

Confessions of a Quack

(Also known as *The Adventures of Holistic Harry*)

For use of this content (or just to talk), please email me at:
HolisticHarry@live.com

--Steven Bratman, MD

Copyright Steven Bratman, MD. 2008

Author's Note

It would be disingenuous to say of this book that it is purely a work of fiction, and any similarities to real people living or dead are purely coincidental. In fact, many of the characters and events presented here are partially modeled on real people and actual events. However, the details are distorted in such a way that nothing can be taken as juicy insider gossip.

"Royce Largo," for example, is based on at least a dozen famous alternative medicine figures, and thus nothing that he does or says in this story can be received as a statement of fact about any one real person. Similarly, the natural product expo described here is a composite of such expos run by several real companies, and so on.

The story also frequently mentions the specifics of various forms of alternative medicine, and here the details are almost always precisely correct. For those who do not have a lifetime's exposure to alternative medicine, I have added explanatory footnotes; none are absolutely necessary for understanding the story, though they may still be of interest.

The Appendix on double-blind studies, however, may be essential. The double-blind study is, in fact, the true villain and hero of this book. Though most people have heard of such studies, few (including medical doctors) have fully assimilated their far-reaching implications. The Appendix explains these implications in more detail than a novel can conveniently sustain.

-- Steven Bratman, MD

Section 1. Losing it

The Horror of Positive Thinking

During the winter in Santa Cruz, California, the sun both rises and sets over the ocean. There is a logical explanation for this phenomenon: Santa Cruz faces south across Monterey Bay, rather than west, and the islands seen against the far horizon are not Japan but the spit of the Monterey Peninsula. Nonetheless, Harry Boullard found it reliably miraculous. On the morning of the day when he would at last completely lose it, he consciously used the morning's miracle as a distraction from despair.

He took a cup of organic coffee out to the porch of his West Cliff Drive home, plopped in a chair, and watched carefully as the sun poured its rays across the water in a deep red streak. He made mental notes about the progression of the streak's shape as the sun rose higher, and carried through a deliberate study of the sequence of colors moving through the few puffy clouds in the sky. He also tried to separate the odors of iodine and bromine in the sea air. When the seals on a nearby offshore rock broke out into their loud morning quarrel, he decided that they sounded like dogs barking with a Chinese accent.

Very funny, but he still had to go see patients, and he still didn't have the heart. He'd been losing heart for years, but yesterday's phone call from Frank Lewis' wife had pushed him over the edge. He was too dispirited to move.

He checked his watch. Seven-thirty. Almost time.

He made a deal with himself: If he could come up with one name, one face, a single patient of whom he could say "I feel good about my work with this person," he would heave his tall, slightly overweight body onto the bicycle and pedal downtown to his place of torment.

He'd practiced holistic medicine for two decades now. There must be someone.

He riffled through faces in memory, first from his practice in Wichita, Kansas, and then, with increasing desperation, among the patients he'd seen in the subsequent Santa Cruz phase of his life. He'd almost bumped up against the present when he finally came up with a name: Sandy Owen

Well, there was Sandy Owen.

It was a sad story, but at least she was someone he thought he could really help.

A week before the day that Harry would at last completely lose it, Sandy had arrived at the Harry Boullard Holistic Health Center right on time, her new-patient paperwork all filled out. Her expression when she handed the forms through the reception window struck Harry as odd. She wore a hunted, guilty look, as if Harry were a Stalinist inquisitor and the intake forms a signed confession.

"You're Sandy Owen," he said.

"That's me."

The tone of her voice made the words sound like an admission of guilt.

She wore a low cut pastel blue dress held up by string-like straps. It was an outfit that had once been intended to look sexy, Harry guessed, but that now only showcased emaciation. Sallow skin barely shrouded her bones, sunken spaces hollowed out her clavicles, and her thin hair hung vapidly, without luster or life. His first thought was "raw-foodist." In pursuit of perfect health, raw-foodists often starved themselves half to death. However, when he glanced down at her forms, he saw that under "diet," she'd written "bad." Not raw-foodist, then.

In order to provide a non-clinical experience for his patients, Harry had set the Santa Cruz incarnation of the Harold Boullard Holistic Health Center in an old Victorian house. The waiting room had once been the Victorian's sun parlor. He'd put up a partition to separate the waiting room from his various back offices and treatment rooms, and the partition was pierced at the middle by a door. He pointed toward the door and asked her to come on back. It was no more than a few feet, but Sandy moved so tentatively that during the time it took Harry to walk around the return of his desk and leave the reception room to meet her in the corridor, she'd only gone so far as to open the entryway a crack.

"Yes, that's right," he said to her peeping face. "Come on through."

