
horrendous error. I keep hitting those same notes, making the same mistake, over and over again, and a few people begin to murmur, and there's a general air of shock and embarrassment. And then, I complete the very same passage, but this time flawlessly, much to everyone's relief. And here's the climax -- just at the moment, the second, when they all get to their feet and applaud, I hit the top note on the piano. And -- BOOM! -- this last note is connected to a wire which is connected to the device attached to each armrest and dynamite stick. The only ones spared have been six-to-ten journalists sitting in a reserved box. Just like that. And the reviews the next day mention terrorism, but never suspect me. I issue a press release stating that I have retired from performing due to such a horrific trauma. And that's it."

The Road Manager dipped his pinkie into his now-drained scotch only holding melted ice cubes. With a blank expression, he shook his glass. "Mind if I get another?"

"By all means," I said.

On the plane to Sydney, Australia, my Road Manager became quite emotional after three vodka martinis, tears welling up. "I don't want you to think I'm being critical, George, because you know I, like everyone, think you're a musical genius. I mean, I don't have to tell you that, because you know it already, but what you're doing is not good. It's awful." "This," I whispered, "is why we always sit in first-class on these flights, because I can always count on you to start simpering like a schoolgirl if anything slightly deviates from your prescriptive notions of order. Now sit up, you're slouching."

"I'm just saying," he continued, voice a bit softer, "that it's become painfully obvious to me that there is no serial killer following
your tour. The police think so, thank God, but for how long? You're the one who's killing your fans; you're the one who's -- " I interrupted, "First of all, let's get one thing straight: fans, as you call them, write letters. They purchase elegant stationery, a postage stamp, and a fountain pen, and then they sit down and write a long revealing letter about themselves and why they love me. They do not barge into dressing rooms, they do not hide in the shower stalls of hotel rooms, and they do not hide in one's piano case. Now I know exactly what you're referring to, and I think you have to simply attribute that incident to just plain bad luck."

He rubbed his temples, said, "I'm sorry, you'll have to go slower with me. Which incident are you speaking of? I'm speaking collectively, three in all," and ticked off on his fingers, "There was the kid in Baltimore. The story, as I can only imagine it because I don't believe the papers and police report, was that he barged into your dressing room when you were soaking your hands. It's a privacy issue with you, and I understand, but by all accounts this kid was known for being soft-spoken and studious, tops in his class. You whip around and you stab him with a letter-opener, which you then smeared with his prints. My point is, that was one fan down. Yes, a fan, because all he was carrying -- and don't deny this, do not wriggle out of this -- was a stack of record albums for autographs. An attack gone wrong, they called it. But I won't dwell on that one. And then there was the Cleveland Expo, in the stairwell, when you pushed that janitor down the flight of steps -- why? -- because he called out your name and asked you to sign a program. He worked for 32 years in that concert hall, and you come along, and -- " I said, "He bounded up the steps, like he was going to attack. You have to agree with me on that. You and I both shared the same look of panic and fear, so don't tell me. He could've been anybody."
He continued, "Ok, so we can put him into the questionable category. You're right, I was a little rattled, initially, but we never got the chance to know because he never had a chance himself. Bounce, bounce, bounce -- plop. Accidental death. Report says he lost his footing, fair enough, but did you have to push him that hard? He never even got a hold of the railing, it was horrible." He leaned his head back and shut his eyes. "What about number three? You forgot to mention him," I asked.

He sat up. "Right, the third one, it's a real beaut," slapped his forehead. "You find the typical shivering fan hiding in your hotel shower; you lure them out with an invitation to talk music over coffee in the bedroom; you talk with him for five minutes and then go, 'Wait a second, I think I hear the house detective,' and convince him that the best way to dodge arrest and scandal is to hide in your steamer trunk, the one which holds all of your compositions-in-progress. Is that sick or what? Of course there was no detective. The trunk automatically locked, and you went off to a performance. When you come back afterwards, several hours later, you have the audacity to ring the cops and tell them you discovered a wayward fan who must've hid and suffocated in your trunk while you were out. Handwringing, tears, bullshit, and everyone asking you if you're the one who's alright, never mind the kid being shlepped off in a bodybag. And then," leaned into me, "it gets better because the papers want a comment from me, your chief roadie, and all I can do is utter some contrived phrase about being shocked and stunned and -- quote -- quite upset given the circumstances -- unquote. So, you're wondering because I can tell by the look on your face, what am I going on about. And I guess, George, the big question rolling around in my mind is: Why? Because if you can answer that, I mean really well and full of flowery logic, then perhaps -- just maybe -- I can begin to see things from your perspective. So, here it is again,
George, on a platter: Why?"

I jabbed an index finger into the middle of his chest, and planted it there. He jumped at the contact, almost spilling his drink. I thrust my face into his. "Because," I began, almost feeling sick, "it is a debasement and defilement of my work, the translation of a master's divine composition, when I am confronted by a stranger, in any city in any private hotel room, whose first words of introduction amount to a plea to fuck or be fucked...Do I make myself clear?"

Shortly after that I spent a week in a totalitarian country, the last leg of an interminable tour. The Leader and police escorts insisted I was too famous to be chaperoned around their country, and although they regretted that I would be unable to see their historical sites of interest (expired Leaders' tombs and endless towering statues), they felt it was better if I remained in one location. So when I wasn't performing in their grand opera house, I spent my free time in a garish kitsch-ridden hotel room that resembled an efficiency apartment. The refrigerator was well-stocked (I was expected to make my own meals, as they were worried about disgruntled cooking staff poisoning me), and the piano (an upright, as if I were a honky-tonk pianist in a whorehouse) was weathered and out-of-tune. Needless to say, I was not happy, and my Road Manager had little contact with me during this time, except for meetings at the concert hall, because the police escorts had separated us.

On the third day during the long boring afternoon, while I was chopping onions for a make-shift stew, a Reporter from the government-censored newspaper (PUCHVIK, The Paper of The Republic and The People) unexpectedly visited me. I needed to shake myself from boredom's grip; he needed a story. I thought I gave him the Quote of The Century when I told
him in answer to a mundane question about technique, "I think one sometimes derives technique from different sources. To say that technique is something manicured, disciplined, and chiseled from stone is an erroneous presupposition. Technique, or style if you will, can be entirely spontaneous and/or dependent on more recent surrounding circumstances. For instance, I've been feeling a submerged sense of bloodlust lately," and stopped to explain or translate the concept of bloodlust for a moment when he raised his eyebrows, but picked up from there, said, "If I may be candid, I will tell you straight away that the thought of killing -- be it with my bare hands or a weapon -- has crossed my mind. Can there be any greater release from frustration?"

The Reporter’s story came out the next day, and the entire article was practically lifted from the bland bio in my press kit, without any reference to the fact that he'd interviewed me for two straight hours on the previous day.

While reading that morning edition of PUCHVIK over motor-oil-style coffee (if only they’d had an adequate grinder) and day-old danish-look-alikes, my Road Manager popped in. I made no effort to disguise the fact that I was still wearing pajamas at 11:30 in the morning, no effort to put forth my usual tidy image. I offered him a seat and an especially strong cup; he smiled nervously and accepted the quiet offer.

"Couldn't help notice you're reading their paper," he mumbled, pointing with a herky-jerk stab.

I paused. "Oh, that? Did the article put you off? I know how you like to be informed, to put a bit of spin or finesse atop the printed word. But you've got to keep in mind, my friend, that you were not hired to play
Press Agent." He interrupted, "It's not about that. The piece was fine -- well, you know, more than fine -- the reporter did his homework and lifted most of it, so you're safe. What you won't read in there is something that I had to tell you -- why don't you sit down first?" I smiled, nodded, first poured myself a warm-up, then sat across from him. "Well?"

He cleared his throat, an exaggerated clearing, and went on, as if charging ahead, "You're a big boy; you no doubt read the trade papers, so you're well aware of the fact that as your tour comes to a close here, Van Kilborn will be kicking off his world tour here," and he stopped to suck in his breath, waiting for a potentially irate reaction. When I gave no expression to what he'd said, the Road Manager blurted, "Any - any thought to that?" I shook my head, "Who's Van Kilborn?"

He put a hand to his forehead and groaned, "Don't, please, don't do this, George. No games, not right now anyway, please. So yes, let's roll from the premise that you know Van Kilborn. Should I pepper that acknowledgment with insults and cracks? No? Fine. Because here's the part where you have to really be the bigger person, if only because you're older by a good eight years -- making you the elder gentleman in the world's eyes. So listen up," his voice dropped to a concentrated whisper, "The Leader here has been griping to the Minister of State Arts that he is suffering from insomnia. Serious insomnia. The Leader has always, apparently, suffered from one form of sleep disorder or another. First it was narcolepsy -- although now I'm uncertain as to whether or not you'd classify that as a 'sleep disorder' but you know what I mean -- and then that went away, but was soon replaced by sleepwalking. He confided to this Minister of Arts that he must've put on at least 30 to 40 pounds through unconscious midnight strolls to the icebox, but on the other hand his sex life also improved as he found himself sometimes in the various bed
chambers of the female hired-help on any given night -- but between you and me, I think that last part is bull, manufactured to cover up his expanding waistline and decreased libido and appeal -- besides, why wouldn't he sometimes find himself in the bed of a butler? Yeah, that last bit is suspect."

I leaned back, pressed my palms together, my mock-prayer stance. He took the cue, "Right, here it is: he wants someone to write a short musical score that will act as a sleep-aid -- which will keep him asleep even after the last note is played."

"A lullaby?" I smiled. "He wants me to write a lullaby?"

His eyes wandered. "Not exactly. He wants someone to -- Listen, you know how The Leader is, right? He's a crass blowhard and he enjoys a bit of sport at someone's expense, and he likes being on the sidelines clapping like one of those insipid wind-up toy monkeys with the cymbals -- oh Christ, here it is: He has suggested that you and Van Kilborn compete for the honors; that you both write your individual scores, then The Leader summons The Minister of State Arts and The State Arts Symphony Orchestra around his bedside, and whatever piece works, then that's the one that takes The Czar's Golden Chalice and the glory, etcetera." His eyes stopped wandering, but still did not meet mine. "What say you, George?"

I grabbed my bathrobe from the back of the chair, slipped it on as if wearing holy vestments, and resumed my sitting and staring position. From On High, as they say.

Van Kilborn arrived just as I had requested. Three hours after my performance, alone, back at my room. He knocked -- three even, polite raps -- and I called out that the door was unlocked, he entered, and took his place among the set-up. I sat in an easy chair, obscured by shadows, with a
pistol between my legs pointed at him. He took his place, slowly and unsuspectingly, at the opposite chair, with champagne and fresh fruit served on a small adjacent table. "Please, sit."

"I see the lighting fixtures in your accommodations are just as primitive as in mine," he said, going right for the pre-filled champagne glass. "Mr. Galmud, I -- first off, understand, this is an incredible honor, to be in your presence. I mean, well look at me -- here I am sharing fine champagne with one of the masters! Who would've thought? Me? I would've never, not in a million years, thought this day would arrive, especially back in Mansfield, Ohio in my parents' small brickhouse on a hot summer afternoon, exiled at the piano with a grumpy forgettable instructor, emitting painful scale after scale -- it's so much to absorb, Mr. Galmud, so I hope you'll understand I'm just very bowled over by this moment, now."

"Quite all right," I replied. "I notice you did a fine job of removing most of the ticker-tape from your hair."

He looked surprised, running a hand through his thick curly and dark locks, then laughed, "Oh I see, I thought you were being -- yes, I take a lot of ribbing from friends and family about that -- as if all I ever do is sit in the back of convertible Cadillacs and wave. No," chuckled, "that was a one-time deal, and clumsily cooked-up by my promoter, too, I might add. I said flat-out, you know, What business does a nerdy classical pianist have in a Lindbergh-style parade? I didn't fly around the world! And my promoter, since fired I should mention, goes on about coverage and LIFE magazine and Pathemarque Newsreels, so I figured I had nothing to lose. But you're a very funny man, Mr. Galmud. And I want you to know, I agree one-hundred percent with your philosophy about the performing artist..."

"And what philosophy is that?" I asked. "Please refresh my feebled memory."
"The one about," he gulped from his glass, a sloppy swallow, "how the artist should never debase him-or-herself, to avoid the intense crispy glare of the spotlight which turns one's skin into a leathery texture after prolonged exposure -- I'm of course paraphrasing, and I regret that I can't recall the publication in which this appeared, but it was one of the biggies. Are these truffles for me, too?" I nodded as he popped one into his mouth, barely waited for my answer. "I just gotta hand it to you, sir, about how you're able to play the recluse in the spotlight -- not many do it with such success or class, but you make it look easy." He raised his glass to toast me at that, and because I lacked a glass and accompanying treats, I merely mimicked the gesture, and in that fashion, we toasted.

"Do you know why you're here?" I asked. That seemed to sober him up a bit, for he became conscious of his appearance, and made certain the knot in his tie was square and straight, and he corrected his posture.

"Yes," he answered, "and I'd like to mention right here and now, for the record so to speak, that I am appalled by The Leader's proposition. Such competitiveness should be left in the sports arena, among wrestlers or boxers. We, you and I, are artists. This is not a revelation to you, what I'm saying, but I want you to know that I have told my manager, press agent, and The Minister of State Arts, who in turn might muster up the courage to relay my opinion to his Leader. My point is, this all leaves me a bit uncomfortable. If we decline, then I keep harboring the fear that we won't be allowed to leave, ever; and if we accept, what kind of precedent or tone do we set for artists around the world?"

I put the gun in back of me, into the cushion, and leaned forward so he could make out my facial features in the dim light. He could see that I was gripped by a sudden flush of sadness, as I cupped my face with both hands and emitted halting sobs. He rested a hand on my shoulder, such deep
concern in his voice making me all the more upset, "What is it, my friend?"

"You, this -- the whole thing. Oh Van, I must confess that I brought you up here on false pretenses. I'm a wicked, hollow man, unworthy of anyone's attention or sympathy," and made a feeble attempt to brush his hand away, but he replanted it. "My original plan was to get you up here -- that part easily accomplished, as you can see -- and then to stuff you like some unsuspecting child in a Brothers Grimm tale, with the ultimate intent of throwing a tremendous scare into you -- a fright that would make you want to give up recording and performing all together!"

He gently laughed, "Surely you're not as bad as all that, maestro. You possess a divine soul; you're a world-renowned gentleman. You command the love and -- " I interrupted, attempting to remove his hand again, "Stop! Please! If you only knew the depths of my-my -- "

Kilborn then took my face in his hands and looked me in the eye. "You must stop this, Mr. Galmud. Now as far as you and I stand, I forgive you for any ill will you might've had towards me."

I sniffed, wiping tears away. "You...forgive me? You do?"

"Yes, sir," a tissue put into my hands, "now I think your prolonged captivity in this apartment has begun to finally get to you. What say we stroll the city and talk this collaboration through?"

I gave him a weak smile of humility. "I'd like that. I'd like that very much. But how shall we get about unescorted? They won't like us wandering about alone."

"We just won't draw attention to ourselves," he replied, "and we'll blend right in."

And as I put on my overcoat and made for the door with Van Kilborn in tow, I felt the cool metal nub on my neck.
"On second thought," he whispered in a robust growl, "why don't we just stay in? I've got plenty of composition paper for you to write a decent score."

The barrel felt as if it had taken root in my spine.

"I...am incapable of writing original music," I replied, throat muscles clenching tighter, still not turning around. "My inability to write...I thought it was the most poorly-kept secret in the industry...I thought everyone knew."

"But in my opinion," Van Kilborn said, "I think you're selling yourself much, much too short. Now please, take a seat. It has always been my secret desire to see a true genius at work."

I have no problem admitting, as some people might, that my family descended or ascended from slow, sightless creatures. I think most people can agree on that point, true?, and it's not until we reach the disputed crossroads of evolution -- that is, Big Bang/God/Sea/Ape -- that we potentially disagree. The slow, sightless creature in my family (whom we can call Galmud The First, or simply The First) was the first to think and even to say anything; a staggering thought, no doubt. A typical life span for The First and his or her offspring was understandably short, but rich in thought: "It's going to occur. Any moment. It's happening. Right now. Then. Just then. It did, it happened -- what did? Did you feel that? Please, someone, tell me in your own words what happened from beginning to end, except tell me slowly and leave nothing out. The story was about me, correct? But who else was involved? Did you get a quote, snap a photograph, draw an illustration or sketch, record the Other's voice?"

And in the time it took for The First to intellectualize his brush with death or danger (a Bigger creature had bumped into him), he became the target of another Bigger creature and was swallowed up. Leaving nothing but a question mark embodied in a string of bubbles lazily climbing to the surface of that particular swamp. If you begin to think of your own family history in terms of these humble origins, don't feel embarrassed; I repeat, there's absolutely no shame in having descended or ascended from slow, sightless creatures.

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On the day that my father met my mother: his boss -- a meaty and imposing individual compared to my retiring father -- walked into his office and
began talking in a certain tone of voice that everyone had used when addressing Edgar Galmud. How to explain? People would begin talking, and Edgar would drop what he was doing. A man leading a life between interruptions. At that moment, however, he was re-typing someone-else's words on a petulant military-green Royal typewriter. I can safely say (pardon the lack of parentheses back there) that my father was a first-rate typist, able to burn his way through uncountable ribbons in a week. But his boss: "Eddie, can I have a moment?", and the typing stopped, and my father -- already looking ten years older than he should, with smooth balding head and tired-oh-so-tired eyes -- nodded. "Eddie," and I should note here that only strangers with a brash sense of familiarity would refer to my father by that moniker, "the copy is mounting up, and maybe this is just an unusually busy week or not, but my question to you is: can you handle this?" I can handle this, he thought, as I've been handling it for the past eight years, which includes six years before you became my boss. But Edgar blinked (the kind of face that betrayed no emotion), "I certainly can." "Because what I'm trying to say is," the boss went on, "I see no problem in bringing someone to help you out -- and this is a big office, so if you ever felt like you needed an extra hand to share the load, then...," and my father -- a man who never dove feet-first or head-first into any conversation -- interrupted, "I'm fine. Really. I enjoy the privacy, and even moreso I enjoy just getting down to work." And for the first time, perhaps in documented history, my father performed an act of defiance by cracking his knuckles and continuing to type. There was a blizzard then of Chik-Chik-Chik-Chik-Chik-Chik -- he assaulted his boss with the sound and literally drove him out. Whenever my father told this same tale, he added that his boss had left a pack of Winchesters on his desk but was too afraid to approach my father again, so the boss never retrieved them.
What my father left out of this story, his sister Gretch (my favorite aunt, the most silly and book-smart) would later fill in, after he had passed on. Edgar finished retyping all of the copy at a break-neck speed, such that he was able to leave the office at 4 o'clock in the afternoon. The boss, of course, didn't bat an eye because the work had after all been completed. My father, not a smoker, stuffed the boss's Winchesters into his overcoat pocket and made his way out into the city buzz and decided then that he would spend an evening doing things in an un-Edgar-like fashion. He stepped up to the curb, popped a Winchester between his lips, asked for a light from a passing kid, and sucked (h-wa) in (h-waa) the (h-waah) smoke.

By the time Aunt Gretch called him on the phone, about two hours later, Edgar had smoked a brazen four cigarettes, but his defiance did not stop there. "Your voice," she said, "it sounds awfully --," and he interrupted for the second time in his life, "Ok, Gretchen, there's no need to paint me into a corner, or back me up against the proverbial wall! Good Lord, you just have that way about you, don't you? I've been smoking, all right? And on top of that, I've been nipping from a pocket-size bottle of scotch, is that all right with you?, for I've had the absolute worst day of my life! And maybe it's not 'the worst', as I just said, but it comes close." Aunt Gretch, being the big sister to the end (although she looked considerably younger than him), took the situation in hand.

"Then tell me, Edgar, does this seem like the logical solution to you? Yes, no? Because you should understand right here and now that you will inevitably encounter another bad day, and then you shall dub that one 'the worst' too, and before you know it, your calendar will become nothing but a series of worst days," she said. "But look at me," he whined. She replied, "I am, Edgar. I am looking at you, in a manner of speaking. And I'm going to tell you something, so listen carefully: Shave, shower, and
put on your tuxedo, for we're going to see the symphony this evening. Also, I suggest brushing your teeth several times and bring chewing gum, as we don't want to be offending people with your smoke-and-scotch breath."

"Anything else?" he snapped, albeit weakly. "Have you eaten yet?"

She knew that he hadn't eaten a thing, even though he lied and said he had, which is why she had a corned-beef sandwich wrapped in wax paper when she met him in front of the Symphony Hall downtown. "Eat it out here," she insisted, and so she waited patiently while he took slow, weary bites as evening traffic buzzed past both ways.

They were among the first to arrive, only a scant few besides staff meandering around; at Edgar's insistence, they planted themselves in the small bar-lounge area. Coffee for her ("One of us has to stay awake to applaud," she smirked), and two glasses of white wine for him. They spent the first ten minutes just sipping, not saying anything, until Edgar seemed to crumple -- put his head between his hands, rested elbows on the table, and looked at his sister with all the lines in his forehead coming to a tangled knot at the center. "Why?" he began. "And I say back, why what?"

He sniffed, sipped, dabbed lips with cocktail napkin, then "Why today of all days was I so humiliated, upset and miserable? It's not like me, is it? I mean, I'm usually the one with enough morale and optimism to spare for everyone. You want the good word, then come to me; it's understood. But today, ah, it was as if someone had put a knife into me, right here," pointed to the back of his neck with a karate chop motion, "and the so-called reservoir of happiness just trickled out. Within a matter of minutes, that was it. I felt, for the first time, completely empty." His sister smiled, "Have you been reading depressing poetry again?" This made him chuckle, and he replied, "Who has time? And besides I'd rather be writing than reading it, but it comes back to time." He sighed. "Well,
after the performance," she said, "let's remember to stop by the drugstore and get a bandaid for that hole in your neck, all right?" and they both laughed.