Harry's reception window was set fairly high in the wall, and he hadn't yet seen much beside her face and shoulders. What he observed now as she stepped through the door unsettled him. Sandy had a bulging, enormous belly on an otherwise stick-like body, as if she were a famine-stricken African child.

Could this be protein-calorie malnutrition, kwashiorkor? He'd never seen that in America, not even among fruitarians.

Liver cirrhosis?

Pregnancy? Pregnancy in someone this malnourished would be a ghastly thing.

She orbited slightly around her belly as she passed along the corridor toward him. She carried a nylon sports bag in lieu of a purse, with white letters that read "Soccer USA," and this, even more than the belly, made Harry feel bad for her. If she'd once played soccer, she'd come down a long way.

He held open the door into his main treatment room. When she passed beneath his outstretched arm she gave a little gasp of pleasure, as did so many patients on seeing this room for the first time. It was more like a living room than a doctor's office (not surprisingly, since it had once been the Victorian's living room). It had Danish-style chairs made of teak and gray leather rather than the usual fake-wood-and-vinyl embarrassments. Its supplies were kept in an ornate Japanese chest, rather than the typical white rectangular metal wall-cabinets. And instead of the usual standard stainless steel examining bench, Harry offered his patients a padded massage table to lie upon, its legs made of elegantly curved oak, its surface covered with a freshly laundered sheet rather than a strip of white butcher paper.

Sandy made straight for the massage table, and climbed up on it using the oak stepstool he kept in place for the purpose. Her belly made it impossible for her to sit upright, and she fell back on her elbows.

He glanced through her intake forms. Only thirty-two? He'd have guessed forty. Not old enough for liver cirrhosis.

He pulled up a teak-and-gray-leather chair and sat beside her. "Well, Sandy," he said evenly, "tell me what's going on."

The reply came out all at once, as if she'd rehearsed it. "I have a constant sore throat, my fingernails split, I get weakness in my legs, and I'm tired all the time."

She hadn't mentioned her swollen abdomen. "And how long have you had these symptoms?" he asked.

"A year, maybe. They're getting worse."

"Have you seen other doctors?"

"No." She craned her neck to one side of her belly and studied her right foot, bare within white boat shoes. "I'm too embarrassed."

Embarrassed? An odd choice of feelings. There was a mystery here.

"Why does it embarrass you to get treatment for split fingernails?" he asked. "I mean, it's not exactly a venereal disease."

She laughed a little. "What I mean is, I'm embarrassed about my negative thoughts. That's how I got these symptoms. I've been told you would understand."

No, no mystery.

An immense weariness flooded through Harry. He understood the context and the origin and the nature of her feelings, and he wished he didn't. "So you live at Morningsun Farms?"

Her head jerked up as if he'd yanked a string attached to her chin. "How did you guess? Did I tell you on the phone?"

"Just an intuition."

More than an intuition. He knew Morningsun's guru, Darlene Mist. He'd even treated her. Darlene preached a particularly annoying version of the you-create-your-own-reality philosophy, and he recognized its toxic symptoms in Sandy.

Sandy held out one hand. "I think my cracked fingernails indicate an inability to dig into the meat of life. I'm too afraid to dig in. No matter how hard I try, I hold back." Tears were welling up.

"I see," Harry said, and let his gaze slide toward her swollen belly.

"My sore throat comes from difficulty expressing myself. And I think I know why my legs are weak."

He rose from the chair and stood beside her. She continued to look down at where his head had been rather than where it was now. "It means that I'm unable to stand on my own two feet. You know -- rely on myself."

"That's an interesting theory," he said. He pointed to her abdomen. "And when did this swelling begin?"

"Oh, and back when I went to college, my negative thoughts made my hair come out in chunks." She was still looking down.

"I understand. You say here in your intake forms that you're not pregnant. Are you sure?"

"I haven't slept with a man for three years. I just meditate."

"Probably not likely to make you pregnant," he said.

She thought this hysterically funny, and while she laughed, Harry glimpsed what she must have looked like during happier days.

"How long have you been losing weight?" he asked.

"Darlene Mist told me it's a uterine fibroid in my belly. She said I got it because I can't open up to my creativity, and that makes the energy stagnate in my womb."

"Interesting," he said. "I'd like to do a physical examination now. Is that OK?"

She nodded and held out her fingernails. Harry had no particular interest in her fingernails -- not with that belly pressing into his attention -- but he went through the motions. He made significant clucking sounds, turned her hands over, and palpated meaninglessly along her thumb and forearm. When he thought he'd done this long enough, he asked her to lie back down, and offered his big hand between her shoulder blades as a support.