They had good tickets, by the way. Second row, seats 1 and 2 on the right-hand side, directly behind the orchestra. Edgar always liked taking the aisle seat, either a ritual or idiosyncrasy, that's for you to decide. Then. At the moment: Gretchen placed her green shawl on the back of her chair, said, "About a half-hour til; where is everybody? I guess it'll give us plenty of time to read our programs. Did the usher give you one or two, Edgar? Because if she only gave you one, then would you be a dear and -- ," but my father had stopped listening to her.

He was in the middle of removing his heavy black wool overcoat, when he stopped and turned around and surveyed the symphony hall behind him, beginning from the opposite side. "Looking with intent," my aunt would later crack. People taking off coats, taking seats, flipping through their programs, whispering into each other's ears, guffawing, gesturing to someone they knew several seats behind or in front of them -- all with the background music of a cellist tuning. And his eyes rested, finally, upon a red-haired woman dressed in a simple red evening gown who was reading a paperback; she was seated three rows up, directly behind his seat, in a reserved box with plush velvet green framing her. And she was alone.

"Good Lord, Gretchen," he whispered, "I've just seen the woman that I'm going to spend the rest of my life with."

My aunt, absorbed in his program, replied, "Please stop standing there gaping at some poor creature, and do take off your coat. My word, two glasses of wine and you become -- " But he interrupted, so she knew he had to be serious then, "Look! I'm telling you. This is the woman." My aunt tried to act nonchalant, turning to notice as if she hadn't, "Yes, she's
definitely attractive, but how do you know she's not with a date?" "I don't know, I guess," he answered, dejected at first but then lightened, "but what kind of date brings a paperback to the symphony?" "Your kind, I suspect," Gretchen giggled, and he found himself oddly replenished, with the invisible hole in the back of his neck healed. He absent-mindedly brushed his fingers against the spot, right above the starched shirt collar, and mumbled, "Must speak with her during intermission," and removed his overcoat and sat down.

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On the day that I was supposed to be conceived but wasn't:
He urged her to take Friday off, she did, and told her to meet him at The Sheldon-Dunn on Clark, at 9 a.m. He'd be running a bit late, he said, but just get the key to room 13B and he'd meet her there with champagne and the reddest roses anywhere in the city. "Don't worry," he told her, "it's a respectable place, and besides we are newlyweds -- just flash 'em the ring -- and this is sort of a honeymoon for us, in a way. Just tell 'em your husband is on the way, and they'll straighten up."

At 9 a.m. sharp, she arrived with a small suitcase and purse. Her exaggerated pen-strokes with her left hand made it more than obvious that she was a married woman. "Congratulations," the clerk said, and startled she replied, "Oh?", and then realized what he meant and thanked him. "Need a hand with that suitcase, ma'am?", but she shook her head with a soft smile and made her way upstairs.

At 9:45 a.m. or thereabouts, the perfume had begun to lose its strength and the city fumes beneath had risen. She tried resting on the bed in a variety of ways, but none seemed to work. Smoothing the wrinkles on her cream-colored slip, she thought of her mother and wondered what it had been like back then with a new husband. But she didn't care for thoughts of
her parents just then, for he could be arriving at any moment, so she propped her pillow lengthwise against the wall and sat up and did the newspaper crossword she'd kept in her purse.

One hour later, she found herself stuck. 15 Down, a three-letter word for smoked salmon. Also, 68 Down, Go aimlessly, six letters. "I'm awful at these things," she thought. "I don't know why I even bother with them. Everytime I attempt one, I discover I'm just stupider -- more stupid? -- than I ever realized. I just want you to realize, Edgar, that I'm not the woman you think you've married. I'm not. Oh no...I guess I'm not."

Another hour then lapsed, and she had removed her clothing in a futile attempt to capture or kindle a sense of impending sensuality. She'd moved the easy chair from the corner and pushed it toward the window, just close enough to get a view of traffic and movement below, but not so that she'd be so completely exposed. As she sat there, naked, it came to her that "I haven't a thought in my head now. I should be thinking something about him, or us, but-- but all that comes to me is this chair appears to be missing a cushion, and oh yes, the slip covers as well. And also think that a cigarette would be the perfect thing to have right here, looking out, like this. With a cold lemonade, pink, perhaps. But I haven't the energy, the drive, to move from here." And though she didn't know it, the drooping afternoon sun was indeed making her a bit sleepy, and she might as well have nodded off if a knock at the door hadn't made her jump up and throw slip and skirt and button-up sweater on.

Through the latched space she eyed the stooped yet tall gentlemen in overalls and moth-eaten cap. "Yes?" she asked. "I realize, miss, that this is inappropriate timing, and believe me, I apologize, but I've gotta get in to bleed your radiators." She didn't answer; he set the toolbox down by his feet, as if to give him more space for explanation and gesturing, as
he'd only been using one hand before. "It's part of my job, miss, and well, if you're uncomfortable, then maybe you could wait out here in the hall while I just quickly do what I gotta do. Is that fair", he asked and held up both hands, "I swear I'm not the house-dick, if that's what's worrying you."

She unlatched the door with speed and threw it open. "I am a married woman, sir," she said, "so I wouldn't care if you were the house-dick or J. Edgar Hoover himself; I resent any and all implications. Now please come in and bleed your radiators." He picked up the toolbox and entered, sheepish, mumbling, "I didn't mean anything by what I -- ," but she cut him off, "The big radiator is right there near the window, and you'll find the smaller one next to the toilet. I suggest you do what you must." As he applied the wrench to the first radiator, being careful first to loop a small pail underneath the nozzle, she returned to her crossword but sitting at the writing table. She looked more serious and preoccupied, in a self-conscious attempt to keep him nervous.

"First time in this city, miss?"

"I'm a native," she said without even turning to face him, still appearing engrossed in the crossword before her.

"Me, too," he replied. The water began to trickle steadily into the pail. "Should be coming up faster than this," he said, "but sometimes it just doesn't. I think it's got something to do with the physics of the building -- depending on what floor your radiator's on and how many pipes are leading to it and where the water's going." She turned to face him, a bit more curious; as she did, he blushed. "I'm not a plumber, ma'am, so it's not like I know everything about the subject; I know just enough to get by, I guess. You oughta meet this master plumber pal of mine -- he goes by Nick, even though his wife calls him Nicky and we tease him fierce --
but he's the guy with all of the smarts. In fact, I should just someday ask him about how this whole hotel is hooked up; it would be interesting, don'tcha think?"

A half-hour later, both radiators had been bled, and he sat with her at the writing table, hunched over the crossword. He'd kept trying to tell her that he wasn't adept at such things, but she insisted nonetheless. "Please, just try," she told him. "Now what about this one: 118 Down, felt regret for, seven letters."

"I'm telling you," he pleaded, "I'm only good at the short ones -- y'know, the ones with like three letters. Cat, bat, rat. I was always a really poor speller in school, shoot, and I'm sometimes I have a tough time even writing checks, for the same reason."

But she shook her head, "Then we move on: 2 Across, Hits with the open hand, five letters. Think."

He raised his eyebrows, squirming, "Do you know what it is?"

She nodded, "Yes, I do. But I want you to get it this time. Think, hits with the open hand, hits with the open hand, what could it be?" He began to get up, but she grabbed his arm tight as if to pull him back down to the chair. This time he was becoming visibly upset. "Hits with the open hand," she repeated. "I don't know!" he choked, and tore away, grabbing his toolbox with a clanging ruckus and made for the door (forgetting the pail). Just as he placed his hand on the knob, she called out, "All right! Forget that one! Blank-and bear it! Quick! Blank-and bear it! Four letters, let's go!"

He stopped. "Grin!", and he did. Setting down the toolbox and returning to the chair, he muttered, "One more, then I really gotta get back to work."

Three hours later, dusk, the crossword at a stalemate juncture, the
maintenance man long since gone home to his own wife, and the phone rang. It was Edgar; she sat up at the sound of his voice.

"Where are you, dear? I've been so worried!"

"Tell me," he answered with a soft chuckle. "Do you know your B's from your C's?"

"What do you mean?" she replied.

"Check your door; I'll wait." So she opened her door, read the number and letter, and returned to the phone.

"I still don't understand what you're getting at," she said. "Where are you anyway?"

He began laughing, "Why not come next door to B and join me? I've only been here, oh, for most of the day it seems. I was beginning to wonder if you had forgotten or got cold feet or what."

"Or what," she said. "I've been working on a crossword, how's that for romantic?"

"Well, why not come over here where we can work on it together. I've managed to secure some oranges and cheese for my under-fed bride."

"You're supposed to have grapes with cheese, not oranges," she giggled.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"I'm positive. But tell you what, I'll come over there if you can answer me one simple question: What's a three-letter word for sweet potato?"

He said, "I yam shocked that you don't know this one. I really yam," and she hung up. Ten seconds later, just as he had begun to worry for a moment, he received a knock.

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A bit of shameless name-dropping to illustrate a point of some sort:
Whenever Edgar brought up the subject of the strength and longevity of his marriage, he'd invariably make special mention of the time that he had gone carousing after work one evening with some fellow employees. My father, who was not the carousing type, found himself terribly drunk and standing outside the front door of our family brownstone, trying to find missing keys. My mother told him that he'd have to spend the night sleeping on the front steps to remind him why he should not behave so, and with that, she turned off the light and went upstairs to sleep. In an angry gesture he peed on the front door and then began walking all twelve long blocks to the downtown district, namely the only bar open at this hour which would be the hotel bar in the, yes, refurbished Sheldon-Dunn.

"You look like you've had a few too many," the bartender muttered when Edgar wrenched himself upright onto the barstool. And in a cool moment of clarity -- that is, voice unmarred and no sign of slurriness -- he calmly placed a fifty-dollar bill on the bar and told the bartender, in no uncertain terms, that he'd like three martinis and that if he was served quickly and politely, the left-over funds would make up a generous tip. This sent the bartender into a bowing-and-scraping routine, in which he scooted down to the end of the bar in pursuit of the most expensive and impressive gin he could find. As the bartender scanned the lined bottles with all the care of a first-day employee, Edgar surveyed the bar and his fuzzy eyes landed on what he'd call The Technicolor Gentleman sitting alone in the corner, in a candle-lit booth, reading a folded-up newspaper and sipping from what looked like a scotch and soda.

When the bartender returned and began delicately mixing the ingredients, Edgar leaned over as if conspiring, "That man. Over there. Is he who I think it is?" Unblinking, the bartender replied yes. Edgar was bowled over, but tried remaining composed; he slapped his forehead and then
restrained himself by daubing his sweat-soaked upper lip with his handkerchief. The bartender set the first martini down, but Edgar was too nervous to drink right away so he wiped his glasses clean with the end of his necktie. "You mean to tell me," he whispered, "that the gentleman sitting down there is none other than Cary Grant?" They both stared for a moment, with Edgar really craning to see clearly.

"But it looks like he's writing in the newspaper," he told the bartender.

"Which means he's probably doing the crossword, you know, to unwind." Edgar was shocked,

"Am I to believe that Cary Grant does the crosswords? Huh? I mean, my wife does the crosswords! And you're telling me -- " "Hey," the bartender interrupted, a defensive edge thrown in, "I'm not saying he's a puzzle-buff or nothin', I'm just telling you what I know, ok? He's over there, unwinding, doing a crossword. Now whether or not that means he does them regularly, it's not for me to say, but yes, he's right there. And something tells me he's probably pretty darn good at 'em. I for one always thought of him as a chess-kind-of-guy, but what do I know?"

"Say," Edgar interjected, "do me a favor. Get him a drink for me, whatever he's been having, and tell him that it's from a really big fan of his." "Who?" said the bartender. "Me, silly! Me! Just say, 'This drink is from Edgar Galmud, a really big fan of your work.' Can you do that?" "You want to give me money first?" the bartender replied. "Hey, don't give me that. You see that fifty sitting there? Now let's go; I'm not that stiff." "Ok, ok," and the bartender went over with a single drink on a tray, receding into the warm cocoon of soft light at the booth, and set it down in front of the Technicolor Man. The two men exchange words, and the Technicolor Man called over to my father with alarming familiarity, "You!
Edgar! Please, join me. I'm stuck here," then appeared to tip the bartender for bringing the drink that Edgar had purchased for him.

Edgar, with martini glass in his shaking left hand, took a seat across from him. He couldn't stop thinking: Yes, it's him, yes, it's him, yes...

"A martini drinker, are you?" he said to Edgar.

"Y-yes, sometimes. Aren't you?"

"Depends on the company in which I find myself surrounded. Sometimes just a simple glass of milk can stave off demons, but I find that to be an infrequent scenario. So scotch and soda it is tonight. Galmud. Galmud. Say, that's French, isn't it?"

"I-I think so," although he'd never bothered to dig into his own genealogy. "French-Canadian, maybe. With a little English thrown in. English, like you."

"Well, all things being equal and some more equal than others, as they say, it's a rather unusual and smart name -- not unlike a rare bird with exotic markings. I've discovered that the longer I've been in this business that one's name, or rather the combination of first and last names, is really the divine mechanism that separates the Blessed from the Cursed in this world. It sounds silly, but take my original name as an example -- you do know what that was, yes?" (But my father shook his head, for he'd forgotten it -- he knew that Cary Grant had once been something else, but right then, it eluded him.) "No, you've forgotten? So, lucky for me then! And I won't bother telling you, for you'll eventually re-discover what it was in a gossip magazine. My point is, Mr. Galmud, that if the angels hadn't glued Cary to Grant, then we might very well be positioned in completely opposite stations. I could be clutching a martini and you could be sitting here slaving over a hot crossword, do you get my point?"
My father frowned. "So you're saying, I'm cursed because I'm named Galmud. That what you're driving at?"

"On the contrary," the Technicolor Man chuckled. "You've misunderstood me entirely. My point being that you are in no uncertain terms a happily married man, for one can see the shine and gleam so self-evident in that ring. Go home to your lucky wife, sir, and thank God that your name turned out to be --- er, what's your first name again?"

"Edgar."

"Yes, thank you! As I was saying, go home to your lucky brood and thank the heavens that your name is indeed Edgar Galmud -- a more happier and loved individual I've yet to clap eyes on."

Father shook his head. "She kicked me out tonight. Drinking. And I just want you to know, for the record, that I never do."

"I know, Mister Galmud," the Technicolor Man said in earnest. "You're a man who usually operates with a level head, and tonight that ol' debbil Gin got the best of you, as it does to all of us one time or another. Or that ol' debbil Scotch. Or tricky whiskey."

"I just want you to know," my dad gushed out-of-nowhere, "that you're as every bit sophisticated up there -- you know, the screen -- as you are right here. You know that?" And with that he thrust a cocktail napkin on top of the newspaper crossword.

"You'd like me to sign it, old boy?"

"Please. To my wife."

"Her name?" The Technicolor Man poked my father, who was nodding off. "I need her name if I'm to sign it." And for Edgar it had been too long of an evening, which is why he was somewhat disappointed to awaken later and discover a napkin which read, "To Mrs. Gehlmoot -- Always remember that your husband is madly in love with you --- Yours, C."
My father once had a vision, but he rarely if never spoke about it. He'd been taking his routine morning journey on the Staten Island Ferry to the city, when he began to recall Someone Famous, a writer he was somewhat familiar with, had jumped off a moving vessel and died. Edgar leaned against the rails and realized then and there that he actually understood what it takes for a man to jump off a boat, arms elevated above the head, and sink without a sound. The notion frightened and thrilled him all at once. Are witnesses necessary or not? He looked to the left, saw a matronly Indian woman in an unflattering sari, noticed she was engrossed in disciplining her five-year old son who insisted on standing too close to the railing; Looked to the right, happened upon a young couple whose whispering and craned necks reminded him of two herons in a tender lovelock. Too many witnesses. And he imagined the aftermath, five seconds after: the subdued Indian woman bursting into hysterics and clutching her child, face smothered in bosom, while the young couple would separate, young man detaching from young lady, he contemplating the idea of diving in after the crazed gentleman, she begging him not to and crying, drawing the attention of everyone, "Someone stop the boat! Get the captain! Tell him!". Is it a commonly held misconception that the captain is also a lifeguard, or is it just me? And he gave up that daydream, cut it loose from his mind, when he thought of his wife and the child-to-be. So his only concession to suicide was the wild toss of crisp newspaper and brown-bag lunch into the water.

He went to his office, and without removing his coat or hat, he typed out a polite letter of resignation, surveyed his office and realized there was nothing of sentimental worth to take with him, handed the note to his boss's secretary, and left. From there he went to the bank and withdrew
every last cent (a veritable nest egg, since he'd been working since he was
twelve), took the Ferry back to the other side, ran up all ten flights of
stairs to their small apartment, and told my mother that they were moving.
"Where?" she gasped, and he pointed to the photograph, circled three times
in red ink, of the cottage on Deep Bend Lake, tucked in the mountains of
western Maryland.

It would be there where my mother would emerge from obscure wife as
genteel Lady, famous mother of an infamous son; there where my father would
do what he'd always wanted to do, and that would be to recede. To allow
each tree, falling leaf, changing season and the Land itself to swallow him
whole without fear of judgment or chastisement. For when one is engulfed by
a Place and sometimes Time, people say it is only natural such a thing
should occur. And in return for seclusion and anonymity, he would offer me
to the world.
At one time, I admit, Hector Urso -- the Artist that you all know and love as that master of Neo-Modern-Platonic-Fauvist-Post-Modernism painting -- was a very good friend of mine. His status as "very good friend" occurred at a time in my life, before Fame grabbed me by the scruff of the neck, when I was flirting with the idea of actually spending time at a university. Hector Urso had the dubious honor of being my roommate for but a solitary month -- a span of approximately thirty days in which he began to amalgamate something of a style. It wasn't that he loved drawing and art per se, but rather was determined to cobble together bits of Things That Had Historically Worked Magic and then wrap the creation (style) in an aura of originality and imprint it with a gaudy signature teeming with bombast. While he tried on different hats (one day Picasso, another Dali, and so forth) and abused a long succession of girlfriends with a self-conscious brooding Artistic Temperament, I agonized over the whole concept of university education. Writing in a short-lived journal, I wailed by means of cramped handwriting, "What is education, after all, but just apes teaching other apes to mimic behavior?". At the end of thirty days, I left. "Remember me when you're famous, Galmud," Hector said at the time of departure, and then thrust a small oil-painting into my hands as if really to state, "I'll remember you when I'm famous."

Twenty years found Hector Urso (as famous as you made him), his wife Margo, and myself seated at a posh restaurant, Three Swans, tucked into the heart of the city. Hector had long since dropped from the platform of my consciousness -- perhaps purposefully so, I confess, for since we're both
in the field of Art, there's little room for creating mental shrines to others when you've got to clear the space for inspiration and random ideas. Margo had a certain charm about her, perhaps, in that she exuded the aura of sex and money (empty promises) -- a quality that rests just within arms' reach of vulgarity. Her laugh that derailed a train of thought, her off-hand comments that confused and stunned -- these things indicated that it was not Hector who had found her, but rather Margo who had set the trap.

"You know," Margo drawled in a pseudo-Southern belle accent affected more for attention's sake, "I can tell that both you and Hector went to an all-boys university sometimes." Hector blushed, looking to see if I'd be humbled by this arrogant beauty's insight; I wasn't.

"Perhaps you should lay off the wine until dinner comes, dear," he said, and he moved her glass two inches away from her utensils to illustrate his discomfort.

"No," she spat, put the glass back in its original place. "I mean, I said that because Mr. Galmud here has a difficult time making eye-contact with me. Don't you?"

I wiped my lips with the napkin that had been rested across my lap. "Ms. Urso, I don't think you mean to be making fatuous comments like that, now do you?", throwing it right back. Mind you, prior to this dinner, I had briefly gleaned from Hector that she placed intellectual pursuits beneath more materials ones, and she sometimes had the reputation for accusing others of trying to talk over her head. In this case, I used the word 'fatuous' to instill just such a doubt in her mind, for I knew she wouldn't understand the meaning. Hector looked at me sharply for having used a word not in Margo's vocabulary.

She struggled to bounce back, "Mr. Galmud, I wasn't insinuating
anything, if that's what you mean. I just think, you know, that you can
talk with me as well as Hector. I'm fairly quick too, ok?"

We all looked at each other, taking sips of wine to fill the pause.
"Ms. Urso," I began, but Hector interrupted in annoyance, "Please,
everyone, let's just -- before we continue speaking, could we all stop
referring to each other as Mister and Missus? I'm Hector, you're Margo, and
you're George. Got it? I just can't take all of this officious back and
forth." "Well put, Mr. Urso," I replied, and we all laughed. But the
levity was short-lived as Margo started right back, "So how do you plead,
George? Guilty of not making much-need eye-contact or what?" Again Hector
appeared nervous, "Margo, would you plea--," and she cut him off, "Hector, I
think Mr.--that is, George is capable of defending himself."

This time there was no mistaking my look, it was eye contact that
reached in and sat her stubborn soul down. "Margo, if I may, as an adult
individual pushing forty, I think it's safe to say that I've long since
passed the age in which one is constantly put in the position of having to
'defend' himself, as you put it. Anything beyond a certain age is just a
flagrant and usually useless challenge to my integrity and/or work, and I
don't see much point in always taking up arms. What's worse is I don't
understand your purpose. Have you ever heard the word 'coy' before?" She
replied by tossing her head back, stage-whispering asshole under her breath
before saying to Hector, "How long were you two guys friends?".