She settled back part way, and then stopped herself on both elbows. "Do you want to know what I think causes my fatigue?"

He said he would indeed like to know, and at the same time used one arm to gently sweep her elbows out from beneath her. With the other, he took her weight, slight as it was, and lowered her down.

Flat on her back, she looked fragile, again like a starving African child. He placed his hand on her stomach and felt a soccer-ball-sized mass, hard, irregular, and attached to the surrounding tissue by lumpy fibers.

"Have you had this lump in your stomach long?" he asked, over the lump in his throat. He palpated further down and found a field of rock hard, irregular lymph nodes.

"Like I said, I asked Darlene about it a couple of months ago, and she said it was a slow growing uterine fibroid. I'm not surprised. I've had negative thoughts all my life."

He took his hands off of her belly, and viewed them with dislike, as if *they'd* given her the cancer.

"Have you ever had an ultrasound of this?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I've heard that ultrasound can interfere with your chakras."

He listened with some surprise as his mind improvised a way through her belief system. "That's a common misunderstanding, Sandy. Actually, the second and third chakras, the ones in the area we're talking about, resonate at a frequency much higher than ultrasound." He warmed to the fantasy. "As it happens, MRI-scans really do act on the chakras. I have a friend working in a physics lab who's experimenting on using an MRI to raise spiritual awareness. Ultrasound, though, does nothing that way, good *or* bad."

She propped herself up on her elbows again. "You really *are* a holistic doctor," she said.

"I try. I'll write out a requisition for the ultrasound, then?"

Her face changed, and she looked like a woman who feels herself lovable. Her eyes softened and sparkled.

"What would you be looking for?" she asked. There were deep musical undertones in her voice.

"There are many possibilities." Such as cancer, or cancer, or cancer.

"I hope it's not cancer."

The directness impressed him. "Of course, of course."

He hadn't said "of course not," but, if she wanted, she could hear it that way. He believed that people who were dying of cancer had the right not to know about it if they wished, and many didn't.

He didn't have the same luxury, however. The slip would come back in a pink attention-getting envelope. The radiologist might call directly to make sure that Harry didn't mislay it. Harry would hold the death sentence in his hand and try to figure out how to break the news.

It wouldn't be easy. It wasn't ever easy to tell someone they had fatal metastatic cancer, but the your-thoughts-create-your-reality philosophy made matters more difficult still. If Harry said, "You have cancer," she might take it as an instrumental act that could give her cancer.

He'd have to phrase it indirectly. Perhaps he would tell her that she'd been given a marvelous life challenge to face, and would she like to know what it was?

"Tell me what you *expect* to find," she said.

He heard a note of bravery in her voice, and it encouraged him. "Let me ask you a question first," he said.

She pushed herself as fully upright as her belly would allow, and held one hand to her stomach in the typical gesture of a pregnant woman. Which she was -- pregnant with death.

"As a medical doctor," he said, "it's part of my job to look for any number of serious problems. You may have none of them. If I tell you what I'm looking for, I might implant negative thoughts in your brain."

"You are so right! People told me you understand positive thinking. It's wonderful! How about if we do some tests, and you don't tell me what they're for?"

So much for bravery. "I can do that," he said, dispirited. He walked over to a little teak bookcase, found an ultrasound requisition form, and filled it out. When he came back and tried to hand it to her, she used his outstretched arm as a support and climbed down off the table. She stared straight into his eyes from inches away.

"I've just been faking," she said. "I have no control over my thoughts at all." Tears brimmed over. "If you don't tell me, I'll think the worst anyhow. That's the kind of person I am. So you might as well tell me."

He saw where this was going, but there was no help for it. "I'm concerned that you might have cancer," he said.

She hugged herself and rocked back and forth, looking at the floor. "That's what they told me would happen if I didn't change my way of thinking. And now it's happened. I feel so ashamed. I don't mind dying from cancer. I'm not afraid of that transition. I don't mind pain either. Pain burns out bad karma. But what I can't stand to think is how

I've mistreated this precious spiritual gift of a body by drenching it with negative thoughts and giving it cancer. I'm so horrible." She turned her eyes back to him and gave a tentative smile. She would willingly become his ally in the condemnation of a certain Sandy Owen and her negative thoughts.

He'd seen similar perversions of positive thinking before, but never in so extreme a form.

Positive thinking was well enough for people who could do it. However, for those with the slightest tendency toward worry or doubt, it too often became a trap. Each negative thought was a cause for negative thoughts about the negative thought, and so on in a downward spiral. The positive thinking gurus made no allowance for this potential side effect.

In her own way, Sandy was a very devout woman. It was just that she'd picked a terrible religion. And he was partly responsible. In that horrific fourth book of his, *Nutrition for the Soul*, he'd given your-mind-controls-your-health a whole chapter. Darlene Mist had read it, and used some of Harry's examples in her lectures. He would have to get Sandy out of this.

"It's time for you to take a new spiritual perspective," he said. "One that's higher than positive thinking."

That confused her. "What could be higher than positive thinking?"

"The notion that you create your own reality is so third level," he said. "On the Kabbalistic tree of life, I mean. I believe that you are ready to rise to the next plane of consciousness."

"But Darlene says ..."

"I am not speaking within one of the reality frames she presents to the uninitiated. There are languages within languages, truths within truths. This cancerous manifestation is calling on you to work at the next level, the fourth astral plane."

Her eyes widened. "You're a high initiate?"

He gave her a steady look that allowed her to imagine that he'd said "yes."

Her eyes shone. "You'll teach me?"

He pretended to hesitate. "I'd have to call your current guru, and ask permission, of course." A deliberate pause. "However, I believe she'll give it. We have an understanding about such things. There's a certain initiate-to-initiate relationship, you know."

Darlene Mist had better come to an understanding with him, or he'd report her for practicing medicine without a license. Calling this obvious cancer a uterine fibroid! Of all the ignorant, overreaching things a New Age guru could do ...

Given Darlene's cooperation, though, Harry felt he had a good chance of deconstructing Sandy's belief system. If he could help her achieve death without guilt, it would at least mean *something*. It would mean more than anything else he'd done as an alternative medicine doctor for a very long time.

Crazy Idealism

Harry jumped out of his chair, took a last, lingering look at the morning ocean and hurried back into the house. He'd found his one meaningful case and it was time to leave. Wasn't it sad, though, that his work with Sandy involved *disinfecting* her from alternative medicine, rather than *using* alternative medicine to help her?

He threw on the collegiate style clothes he used to present himself as a properly unconventional doctor, wheeled the bike out from where he kept it in the dining room, buckled on his helmet, and tucked his dress pants into his socks so the cuffs wouldn't catch in the chain. He locked the door behind him and set off along West Cliff Drive for the ride to work.

He rode on the sidewalk to keep within sight of the ocean, periodically dropping off the curb to give pedestrian right-of-way to fellow citizens enjoying the morning: retired couples out for a stroll, joggers in Lycra or cutoff jeans, seal-like surfers in dripping black wet suits. On various beaches below, he glimpsed the sleeping forms of later risers, Rastas, hippies in town after the recent Rainbow Gathering, and paired college lovers, comfortable in their blankets or mummy bags on the sand, lulled to continued sleep by the hiss and slap of small waves and the occasional thud and boom when larger waves surged into the sea caves or struck a shoreline rock.

After a mile or so, he turned off West Cliff and took a random path through the grid of suburban neighborhood seaward of Bay Street. He soon found himself on a street that he hadn't visited for a while, and came to a classic Santa Cruz home he'd discovered some time back and then lost.

It was an elegant hypermodern structure, built by an ex-hippie with money. The home, which must have cost millions, was all angles and glass: gigantic, elegant, striking. But its idealistic owner had felt compelled to moderate such a materialistic creation by adding an ethical message. He'd posted a sign that declared the property a "Wilderness Zone" and allowed the weeds to run wild. Ten-foot stalks of the previous year's weed crop occupied the acreage like a gang of anorexic deadheads: gigantic pigweed, mullein, thistle and black-eyed Susan.

Such silly idealism, and yet so appealing.

Harry felt cheered by the house, and pedaled onwards in a better mood. But after he passed over the trestle bridge and moved closer to Walnut St. he felt the looming presence of the green Victorian that housed his office, and the unappeasable exhaustion crept back. Silly idealism wasn't so charming when you faced it forty hours a week, and got paid to take it seriously.

His Victorian had elegant bay windows, detailed scrollwork, fine bric-a-brac and three gables, all painted in harmonious shades of blue, green and white. It delighted his patients, and it had once delighted Harry too. Now, though, his loathing for what went on inside the beautiful old building stained every exterior inch of it. When he came to a stop beside the white picket fence that marked the boundary of the Harry Boullard Holistic Health Center, Harry felt stuporous, as if this were the end of a long workday rather than the beginning.

He forced himself to open the gate in the fence, and threaded his bike along the paths in the flower garden around back. He wished he had time to stop and do something meaningful, like pull weeds. Halfway through, he hoisted the bike on his back and trudged on like a man carrying his own donkey.

In order to provide his patients with the long visits full of two-way communication that they cherished, he worked entirely alone, without receptionist, nurses, billing clerks, or even janitors. More like a psychoanalyst than a doctor. As he opened the back door, Harry wondered whether he might find his work more survivable if he went after quantity rather than quality.