If given the chance I would've reminded her that this was not the
first time our paths had crossed. She'd been one of many unknown
girlfriends that Hector had squired during my month at university. I
encountered her when I was sleeping solidly (one night out of that entire
month then) and was awoken by a sound emanating from the bed across the
room. Loves cries that reminds one of an unabashed starstruck performing
seal! And since she had struck me as a seal that night, at the end of her particularly effortful performance full of hammy barks, I was almost impulsively looking for the obligatory kipper to throw in her direction. In fact, the more I thought about it, I couldn't decide whom I hated worse that night -- Margo The Seal, or Hector (that most sensitive soul) who actually said the phrase "Oh Fuck" repeatedly during the act in place of the more traditional "Oh God". I got to say none of this, for two fans approached our table in quick succession then. Fans for the Great Hector Urso, that is.

First the owner of Three Swans, a small gentleman who enjoyed playing the role of humbled peasant, complete with anxious hand-wringing, took a seat after introducing himself and asking our permission to briefly join us. He grabbed Hector's hand as if communing with the pope. "Mr. Urso, I am a huge fan of your work. All of it. We've got your coffee table book, and then also the Christmas cards that they made out of your painting Cycle Windward -- you know which one I'm talking about? Of course you do, what am I saying, you painted it," and slapped his forehead to show Hector how dumb he was, "but that's my favorite because I get to see it everytime I take my family to the modern art museum. Which isn't often anymore, since my kids are grown up, save for one in college but she's -- oh, and my wife has a touch of arthritis, she usually works the kitchen, and it's just a sad, sad shame that she's not here tonight, but she had to drive her old maw to Quebec for some tour of cathedrals up there. We're French -- well, you probably knew that," palm against forehead again. "Melteme is sort of -- well, it's not the whole name -- What I mean is, I'm actually Roger de Melteme. Look at me, I'm just babbling on, and meanwhile your bread is getting cold," so he stopped for a moment and pulled a passing busboy aside and barked for more
bread, then continued. "I'll cut to the chase, Mr. Urso: I have been honored countless times by your presence, with your lovely wife, in my restaurant and it's only been now that I've gotten the courage to talk with you. Like this. And I was wondering if you would honor me, just one more time, by --"

Hector interrupted, reaching for a pen inside the breast pocket of his ratty tweed sportscoat, "An autograph, you say? I'd be deli--". "Oh no," Mr. de Melteme said solemnly, squeezing Hector's hand just a bit harder, "Although an autograph would be thrilling, I had something much different in mind. Back there -- well, you can't see it because it's cordoned off -- is an addition that will be opening up in six months to expand the dining area. I've got one great big blank wall there. For you. Waiting for you. Waiting for Hector Urso to paint yet another masterpiece. A big white wall that could fit -- I guess you'd call it a mural, right? And in return, sir, I would grant you free dining privileges for the rest of your life, and your wife, and your family forever, so that generations of Ursos could dine here and see the handiwork of their great-great-great-grandf -- "

Margo stage-whispered in a snippy tone, "Maybe you should consider it, Hector. After all, he does own your coffeetable book. And you could eat all the free escargot you could handle."

To Margo, he shot back, "Shuddup," and to Mr. de Melteme, "I appreciate your generous offer. I really do, but," and as he said the word 'but' you could notice Mr. de Melteme's heart drop, more so when Hector began scrawling an autograph on the back of a coaster, "if I followed up on every offer made to me by bar and restaurant owners to paint walls, I would never have time for my own personal painting." In a weak defense, Mr. de Melteme answered, "But look at Leonardo, he painted walls, no?" Hector, in
a grand showboat gesture, handed him the autograph with one hand and with
the other arm scooped Margo, saying, "Ah! But Leonardo didn't have such a
lovely wife like mine to upkeep, now did he?". Defeated, Mr. de Melteme
thanked him for the autograph and the opportunity to ask the favor, and
left the table in a flurry of bows and scrapes.

When the gentleman retreated behind the kitchen doors, Hector
immediately turned to Margo and said, "That guy's full of shit. This is the
first time I've ever been in here; where does he get off acting like I
regard this place as my fucking soup kitchen or something? Jesus, the gall
of some of these people." Margo added, "You don't think he'll spit in our
food now that we've turned him down, do you?"

We would've almost resumed talking among the three of us, if not for
the second fan -- a young well-dressed man who had paid up and was just
about to leave the restaurant when he'd turned and spotted Hector. His
date, an attractive lady in the first blush of womanhood, opted to wait in
the lobby, as she was too intimidated by the idea of approaching a famous
person at his dinner table. Again, another self-confessed big fan. "This is
too amazing, it really is. I'm into architecture, but your stuff is -- it
speaks to me. And what's weird is that Christine -- my date, she's hiding-- and I were at the modern museum just three hours ago, and we saw that
really huge one of yours -- oh God, I'm so sorry, I'm drawing a blank on
the title, but it's the one with the gigantic old naked guy and he's got a
sign over his lips which reads 'No Lips' and at the bottom, at his feet is
another sign which says 'Sinking Ships?' with a question mark. And that's
just amazing to me, how you captured the whole idea of birth and death
right there -- you know, the idea first about being born head-first or
feet-first, and then it's a fantastic cosmic joke because what does it
matter in the end, right? We're buried on our backs, or at worse turned
into charcoal -- oh jeez, I don't mean to ruin your appetite here. I just had to say hi and, you know, I'd seen your face on this month's cover of American Artiste magazine, so that's how I knew. Oh jeez. Do you think I could possibly get your -- look at me, I don't even have anything like a pen or paper or anything, God, what a dork."

Hector to me, "Galmud, your coaster? I appear to be running out of 'em," and I gave him mine, and Hector signed without asking his name. Upon handing the coaster to the gawky kid, Hector said, "Tell your date that I'd be honored if I could paint her nude on the back wall of this restaurant." "Hector!" Margo snapped, jabbing him in the ribs with a well-placed elbow. The young man turned dark red, standing up, fidgeting, not knowing how to make an exit after such a tacky offer. Hector burst into laughter, which prompted the kid's own nervous laugh, "I'm sorry. I was being crude. Must be the wine. Forget I said that. I'm a happily married man with a luscious wife -- I proudly present The Luscious Wife, Ladies and Gents -- and I deserve to sleep on the couch tonight. So listen, seriously, good luck with your architecture. What're you interested in designing?" The uncertain fan now spoke in a near-whisper, looking eager to leave, "I'm most interested in working out a design for a tourist oasis on the city-side of the Bay Bridge, so it would be part museum, part classy restaurant like this one." Hector chuckled him on the shoulder conspiratorially, really revealing the effects of a lopsided alcohol-food ratio, "Naahh! No, it sounds like a noble idea, and don't get your feelings hurt, but you and every bright young architect or engineer like you should concentrate on designing plush and aesthetically-pleasing state-to-state tunnels! There, how's that for a tip? Instead of driving above ground, people take underground interstates. There. I'm giving you that idea for free, and if you make it happen, you get all the glory. Sound fair?" The confused kid
mumbled, "Sure," thanked him for the signature, and left.

Margo started up again to Hector, "I swear, I thought he was going to pee his pants when you made that joke about painting his girlfriend buck naked." Hector said, with expression now wry and unamused, "Yeah, well, I only said that because I immediately noticed him zeroing in on your chest, like radar or something, and you with the two satellites. I mean, his friggin' eyes were planted there, one eyeball on each tit. Little bastard deserved what he got. These kids assume that because you're an artist that also means you're into three-somes and snorting all kinds of junk and listening to free-form bullshit jazz; well, I like to be the one to set them straight...Jesus, where the fuck's our food already?"

Two hours later, during coffee and dessert, I had begun to understand the twisted relationship between a hostage and his captors. Hector and Margo had managed to always steer the conversation back to them. Our needs, our demands, with the occasional question about myself and my two-sentence answer to appease them, then back to them. Or to look at it another way: The man enjoyed painting verbal portraits of himself in front of others, a sort of more mental form of exhibitionism, figuratively flashing himself without pausing to retreat into the bushes -- so perhaps the metaphor is wrong; I meant streaking.

When the check arrived, I almost too eagerly grabbed for it, but Hector was quicker and retrieved it. "It's on me," he said, "but I just ask for one thing in return." He handed the credit card and tab to a passing waitress, not ours, and requested a warm-up on the coffee; she looked perturbed.

"I'm keeping you prisoner for one more slug of java, if you don't mind, because this is a real favor I gotta ask of you," he said, "and I
regret I didn't bring it up sooner, but I guess it comes back to the whole business-pleasure thing, you know." At the mention of the word 'favor', my mind raced towards dismal thoughts of baby-sitting; though they hadn't mentioned any children in their family portrait, I feared the worst.

"Anything," I choked, sipping down the cold remains of my first cup of coffee to disguise any potential adverse reaction.

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Several things I'm not accustomed to doing: waiting by a flatbed truck at five in the morning, drinking an odd-tasting drink like tea called \textit{chai}, and waiting on recalcitrant movers. And yet I was, the following Monday of that week. I'd met Hector at the outside of his brownstone in the upwardly mobile yet bohemian neighborhood downtown.

"The movers should be here any minute," he said, sipping from his Styrofoam cup. "I mean, I got it all set up, all they gotta do is just do what their name implies: move it. I've been up all night doing this. Wrapping the painting up, renting the flatbed, driving it over here, then driving it around the block for an hour and a half 'til I found this space, and now all we need is the movers. Listen, thanks again for taking care of this painting for me. You understand why I asked, right?"

"I think so," I replied, forcing another swallow of \textit{chai} down.

"I mean, yes, I could technically keep the painting here, but it's gotten to a point where I'm having difficulty staying financially solvent by insuring myself. I have to insure myself everytime, and it's become ridiculous. Even sketchpads. My agent and accountant, two different folks, tell me to get the stuff off me; \textit{The more you create, the more you're at risk of losing money}, they say. \textit{If Van Gogh were alive today, Lloyd's of London would own the world}, they say. I thought it was b.s., but since
super-doozer-Fame set in a long time ago, I see how true it is. The short of it, I can't keep the work on me -- for fear of fire, water damage, theft, you name it. I'm constantly putting the paintings out after they're born, this isn't the first time I've done this. But, you're ok with this? The painting will stay at your studio apartment for a few weeks until the fall exhibition uptown, and then I'll just have the museum's people move it gratis -- shit, they'll still have to reimburse me for this little hike across town. What was I say -- oh, you sure it's alright? I mean, I feel sorta like the long-lost uncle with the missing teeth and bad liver who emerges from your past and asks for a huge favor."

The movers arrived an hour late. Hector kept his criticism of their tardiness to a minimum (probably wise, for one swift kick of a workboot could render a priceless masterpiece worthless in less than three seconds). The painting, a work that measured 10 feet by 10 feet, was carefully wrapped in various protective layers of plastic, burlap, canvas, and some other kind of synthetic material (tyvek?) that appeared indestructible to all elements. The movers, two bleary-eyed bearded and pudgy drinking buddies by night, handled the painting with utmost delicacy down three flights of steps to the outside, where then they snugly fastened the painting onto the flatbed, as if the work were a puzzle piece that had been joined to its rightful position in the grand scheme.

"So how you wanna work this?" Mover One said, lighting a cigarette. "Don't bother with the Expressway," Hector replied, "because the sun's due up soon, which means you'll get stuck in rush hour."

"So you're thinkin' the bridge then?" Mover Two said, borrowing Mover One's lighter.

"No no no, definitely not the bridge!" Hector shot back. "One good wind up there, and who knows how good those cables are -- no offense, 'cause I know
you guys are pros, but just consider me a worrywart. Here's what: Take the Bayside Tunnel. Sure, it's a bit of a long way around, but at least the painting won't be as exposed. Does that work for you guys?"

The movers looked at each other, shrugged shoulders, "Yeah, fine. It's your choice. Our time's on your dime. We can take whatever route you want."

"Fine, so Bayside Tunnel it is. And Mr. Galmud here and myself will be following behind you in his Lincoln. Should you need to pull over, just blink your lights several times or wave, ok?"

I guess it should be noted at this point that Hector Urso, at least in relation to me, has one dominant annoying habit and that is the ability to muster interest in another person's affairs (mine, for example) only when he's riding in the passenger seat of that other person's car. And even then, he still manages to bring the conversation back around to him, which I suppose is a common weakness attributed to all humankind. Nonetheless, should you simply chalk my observation down to mere bitterness, just remember that I've had the same criticism corroborated by a few others who've begged that I preserve their anonymity.

"When I knew you," he said after a lull and fiddling with the dials on the radio to arrive at a Petula Clark song, "that is, when we first met, you didn't drive, did you?"

"I was terrified of driving. Constant nightmares of going over cliffs or worse, driving on train tracks and realizing I have no control. But then a forced ride in the country -- forced by my aging father -- turned me around. The first five minutes, sheer terror with anxiety about trees leaping in front of the car, but ten minutes later, I felt as if I'd been born to it."
The radio song came to an end, and the deejay rushed on to announce the weather for the tri-state area. As if to fill a small void, caulking space for fear of some kind of crumbling, we both agreed that the song had been an enjoyable listen. But aching to take the metaphorical steering wheel driving our conversation, Hector latched on and veered onto the on-ramp leading to Himself.

"Do you remember Tyler at all? No, wait, you wouldn't. He arrived the year after you left," he began. Tyler had been a petulant, mediocre student of the oboe. His sole basis for venturing into the oboe, and subsequently music school, was that he'd heard Ravel's Bolero and unabashedly admitted to Hector, "I thought that was the only piece then that could compete against anything by Little Richard." Hector, ever the musical dilettante and thus lacking any conviction or at least tasteful understanding, said to him, "Yes-yes-yes, I know exactly what you mean!", although chances were he didn't. Tyler had been one of those people with a two-sided ax to grind with the world -- one side based upon his premature balding and miserable growing up was perhaps justified, and the other side was based upon outright hatred of anyone who could perform better than him at anything. The footnote to that latter point would be that Tyler possessed a fierce competitive drive, but never developed any appreciable skills that would make him a valid competitor at anything.

Hector sighed, sounding more bored than melancholy on this account, "Two things, to get you up to speed, about ol' Ty: First of all, I discovered -- shit, I didn't 'discover' jacksquat, I was told -- told by Margo that she'd had a brief affair with Tyler behind my back. Well, where else? In front of me? You know what I'm trying to say. This all happened after art school, we're talking the period right after my debut show, the Armory one in San Fran, and then the hoopla, we're (Margo and myself that
rolling in it and the photos, constant press and praise -- and meanwhile, what never struck me as strange was the fact that Tyler was constantly standing right there through it all. I mean, I know he was a friend, but he didn't give us any space and he worked it so that he'd be there. I never thought it was strange. Not once. He went from being the most jealous guy on the planet to this fella who begged to stretch canvas for me and go purchase my very particular paints and supplies. Not once, me, stopping to question the insanity of this...this reversal, change. But always in hindsight, you can always fucking chart the coordinates as to the approximate time and place that your little emotional ship sunk. I can almost see it, like a silent film in which we're all walking slightly out-of-step. Tyler and I have just done a two-man job on an extra-large canvas, one that spans about twenty feet across at least. Margo comes in, pissed about something, I dunno, and she keeps screaming Amateur! at me without letting up, and what galled me most was that Tyler was right there. Again, just at the center of my private life. I told Margo to stuff it, I split, guess I went downtown and brooded in the company of some Pakistani beauty I'd kind of been seeing anyway -- she's a graduate student in Design by day and coffee-wench by night...and that's when Tyler stepped in. He thought screwing Margo was the quickest way to get into my spotlight, I guess, and it must've...

I pulled up to the tollbooth.

"Six-fifty, please," the old uniformed gentleman said.

Hector leaned across me, to him, "What? You kidding? Is this new or something? I know you've been charging the other way, but it's always been a one-way deal. This is ludicrous."

The toll-collector rolled his eyes, making it apparent that Hector had not been the first critic that had passed this particular kiosk. "Look,
take it up with the mayor or the governor. If you drive these roads, then you gotta pay for the upkeep," and as he said this I handed over seven dollars. "There," the fellow said to Hector while handing back my change, "your friend seems to understand the concept."

"That's what taxes are for," Hector snapped. "Taxis?" the man replied, confused, but I drove off before the argument could continue. Hector was livid, but thankfully not towards me. "It's people like that who've got no understanding that they're driving this city, state, and country into the ground. They just go along blindly, happy to be sheep, eating and drinking feces, watching six hours of television per night to massage their weary sheep-like brains and get them prepared -- meaning, suitably dulled -- for the next day. And it's why I...I, shit, I lost my train of thought."

"Well, since you did," I replied, "then tell me the other thing about Tyler. You told me the first part (awful) about him and Margo."

"Right-right-right," he jumped in. "Shortly after Margo told me, she went down South to visit her family, although why she needed to get her head together I'll never know. Did I ever tell you that she has her own publicist? I kid you not. I mean I love her, she's my wife and all that, but the woman does absolutely nothing worth publicizing. She doesn't create, doesn't do a damn thing except spend and take in everything like a sponge. A very one-dimensional creature, my wife. But she's got a publicist, so go figure. 'I'm going out to Le Madri,' she'll tell her publicist and that somehow makes a column inch somewhere in America. Her talent is just being alive and announcing it, sort of like what Warhol used to do in the last years of his life. You gotta admire the, uh -- well, I was speaking about Tyler, so I'll just give you the bare bones: she goes back to Backwater Mansions to be with her folks and katrillion siblings,
and I'm stuck up here to deal with Tyler. I was all set to really have it out, and not just because of the doing-my-wife scenario but also because of the fact that for every hour he'd spend actually doing work, he'd spend another hour in the bathroom of my studio blowing coke or smoking something; So I figured 'Enough' and broke down the door of the bathroom, him inside, and he wasn't doing any drugs at all, oddly enough! The guy was, uh, you know, he was beating off to some picture in the back of Architectural Digest, not my first pick. And I say the first thing that comes to mind, because I notice what he's picked for so-called reading material, 'What are you? Hitler?', because you know Hitler back in his pre-gas-chamber Vienna days had this fetish about painting buildings and houses without any people present in the picture. Right? But Tyler doesn't get it. He's just shocked, mostly pissed, getting his trousers back on, and he screams, 'Fuck you, dumb wetback-motherfucker, I'm part-Jewish!', 'cause he thought the Hitler reference was somehow a swipe at his race. Which it wasn't. And besides, he told me that his whole family had been Mormon, so I don't know. Also don't know where he came up with that 'wetback' crack, 'cause he knows full well I'm part-Chilean and part-Venezuelan. Creep. Anyway, he's got his pants back on and makes as if to walk past me, but no, he decides to tackle me, and my goddamn chin gets cut on the corner of the bathroom sink counter -- that would be sixteen stitches, by the way. We roll around, breaking shit, throwing pots and whatever we can get our hands on at each other, and all the while I'm saying 'That (whatever it is) isn't yours to break!', but he chucks the thing at me, and somewhere along the line he jams his thumb so that the bone is all twisted, and there's a cease-fire. We curse at each other under our breaths, because we're out of breath. The air is thick with four-letter words. Then I think it was Tyler who said, 'Think we should split a cab to the hospital?', so we went and in
the cab we sort of talked it through. Cabbie thought we were two gay guys having a major domestic squabble, but we both told him to keep his eyes on the road. I said 'Listen, Tyler, I thought we were best friends, and then you go off with Margo,' and -- get this -- Tyler says, 'I did it for you.' I said, 'What? Come again?' and he tells me that he'd noticed Margo had been wandering lately, flirting with strangers and coming dangerously close to affairs with just Joe-Blows on the street, so he figured that the best way to keep her at home would be to 'keep it in the family' and justified it all, to me, that he saw himself as the (quote) Worst Lay in Western Civilization. By the time we arrive at the hospital, I'm consoling Tyler and telling him not to be so hard on himself and that he's a nice guy and that he could have any woman in this city, just not my wife, and he'd say through tears and sobs and crapola, 'Yes. You're right. I know. I can't believe I almost fucked things up between us.' When what he really was trying to say, but couldn't, was that I was his meal ticket and that he'd almost lost the job of his life and could've found himself on the streets playing the oboe, badly!, for loose change. So what happens is, I pay both of our hospital bills and tell Tyler to relax for the next three weeks until he gets the splint off of his thumb, and sometime in there, Margo comes home and she's stretching canvas for me. Like when we first met. Romantic almost. Then: Our friend Tyler decides to top himself off in a really seedy bar -- I mean, so pathetic and seedy that you'd want to wear one of those suits that they wear to remove asbestos. One minute he's heckling some chunky stripper; next he's puking up blood, and the bouncer and owner are freaking out because they don't want the liability, and between seizures Tyler gives them my phone number. By the time I got down there, he's dead in the back of an ambulance and they say 'You know this guy?' and I say 'Yep. He's a self-obsessed bastard.' They say 'Was. Was a
self-obsessed turd.' and I say 'I said bastard, not turd,' and I just sign the papers and then later arranged the funeral and everything. His parents, Christians that they are, said 'Just put him on a Greyhound and we can take it from there.' Can you believe it? Like he was freight! So I figured 'Screw this', had the funeral service out at a quaint chapel in Little Neck, and it was about one-hundred-something people in a teeny Episcopalian graveyard saying good-bye. And when I say 'teeny' I mean that Tyler was probably one of eighteen other dead folks there, and that's it. His family never showed, predictable. Uh, other fall-out was that Margo fell to pieces and ran back to her family in Louisiana for health reasons, mental. Her dad's a psychiatrist, and he prides himself in keeping his whole cracked-up family hooked on one kind of prescribed drug or another. It's all so sick and sad, and I keep telling Margo to pull herself up and get off the prescription crap and just look the world straight in the eyes. But she won't have it. She just won't. She wants to be some sad-sack Saint/Whore that you'd find in a Tennessee Williams play, and her family just promotes it. Christ, the first dinner I ever had with her entire family, her pop tells me 'She's always been trouble; you sure you're up to the challenge?', and I - I don't remember what I said exactly, hopefully something brilliant and pithy. So, just to spite her old man, I wind up with a Muse who doesn't even like Art, isn't that something?"