Once he was inside, though, habit took over and pushed away his self-pity. He parked his bicycle in the room he used as an herbal pharmacy, and moved rapidly around his office, turning on lights, booting up computers, and unlocking doors. He stepped into his main treatment room, inserted an ambient music CD in the stereo, and straightened the teak-and-gray-leather chairs. He saw stray red sock threads on the rug, and used his carpet sweeper to roll them up.

Having made the treatment room ready, he hurried forward to his reception desk. The appointment book lay open and he glanced at the first name on the day's schedule: Leanne Beckham.

Not Leanne Beckham. Not today. He couldn't stand it.

Head Explosions

He'd been seeing Leanne for over four years. So far as he could tell, beyond getting her to quit cigarettes and eat more vegetables, he'd never done her a bit of good. Her deep gratitude for his endless efforts only made him feel worse.

She'd first contacted him on her fiftieth birthday, a year or so after he'd opened his new Santa Cruz practice. She'd read about Holistic Harry in the Santa Cruz Sentinel, and decided it was time to get her life together. Harry lauded Leanne's intentions and said he greatly looked forward to working with her.

One glance at Leanne, though, showed Harry that he had his wellness work cut out for him. She looked like a plant that hadn't been watered for a very long time. Her skin was dry and worn, her voice was rough and her eyes were bloodshot. From these signs, as well as the carton of Winston's poking out her bag, Harry inferred that Leanne smoked at least two packs of cigarettes a day. The deep-fried appearance of her hair suggested that she regularly soaked it to the roots in bleach. Another feature of relevance presented itself to his instant examination as well: a contraction of the muscles around her left eye that gave her face a lopsided, uncomfortable cast.

Before looking at her new-patient forms, he asked her whether the left side of her head hurt. Her eyes (to be precise, her right eye) opened wide with astonishment.

"I never told him that, did I?" she exclaimed. "How did he know that?"

Harry pushed away the temptation to play the part of a magically clairvoyant healer and he confessed the source of his insight: anyone could guess just by looking at her.

"Well, you couldn't be more right. I have these head explosions that tear the top of my skull right off. Three days before it settles back on."

As they walked together back to the treatment room, Harry screwed up his face in imitation, and felt discomfort radiate down to his shoulder.

He asked Leanne if her left shoulder hurt too, and again she opened her right eye wide. In the story she later spread around town, she said, "He knows all your health problems without even asking questions."

But he did ask questions, many of them. He learned that besides the headaches she had frequent bladder infections, constant nausea, hair loss, and diarrhea. She did not have what one would call a great lifestyle: she drank too much, ate trashy food, and did indeed smoke two packs of cigarettes a day. She'd always intended to live a healthy life, however, and now, having turned fifty, she meant to do it.

He again praised her intentions, and said that he wanted to hear a bit about her life as a whole, to get a more holistic perspective.

She laughed at him. "My life as a whole?" she echoed. "Hah, that's a joke. I never had no life, unless you count a husband who leaves in the middle of the night and never comes back, and a grown up daughter who burglarizes your house for drug money, and another ex-husband who kidnaps your twin boys and never brings them back. That's for starters. Want more?"

"I'm so sorry," he said. "That's really terrible. I'm sure you've seen psychotherapists to help you deal with all that trauma?"

She gave the left side of her face an additional turn of the screw. "No, and don't try to make me. I believe you got to let go of what can't be fixed. If you feel a bad mood coming on, you batten down the hatches until it goes away. Not weep your heart out to some shrink."

Harry had wished she were more open to emotional work. Back in those days, he, like Sandy Own, believed that illnesses were metaphors for underlying emotional patterns.¹ Pain in the muscles along the flanks, for example, might represent an insecure need to guard one's flanks, while asthma could indicate an inability to take in the breath of life, and so on. In Leanne's case, it seemed obvious that her clenched left eye represented the battened down hatch of her emotions, and her "head explosions" signaled an attempt by her emotions to break free.

However, when he delicately suggested this analysis, she told him that expressing feelings was good for spoiled sissies, not people with real problems, and she didn't intend to go blither-blathering on anyone's shoulder, thank you very much.

He said she had the right to control her treatment, and dropped the subject. Surreptitiously, though, he added “afraid to contact feelings” to his diagnostic list, and made a resolution to address it eventually.

She had plenty of other problems to work on in the meantime. Over the next eight months, he performed weekly acupuncture to relax the muscles of her neck and balance her overall energy, and sent her to a massage therapist to support the work. He supplemented this attention with a program of individualized Chinese herbs to undo the damage caused by years of exposure to cigarette smoke and hair bleach. He also performed a makeover on her diet.