I didn't know what to say, except "So, you actually broke the door down on Tyler? With what?"

Flustered, and looking as if I'd missed the whole point of his story, he replied, "I don't remember what I used. I want to say 'mallet', because it sticks in my mind. But it doesn't make any difference. And besides, it was my door to break."

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I don't know what I expected, but this wasn't it. This was too good. An hour after the movers (whom Hector paid an additional one-hundred-fifty to mount the painting) left, Hector and I stood before this massive painting. Four things in the room: Hector, myself, my piano, and this painting. Within minutes, I was so overwhelmed by the painting that the piano might as well have vanished, because that painting -- which became The Painting soon -- seemed to possess all the indefinable criteria suitable for considering it a masterpiece.

We sat on the spacious hardwood floor, drank tea and ate biscuits, and looked up at The Painting. Said nothing for a very long time.

"You haven't said anything. I'm beginning to wonder if it's any -- "

"Yes," I said. "Yes, it is. The Painting is fantastic. I'm just - I suppose I'm feeling at a loss for words. I normally don't feel this kind of - I want to put this in the most eloquent way without coming across as a fop, so I'll just tell you right out that your Painting has succeeded in making me question what I'm doing."

Hector laughed, pleased that The Painting had an impact. Impact, such a weak word to describe the feeling of standing in ankle-high water and then find one's self knocked flat by an unforeseen wave. "Really?" he replied. "But you're a creator, you make records, you -- "

I cut in through somewhat clenched teeth, "I've never written a piece of music, Hector. Never. There's not one composition with my name on it. I'm like - like one of those Medieval monks who sits and transcribes Bible verse onto parchment. But I'm not an author, er, composer."

A pause, then he said, "Well, I hope it's still alright to have the painting here until the exhibit -- I mean, I don't want it to be a source of -- "
"It's not! No," I laughed like an idiot to soothe his concerns. "I'm honored, flattered really, that you asked me to house your Painting. And let me just say, it's going to make the desired splash when you finally get it in the museum -- eh, when was that again?"

"We're talking about two, three weeks tops. Maybe even a shorter amount of time, depending on how quickly I can get these museum folks to move. You mind if I use your phone to call Margo? She's probably anxious to meet for brunch at The Durrer."

The first evening with The Painting was rather crippling. I tried practicing scales in the same room, but then it was as if The Painting had developed a voice of it's own and was drowning me out. Said The Painting in a voice that shifted from female to male, "What are you doing here? Scales? For what? So you can get limber to play someone else's piece? Your big problem, if you don't mind me saying, is that you've really got to become an original. What happens with musicians like you is that longer after your career ends, somebody else comes along and they play Debussy or Chopin with much more originality and flair than you ever did. And you get buried, forgotten, replaced. But you take Me, for example, and you know full well that they could put me anywhere and I'd be pretty darn permanent, either in the same room as a Rauschenberg or Johns, or next door to a Lichtenstein even. My point is, Galmud, that you've got to stop making soup and put a friggin' steak on the fryer, do you understand?"

I replied, "Quiet, Painting," and decided to check out a movie in the bohemian district, a film titled Diem about a Vietnamese girl and her family and their hard-fought struggle to immigrate and become full-fledged Americans. I generally don't like films as a rule. One of the last films I saw was when I was a child, it was Fantasia, and I thought (as I still do)
the hodge-podge of colors was simply too gaudy. But what disappoints me more than the film itself is the audience, particularly an intellectual audience at a so-called Thinking Person's Film, which insists on laughing or gasping at the most inappropriate segments.

I was at the point in this film where the director had linked various bits of aerial footage of the Delta being bombed and overlaid the mindless "Release Me" as the soundtrack, when The Painting -- a five-minute drive away by taxi, mind you -- piped up, "What're you doing watching a movie? You hate all movies, and besides aren't you the one who gets on his high horse about television too?"

"No," I whispered. "You've got me confused with Hector. He's the big moralist of the two of us. Now be quiet so I can concentrate."

"Hey," The Painting shot back, "I don't want to here a word of criticism about ol' Hector, you got it? At least he's not sitting on his fanny and watching a flick; he's actually doing something original, which is more than I can say for you. And remember, he made Me. And I'm gonna be the Art Sensation of The Year, I tell you."

I got up and made for the door.

"Where you going?" The Painting asked.

"Popcorn. Tell me what happens when I come back."

By the next evening, The Painting and I had cut a deal. I would move my piano towards the end of the room, so that the instrument would not in any way be obstructing the view of It. And to prevent myself from being too distracted, I faced the piano away from It so my back would be showing.

I was two hours into an intense and fluid session of practice, when Painting piped up, "Ok, it's after 11 p.m., time to cut it off and admire me." My concentration broken I turned around, "You don't understand, do
you? I'm a pianist, a performer. I'm due to go into the studio next month and begin work on another album. I need every second to perfect these songs. So I would ask for a little consideration." Painting chuckled, "Ho-ho, look at the prima donna!", then changed to a distinct growl, "I'm a Work of Art, you miserable hack, and if I'm not looked at all day, then I'm not worth a shit. It's like forgetting to water your plants -- of course, you don't have any, so the parallel is probably lost on you -- or better yet, in terms you can understand: it's like forgetting to have your piano tuned."

"Are you finished?" I asked. "Because as much as I enjoy listening to a non-living object give its opinion on aesthetics, I must get back to this," and turned around and played without hearing one single objection from The Painting.

Three days passed without any word from Painting, and by that time I'd honestly thought It had just returned to being painting, little p, an inanimate unthinking object. I'd put my three suitcases in the foyer, as I was waiting for a taxi to take me to the airport, and while I wrapped my scarf around my neck, Painting took notice.

"So," Painting said, "going somewhere?"

I turned to face It. "Do not, repeat not, start now. I don't need this," I replied. "I'm off for ten days for the Tanglefoot Music Festival in Vienna, Virginia, understand?, and I've got to have my mind on my work."

It chuckled, "Bologna, you're putting off what you have to do. This is classic avoidance behavior. Some artists drink or cat around, while others like you concoct so-called obligations that you have to fulfill. Anything to keep you from sitting down and producing some old-fashioned sweat and tears. Fine. Go to your Tanglefoot thing, whatever it is. Are you
playing in it? No, wait -- don't tell me, I can probably figure out the scenario: you're handing out trophies! I mean, medals! Or ribbons! Right? Please, tell me if I'm even just a little bit close."

Trying to act nonchalant, I continued getting prepared by buttoning up my overcoat in front of the mirror and adjusting my slouch hat. "You're only half-right, Painting. I'm serving as Grand Judge at The Tanglefoot Music Festival, in which I'll be surveying the talents of twenty talented children on the piano. There. Children. Now don't you feel foolish for hounding me? - Ach, why do I bother asking," and the cabby pulled up and honked his horn, so I was out the door before Painting could formulate a reply.

But in the loneliness of my hotel room in Vienna, Virginia, when I was resting on the bed and trying to work myself into a meditative state, Painting posited an answer. "Good flight? Fine. Listen, Galmud, I'm not impugning your way with children. In fact, when I was being created, I'd often hear Hector and Margo say that if they'd ever have kids, they'd want you to be one of the baby-sitters. Said you were gentle, and best of all knew how to make little ones feel clever. Now, how they came to this insight, I don't know. But that's not the point. The heart of the matter is that you'd be doing these kids -- and the Future of All Humankind -- a better service if you'd just sit down and compose. You want to know how long it took Rodgers and Hammerstein to write the entire score to Carousel? Two days! Yes, that's right! They'd wake up at four in the morning and work through the next day, pausing only for the occasional sandwich and cold cup of coffee but -- ah, who'm I kidding? Ok, so I was lying, but I was just trying to show you that you've got to push yourself that much further or else you won't have your name on anything. That what you want? Huh? Hey,
are you listening to me or are you sleeping?"

"I'm trying," I said, "to meditate, which explains why my eyes are closed. And as for Carousel, it's rubbish. A musical about a wife-beater, atrocious."

"Well," Painting sighed, "I didn't want to do this to you, but it looks like you leave me no choice: I can see into the future. Sure, my scope is a touch limited, but I've got a more or less clear picture of the whole scene laid out in front of me. Now, hate to be blunt, but here's where you're going -- paunchy, balding, depressed, hypochondriac, ulcer-ridden, permanently cold hands, a bit of arthritis in all joints, and -- "

I interrupted, "You're describing most old people. Some fortune."

"Let me continue then, will you? You didn't let me get to the main point: you, my friend, drop from the limelight. Your record of assorted Gershwin songs is dismissed by critics the world-over as crap, and suddenly your image undergoes a dramatic shift from which it can never recover. Where you were once regarded as genius material and thus beyond average comprehension, you become a dummy in everyone's eyes. Conservatories scorn you as someone who fooled everyone with your miserable playing, once seen as some new form of interpretation. Frustrated, you try to tour again, but the only people who will have you are hotel bars. Sure, you get some kind of billing, but do you really want your name next to ventriloquists and idiotic stand-ups in the newspaper? Thoroughly screwed, you -- "

But I couldn't take it anymore, so I went into the bathroom, locked the door behind me, and turned on all of the spigots to top force to drown out its endless litany.

Six hours later, the Tanglefoot Director (Amanda Coldiron) and her program assistant (Derek Gilt) were talking with -- or to -- me after the
Festival. They were concerned. Deeply. I'd been a fine judge, really, even when I gave the ribbon and handshake to the winning child. But it was afterwards, when I was supposed to make small talk with the child, that things turned sour. I was in a small out-of-the-way room chatting with this bright prodigy when Painting began talking in my right ear, telling me "Charles Benbridge. Yes. I see him in the future. Do you realize what you just did, Galmud, when you gave that boy First Place? You took the rope, made the noose, and hung yourself but good. Benbridge in twenty years is the genius you never could be nor will be. He composes his first full symphony score next year, gets a recording contract by age nine, plays in front of every famous world dignitary by age nineteen, and when he dies, the United States runs his funeral service on television and the pope delivers the eulogy and they ring The Liberty Bell for the first time since it was cracked!" And that's when I cracked.

Amanda Coldiron was trying to choose the right words then, while Mr. Gilt coaxed fresh Kleenex into my hands every so often.

"Mr. Galmud, I realize that professional pressures can consume a person, you've got nothing but my utmost sympathy," she began.

"Yes," Gilt added in a whisper, placing another tissue in my hands.

"But Mr. Galmud, we're afraid that we're going to have to do the only logical thing in this situation, for we've never had a Grand Judge actually exchange harsh words with the First Place winner, and that is strip you of the Grand Judge title and ask that you pay your own expenses for this entire trip. The Tanglefoot Music Association was quite willing to give you the full ride, but then your behavior this evening turned everything around. Believe me, we mean no malice, but we like to think of ourselves as an institute or organization with a certain, um, integrity to uphold. And if we stand by your actions, then we'd be defeating the whole purpose.
Which is to recognize and support the musical abilities of piano-playing youths on the Eastern seaboard. Can you back me up, Derek?"

Mr. Gilt, thrown by the fact that she asked for his input, began with a combination cough and stutter. "Yes, well, what I think what Ms. Coldiron and myself are trying to say is that while we regard you as head and shoulders above most everyone in your field -- eh, care for another tissue?"

"No," I said, though I couldn't stop crying and really did require another Kleenex. "You were saying?"

Gilt cleared his throat, "We here at Tanglefoot have been around for close to thirty years now, and fact is, we've always seen ourselves as standing on the fringe. A little loose, wild, unconventional, but nevertheless adhering to a strict code of discipline and talent and respect for the Arts. What we witnessed between you and that child was simply," and he paused by wiping his brow with a tissue, "unfathomable. The closest I've ever come to being shocked here was one year, many years ago, when we had Miles Davis deliver the keynote speech to get the festivities underway, and he inserted the word 'bitch' into his text. We thought that was pretty racy stuff..."

"But you," Ms. Coldiron picked up his thought, "beat everything when you grabbed that little boy by the lapels and started calling him an 'upstart' -- "

"And 'ungrateful bastard'," Gilt chirped.

On the plane ride home, Painting tried convincing me that I'd done the best thing. "Galmud, I'm telling you, you did what you had to. Now the world will never mourn the loss of Charles Benbridge in seventy-some years, because you came forth and put him in his place and now the only thing
he'll be interested in is little league baseball. No kidding, he won't touch a piano. Everytime he hears one, he'll come close to vomiting. He'll try his hand at another instrument -- the sax, to be precise -- but his braces will make playing the damn thing almost impossible, so he'll drop that, take up sports, girls, cars, school, college, beer parties -- am I painting a detailed enough picture for you? What I'm saying is, the once-and-future Charles Benbridge (such an oh-so hotsy-totsy name, no?) will slowly evolve into (at least by college) Chuck Beebo, a nickname he'll get for his talent of being able to put away a six pack and produce flatulence that sounds like beee-bo. How's that for our Mozart? And after that, he becomes -- hell, I can't see that part too clearly, but he does something in which he looks out an office window all day and wishes he had what he calls 'a free spirit'. So you took away Charles Benbridge but gave the world Chuck Beebo, family man and lodge member and curator of a fantastic archive of regrets. The world has those types going a dime-a-dozen, Galmud, so don't feel bad. You're still top dog. Now just go write a song that's your own."

Upon returning to the city, I had the cabby drop me off six blocks from my apartment building. I gave him ten bucks tip and told him to leave my suitcases with the doorman, that I'd catch up with them, gave him the address, and waved good-bye as he pulled off. "What're you doing?" Painting asked. "Going to a bar, that it? Galmud, I don't see how a drink is going to help get you primed for composing, but -- hey, you just walked right past it, so what are you up to? And another thing, you haven't said one word to me since you left the baggage carousel. Is it something I said?" I stepped inside the neighborhood drugstore, picked up what I wanted, and waited in line to make the purchase. "Razor blades?" Painting continued.
"Aw jeez, you're not feeling suicidal, are you? Did I drive you to it? Galmud, please, just check yourself in somewhere. Wait, you might also be getting them for a shave, but then again you use those crummy disposable kinds, so why the blades?" "Two-eighteen," the cashier said; I paid up and made my way back onto the street toward my building. Painting sounded more nervous than ever, "I don't think you're entertaining thoughts of suicide at all, are you? Of course not. You're just as arrogant and cocky as that chubby Benbridge slob ever was. And to think I pulled your chestnuts out of the historical, futuristic fire. You know you won't get away with it. You'll be sued, scandalized and -- "

"It will be worth it," I said calmly. "I don't know why I didn't think of it before. And you're missing a key ingredient here, Painting, and that is I can always attribute the accident to irate burglars. Would a world-famous mild-mannered pianist actually commit such an act of violence?"

"Who knows," Painting replied, "but you're the same guy who had a nervous breakdown and shattered a little boy's dreams of becoming an accomplished performer and composer, that's obvious. You've got witnesses there, not even including the child himself. You need help, Galmud."

"It's going to be beautiful," and I confidently jiggled the tiny box of razor blades in my right overcoat pocket.

"You remember what they did to the guy who went after The Pieta, that sculpture, with a sledgehammer? Right, think about it. He's probably still sitting in a cell somewhere, thumbing through old copies of Reader's Digest and memorizing those insipid inspirational stories like a backwoods monk. Galmud, you wouldn't survive ten minutes in The Big House. They'd take one look at your milky soft hands and pummel you. Three beatings a day. The guards would eventually place you in solitary confinement, but even then
they'd still corner you on the grounds during your measly one-hour break in the fresh air. It would be an existence that would make ol' Chuck Beebo's look positively enviable in the long run. And you'd become so brainwashed and eager to comply, that you'd begin to listen to country & western music and say to yourself, 'You know, it really ain't so bad,' and yes, you'd begin to use words like 'ain't' just to ingratiate yourself with the other ignorant inmates. We're talking a mere matter of a few months in which you'd become a dumbed-down blob, fearful of sharing any original thoughts. Until you'd meet an inmate who'd possess the only piece of classic literature in the whole cell block, the book being a ratty paperback copy of Dante's *Purgatorio*; so starved you'll be for intellectual companionship that you'll try to engage him in discussion and he'll give you off-the-wall interpretations, insisting that the book is about Barry Goldwater's personal experiments with magic mushrooms. -- Are you listening to me?"

But I had stopped. Because I'd arrived at the front steps of my apartment building, and there sat Hector, head in hands, on the front step. Voice thick with alcohol, he slurred, "You'd be doing me the greatest favor in the history of the free world if you'd just let me come up, talk, and crash."

So I helped him up, went inside together, took the elevator to my floor, and at my door he helped shuffle my waiting suitcases inside. I ushered him into the kitchen, ordering him to take a seat at the table, and told him that coffee would be coming up quickly as I put the kettle on.

"You wanted to talk?" I asked, after I'd hung both our coats up and returned to the kitchen table.

"Oh," he moaned, "Margo's left me. Gone. Gone for good, and I guess that's good. I don't know. I should be feeling better than this, but I guess the Pale Ales are making me muddy. Galmud, she went back to Louisiana. No wait, I'm telling it wrong. She came up from Louisiana first
off, hopped up on Daddy's pill combo of some sort, and tells me with a straight face and literally just no expression, as if she'd been reading stock quotes, that when she'd dropped her affair with Tyler way-back-when because he was uncircumcised and his unarousable penis resembled a gasping out-of-water turtle, she picked things up with a high school sweetheart. A second-string football player, her First she says, not for him though, and such a sweet romance had gone sour all those years ago when he got the clap from someone else and she found out. Fast forward to present day: The clap has been remedied, and All-American (as I prefer to call him) has blossomed into The Neighborhood NumberCruncher. Turns out he does her old man's taxes. The old man and All-American are doing taxes, and next thing you know, her father says 'Why not look my daughter up while she's visiting?', and this leads to dinner on a steamboat, then back to All-American's for a quick bang -- and the guy's just a sad chucklehead, for he keeps knocking his head into these model airplanes hanging from his ceiling while he's on top of her. That's right, he saved his model airplanes, is that sick or what, and she thinks this is adorable and that it's a sign that he was never able to recover from the past because she dumped him and tore a whole in his heart, or whatever bumpkin thing she said. So, I told her 'Fine, go with All-American', and she did, but not without the pestering 'Are you sure it's alright? Will you be alright? Are you sure?', as if my permission really mattered. I said, 'Divorce is imminent, don't you get it? You can't have two husbands, you silly bitch. Now please start packing, get on a plane, and you just might make it in time to see the sun go down on your papa's cotton fields.' I thought I was being so Yankee-clever, when really words were failing me. We ended on an inane note of bickering. I told her that she was always full of shit, because she'd always reminded me whenever I accused her of being from hillbilly stock that she was fourth-cousin to
William Faulkner; she told me that at least from now on All-American (she didn't call him that) would treat her like a Lady, which is maybe, who knows, true; I did once throw a chair at her, yes, but I didn't aim at her and she..." The kettle began whistling. Hector gave a broken chuckle, said, "I thought that shrill whistle was Margo for a second."

He took one sip of his instant coffee and then sat up, looking inspired. "Is Margo #434 still here?"

"I'm sorry," I replied. "What's that?"

He jumped from his seat, and began fumbling down the hallway. I heard him enter the grand room where his painting hung. "Yes!" he screamed. "Please come join me!"

And as I made my way down the hall, slowly, I heard ripping sounds. Fingertips sinking into and popping taut canvas. Then a deliberate, methodical strip being pulled down. When I entered the room, shocked, he'd already removed a two-foot section from the left-hand side of the painting, such that the piece now only looked like a ravaged billboard. PAINTING to Painting to painting to this. Hector laughed, "This, Galmud, this is what I call Margo #434! Quick, call her publicist!", and he tore another shred. He began to tear smaller pieces thereafter, stopping every so often to step back and admire his own handiwork. "You've got to understand, there were four-hundred-and-thirty-three Margos before this one. All equally bossy and demanding and unrepentant. Why else do you think I refused to keep this one in my house aside from the financial concerns? I've spent so much time unloading Margos on everyone. The Japanese have one in their Mitkuni Incorporated Tower, the Dutch have one somewhere gathering dust in a windmill, and -- well, just name a country of your choice and they probably have one making their lives miserable as well. But now I'm taking full responsibility, and if the world needs to be purged of them, her, then so
be it." More ripping, tearing. "Oh Galmud, if you only knew how therapeutic this is -- but look who I'm talking to! Mister In-Control himself. You have your piano, your Bach and whatever, whoever, and you're perfectly content...God, if only I were. Say, join in. Just have a go. It's great exercise and you'll feel oddly refreshed."

I smiled. "No thanks. I'll watch from here." And without either of us talking, Hector continued for a good half-hour until the only thing in front of us was an over-sized frame and a soothing blank wall. He sat down next to me on the floor then and exhaled like a weary boxer.

"Is there another room I could sleep in?" he asked. "Even the frame reminds me of her."
"Believe me, please, when I tell you that all things before -- meaning, everything -- had been uneventful, lackluster and drab black-and-white lacking Technicolor. I felt as if I'd been one of those people that you see in silent films, footage of New York City or any city at the turn of the century, and I'm a lanky fellow in bowler hat trying to outpace the horse-and-buggy and people going in both directions, and I think yes, I'm the one you see in the center of that, perhaps further back, trying to decide which current to follow, and then I do something foolish like look at the camera; the man on the other side says, 'No, George, don't look at me, keep walking,' but that makes me freeze, self-conscious, and again the man says, 'Don't look at the camera. Walk. Go.' So I do, and blend into the crowd, thinking that I should've done something like wave so that you'd notice me." I stopped to sip my water. "That image had been coming to me since I was about ten years old, in the form of either a daydream or actual sleeping dream or (and I hate admitting this because it sounds so pretentious and now bloodless) a vision. People over- or under-estimate visions, there's never any middle ground which explains why we're either nailing God to a tree and then forever apologizing, or we're trampling over people to satisfy our addiction to visions. Television offers the most immediate solution, the quickest injection to the retina, that I know of. Hardly anyone, myself included, asks whether or not if the vision is true. And I guess what I'm really trying to ask, albeit in a long-winded manner, is what do you think?" I said, looking straight into the eyes of a reporter named Gwenn.

I'd been explaining to her, more or less, why I felt that performing
for me had lost its function or essence as a means of communication. We were talking in the Peabody Library, adjacent to the main concert hall where I'd just delivered an hour's worth of music to a SRO audience. A healthy crowd of about 200 people (staff, benefactors, local celebs and the like) were milling around at the post-performance celebration party -- a function I usually shunned but this time figured that perhaps I could connect with someone who would sympathize. My brief chat with Gwenn made me realize that I'd definitely have to give it up, performing, then and there.

She made a look of forced empathy and leaned toward me after taking a sip of wine from a plastic cup, "I think there is someone here who'd be more qualified to work this stuff through. I mean, this goes beyond dream interpretation, which I'm normally pretty good at -- for fun, that is -- but you're talking more about, um, visions and daydreams and stuff like that." She pointed to a gray-bearded gentleman across the room, "Do you see that fellow over there? He's Dr. Samuelson and I think -- "

"Yes," I interrupted, "I'm familiar with the esteemed Dr. Samuelson. He's a psychiatrist. And it's not pills that I need, and if I were to chase down such a doctor, I don't think he would be my first choice -- no reflection on him, you see, but I'm more than familiar with self-styled doctors of his ilk who try to string me along on pills. Then our bankbooks start to ride a wave of inverse proportions. No thanks."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe you should reconsider, for I think he's become more of an herbal therapist these days and he's turned away from pills and chemicals as a means toward healing. He's apparently taken a shine to roots and plants, a more natural way. He's concocted about 50 varieties of tea which can cure various mental ailments -- I know, because I went to him after I broke up with my boyfriend and plummeted into a real deep depression, and two weeks of his special tea picked me right up. But
don't just believe my story. Did you know he fixed up the latest recruits in the Vienna Boys Choir? It's true; the choirmaster brought him about 10 boys, all of whom were suffering a severe case of homesickness -- you know, crying at odd times, bedwetting, obsessive-compulsive handwashing and so forth -- so Dr. Samuelson gave them some kind of berry juice and - voila! - now these kids are seasoned world-travelers, just slap-and-tickling their way through customs."

I sneaked out of that party without saying good-bye to anyone, took the evening train back to my city, and spent the following week sleeping for long stretches at a time -- waking up only to eat, use the restroom, occasionally tinker at the piano (I was playing faux-honky tonk so I knew I wasn't in my right mind), write notes to myself, read the newspaper, make a few phonecalls to my assistants and recording cohorts. By midweek I'd come to realize that my surroundings (this apartment, this city, all these people) were not making me feel any better; they were contributing to whatever was bounding and gagging me to a figurative chair.

Wednesday, yes, a day spent almost entirely on the phone. My Assistant called to say, "I was re-reading that interview you had with Gwenn Montague in The Ladder, and I just gotta say I loved that line of yours (shoot, where is it? ah!), it was the most droll thing you could've said under such pressure -- remember? 'I'm the envy of all my friends'. Brilliant, George! See, I'll never have to worry about you sticking up for yourself, never. Listen, I understand you want some quiet time to yourself, but is there anything I can do?" I told him to use his imagination, that my apartment had begun to grow invisible bars and I was starting to see people pressing against the cage and throwing me pennies and vegetables and trying to poke me with a stick. He said he'd get back to me.

I rounded out the day with a phonecall (after grappling for two hours
with Information) to a woman who had once stalked me, years ago. She said, "Hello?" and from there I started.

"Alisha, er, Erika? This is George Galmud. I apologize for calling so late, but you were the only person I had on my mind, and I also saw with crystal-clarity that you'd probably be the only person able to comprehend what I'm going to say. This afternoon I had -- er, this is Alisha, yes?"

"Yes," she replied, cold and flat.

"Good. As I was saying, I had this fantastic dream this afternoon -- uh, perhaps I'm getting ahead of myself here. How to distill the past several years into a few well-timed sentences or phrases? Here goes: Recorded more records, traveled and played to more places, now I'm here feeling a change must take place except I can't identify what form that change should assume. If memory serves me correctly, you were in a similar boat like that when we met way-back-when, right? But the dream, yes, I'll tell you: I had a dream that I was a homeless man in a soup kitchen. Sitting at a small table, alone, looking down into a bowl of white soup, like porridge or even vichyssoise. In the dream I don't look much different than I do now, in reality, except that my coat's a bit scruffier and I have the sense that I probably have a ripened odor about me. Someone, a lanky young man with a kind face, whom I suspect is a priest in layman's clothing, walks over and rests his hands on the back of a chair across from mine. Lips mouth something like, 'Are you okay over here?', and without my prompting, he takes a seat and clasps his hands and waits for me to talk. I then say, after he's already taken a seat, 'Please, sit...I was a cute baby.' And he nods, says, 'Yes.' And this conversation gets stuck in a loop, because I keep telling him 'Please, sit, I was a cute baby,' and he keeps repeating the same. And as I'm saying this, or as we keep whirling back and forth in the loop, my internal self (in the dream, I presume) is
wondering with some measure of panic, 'Why can't I stop saying the same thing? I want to tell him that everything went downhill since childhood, and tell him how exactly it all lead to my sitting here in a soup kitchen, but these are the only words that come out of my mouth.' And then there's panic growing, so that I start crying in the dream, and we're still in the same loop, mind you -- but then I understand that my repeated phrase and his repeated nod and yes is all that is necessary to convey the history and inherent sorrow that I want to convey. In other words, he doesn't need to say anything else because if I listen in a deeper sense, then it becomes apparent that his nod and his yes contain a wealth of gestures and words; same goes for what I'm telling him, because my entire history is written in the phrase 'was a cute baby'. Babies grow and age, and the young man knows that, we all do, so it's not necessary to attach everything else -- because in dream language it would be ridiculously redundant. And that revelation leads to the thought that the young man sitting across from me is, who? Someone I want him to be? Or someone who simply is? And I think, is it God? Mind you, I'm not partial to religion or even visions of Madonna statuettes that weep bloody tears. But this got me think --," and the woman hung up, so I decided it was time to sleep some more.

I was awoken the following afternoon by an XPress mail courier who had me sign for a letter, sent oddly enough by Alisha/Erika whom I'd spoken with not twenty-four hours ago. Over coffee and an English muffin I poured over the contents:

"Dear Mr. Galmud, I assure you that this will be the last letter you ever receive from me. I did not enjoy our telephone conversation of a few minutes ago; it's left me cranky and confused, wondering just why you decided to track me down. If it's to know how I'm doing then I'll tell you: I'm now an executive producer at a cable-access television station. I
oversee approximately 4 shows, all of which are related to the arts. I've found my calling, if you will. Other things that have fallen into place include: 1) A new auto, a 2-door Japanese job that purrs and never gives me a bit of trouble, as long as I feed & wash it like the metal animal it is; 2) A new love in my life, Vaughn B. (do you think I'd be crazy enough to actually give you his last name, lest you call & harass him like you did to me?), the owner of three local art galleries in the area; met him when he appeared on our Frank Talk show (the host's name is actually Frank Tulk, I kid you not), as he'd just acquired a series of long-lost lithographs by Dali, a real coup for this small-town kid who made good; 3) A new family = same kids (rejoined with me, thank God) + Vaughn's two hyperactive prepubescent raggamuffins. We're intending to get married in a few months, just so the kids aren't floating around in some sort of ethical limbo. We (that is, Vaughn & I) wouldn't care so much about the living-together thing, except that the kids always have so much explaining to do at their respective schools, and the root of all evil in V's and mine eyes are the parents and teachers with their oh-so-stuffy morals; 4) my Ex from Oklahoma has been kicked out of the police department. Seems he couldn't keep his grubby hands off the Cutty Sark nor a certain 16-year-old from the local high school in his district. The pair were caught en flagrante by the deputy, of all people, who was simply working the parking-ticket beat. The tableau = My Ex + a gap-toothed, buxom, brainless bimbo. The upshot, not that you asked, is she'll be bringing a child into this world, and to that I say (privately) better her than me. I did my time with the salt of the earth, and dammit I'm ready for some pepper -- a spicy way of saying that I've also put that sad clown-cop out of my mind for good. Just like I have with you. So please, now that you know where I'm at and you're aware of my happiness and how I like doggy-paddling in the deep end of the Status Quo
these days, leave me be. Is that right? Let me alone, then. Here, now good-
bye, and Vaughn has a few words he wants to write, won't let me read 'em,
so see ya 'round, cookie. Yours, Alisha," and scribbled sideways in the
margin in red pen were Vaughn's words, with an arrow drawn from her name to
his notes. "G.G., whatever went down between you & my wife is strictly your
biz, so I've no opinion. However, I'm a HUGE fan and I hope you'll oblige
me with your autograph. I've paper-clipped a postage stamp," an arrow was
drawn to that as well, "and my work address is opposite this margin. For
obvious reasons, just send it to my workplace. FYI- 2 best moments of my
life remain seeing Brubeck and YOU in the same year! Music to my ears! Your
big BIG fan - V. -- p.s. Love them etudes!" In pencil, in the tiniest
print imaginable, Alisha had written under his words, "He's such a
cornball."

"Consider yourself forgotten, my dear," I whispered to myself, then
took the stamp, licked it, and slapped it to my forehead. With stamp on
forehead, I realized then it was time to make my once-a-year get-away -- a
ritual or tradition by any other name, but I enjoy the feeling of
spontaneity, even if my run-away is a bit timed. So I dressed quickly,
threw together a suitcase of simple clothes, grabbed a stack of
complimentary records (by other artists) from various record companies, and
ordered a limousine to take me as far as the state-line.

From the limo phone I made the calls that most of the same people
have come to expect.

"Is it absolutely necessary?" my mother asked, and I replied, "I do
this every year, you know that. You're the only person who's still somewhat
surprised every time I make this call. What I'll do next time is call you a
week in advance, to let you know I'm preparing -- even though I never
really make preparations as such -- and then call from here...Well, no, I
don't really like Florida that much...We're going under a tunnel, mother, so I'll have to call you later, alright? So await my phonecall in about a week."

The critic for Disc Salon, who had slammed my Mozart record two months ago by dismissing it among others as 1 of 50 terrible recordings made within the past five years, was also surprised but rightfully so because I'd never spoken with him before, and he began back-tracking, "Perhaps I was a bit brash, Mr. Galmud, but -- where are you calling from? I feel terrible that this call's on your dime." "That's alright," I told him, "but I'd just like to know why you think I'd purposefully make a bad recording, why I'd set out to ridicule a dead composer by playing in a lazy or mocking manner? I don't have the article in front of me, but I do remember something of a word-cartoon of your devising in which you noted, quote, Galmud has laced up the ol' boxing gloves and has sat down to the keyboard again, unquote. And then something about 'the musical pugilist has been k.o.'d by his own satire'. Knocked out? Really? Is that how you view my efforts?" The critic stammered, "I just -- ehm, Mr. Galmud, my column tends to be a bit heavy on the hyperbole side of things, and most people know that. I'm a nerdy version of a radio shock jock, if you will. So all I ask is -- well, where are you calling from? I was thinking maybe lunch at Johnny U's would clear this up," to which I said, "I'd like that, when I return, for you see I'm headed for an impromptu vacation." "So no hurt feelings then? I mean, I must say, you're being very gracious, considering Bernstein once threatened to rip me a new one. And he actually used those words: *rip a new one*. I'm not kidding." I chuckled, "We'll sort it out upon my return," and hung up. I admit that I have an insatiable appetite for the last word.

To the limo driver, mostly obscured by the tinted-window separating
us, I said, "That critic -- I don't know if you were listening, but that critic wrote 'There's not enough cohesion to even consider this a record.' Cohesion, imagine that. Whatever happened to face value, I ask you?" and then realized that he couldn't hear me at all. And upon closer inspection by almost pressing my head to the partition, I could see him bobbing his head in time to some pop song on the radio.

About two hours later, with farm and woodland surrounding the now uncluttered roadway and the first wave of mountains greeting us from a close distance, the driver turned and knocked on the partition to get my attention. I discovered that although he had the build of a teen-ager, he was probably about sixty years old with smooth gray clinging to his temples. He pointed to the sign that read "Scenic View, 1 Mile," so I nodded. Once there, at a lonely site marked only by a picnic table overlooking acres and acres of desolate and overgrown farmland, he opened my door with a bow and flourish of the hand to suggest humility. I stepped from the car and thanked him.

"Hope you didn't mind me pulling over, because I had to stretch my legs and grab a cigarette. Anyway we're making good time, so not to worry. Not to worry, my friend. Now let's see what we've got here," he said, and ambled towards the grass which met the border of the unkept acreage before us. I followed behind him. "You know, they got your favorite bottled water in the back there, right?"

"No, I didn't know that," I replied.

"Well, there is, so help yourself. Looks like a little box, you know, like an itty-bitty footlocker but that's your fridge, so take a look, you're all set up, nothing for you to worry about," took a drag and exhaled by asking, "So you're somebody famous, yessir?"

"I make records, yes. I'm a musician, and famous enough to keep
making more records, I guess."

He seemed suitably impressed, though still a bit confused as to my identity; I know he'd never heard of me before, so I didn't push it. "A musician, huh, that's a good line of work to be in, yes, I play a bit of flamenco guitar -- you play guitar?" I shook my head, "No, piano."

"Piano's good, too," he said, "I always wanted a piano in my house, but we were always saying to ourselves 'It's one or the other: a pool table or piano.' My wife wanted the piano, so did I, but the kids loved the idea of a pool table, and besides all the kids on the street want to come over, and it's a good friend-maker, that pool table. So we got one. Now they're all grown up, and they all go 'Why'd you never get a piano? We coulda learned some kind of talent.' I say 'You are talented,' because it's true, one's a doctor, the other's designing buildings, and the third has her own business. So they got talent, but different, and I always remind them that they bugged me to death about the pool table. To death. I tell them to this day, 'It was one or the other,' and they all go with long faces 'Yeah, dad.' So now they all got pianos in their houses, go figure. Pianos air-hockey and whatever else their kids' hearts desire. I personally purchased the three pianos, so they got nothing to complain about now -- ah, they're all good kids, all of them."

I asked, "They don't object to your driving all over the state?"

"I know this state like the back of my hand, they know that. Before I started driving limos, I drove Greyhounds from the inner city to the Tidewater stop just across the Pennsylvania line; that stop overlooks a whole lot of nothing, some pretty forest, but a fine diner up there. Got sick of doing it because of my age and the pay, but mainly because you get tired of being a policeman. That's what they want you to do, drive the bus and police at the same time -- so let's say you got runaways smoking reefer
in the back, then you got to see them off. And a lot of times they're not even runaways; they're drunk, high, ticked-off, or worse. I got tired of it. Took me close to twenty years, but I eventually got tired of it," he chuckled, lighting a fresh cigarette with the nearly-burnt-out one. "But what you were saying before, I know plenty of people up and down this road, so if anything were to happen, they'd know who to call. Anyway I only drive during three seasons: spring, summer, and now fall. By December, I'll be sitting in my LazyBoy under a pile of grandchildren. So we got plenty of..." he stopped, distracted by a rust-brown Dodge Dart making a slow and lonely approach. "Looks like I won't have to be taking you as far as I guessed," he said, flicking his cigarette into the brush, and walked to the edge where the chopped black gravel meets the road, waving to the car.

The Dart pulled over, and sure enough it was Edward Maltar -- dressed in ubiquitous Hawaiian print shirt, but with ratty denim jacket since the weather had changed. He owns The Maltar Alpine Resort -- not so much a resort really as it is a series of individual triangular-shaped cottage with the basic amenities installed, depending on one's taste. Each cottage is positioned on its own plateau, sheltered privately by trees and a comfortable mile separating itself from the neighboring cottages. Maltar's domicile ("The Lodge" or "The Maltarian Lodge" as I sometimes call it), doubling as the lobby, dining room, library, and rec area, sits at the base of the mountain. He says that the wearing of Hawaiian shirts started off as a gag gift back in 1953, when he first opened the resort -- a friend of his just loved the idea of a mountain resort manager wearing tropical attire, and it stuck. I'd known Maltar from the past five years, but The Driver appeared to have a longer relationship. Maltar emerged from the car, and the two men exchanged laughs, handshakes, and backslaps.

"You know this gentleman?" I asked Edward. He knows I don't enjoy
handshakes, so we traded smiles instead as usual.

"Indeed, we know each other," Maltar chuckled, "he's been limoing -- yes, I've made 'limo' into a verb, to limo -- he's limoed people here for years now. The stuffier clientele like yourself, Mr. Galmud -- just kidding about the stuffy thing -- and honeymooners. Mainly honeymooners, I'd say. How fortuitous bumping into you two, as I was going to meet you at the meeting point in a matter of minutes. You wanna hand him over to me, Mr. Dawson?"

Dawson laughed, "Makes sense to me. Unless you want to follow my car anyway and meet up in five minutes. But seriously sure -- hey, Mr. Galmud, you don't have to get that stuff, let me," and he'd caught me removing my junk from the backseat, so he began taking it all from me and placing it into the Dart's backseat.

"Can't believe you still drive this ol' war horse, Eddy!" he called out. Maltar turned and gave a half-love/half-hate look at the car, "That? Then you haven't been up to The Resort in awhile, have you? I finally broke down, about two or three years ago, and bought myself a genuine state-of-the-art Mercedes with all the trimmings. Leather upholstery and um, well, the other bells and whistles -- I'm not a huge car buff, but I know what looks decent. Stop on up sometime and you can give it a spin. Heck, you can even take it back into the city, if you want, and take your wife out on the town."

Dawson gave a whistle, "Tempting, mighty tempting...Well, that should do it, boys, which means I'm heading back a bit earlier than I expected. Mr. Maltar, always a pleasure. And Mr. Galmud, I thank you for being a cooperative and pleasant passenger, and I'll be looking for your records as soon as I get back." As soon as we were both in the Dart, Maltar turned to me with a wink and said, "I hope you know he was humoring you." "I know,"
I replied, though I wish Maltar hadn't pointed that out.

Upon arriving at The Resort, Maltar drove up the pine-covered ridge and deposited me and my belongings at the door of Cottage 319. I'd nicknamed the small unit "Cottage 319" to give it character, and it became a joke to anyone who realized that there were only 30 cottages in all. "I hope you'll find everything in order," Maltar said, "and should you want anything, of course press the pound sign and 8 to reach me. Can't think of anything else. We've been anticipating you for a week now, so it's not as if you completely caught us by surprise." "No? Then I must learn to become more spontaneous." He laughed, "More spontaneous? Ah, Mr. Galmud, we prefer your regimented chaos just the way it is, thank you." With that he drove down the ridge, and I prepared myself for the twilight hour.

He was right. He had stocked the small refrigerator with a sufficient supply of Arrowroot cookies and bottled water to get me through one evening; he'd also taken care to leave a portable record-player on the dining table, along with a radio and of course a sheaf of paper and sharpened pencils; also a hot-plate on the bureau, with a small kettle, spoon strainer, and a miniature basket with various tea bags. I couldn't think of anything he'd forgotten. That was the good thing about Maltar, he never overstepped boundaries -- he could almost anticipate my next move. For example, he was the only hotel/lodge proprietor who had intuitively understood my need to not have a piano installed in my room. The surroundings were fit for a monk, with high ceiling meeting at a steepled point it seemed, and polished wooden buttresses crossing beams to lend that look of ancient sanctuary.

I brewed a cup of tea, sat down on the edge of the king-sized bed, and placed the first record on the player. Dave Brubeck. His first in...how
many years? This is tradition for me. I take a stack of records and play them all through, and I torture myself. It's a method of discipline for me, to remove myself entirely from my recorded works and instruments, and then place myself in the position of student or audience. I look at each record sleeve, searching the face and posture of the photographed artist for any insight as to how I can improve myself, correct my image, provide myself with the same amount of dignity and grandeur or to use that grotesque show-biz-sounding colloquialism: pizzazz. I take notes as the record spins:

"Title: Just Me, Just Brubeck, Pearl-Diving For One (OR Thoughts For A Potential Journal Article/Review. {ROUGH Draft #1})"

"Christ, I hate you, Brubeck; I love you and hate you at the same time, how can you just sit there and smile, B.? You understand, I feel, that dualistic pleasure of being an artist -- of being misunderstood and yet being loved by those who appreciate the fact that you're so misunderstood. And still you smile, still you keep the keys polished, breezing through, taking it in a certain stride; yours is the music that makes me swear I'm drunk and despondent and at times such a miserable bag of loneliness, wallowing in my hypochondria -- do or die, do I die, or will I die -- It's a certainty, but you just seem...seem oblivious and go forth with that winning smile, and how do you think that makes me feel? How does that make me look? Mine is the music they hear on solemn Sunday nights, but yours is the infinite joy of Saturdays overflowing with possibility."