She enjoyed the treatments very much, followed his instructions to the letter and promptly failed to improve. A typical conversation during this period went as follows:

“So how did you respond to that last treatment?” he’d ask.

“I really enjoyed it. It was a big help.”

He would brighten with anticipation. “Exactly how did it help you?”

“I felt really good after the treatment. I can’t get over the fact that you, a medical doctor, are willing to try acupuncture.”

His pen poised over the chart, ready to record specific signs of improvement, he would ask, “Did your neck and shoulder feel any looser?”

“Oh, definitely.”

“For how long?”

“Oh, an hour at least.”

“I see,” he would say, and make a note of “one hour.” “Were your headaches any better this week?”

“Oh my yes. My headaches weren’t half as bad. Though, I had twice as many of them. Still, that’s a *change*, isn’t it?”

“Definitely,” he’d say. “A change in symptoms is often the first step toward healing.”

Unfortunately, so far as the headaches, bladder infections, hair loss or any other of her specific symptoms were concerned, the second step never followed. Some weeks she had headaches that hurt terribly but didn’t last as long, or lasted a long time but didn’t hurt as much, or both lasted and hurt but came at a new and different time of day. From visit to visit, Leanne always saw the arrow pointing upward, and yet, after nine months of intensive work, Harry reviewed his notes and concluded they were going in circles.

He decided residual toxins must be the problem. To help rid her of toxins, he put her on a body-type diet that followed the principles of Ayurveda.

Like many ancient healing systems, Ayurveda (the ancient healing system of India) analyzes the body in terms of a variety of primary energies. Greco/Roman medicine has its four humors, Chinese medicine its five elements, and Ayurveda its three “doshas” -- kapha, pitta and vata. Harry evaluated Leanne according to this system, determined the imbalances, and selected foods that should help restore balance. He had her increase her intake of milk, yoghurt, brown rice, oats, wheat, chicken, fish, turkey, artichokes, carrots, fresh corn, okra, fresh peas, parsley, potatoes, radish, tomatoes and turnips. He also had her cut down or eliminate corn, rye, beef, lamb, pork, apples, asparagus, beans (except tofu), broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, cranberry, cucumber, dried fruit, eggplant, lettuce, melons, mushrooms, raw onions, and spinach.

Leanne loved the extreme specificity of these suggestions. “It really feels like I’m doing something for myself,” she’d say.

After six months and no improvement in any of her symptoms (except in the usual week-to-week manner), Harry switched her to the blood-type diet advocated in *Eat Right 4 Your Type*, and gave her a completely different (though equally specific) list of foods to consume and avoid. Leanne faithfully swallowed his new instructions, though they contradicted all the rules he’d given her before.

When the blood-type diet didn’t work, he sent in hair and toenail samples to an alternative laboratory called Deep Wisdom labs, and received back a list of forty highly allergenic foods that Leanne shouldn’t even look at, and one hundred twenty moderately allergenic foods that she should avoid eating more than once a month. Again, she enthusiastically embraced the diet, and again nothing happened.

When the midpoint of the third year of treatment came along, Harry felt thoroughly discouraged. He expected Leanne to dump him as a failure. But Leanne didn’t dump him. She told her friends, “he’s the only doctor I’ve ever met who understands the importance of nutrition,” and sent him two-dozen referrals.

With steadily decreasing confidence, Harry tried other treatments in the endlessly capacious alternative medicine tool bag: he supported her adrenal glands, detoxed her liver, and cleansed her colon. He sent her for Feldenkrais, Roling and Jinshin Jyutsu. He put her name on a spiritual healing group’s prayer list (without telling her). He cleansed her colon and detoxed her liver some more. After that, he gave her high potency homeopathics, cranial sacral therapy, and orthotics. Still, she didn’t improve, and still she kept on sending him referrals. “He’s the most holistic doctor you’ve ever met,” she would say. “He treats everything.”

Harry’s frustration with Leanne in particular and holistic medicine in general finally reached a point where he had only one desire left: that she would go away and leave him alone. She declined to stop seeing him, though, and

maintained a persistent attitude of thankfulness. In turn, her faith obliged him to suggest something new to try on each visit, and for some time now he'd been scraping wood slivers off the bottom of the barrel.

On the day of Harry's inner struggle on the porch, a day on which he'd almost been unable to come to work at all, the thought of seeing Leanne felt far beyond his capacity. Nonetheless, he assumed an attitude of professionalism and prepared for yet another useless session.

But when the chimes hanging from the door announced her arrival, and Leanne came to the reception window, he saw, to his astonishment, that she was wearing The Look.