I stopped to turn the record over, and began the notes again:

"I'll say one thing for you, Mr. B.: when I listen to you, I mean really listen so that the notes tickle my marrow, I feel as if I could live forever -- and then fold into myself, asking about -- well? -- what wife?"
what kids? When if ever? And what happened to the two dogs and six parakeets I once adored? I have a feeling that my parents also understand you, Mr. B., probably better than they do me, although they'd never say. I mean, who would you rather dance to? To whose strains would you feel possessed enough to even initiate a touch? You make me downright jealous, you hold a mirror up to my own deficiencies, you're the one-room temple that they'll build on the grounds of where my once proud but now wretched Babylon stands. You'll never know, B., you won't have an inkling as to how much I looked up to you, or how long I stared at your record sleeve and thought the most amateur desires, the most amateur being: I wish I could do that. I wish I were you. If I could blink away who I am and wake up surrounded by such warmth, I'd do it in a heartbeat, Mr. B. But it'll never happen, and I thank (God?) someone for my wits. You'll never know. The tracks, on this record, are pearls," and the record ended. So I broke it, shattered into seven or eight chunky black fragments by slamming the disc against the edge of the nightstand. Then, as I always do, I turned off the lights and went to sleep ontop of the made bed. Still dressed in the same overcoat and clothes that I wore when I stepped through that door a little under an hour ago.

When I awoke, I set about collecting all of the record fragments and wrapping them in newspaper before stuffing the contents into a wastepaper bin. Last thing I needed would be an overzealous cleaning maid selling the story of an irate musician holed up in a mountain cottage, breaking things and baying at the moon, to a local-yokel newspaper. Quickly showered and dressed in my Sunday gray suit, the going-to-church suit that mother had purchased for me even after I'd told her, somewhat belligerently I admit in hindsight, that I am a devout atheist -- well, agnostic at least, and while
I don't doubt the existence of a God or Supreme Being, I do feel a bit put off my his/her/its elusiveness. However, I humored my mother and told her, "Fine. My one concession to adoring The All-Knowing Artful Dodger every Sunday will be wearing this gray suit. Fantastic, thank you."

It was before I walked out the door -- if I hadn't been looking just right there, at that instant, I would've missed it for sure. I never make sufficient use of those drawers anyway, but this time I did. I had the notion to use the bottom left-hand drawer to throw the newspaper-shrouded record bits. And that was when I found Anna M.'s notebook. Just notes and scribbles, just shy of thirty pages. Two photographs were paperclipped to the back. The first, the woman I presumed was Anno W.. Much younger, you could tell the picture had been taken a few years back, maybe longer -- you can just tell with a certain style of photograph. And in the picture, what appears to be a beautiful woman in her early thirties, sitting on a blanket, backdrop of woods behind her, seems to have been taken here, it just feels like the exact same location, the sense that something happened here, a life had been lived there, and I missed all of it. The second photograph is Anna M. squeezing two children (boy and girl, toddlers) in snowsuits to her. Anna M. looks a bit older, has the face of a thinker, perhaps a smoker, something in the gray parched skin and the weatheredness, and the green eyes have not aged a bit. I'd never seen a woman with green eyes before, I'd never even noticed the color of anyone's eyes before. I can barely tell you the color of my own. I generally can't stand color at all. Except for that which Anna M. revealed.

During the brisk walk down to Maltar's Lodge, where I intended to indulge in some hearty mountain cuisine, I was accosted by a husband-and-wife couple, Carl and Clarinda, probably in their mid-60s and bearing the signs of their advancing years with a kind of arrogant pride; perhaps it
was the matching jogging outfits that gave me this impression, outrunning something to catch up to Youth, always just a little more fleet of foot than everyone. They knew who I was on sight, and the husband, grinning behind a steel-wool moustache, immediately inquired, "I'm curious to know if it's true."

"Whether what's true?" I asked.

"Ah," he said as an aside to his wife first, "I told Maltar that he'd quit the stage for good. Read it in Look magazine back in nineteen-sixty-something, uh," to me, "anyway, Maltar about knocked us out of our socks when he told us that you'd be playing for The Festival of The Comet, tonight. And I told him that you'd expressed some real serious doubts about whether or not you'd ever sit foot in front of an audience again. I wish I'd put money on this bet, because I'd clean up."

"Could you clarify what you mean by --?"

His wife poked him in the ribs to quiet him, "Carl, you're leaving the poor man lost and confused. -- Mr. Galmud, The Festival of The Comet is very simple. Every four years there's what appears to be a comet, for lack of a better word, that passes over these mountains. Same time, every four years. And Edward Maltar has created a kind of festivity surrounding it. He's been celebrating this comet -- I think it's a shooting star, some say UFO -- for about...well, how long would it be, Carl?"

"Let's see. We started bringing the kids here after Hetty was born, and that was summer of...jeez, I'd say it's been about thirteen, seventeen years. So, Mr. Galmud, the buzz from Maltar is that he's having a Steinway trucked up here this afternoon, should be here in the evening, and then if weather permits, you'll be tickling the ivories just as the comet passes overhead 'round eleven-thirty." Carl made an arcing motion with his index finger then, a slow conductor-like gesture. He followed the loop by
pointing at me with an arthritic thrust, "Yes, a Steinway just for you. You're looking at me with complete and utter disbelief, and not many resort owners would do that for their clientele, but you know Maltar -- you know he bought our gifted and talented son a cello one year? I kid you not! We drove up here in about seven hours from Connecticut, and there's a cello with a big red bow inside our cottage! Tell him, Claire."

Clarinda sensed I was growing weary and took her husband by the arm to start drawing him away. "I think Mr. Galmud's going to pass out soon if he doesn't eat, and we're just keeping him with all our stories."

"No, it's alright, really, I...," and I reassured them by reluctantly engaging in a round of handshaking for it seemed like my only recourse, and just as I was turning away after good-byes, I added, "Oh, forgive me for holding you up now, but I was wondering if you knew Anna?"

"Anna?" Clarinda smiled. "Oh yes, delightful lady. You know her?"

"Afraid not. I'd only got whiff of her presence by her name written on an index card in my cottage," I, er, cheated.

"Yes, Anna and her family have rented that cottage -- the one you're occupying right now -- for many, many years. About as long, if not longer, than we have," she said. Then scrunched her face, searching for the right word and confusing me momentarily in the process. "Burg? No. Burgy-own? Um, let me see."

"Burgoyne," Carl said. "The Burgoynes. How can you forget a name like that?"

"Well, we only see them once-a-year, if that," she replied appearing somewhat hurt at his suggestion that her memory was addled. "Anna Burgoyne. She's a film-maker in New York. I can't quite remember if she's got...well, her kids are grown up now, and her husband? I don't really get an image of him, I mean I know he was sort of burly, double-chinned at times, and bald
with traces of what was once probably a brilliant head of curly hair, and a voracious book reader, but aside from a strong jaw he had a nondescript face -- what I'm saying is, I think they were either still together or on the verge of divorce when I last saw her. She had come up alone, kept to herself, would only say hello if we were walking past her cottage and she'd been on the little porch smoking cigarettes and taking notes in that huge sketchpad of hers. Hm. The Burgoynes are lovely people, at least the kids are, but the parents are sort arty eccentrics to a certain degree. The husband writes, um...plays! Yes, plays. And he'd drink and get into long-winded political conversations with Maltar, you know, and bait Maltar for being a Republican and a homosexual -- not anyone's business, I think, personally -- but he'd say it's an impossible mix. Then he'd pee in front of his cottage -- the husband, not Maltar. Etcetera and so forth, Jeez-Louise, I can really gab away, can't I?"

"So will you play, Mr. Galmud?" Carl jumped in. "Maybe loosen up the repertoire a little, and play us some Dixieland, huh? Do you know the piece that goes do-Dee-do-tum-tum -- "

As I was passing through the foyer enroute to the dining area at the Lodge, I caught sight of Maltar opening a box full of new editions of National Geographic, which he made it a habit to supply in each cottage with the philosophy that he felt a Bible seemed "a bit too something" to leave in a retreat and much preferred the down-to-earth variety of topics in this magazine. I asked him about Anna M..

He smiled, though still trying to concentrate on the counting-out of magazines, "Lovely lady, warm family, it's as if we've all grown up together on this mountain, so to speak. You probably already heard she makes films, little obscure documentary things. Her last one was, let me
see -- oh yes, on ants. Ants of different regions, how they interact, mate, eat, respond to their particular conditions. She's the only person I know who could make a two-hour documentary on ants interesting. You see it?

"Me? No."

"Well, if you can get your hands on the video or catch it again on PBS, let me tell you, you're in for a real treat. Shame you didn't get to meet her, but of course you just crossed paths. She was up here, oh, about a month ago. Alone. Mum's the word, but she's been going through some tough times. She hid it well, you know, but for someone like me who's known her since forever, you become accustomed to noticing when someone's not their usual self. I don't want to say 'six sense' because that sounds so hokum; you get the idea, it's in how you exchange looks or hear how the other person phrases things. And of course there's the obvious: she was just by herself," he sighed, then pointed to another box just out of his reach. "You mind kicking that over here? Those are the new Smithsonians. Don't ask. It's all a futile ruse to make my guests think I'm smarter than I really am. So I went crazy and decided to double the culture around this joint."

It's on one of the last pages in her notebook, and I guess it stands out firmly in my mind because really it's the only drawing of a male figure. And what else to say? He's quite definitely nude, but I wouldn't call it a flattering portrait, in the sense that she, the Artist, and I'm making an assumption there, has accentuated his obvious positive aspects -- meaning, muscular in places, a realistic depiction of genitals -- while not sacrificing the more true-to-reality unsavoriness of the body. Uh, I mean, the aging body. He looks like a middle-aged caveman, and she even took the liberty of adding some liver spots to his hands. Kept the baldness. Didn't omit the prominent ears, not that they're flappers but they're just there.
And you're going to ask, So why do you fixate on this one? Because. For many reasons, there's a because. Um. He reminds me of myself, we appear to be headed down the same biological road. The usual identification bit. Also, I'm more concerned about her frame of mind when she drew this. I can't quite pin down the expression on his face, it's a cross between so many things: sadness, pain, anger, simmering lust, boredom, anxiety. I swear, if you'd see this, you'd know just what I mean. The same ambiguity of Mona Lisa, except I personally think she's bemused, end of story, but as for him and her, I wish I knew. And what sort of personal relief or satisfaction I'd get out of knowing, I couldn't begin to articulate or comprehend.

"By now," Maltar continued, "I'm sure the cat's escaped from the proverbial bag, and believe me, I wanted to be the first to ask you, but will you play for our Festival of The Comet tonight? It's been a long time since I've done any amount of begging or beseeching, so forgive me if I'm a tad rusty, but hey look, I'm already on my knees, so that's got to count for something, right?"

I gave him a hand and helped him to his feet, then told him, "Listen, the expense of a Steinway alone has made me indebted to you. In fact, I feel awful about it, so I'll have the bill footed by my record company first thing tomorrow. You're spending enough money as it is on magazines for everyone." We laughed, and both decided to head towards the dining room. Upon entering, we came across another couple -- both of pudgy frames, almost looking like brother and sister, in their last 40s perhaps wearing the casual attire that passes for rustic clothing in the big city. From the far end of the white-walled dining room, they beckoned us over. Maltar waved for both of us.

"Before we go over, do I have one maestro-pianist booked for
tonight?" he asked, taking me by the shoulders.

I nodded. "Done deal. But my only demand is that you supply me with Anna Burgoyne's telephone number and address, no questions asked." Maltar smiled without a hint of question or concern about my request. "Consider it done. I'll have a member of the cleaning staff put it on your night table," then he pointed to the still-waving couple, "Your public awaits you."

When I walked over to their table, the husband stood, introduced me to his wife ("Mrs. Werze, thirty-five years of marriage as of tomorrow") and pulled out a chair for me to sit in.

"Tell him what I was just telling you," he said to his wife with a sheepish grin. "No, you tell," she blushed, wiping her lips with a napkin. "I was just saying, and this was because we'd got wind of your arrival sometime last night, that the two best performances I've ever seen in my life -- and tell him if I'm lying, Joyce -- were Lionel Hampton in '62 and you around the same time. We're talking experiences that change your life and alter the way you think, work, live, breath," he said. When asked what he did for a living then, he told me investment management.

Seizing the moment for a change in conversation, I asked them if they were familiar with Anna Burgoyne. "The quiet gal who was staying in your cottage just before? Why? She break something?" I told him no, that I'd just found a postcard with her name on it and was curious. The Werzes looked at each other, shaking their heads in a pitying way.

He began, "From what I know, and you didn't hear it from me 'cause I get everything third-hand anyway, is that Anna's had a very rough year. It was just apparent. She came down here to the Lodge infrequently, and usually not for company or a meal -- she'd be asking for one tea bag, or a couple, then you wouldn't see her for most of the day. I don't know, it's not like I took inventory." Mrs. Werze jumped on the end of his last
breath, "Although I do remember -- maybe you remember, Gary -- that time
she was talking in the lobby with Mr. Maltar, and he'd said something
terribly amusing, and we were eating in here, and we could hear her laugh
through the whole Lodge, and I remember one of us said that was the first
time we'd heard her laugh since we'd been here, on this visit. We looked at
each other, like, 'Oh how odd,' but when we passed through the lobby after
breakfast, she'd gone back to her cottage, and then when we saw her after
that it was like -- " "She was back to her old sad self," Gary
interrupted, gesticulating with his fork, brushing a kind of invisible
cartoon depiction of melancholy in the air. "Um, but to answer your
question, we don't know what's eating her. All we know is, The Burgoynes
used to make it a family affair, coming up here. This time, just Anna. So
I'm not good at sleuthing and especially not good at asking a stranger que
pasa, so I didn't dig. We didn't. Just figured she wanted some space, quiet
time, to sort out whatever was bugging her." He shrugged his shoulders and
bit down on a cold, crunchy piece of toast. Mrs. Werze touched my arm to
get my attention, "They're not complete strangers. We did have a barbecue
with them about eight years ago, when we first discovered this resort.
Maybe longer than that. Anyway, the whole family is creative, everyone in
the gang has a talent, and they're smart and funny, and Mr. Burgoyne
especially has this way with his kids that makes everyone laugh -- I mean,
kids are bound to get into mischief, but he'd command their attention with
a goofy face or a joke, and that would be enough to make them stop whatever
they were doing."

"And she makes films, correct?" I asked.
They both nodded, and Mrs. Werze took the lead, "Her ant film is just --
have you seen it? I think it just premiered on PBS a month or so ago, but
we loved it. They're coming out with a companion book, and of course the
video, oh, and I guess my personal favorite was the soundtrack. It wasn't Philip Glass, but gosh it sounded so much like him, that kind of space-age choir music, you know." Her husband chuckled, "My favorite bit was the review on one of those Sunday morning talkshows, and the critic said something to the effect of 'Her study of ants gives us rich insight into the human condition.' Ants and people, mind you! Two different things! I didn't know whether to laugh my head off or throw a fit. Says more about the critic than it does her film, if you ask me."

Each page in the bottom left-hand corner had a simplistic doodle of an ant. And there were also numbers, which I have no idea what they meant. There was one that looked like a fraction "400/206" except it was written on its side. I think I'm reading too much into that, upon further reflection, and I admit that I've got quite the sweet tooth for numerology. Never completely able to dismiss it all as bunk [...] It's always easy to read connections into things where you desire to see them. People tend to manufacture these associations in relation to the Highest or Lowest points of their lives, never an in-between. It would be extremely tempting to do the same thing in relation to Anna M. Shall I run you through the proposed cycle? Very well then, remember you gave your consent. On the weekend that I returned from Maltar's Lodge, I read the paper and whose name showed up in the obituaries? Alan Gregh, a film-maker who'd helped me out on my much-masticated Internal Geography. Cause of death was drunk-driving, plowed into a tree that countless other inept college students had merely ricocheted off, but that's not the relevant part. Back in the late 70s, Anna M. and Alan Gregh had worked on a film together -- yes! The film was titled simply RACE, or something, and the gist of the film went like this: they went to a site like the New York City or Boston Marathon. She picked ten runners to interview before the race; conversely, he picked the first
ten winners, finalists, and interviewed them. And together they interviewed the first spectators to arrive on the scene, before the festivities and race kicked off, and then both interviewed the very last spectators to leave. The purpose of the whole thing, I presume, was to show the construction of an event -- oh wait, that was the title, Event. Perhaps I mean deconstruction then, analyzing the various sections of an event under a sort of microscope. I've gone off my point, but what I'm getting at is how eventually we all met up together. And the Fated connection of it. You can chalk it up to Chance, too, I won't object. I like to think that there is a middle ground between Fate and Chance, and that I swim around in that. Only fools strictly embrace one side over the other, and such people are made to look more foolish when the scales slightly tip in the opposite direction of their original belief.

I'd just gotten through with breakfasting with The Werzes when I came back through the lobby enroute to my cottage when I caught sight of Maltar talking with a middle-aged woman and a younger lady who appeared to be the daughter. I ducked into an adjacent reading room, grabbed a copy of Newsweek, and went into shameless eavesdropping stance. Maltar appeared to be soothing the woman, while the daughter remained a bit disinterested and removed from the whole thing.

"I'll tell you what, we can work around this, we really can. I've got the Nantucket-style cottage on platte six which should make you feel quite comfy," he said, then to someone else, "Where's that pot of tea for these ladies? Come on!"

"Thank you, Edward, really. It's just that when we heard the plane had been delayed yet again, and then they were offering us all of these out-of-the-way routes, I just about died. I mean, I don't mind one night in a strange hotel and a voucher, but...Anyway, I didn't expect to be back so
soon, and I'm just glad you don't mind me using your lodgings as a brief stopping-off point."

"Which is why I say," Maltar cooed, "relax and kick back for the rest of the evening. In fact, as we speak, all of your equipment has been neatly moved into your cottage. Nothing to worry about -- "

"What do you want my purse for?" the woman asked.

The daughter gave a huffy sigh, "Because I'm out of cigarettes, that's why. If we'd stopped at the -- "

"Then take the whole pack, just don't rip it off my arm everytime."

Daughter again, "Sorry, I'm just so -- urg, you know. Do you have matches, Mr. Maltar? My purse is just totally stuffed with Kleenex, chapstick, and assorted crap. Not a match in sight."

"Of course, miss," he replied in a sweet understanding voice. The cigarette was lit, and I could smell the tobacco working its way slowly towards me. I kept one ear tuned to the sauntering footsteps approaching, two nostrils toward the smoke, and the other ear to the conversation between Maltar and the woman.

"--Overbooking seems to be epidemic these days. Why sell the bloody tickets?...We'd worked it out so Shendra would meet me in the city, then off to Los Angeles for a week's work. This is going to throw it off just a bit. And now that I think about it, I'm not as upset as I was when I first had to get myself, her, and every last bit of luggage and equipment out of that airport. -- Say, Shendra, give me one of those cigs -- where'd you go?"

Shendra had turned the corner and gave me a nonchalant nod, then turned to the source of the voice. "Right here, ma!" And soon I was looking at both mother and daughter, realizing that the lady standing before me was none other than Anna M., just slightly older-looking than the
photograph from her notebook.

I could've given the notebook back then, yes. Culpability is a word I've been tossing around for the past several months, replaying how I could've worked it out, but there would've been no clear-cut approach, none that I can plainly see. Ego's always behind it, there, I'm caught red-handed again. And again and again.

At dinner, Edward Maltar set me up at a table with Anna M., and I kept to my promise of mainly serving as listener. She did not mention her husband once (good sign?), but instead went on at great length about her absent daughter, Shendra. "Yes," I said, "speaking of the young lady, where is she?" Anna sighed and knocked back the last remnants of her first glass of wine of the evening. "She's busy perfecting the Art of The Sulk, so you'll have to excuse her. She's 23 years of age, and still insists on -- well, I consider whatever phase this is to be a prolonged teenagehood. I was probably just as bad at her age, but definitely not worse. My daughter's been busy playing the part of The Other Woman lately, I kid you not. She's been waiting tables for six months at an Italian restaurant downtown, meets this 24-year old married kid, and convinces him to break up with his wife of one year. The guy, thinking he's getting a commitment out of her, moves his stuff out -- into his car, mind you -- shows up at my daughter's apartment, and Shendra nearly has a stroke. She tells me that he'd gotten the wrong idea; I said how could he not get the wrong idea? So this has been the big friction between us, because I'm not going to let her not think that she's not a home wrecker; she is, of the first order. So I get a lot of looks and 'don't guilt-trip me' and on top of that I get this man-child, Kelvin is his name, calling up constantly because Shendra moved back to my place after she maxed out about six credit cards on crap she
can't even remember -- Jesus, excuse me, where are my cigs?" and she stopped to rustle through her purse.

We'd just finished dinner, her plate was in fact half-finished, and Maltar appeared at our table as he handed her a black-and-gold pack of cigarettes with the cellophane still intact.