The Look

The Look was an affectionate, misty expression that said, “You’re every patient’s dream, a wonderful, amazing doctor, a gift from God, a true healer of the sick.”

What he could possibly have done to deserve The Look?

He flipped through the chart and found the prescription page for the previous visit. He’d given her the herb butterbur.

And why had he given her butterbur?

Oh yes, he remembered now. He’d recently read a study that found butterbur helpful for migraines.

Fine, but it wasn’t more than slightly helpful. Certainly not enough to justify The Look. Besides, Leanne didn’t have migraines.

Nonetheless, when they walked back to the treatment room together, she moved in a cloud of beatific joy. She settled into his teak-and-gray leather chair, gave him The Look for an uncomfortably long time, and said, “You know Dr. Harry -- you’re either killing me or curing me.”

He didn’t like the sound of that. “What do you mean? Did you have a bad reaction to the butterbur? An upset stomach maybe?”

“If a tiger’s a kind of lamb.”

“What?”

“I wouldn’t just call it an *upset* stomach. The first night after I take that buttery butt herb of yours, I wake at one, maybe two in the morning, and vomit my heart out. I dig down so deep I strike bile. The next day, I get the most god-awful diarrhea, like Anderson split pea soup. After a couple of days, my guts stop running, and I get a headache so bad it rips my skull to pieces.”

She could sue him. And what if the Medical Board got wind of this? “Why didn’t you call me? You should have called me immediately. You stopped taking the butterbur right away, didn’t you?”

“Hell no, I didn’t stop taking it. I figured I needed it. Lots of weird stuff happened, though. One day, my heart goes klunkity-kabam all afternoon. Another day, my right arm stops working. I faint in my kitchen. I have a dream of some guy firing a rivet gun through my right eye. Not my left. My right, the one that doesn’t hurt. Isn’t that interesting?”

“Leanne, I’m really sorry. I had no idea butterbur would do anything like that to you.”

She seemed surprised by his anxiety, and Harry realized that once, back in his days of faith, he wouldn’t have shown any anxiety.

She reached out and gave him a motherly pat on the knee. “Don’t look so upset, Dr. Harry. I knew I was all right. It was just one of those healing crisis things. You told me all about them. Last Saturday, I was at my girlfriend’s house watching the soaps, and I started sobbing. Sobbed away for my whole damn life. Today, I feel better than I’ve felt in years. I’m taking butter butt three times a day now. I’ll keep taking it as long as you say I should.”

Harry didn’t want to think of what a quackbuster like Vance Holding could do with this. Talk about dangerous unproven therapies. During Holding’s successful five-year battle to throw Harry out of Wichita, he’d used far sligher incidents to damn Harry as quack.

Not that Leanne would ever turn him in. She was completely loyal to Harry. Still, he’d have to get her to stop the butterbur. She was probably allergic to it. Allergies could be extremely dangerous.

Though, come to think of it, perhaps what had really happened was that she came down with a stomach flu on the same day she took the herb ... and developed enough dehydration to give her heart palpitations and make her faint ... though that didn’t explain the paralyzed right arm, which sounded suspiciously like a transient stroke.

It was also possible, of course, that the butterbur had truly helped her. Such things did happen occasionally. Over the course of his career, Harry had seen quite a few apparent miracle cures brought about by otherwise ineffectual herbs or supplements. It was possible that certain people had a specific metabolic defect that the miracle cure in question accidentally addressed, or maybe it was only that he’d finally hit on the right placebo, or that the person had reached a state of readiness to respond to placebo.

It had to be one of these things, since the substances that were so amazing for one person seldom worked on anyone else. It was so random. One might as well start at one end of the health food store and work your way to the other.

In any case, this particular “cure” involved way too much weirdness. He needed to get Leanne to quit the butterbur and see a neurologist ASAP.

“I think I know what happened,” he said. “The butterbur flushed out your triple heater meridian. That spilled into Pingala Nadi, whereupon it flooded your Agnya chakra, and set off a Herxheimer-like reaction.² The good news is, once that’s done, it’s done. You don’t need to take any butterbur. In fact, taking more might over-flush your meridians.”

“You sure?” She sounded disappointed.

“Absolutely. More isn’t better, you know. It’s important to know when to stop.”

She didn’t look convinced.

“Of course,” he added, “I’ll want you to take a great many herbs to support the next phase of the process.”

That encouraged her, so he continued along these lines for some time, reeling off exotic names and garbled explanations. When he finally saw the signs of acquiescence in her dried out face, he added, in the manner of a one-two punch, “Some of these herbs are pretty strong, so I’d like you to see a neurologist before you take them. To make sure the circulation in your brain is up to the task, you know.”