"Black Valiants!" she shrieked, tearing the wrapper off and immediately lighting one up. Maltar chuckled, satisfied that he'd surprised her with his gift, "I knew you were looking for something. When you and Mr. Galmud were engrossed in conversation and wine, I took the liberty of snatching those crappy Marlboros out of your open purse. You've been set up, honey, in the best way!" She nodded in agreement, "I have. I have indeed, you wily sonuvagun. -- You see, George, this is a little tradition between us, we've been doing this for years. He rips my pack off, then springs a swanky brand on me. -- But jeez, Eddy, you can't touch Black Valiants back on Charles Street for less than six bucks. This is special, thank you, c'mere," and she planted a kiss on his cheek.

Maltar winked at me, "See that? All I had to do was buy her a pack of cigarettes. She's a cheap date, George, and obviously easy!" "Oh stop it!" she laughed. "And I want you to know something else, Anna, and that is Mr. Galmud must've taken a shine to you, 'cause he's broken one of his little self-imposed rules about alcohol -- look at that, he's nearly killed an entire bottle with you."

I stood up then and gave a sloppy exaggerated bow to the lady and then to Maltar. "Now, sir, if you'll just show me to the piano, I'll prepare for the festivities, which should kick off in a mere three and a half hours." Anna M. looked at me with soft pity then, poked Maltar in the shoulder, said, "Look what you've done, Eddy. You've gone and embarrassed Mr. Galmud. Now he won't sit with me." Maltar made as if to
stage-whisper to her, "My dear Ms. Burgoyne, he's beyond embarrassment."
"Is that true?" she asked me, eyes melting me to the floor, a tender radiance that had been foreign to me until just that moment. "Could be," I replied, "but then again I still have yet to play for you," bowed again and walked off. As I turned the corner to the lobby, I heard her utter, "I thought he was going to kiss my hand" and I still don't know even now if she was disappointed or relieved that I hadn't.

Four hours later, they had their Festival of The Comet, a quiet affair really. I recall practicing, for quite a long time, and then my reverie broken by light applause all around me. People emerged from shadows carved out by Chinese lanterns. The Werzes came forward, Mr. Werze patting me on the back as if I were a child, and the two-C's, yes, Carl and Clarinda stepped to the piano with Carl saying, "What you need, my friend, is one of those big tip jars," and Maltar at the very end of the piano, his hands clasped together, tears in his eyes; I didn't know quite why he was so choked up, but then again this had been my first experience with the Festival of The Comet and I'd played right through it. I raised my eyebrows to him, as if asking for a reaction and answer at once. He put a hand to his mouth to halt a sob, then "George, simply beautiful. You outdid yourself. Did you see it?" I shook my head, I turned round in my chair and caught sight of Anna M. heading back up to her platte via the winding pathway bleached with moonlight.

Just for the record or posterity, so you don't paint a Goya-esque image of me -- you know, Venus Eating Her Child, I think it's called -- I must be allowed some sort of recognition for having placed the notebook in my overcoat pocket. Is there a column somewhere in the middle between Debts and Credits for Good Intentions? Is there a gray area of one's character that proves without a doubt, even when questionable circumstances arise,
that a man or woman has a basic core of good or bad inside of them?

Meaning, when actions fail -- ok, when people fail...

I knocked on their cottage door, which was open. They were in different rooms: Shendra talking very loudly in one, and Anna M. lugging heavy objects around and puffing in another. Their voices almost intertwined, with the mother calling "Be right there!" to me, while Shendra's voice would be the left-hand playing steadily, still on the phone, "Listen, I'm not your -- right, so what you gotta do, and I've told you this like one hundred times, is call your parents and make 'em pay out. It's not my fault if you already sold you mountain bike, and definitely not my fault if -- "

Anna came to the door, smiling and now dressed in a men's oversized plaid flannel shirt and gray sweatpants, which surprised me in that she still maintained a steady femininity. "George! Ah, how nice of you to stop by! Listen, Shendra's on the phone and we're not going to be able to hear ourselves talk much less think, so let me pull one more chair out onto the front porch, ok? There's one out there already, just let me grab my cigs and glass of Merlot that's hiding somew -- oh, can I pour you a glass? No? Alright, suit yourself. Just give me half a second and I'll meet you outside; it's okay to leave the door as is, we like the fresh air."

I sat down, stared at the cottage lights from the platte below us almost entirely obscured by trees, but still emitting star-like twinklings. Anna seemed to take forever, cursing because she couldn't find something, then stomping about and every so often calling out in a hopeless sigh, "Damn, Alex." Then the daughter's side of the phone conversation stealing my attention, as I tapped my foot in time to her changing rhythms of speech, "Then deal with it. Deal. Part of my long-term and short-term planning does include moving to Oregon for grad school, yes, but if you
think I want you following me there, then you're -- What's this happiness garbage you keep -- How can I look that far ahead either then? You see what I'm saying? I wouldn't ask it of you, so don't ask it of me -- "shuffle shuffle, "Damn it, Alex, why?" trickling out from the cracks of each shingle in her cottage, with Shendra over-taking, finally, "Well, if we're going to give each other's shit back, then where's my notebook? What? You do too know what I'm talking about, because it drove you nuts that I'd always carry it around; you hate anything that reminds someone of their family, fuck, you hate everything that makes anyone stop and assess their fucking thoughts, you dickless wonder!" Anna M. overheard and called out, "Hey! Language! Mind the language, sewer-mouth! We've got company sitting outside, Shendy!" Shendra replied, cupping her hand over the receiver, "Ok, well, have you seen my notebook, ma? I don't want to rip Kelvin apart for everything, just almost everything." "Then rip him apart with less f-words, please. And no, I haven't seen your notebook."

When Anna finally joined me on the porch, she let me in on a Terrible Secret, that's how she put it. Shendra was still yammering away. She told me that she read Shendra's diary. I asked "Diary or notebook?", and she blushed and said "Notebook, that's what she calls it. Thinks it's more mature." Said she started reading it when Shendra got involved with an older man, a drama professor who was always one step away from statutory rape charges. She'd taken Shendra's notebook with her on the most recent trip up here, to read it for clues as to why her once-gentle and loving daughter had become so remote and wild, but now Anna couldn't find it and thinks someone, a cleaning woman or someone like that, probably just threw it out. "So how I've told you my Terrible Secret, Mr. Galmud," she said looking me squarely in the eye with all the guilt that a parent could possibly shoulder, "do you have any you want to share?". And I did the
first thing that came to mind: smiled and shook my head no. And now I've got a Greek chorus in my head, kicking me to the ground for reasons that I think are rather obvious by now.

The next day our departures (Anna M. Burgoyne and daughter) were to happen at the same time, as we found out in the dining room over breakfast as the sun was just about to coat every crack and crevice of the Lodge and the surrounding mountains. Anna M. ended up eating with me, both of us choosing to eat a minimal breakfast of toast, minute egg and tea. We quizzed each other on our reasons for leaving. I told her that I had recording commitments; she said that a call from an associate had put the trip to L.A. off, so she'd be returning to the city as well and beginning a new project of her own, maybe with Gregh's assistance. Shendra showed up about a half-hour into our discussion, with cigarette popped between two freshly-lipsticked lips, and plopped down between us with a bleary yet happy childlike expression.

"You're not gonna -- oh, g'morning, Mr. Galmud -- you're not gonna believe it, Ma," Shendra said, as she stubbed out her cigarette in a saucer and turned an empty coffee-cup rightsie up for her tea.

"Well, you look content, so you mind if I have one guess?" mother replied. Shendra shrugged her shoulders and slurped back a decidedly undainty swallow. "Sure. Guess all you want, but I bet you a million bucks you won't get it."

Anna M. replied, "Let's see, I predict the following good news: Kelvin has chosen to go back to his heartbroken wife, which means you're a free woman, and you're seeing -- " Shendra interrupted with a giggle, "Not even close, Ma, but nice try. You definitely get points in the Wishful Thinking department. But guess what? As I was walking past the lobby, Mr. Maltar stopped me and told me that a cleaning woman had found this!"
held it up. Mother and daughter smiled at each other, even touched for the first time since I'd seen them together. "The notebook," Anna M. said. "Your treasured notebook. I'm glad for you, honey," and to me, "This notebook is everything to her. I've got my films, she's got her journals." Maltar brought in a tray of freshly-dried coffee cups, walked past our table, and gave a knowing nod to me.

After breakfast I helped Anna M. and Shendra pack their suitcases into a waiting taxi; the rest of the film equipment would be delivered via courier to her place in a day or two. Shendra had gone back to their cottage to double-check for any missing items, fearing that she'd lose something precious again; the cabby had gone into the lobby to chat with Maltar, so Anna M. and I stood there staring at the curving valleys below the Lodge's plateau. "If you don't mind me asking," I said, "who's this Alex that you kept taking his name in vain last night?" Anna M. made as if to reach for her cigarettes in her purse, but then aborted the thought by folding her arms across her chest. "Husband," she replied. "I've been cursing him lately for not showing his face, for no signs. He died of a heart attack a year ago. He was the fantastic disciplinarian and parent between the two of us. So if you see Shendra, you know, reacting to me all the time, it's because he had the Midas touch with them; I'm just someone who keeps them in cigarettes, tuition, and funny money, as far as they're concerned. But Alex, yeah, he agreed to show me a sign when he got, you know, over there. I gather he's just getting a lot of interference. I look at it this way: there's a lot of prayers and hopes being sent up to Him or Her or It, and Alex's sign has to swim against all that like a salmon going upstream. It's tough. Do I sound like a religious nut or what? I don't mean to scare you, Mr. Galmud, don't worry, I'm what you'd call an Atheist-With-One-Eye-Peeled."
Shendra returned, and as we were saying our good-byes, she suddenly grabbed both of our arms and said, "Wait a sec -- we're all going back to the city, so why doesn't Mr. Galmud hitch a ride with us? It'd be fun, and then we could all take in dinner at The Red Lotus on Greenmount -- you know where that is, Mr. Galmud?", but I interjected that my ride was already on its way and to cancel out would be rude to the driver who had spent three to four hours on the road to collect me.

"Well, tell you what I would like to do, Mr. Galmud," Anna M. said, grabbing a bag from the backseat, unzipping the case, and removing a videocamera, "I'd like to try a little experiment. I got one of those lightbulb ideas. How about me filming you from our cab as we drive off? All you have to do is just walk up the path to the Lodge slowly, and we'll be going away just as slowly, I'll tell the driver. I figure I can use this last bit of film on this tape for a good exit scene in one of my video montages, or hell, just use it for a beginning to be different. What do you say?"

So I agreed, and when they got into the cab and the driver started up the engine, she leaned out the window. "Good," Anna M. said, "Just stand there like that. Hands in your overcoat pockets, I like that. The Maestro in Repose, kind of. -- Ok, driver: drive, please, but to a crawl -- George! Now you turn around and just walk up there; great! This looks wonderful from here -- walk, right, slow -- don't plod -- hey, listen, we'll call when we get back into town, alright? So don't worry about -- No, George, don't wave! No waving! This isn't a home movie! Just keep going, that's it, right, bye! Hey! What's with the waving again?"
1. "Seeing as how the pilot says this plane is not going to make its destination, I thought perhaps we could conduct a quick Deathbed Interview," said the Reporter siding next to me in my first-class compartment. "I hardly see the point in it," I replied. "And furthermore, how would it get through?" "Oh they still have contact with several control towers, and all that I'd have to do would be to read the text of the interview, and then a wire reporter would pick it up from there. So what do you say?", with pencil poised to write over a grease-and-coffee-stained notepad. "I think, well, I have one comment to make, and probably not worth printing, so please don't even make the effort: why's everyone so damned calm?" I asked. He nodded, "Good question, simple answer: Aside from you and I, the only people who are aware of the fact that this plane has lost fuel and probably won't make it are the captain and the flight crew. Did you notice how he only told you and I up here in first-class, and he didn't bother going back there?", jerking a thumb to the drawn curtain, "It's 'cause you'd have people doing all kinds of hideous things if you did tell them; I know, because I've been in war-torn areas all around the globe, friend, and I'm here to tell you, as a survivor and journalist, that people will commit the most insane and unimaginable actions if they're reminded of their imminent demise. People will debase themselves in all kinds of ways if it means buying a few extra seconds on the clock." I leaned back and looked at him with a sidelong glance, "Then how does that account for your calm?" "Me?" he laughed in a bubbled voice drawn down to a whisper, "It's because I've been knocking back the drinks since I heard an hour ago. But then again, I'm an old hand at this kind of disaster
stuff; I've been in seven airplane crashes, four train wrecks, and twelve sunken boats. Oh, and one -- what do you call those things? flying over stadiums during football games? -- well, one of those too. You'd think after awhile I'd get more inventive, you know, when it comes to dealing with these types of situations, wouldn't you? But no, here I am, yet again with yet another scotch in my mitt." "I see," I answered with a nod, "so do you have a question?" "Right," and he stood up clumsily, groped around in the overhead compartment directly above us, then sat back down to open a tattered briefcase which contained only a coffee-stained notepad, a #2 chewed-up pencil, and a black-and-white photograph of someone. He held the picture close to my face, "My wife," he belched, "left me years ago. Got sick and tired of the endless treadmill of disasters I'd put myself through. Never knew if I was coming back dead or alive, she'd say. Who could blame her? Then again that's just called living, who the blankety-blank ever knows." He planted a kiss on her forehead. "The interview?" I reminded him, for I was growing just a tad annoyed at this point. "Sure," he said and began writing and talking at the same time: Q. So what was your first favorite song when you were growing up? GG: "Night and Day. I had Big Band ears before I grew serious ones. My parents used to dance to it in the kitchen, made me think that they were a lot more romantic than they actually were."

2. "And speaking of romantic couples, Jesus, get a load of these two," he interrupted by poking me in the ribs and pointing towards an apparently aggressive female flight attendant pinning a considerably younger gentleman, also a flight attendant, against a closed lavatory door. "Don't give me that shit about being married, dammit," she growled, almost panting in a choked whisper, giving off fear and sensuality at once, "because
you're no longer anything, you hear me?, Up Here is it, that's all, there will be no more, and I can't die like this, with an ex-husband who'll just nod and crack a beer when he sees our burning wreck on the six o'clock news tonight, do you hear me at all in that scrawny hollow head of yours? I'm sorry, sweetheart," as she planted a rough kiss, "I meant nothing about that skinny comment, really, it's just -- don't you understand the concept of complete and delicious vindication? Getting even, baby, that's what I mean, the Greatest Screw to end All Screws -- the, uh, the last laugh! Yes! Because he'll read the newspaper, see the photos, you know, fire and ash and so forth, and they'll find both of us -- you and me, you gorgeous thing -- with two big fat sloppy smiles on our faces." The younger man tried to wriggle free, with no luck, and said in obvious desperation, "And let's say we land, what then? What happens if we do land and we arrive without a scratch? And my wife and two toddlers are waiting for me on the tarmac? What then? And what about, well, what about whomever's waiting on the tarmac for you?" The woman made for his zipper, he tried holding her back; she laughed, "I'll tell you who's waiting for me, pretty boy, ready? I've got a bitter seventeen year-old daughter who can't wait to move out and stay with her deadbeat dad in Oregon; I've got a cactus in my cramped two-bedroom apartment that begs for water and falls to the floor whenever I shut the blinds; I've got a pair of goldfish who bitch at me and weird me out everytime I walk by their freaking bowl; I've got a brother who married a hooker when he was backpacking through Portugal, and now he wants to stay at my cramped quarters for the next three months with his drooling child-bride. That's what I've got waiting for me down there, sweet thing, so what do you say? -- ooh! For someone with oodles of principles and scruples, you're certainly more than a little turned-on, aren't you? Don't lie now, 'cause I've got the hot hard truth right in my hand." The younger fellow
moaned, the resistance draining from him by the second but still keeping up the appearance of a struggle, "I admit, ya know, there've been times when you would, ya know, wear that little black skirt and you'd bend down to get more ice or peanuts or something, and I would sort of, that is kind of, let my mind roam. Just to get my hands on that sweet triangle." "Don't think I didn't notice," she purred, flinging her panties to the chair opposite ours and pressing against him, "You and your itsy-bitsy ethics, all this time working together and never once giving in, and all it took was a little disaster like this -- g-uh!" He grew more aggressive, which looked all the more odd because he was also a good four inches shorter than her and wore an almost angry expression mixed with sweat. "She'd understand," the young fellow said in a whisper, still thrusting. "Who she?" the woman asked. "My wife." "G-Ah! Of course she would, sugar, course. Don't you think if she was on the same boat she'd be doing the same thing with someone else?" "Don't ruin it for me," he hissed, trying not to break his concentration, "No talk of boats or wives or anything. Pretend I'm like a horny terrorist." "Always wanted to do it on a plane," she sighed, voice rising, and he replied, "Now you are," tore open her blouse, ripped her bra off with his teeth, began administering sloppy animal licks and kisses, "now you are. With my hands on your moist rhombus. Your slippery, dewy trapezoid." "G-OH!" her voice escalated into baby squeaks but added, "Mind your language, stud, there's kiddies right behind that skimpy blue curtain. Besides, what's with all this Geography talk?" "Geometry, not Geography," he corrected her. "So what's the diff? You don't think I know my Geography from Geometry? I think I resent that; in fact, I know I do. Maybe we should just stop. All that shape talk weirds me out." "Too late," he said and clenched her buttocks. When their eyes met a few seconds later, he gazed at her with fuzzy adoration and she reciprocated with absolute hatred wrapped
in a tight scowl. "What?" he asked, shrugging his shoulders while she smoothed her pleated skirt out and looked about for her panties. "A grade-A, blue-ribbon disappointment," shook her head and lit a cigarette. He looked flabbergasted, "Disapp --? What? You got the Grim Reaper whacking you in the ass with his scythe and you question my technique? Give me the smallest of breaks here, can you? We're not in a bed, for starters, and secondly -- " She looked at her watch then and said flatly, "Snack-time." "What?", almost startled by her nonchalance. "Them," she pointed toward the blue curtain, and then the two of them wheeled out a metal cart on wheels and made their way without a word to the other side. The reporter burst into ham-fisted chuckles, "See what I told you? People are animals in these kinds of situations! The best kind of theater in the world, and you know why? Because it's all ad-libbed; the script, the manners, the etiquette goes right out the window. When you're hurtling toward the ground at several hundred miles-per-hour, I mean, does it really matter which fork you use first, the little or big one?" I shook my head, "I can't tell if you're being rhetorical. Are you really asking me?" "No," he said, "but I am asking you this," and he flipped a page in his notepad and held it up so that I could read what he'd written: Q. Any regrets about having spent your youth as a performer?

3. I answered him without making eye contact, perhaps reluctant to observe any reaction. "When I was twenty-four, sometime after returning from my first international tour, I remember playing a version of that same question over and over in my mind. I felt that perhaps I'd missed something by not committing myself to four-to-five years of not sitting in a dormitory room, smoking cigarettes, drinking brandy, or whatever it is young people did in those days. I don't think I would've done well
altogether; still, I received an honorary doctorate anyway. What it proves, I don't know, but I feel there's a beautiful irony or contradiction buried in there somehow. What say you to that, interviewer?" However, the reporter did not get to answer, for at that moment the young male flight attendant arrived back in our first-class compartment dragging an obviously dead overweight gentleman. He propped the body into the restroom then shut the door quickly, just in time to hear a hollow, meaty thud against the thin wall. The attendant made his way back down the aisle, but then seeing our disturbed expressions he came back to explain, "The guy ate himself to death. Got into a peanut-eating contest with the other fellow sitting across from him, and guess who lost. Wondering why I'm not rattled? 'Cause we see this garbage all the time. Now if you'll excuse me." He returned five minutes later, dragging another body, the head covered by a duffel bag. The corpse was folded into a fetal position by the attendant, then placed in the kitchenette area. Turning to us for a second time, the attendant raised his hands in mock surrender, "Ok, that one, yes, I admit, I killed him. But only because he had created a rumor about the plane losing gas and everyone going down, so he claimed that he was a," stabbed at the air with invisible quotation marks, "the manager of the parachute inventory on this flight, so he began selling off the 'chutes. When I figured out what was going on, he was sitting there thumbing through a wad of bills. Someone had even given him their Cross pen and a wristwatch. Sick stuff. Fortunately he'd only gotten the word to the last six rows behind him, so it was controlled." "So how did you --?" the reporter asked nervousy. The attendant smiled, "Oh, the fold-out tray, that's how. Those things are heavier than sin, although you wouldn't know it. Now if you can excuse again, someone up in row 26 wants a Bluebird grapefruit," and he left us again.
4. By now the coach class had grown disturbed, as I could tell from the sounds of babies out-bawling each other, husbands and wives and passengers (who had been complete strangers to one another until this point) cursing at each other, praying, vomiting, someone obliviously whistling the theme song to The Andy Griffith Show, and of course lots of crying. I became immersed in the frayed link of loud thought growing in the back ("What do you mean you 'didn't'? Why so surprised? It's a will, for crying out loud, and done for such an occasion as this; God, you're so thick sometimes when you want to be!", "No regrets, man, that's what this six-pack in my carry-on is for, to wash the frickin' regret outta my hair and down my lungs and out my anus. You want one?", "Try the SkEYEphone again, Gene, just one more time.") and closed my eyes while drawing my hands over my face and letting the tips of my fingers rub my eyelids.

5. The reporter nudged me with the eraser-tip of his pencil; I didn't break my concentration, refused to. "Hey, maestro, you awake there?" I wouldn't answer. "Please. George. Amigo. This story won't write itself, you know, and I don't care if we're cruising on a thimbleful of gasoline, I still got a deadline to meet and your clamming up isn't exactly going to win me any Pulitzers or make me the next Studs Terkel. So what do you say? Another question?" "Momma, Dada," I whispered to myself. He saw my lips move and barked, "What? That's a yes, right? You gave me a nod in the affirmative, there it is again, so let's proceed. This time, with feeling, as those conductors probably say in your line of work. Question: If you, George Galmud, were on a desert island, what would be the top three records you would pick?" I cracked my fingers apart on my left hand and looked at him through the small opening, "Desert island? Records? I -,") "You know,
this works much better if you don't have your hands in front of your face," he interrupted. I closed the crack back up, "The question seems ludicrous to me. I'm on a desert island, I've got no electricity, I only grabbed a life preserver when I fell off this hypothetical sinking ship, and after having been in solitary exile for the past three months I've got no interest in records for I'm still wondering if I'll live another day on bananas, coconuts and spring water from a lagoon. Good Lord, I can't believe I'm even having this discussion," and I felt myself start choking on periodic staccato sobs. "This isn't a word problem, maestro," the reporter sighed with more than a hint of annoyance, "now stretch your imagination for a change: you do have electricity; you did grab a record player, extension cord, and three records when you jumped ship. So, we return to the original question: what are those three essential records?" "Was there anyone I knew, like family or friends, on board the same ship?" I asked.

6. He slapped his forehead, "Ya know, if you're not even going to try, I don't think it's worth my time," and moved across the aisle, took a seat by the window to impress upon me how irritated he was. I wanted to cry, for I felt that the action would've at least provided a distraction, but I could not even muster a single tear. Just dry sobs, sputters and half-attempted chokes. And for a moment, yes, I did become slightly distracted, wondering if I'd neglected to drink the proper amount of water or other liquid that would necessitate crying vis-a-vis full tear ducts, and I tried breaking down the number of glasses of liquid that I consumed in an average day, week, or month. I'd just about calculated how many glasses I'd drunk in the past month (taking into consideration that all liquids are equal), when a flight attendant tapped me on the shoulder and broke my reverie. She looked
at me imploringly, "I'm sorry, sir, I apologize for disturbing you and I
normally wouldn't ask this favor of any of our passengers, except...you
see, it's general opinion that you're the most sane of the group at
present, and you also possess an intuitive logic that most people lack. Or
in a nutshell, mental giant. Our pilot is in the lavatory at the moment, a
bit queasy, and we're wondering if you might, you know," and she made a
motion with both hands as if to clutch an invisible steering wheel. I
laughed then, "I can't. I'm -- what makes you think that I'm the best
person for the job? The reporter over there has been in numerous airflight
accidents and survived them all, so if anyone could shed light on how to
land a plane, I'd bet he'd have better insight." The reporter gave a
knowing wink to the flight attendant. She looked at me with steady
patience, "An interesting suggestion, sir, but unfortunately you'll also
notice that your fellow passenger has been imbibing and FAA laws are quite
strict about allowing individuals to operate any and all equipment when the
individual in question is under the influence of alcohol or narcotics. I'd
feel that I'd be putting the other passengers at risk." "Well, I'm sorry,
I can't. I know there's someone more qualified than myself," and the pilot
who had been eavesdropping from behind the lavatory door called back, "For
God's sake, man, is it not worth at least a try?" "Then what about the co-
pilot? What condition is he or she in?" I answered. "Have a look for
yourself," the pilot cackled. So the stewardess took me by the arm and led
me into the cockpit, where indeed a petrified-looking co-pilot sat cowering
in the corner, staring at his palsied hands that were screwed-up into the
same position as paralyzed eagle's talons. The co-pilot, a mere youth of a
man, gave an awkward wave with his left clawed hand, said, "See? I'm in
terribly rough shape. You wouldn't know it to look at me, but I'm a
professional, er, flyer. I've just had a kind of momentary mental block,
that's all, and when I come to, then you'll see. I could land this bucket on a saltine, that's how accurate I usually am, but today's just not my day, as you can see. So work your magic, maestro." I stared at the flight attendant and co-pilot, slumping into the pilot's chair. "Has it occurred to any of you that I have no flight experience whatsoever? And does that disturb either of you at all?" They looked at each other and shrugged their shoulders. "Nope," she said. "Just hit buttons or whatever," he added, "for it can't be any worse than what's happening right now. Besides, even though we've just met, we've got a good feeling about you. Just a kind of -- what's the word I'm looking for, Wendy?" "A vibe," she nodded with enthusiasm, "just an overall positive kind of impression. An aura. Yes, that's the word. I'm not usually one for that mumbo-jumbo New-Age hand-holding thing -- you know, getting in touch with your Inner Idiot -- but there's just moments when you gotta suspend all your disbelief and say yeah, go for it!" The co-pilot gave her a sour look and said to me, "This is why we didn't ask her to land this thing, 'cause the last thing we need is to find ourselves Twelve-stepping into the side of a mountain." "Hey, screw you!" she replied, then to me, "So do what you have to. I'm going back out there to dispense honey-mustard pretzels to the cranky masses," and left. "And now," the co-pilot said with a trace of annoyance, "could you commence the button-hitting and lever-pulling?"

7. And so help me, I tried everything I could, I really did. Flicked toggle switches, tapped buttons, punched and kicked and pounded the entire panel. At the end of my flurry of fruitless activity, I slouched back into the pilot's seat trying to catch my breath. The co-pilot was unimpressed and told me so, much to my surprise, "If I'd asked Sonny Liston to come up and help us out, that's the kind of assistance I would've expected. You, on
the other hand, are a world-famous musician known for subtlety and
gentleness; that's the best you can do? I mean, none of us expect miracles,
not in this day and age anyway, but that so-called rescue attempt lacked
all imagination. You disgrace this cockpit. Go sit down." So I did, and it
was then -- with hands planted firmly against the contours of my shamed
face -- that I began to cry at last.

8. I then heard the reporter's voice, as if emanating from the airplane's
 crackling p.a. system; I turned to look at where he had been sitting and he
was no longer there. "No," the reporter said, "I'm not there. I'm what
you'd call ephemeral," paused to burp, "No, that's not the right word --
jeez, I get so muddled during these trans-Atlantic disasters. I never have
any notice, always have a good time, chit-chatting, then I get the word,
and it's time to interview someone. Not ephemeral, ethereal! There, a
master's in journalism from Columbia (class of '64) is not wasted after
all; somewhere my mentor smiles. Ethereal, Galmud, ok?" I looked toward
the front of the plane, noticed that the address speaker remained on its
hook. I covered my face again. He giggled, "That co-pilot was a silly hot
head, wasn't he? I mean, here you are, trying to save the day, attempting
to live up to these inordinate expectations, and he's sitting there like a
stiff ol' paper-mache puppet telling you how to do it right. I would've
popped him one, if it'd been me; you're too much of a gentleman, Galmud. By
the way, are you starting to feel any calmer? You should. In fact, the
sound of your breathing -- that is, the more you breath -- it'll wash out
that horrible noise from the back. So just work on that for awhile." Sure
enough it was true. Every breath of mine diminished the volume of the
screams and moans, until there was only my breathing accompanied by the
steady sound of engine white-noise from the airplane. I dared not remove my
hands, for fear that I'd break whatever spell I'd set into motion.

9. "Good," he continued, "you're doing amazingly well for a first-timer, Galmud. Usually I'm used to getting screamers -- you know, people who prefer shouting their heads off and knocking their heads against the window; they're the ones who end up costing everyone else's lives while at the same time gravitating toward the fire -- literally pitching themselves into the source of the problem head-first. I've seen it, and I'm here to tell you, it's a grotesque sight. But I don't mean to shake you up, because you're doing a fantastic job. This is the first bit of normality that this airplane has seen since the pilot went 'whoops' an hour or two ago. Now the next step is the trickiest, and this is where most folks blow it -- however, I want to emphasize this -- you're no dummy. You've proved that. But all it takes to bring this airplane down without a hitch is just the one unspoiled thought from your stuffed noggin, and all you gotta think -- just once, mind you -- is: I, George Galmud, can land this plane. And the only stipulation is believing it wholeheartedly, no half-hearted recitation of the phrase. Now, I'm not going to tell you exactly when to begin, because really it's up to you; my only suggestion, if I may, is that you do it within the next -- ," and he stopped speaking.

10. Silence, as the sound of the airplane's engine cut off in a second.

11. The only sound being my breathing. Inhale, exhale. Eyes tight, daring not to remove my hands from my face.

12. The next thing I heard was his nasal tone coming from the tinny speaker again, laughing, "You're still nervous, aren't you? Well, let me
clue you in: do you hear another sound besides your breathing? And if so, tell me what it is. Just say it out loud." He was right. I did hear another sound!

13. "** *****," I replied. "What? You're going to have to take your hands away from your face this time, Galmud, even if you want to keep your eyes closed still. But hands away from face, and repeat what you just said." "My heart," I answered, eyes indeed still squeezed tight, "the sound of my heart beating quite fast." "That's exactly right! You are correct! Give the man a cigar! And do you know why you're hearing that particular sound at this very moment?"

14. With hesitance in my voice, almost a frightened stutter, "Because I landed the plane?"

15. He burst out in a hoarse chuckle, "Are you asking or telling me, Galmud? And hey, I thought I was the one giving the interview! Seriously, yes, another check for you in the 'correct' column, for you have landed this plane. Yes. Like the proverbial feather. Now the next thing I'm going to ask of you, this being the crucial part, is to open your eyes. The opening of your eyes is key. It's not only key, it's common sense. For if you want to walk off this plane, you have to see your way to the exit. Get it, man? Now up and at 'em. I'm waiting outside for you."

16. At his wish, I opened my eyes. Still seated I tried looking out the window but each and every window was clouded over, allowing only a dusty light to penetrate the cabin. I stood up and attempted to remove my overhead bag, but found nothing there. And looked around, only to see that
everyone -- fellow passengers and flight crew -- had all vanished. I made my way to the exit, and poked my head into the cockpit thinking that I'd get a view of the outside finally from that front window, but it too was equally obscured. So I pushed open the exit door.

17. Before me was the lengthy stepladder, with the reporter below, his back to me and blithely trying to light a cigarette in the wind with little success. The landscape resembled a desolate, misty and foggy Scottish moor -- a setting that I perhaps mistakenly remember reading about in a Tom Swift novel as a boy, but always wishing, from then to that very moment standing at the top of those steps, that I'd come across such a place in reality. The gray expanse wrapped around me like a soothing blanket. It was the most un-colorful environment I'd ever imagined, hoped for.

18. The reporter turned to look up at me, somewhat wearily I might add. "You've got two very annoying qualities, if you don't mind me saying, Galmud: First, you move like a turtle. Your curiosity in your marrow takes forever to reach your nerves. It's painful to watch. I just want to give you a push. And secondly, well, you've got an odd sense of what constitutes receiving a gift." "What do you mean?" I asked. He gestured with a guiding motion of both arms, "Come down, please." I joined him at the base of the ladder, and pulled the collar of my overcoat up, which until now I didn't realize I'd been wearing.

19. "This place is what you've wanted, or so you said, and you know, it can be subject to change if you desire but you just have to give us a little notice. If you don't give us advance notice of what you want changed and you decide to wander off, then hey, the consequences are yours alone.
All we ask is that you ask and then you wait for an answer. Keep in mind, the answer comes back when you least expect it. But anyway," he said and paused to finally light his cigarette, "this is your place. You always imagined a place called Kayserling Grove, and here it is. We've got here in abundance what you have lovingly referred to as broken animals -- remember when you were a kid and your dog Simon died and you vowed since that day that you'd eventually make enough money to start a farm and tend to broken animals? Well, forget the money, for that's not an issue here. You've got all the broken animals you'd want -- only broken in the sense that they were all unloved and now they've got your endless reservoir of love and attention, and they're all -- well, for lack of a better word -- special. But you probably already know what I mean; you'll know when you test my assertion."

20. He took me by the arm and led me across a foggy knoll to a stone house with a chimney billowing soft smoke. He stopped us both short of entering. "I need not be redundant here," he explained, "but this is obviously your cottage. The one thing you'll find missing is, of course, a piano. But I think you already know why you don't need it. In fact, I'm quite willing to cut my yapping short so that you can go survey your flock of various animals and engage in a little," and waved his arms around, "composing." I was overcome with such happiness; I gave him an extended hug, much to my surprise. "But what about the other passengers? And the crew?" I asked. He shrugged, "They've got their own futures and pasts to look forward to. Everyone's safe, if that's what your big concern is, Galmud." "Then what about finishing your interview with me?" To which he replied, tears forming in the corners of his eyes as he smiled, "I've run out of questions."
21. A sequence of discordant cow moo's echoed from afar. "I believe you're needed, Galmud. Now, if you don't have any other questions that need answering, er, do you?" I hugged him again, "Look at me, reporter, I'm hugging! I, who used to loathe physical contact of any kind, am hugging. And conversely, I have no questions for the first time in my life. I have the sensation, like a tiny itch on the end of my nose, of wanting to ask questions, but I feel like...well, like I know enough as it is, and therefore I also have a feeling of ridiculous happiness." The reporter smiled, "It's a common experience, Galmud. No matter how brilliant or simple a person is, it's typical. And I'm glad for you. Really. When I first met you on that plane, my oh my, what a bag of neuroses you were; if the plane hadn't started to act fluky, I had half a mind to throw you off myself. Now go. Play." He pointed to the source of the cow sounds, and I turned to look and face a small muddy green hill not fifty yards away. With my back to him still, I asked, "Now, when you say 'play', do you mean 'play' as in 'like a child' or do you mean 'like a musician', as in -- ," and when I turned to face him again, I discovered that he had indeed disappeared.

22. disappeared.

23. I began running up the gentle slope that made up this insignificant hill, toward the sound of the cacophonous cows just beyond the foggy embankment. Each footstep into soft sod seemed to somehow excite the cows with my approaching presence, and the noise grew to a more giddy pitch, more cows chiming in, more bells clanging; each footstep made me feel younger, until I had forgotten that I was fifty years old, puffy in all aspects of my anatomy except for the piano fingers, and hopelessly gray;
each footstep made me swallow the thick cleansing air of the glen, and with each intake of breath I let out a laugh, for this just seemed as it should be; I threw up my hands in victory when I made it to the top of the hill, let out a majestic yet silly cry, and summoned the cows -- probably close to a hundred, I'd guess, for they took up most of the view below. They looked at each other, at me next, then came to order in neat rows of their own devising. As it should be.

24. And it was then, for the first and most likely the last time that The Kayserling Grove Symphony Orchestra performed with all unrestrained bovine genius; I waved my arms in motions and directions that seemed appropriate, and the cows in turn uttered sounds of instruments in sweet delicate pitch; melodies I'd never imagined until then, from the sounds of instruments I'd never heard; their cow mouths opened and let forth a sound that shook the cloaking mist, clearing a ring of light from above that descended softly on each individual talented beast; they possessed the ability, it amazed me, to not only create their own music but to also mold the conditions of their environment by their sound; those cows which were not playing at any given time would take nonchalant nibbles at the rich turf in front of their unmovable hooves; as I waved and chopped at the air above my head, I cried in ecstasy and the cows responded by looking at me with sympathetic eyes, their way of reassuring me that the music is always like this, their way of imploring me to submit to the aria without being overwhelmed.

25. And when I shut my eyes and clasped my hands together, as I had expected, the music stopped on a dime. Upon reopening my eyes a moment later, I discovered that the cows had already disassembled and meandered into the thicker recesses of fog, leaving only a handful of cows in my
field of vision; soon those cows strode off at a blissful pace, like monks absorbed in their own peculiar thoughts, leaving only myself standing at the top of the hill. Then only the odd cowbell, every ten slow seconds later or so, chiming its hollow metallic clong-ong. And then just a rook's caw from an unseen lofty pine.

26. The punctuated cry of that crow, then, was broken by a gang of twenty or so beagles bounding up the side of the hill that I'd climbed before, racing towards me with childlike smiles and tripped-up fumbled and tumbled leaps, and within seconds they were all around me yipping and yattering and taking bold sloppy licks at my hands. "Hungry, are you? Then there's no sense standing here, is there, so let's go down to the cottage, where I've been told none of us will want for anything," and they followed and occasionally tripped against each other or would get underfoot and yowl. The stone cottage soon came into view, and the chimney still proudly puffed curled smoke. "I just realized something, my children," I told the beagles, "are any of you musicians like your cow friends?" The dogs barked loudly in the affirmative, then a couple took playful nips at my hands to provoke me into conducting, but I told the group, "No, we'll have plenty of time later to rehearse. I fear I'm just a bit tired, for this has been an awfully long day for me. But rest assured, my dear doggies, there's a place for all of you in The Kayserling Grove Symphony Orchestra, yes indeed."

27. Just as I placed my hand on the door latch, the hounds looked away and barked in the direction of something unseen. "Surely you're not all as silly as this, are you?" I asked. I gestured to the door, "It's warm inside and I guarantee you there's enough chow inside to stuff yourselves, so stop dallying around." But to my surprise, the pack began to quietly trot away
from me, and so I was forced to follow them down a gravel pathway surrounded on both sides by dense forest. The gravel soon gave way to dirt, winding downwards and giving me the feel that we were putting quite some distance between ourselves and the comfortable cottage above and back there. The beagles led me to a gate affixed with a sign, marked in black-on-white lettering upon a bolted metal plate, which read: PROCEED NO FURTHER. The fuzzy image of a fox, peering behind an overgrown fern, was beyond the gate. "This?" I chuckled to the whining beagles. "This is why you've taken me down here? For a frightened fox who's probably got more sense than all of you put together! I must admit, dogs, I'm rather taken aback by the idea that you're the kind of canines which hunt foxes, for I'd always imagined Kayserling Grove as being a peaceful place in which all of us, to varying degrees, were musical creatures. This disappoints me, dogs. Now in the interest of good will, I think we owe it to this poor fox to allow him into our enclave. We're all -- myself included -- broken animals, are we not?" They barked in agreement. "Then permit me to bring the fox in," I replied, and as I was about to unlatch the gate, two of the beagles tugged at my overcoat. "Whatever are you doing? Gentle dogs, I repeat: ours is an inclusive community, and I will not permit any kind of intolerance, now shoo!" The beagles cowered, backed off, and stood well out of the way as I swung the gate open and stepped out. I turned to glance at the shivering beagles and laughed, "You should get a look at yourselves. I've never seen anything like this. Twenty scrappy beagles all turned to jelly."

28. The gate then swung shut at the force of a passing gust, and twenty scrappy beagles turned tail and ran back up the mountainous path, disappearing into the fog. I made no effort to follow, only shouted after
them, "Wherever are you going?". There was an identical sign positioned on this, the other side of the gate where I stood: PROCEED NO FURTHER. The fox looked distressed at the closed gate, then began to slink off; I followed, trying to keep pace with the swift creature, keeping my eyes on the patch of orange-red shifting in and out of the green maze before me. "Come back, fox, I've gone this far with you, now if I give you my word that the beagles won't harm you, will you return? No?" and kept pursuing this fox, but oddly found myself losing my breath. "You insane fox, if I'd stayed in Kayserling Grove I wouldn't -- huh, huff -- I wouldn't be short of -- huff -- breath, and you'd be feasting and out of the cold."

29. In a small leaf-covered clearing in this forest, where I had lost complete knowledge of where the original path and the cottage were, we both stopped. The fox stood a mere ten feet away, elevated by a rotting tree stump and thus looking down upon me. I wheezed, "Fox, I'll be honest with you, I'm having a very difficult time understanding where you fit into all of this. I'd just gotten a fix on everything else back there, although I'd be hardpressed to articulate what that understanding is or was, and now I find myself chasing you and I can't quite figure out the reason. But this much I'm certain of: there's a sense of order to this, the idea of Kayserling Grove, and so you must fit into place somehow. So I'll await your answer and give up the chase, if that's what you'd like."

30. The fox sprinted off into darkness, and I made no effort to follow. I dropped to my knees, pulled my overcoat about my chest, and cried out, "Confound you, fox! I have tried, I have tried, and in return you give me nothing. You did this on purpose, didn't you? Removed me from the cows, the cottage, the faithful beagles, and then my music," as I illustrated my
impotency by waving my arms around and failing to produce any music from any available sphere. "Cursed fox! Evil fox!" and pulled my knees to my chest, forming a perfect sobbing ball.

31. A chugging automobile engine approached, slow and deliberate. Every so often, the antiquated horn would blow, a strangled sound from an unseen road below. "George!" a voice called. "Yes?" I called back, rising to my feet and making my way down the path. The driver, also the voice I assumed, cut the engine and I could hear him exit the vehicle, shutting the door behind him. "George, that you?" the man repeated.

32. And I met Edgar Galmud at the bottom, where the paved road linked the thick forest. He stood proudly, a younger gentleman with the same thick glasses in a brown-and-white-checked flannel woodsman's jacket. I'd grown smaller, this I knew, and softer; and as the words made their way to my tongue to explain why I'd lost all remnants of my aged self, I forgot. He placed a big comforting hand on my head, "If you get in the truck right this second, we can get back to Lake Roland in a half hour and your poor mother will never suspect you'd gone missing and I won't make a peep about it." "A conspiracy?" I asked, looking up. "Big word for a little man, yes. Conspiracy, that's right. Now in you go." My father started up the engine once I was safely inside, and I recall with acute clarity the moment of turning on the radio and hearing a song that so piqued my interest with its frivolity that I had to ask my father the title. "Night and Day," he answered, "it's easy to remember if you think of it like this: I'm day, your mother's night," and he winked and hummed along as I laughed. "Then what does that make me?" I said, but my father was too distracted to reply.
33 & 1/3. I thought, this all reminds me of something I've never experienced before, if such a thing is possible.