She agreed complacently, and was still beaming (with her right eye) when she departed. Harry managed to smile too, all the way through his farewell wave. But when the front door closed behind her, he laid his cheek down on his desk and thought: I can’t keep this up another day. I’ll go out of my mind. I’ve already gone half out of my mind.

Only, what else could he do? He had a daughter in college. He had a mother with Alzheimer’s who needed a home health aide around the clock. He had an expensive West Cliff Drive house. And he didn’t know any other trade beside the alternative medicine business.

He had let out at least one audible groan when he spied Ashley Wayland, M.D., sitting at the far end of his waiting room, her face set in the ironic expression that every doctor wears while waiting in another doctor’s office.

Temptations

Ashley Wayland was a young holistic M.D. who came to Harry once a month for advice and encouragement. Over the last few years, as his loss of faith progressed, he'd performed the task with steadily increasing disability. Today, he feared he might blurt out his real feelings about holistic medicine. This would be quite inconsiderate, considering that Ashley had recently opened the Holistic Galleria, perhaps the most ambitious holistic health center in the country.

Ashley was a tiny woman, no more than four foot ten, a bundle of nervous energy and high enthusiasm. She'd opened her practice in Santa Cruz before Harry had begun to acknowledge his doubts, and they'd formed a mentor-protégé relationship. In recent years, as Harry's faith failed him, he'd shielded Ashley from his changing attitude because he believed that a person of his age must always take care not to jade out the enthusiasms of younger people. However, it had become difficult to hide the fact that he was riddled with doubts.

Ashley had no doubts. She was a true believer. She purveyed her worthless treatments with passion and sincerity. As she walked beside him to the treatment room, she held her chin high with ennobled purpose, and her eyes shone with the certainty that she was helping to bring on a new age of medicine. Harry envied her and wished he could believe again.

When he held open the door to his treatment room and Ashley passed under his arm, though, his envy for her faith was replaced by curiosity regarding whether or not she wore a bra. This was a new problem. Harry tried to be a good mentor in all ways, and it was his firm belief that one shouldn't hit on one's protégés. Today, however, Ashley wore a light red shirt with almost see-through fabric that made it difficult not to gather information regarding the bra question. He tore his eyes away, and looked at her necklace, a simple handcrafted design that Harry suspected came from the Sundance catalog and cost several hundred dollars. The necklace drew his eyes back to the region of the possible bra, and when he caught himself searching for it once more, he dropped his eyes down. On their way to the floor, his eyes observed a subtly flower-patterned black cotton skirt that reached just below her knees, followed by bare legs and bare feet in black low heels.

The overall picture disturbed his groin, and that sensation further depressed him. He was single, but she wasn't all that much older than his daughter, and anyway, she looked up to him and he couldn't go there.

Ashley jumped straight up on the massage table and swung her legs. "I *so* love this room," she said. She examined every corner, although she'd seen it dozens of times before. "It's got *such* a nice feel. Is that a new plant?" She pointed to a Japanese maple in a fine brass pot, beneath a watercolor of a similar maple.

"No. Just repotted in a bigger pot. I wanted to hide the sharps container." He pointed out the bright red lid of a biohazard disposal unit peeking out from behind the maple. It was half-filled with plastic-handled acupuncture needles and the occasional normal hypodermic.

She gave a luxurious sigh, and dropped back on the table, supine, her hands folded behind her head.

"I'd love to be a patient here," she said. "I don't need to be a patient, but if I did, I couldn't imagine a better place to be one."

"Come now," Harry said, "what about the Holistic Galleria? It doesn't get much better than that."

"I prefer your style. I can't pull it off without props, you know, all that regular doctor stuff. You don't need props. You carry everything you need inside your own heart."

"Thanks for saying that," he said. "It's quite a compliment. So how's the Galleria going?"

She sat back upright and resumed swinging her legs. "The Galleria? So many headaches. I never had any idea it would be so much trouble. I didn't have any problems like this at my other office."

"Your previous office didn't have twenty treatment rooms, ten practitioners, and three retail shops. Come on, Ashley. What you're doing now is plain hard."

She dropped off her shoes, lifted one foot in her lap and massaged it. "I guess so. The worst part is the ten practitioners. I'm trying to run the Galleria by consensus, you know? So I'm not telling people what to do? But they can't ever agree on anything, and when they do, it's so crazy I have to veto it ... you know what I mean? Overall, though, things are going great, I guess. Except that you're not there. When will you join? We need you."

She'd asked him to join several times already, and on each occasion he'd rejected the overture in a heartbeat. Now, though, to his own surprise, he found himself wondering. A complete change of scene, the company of so many innocent idealists: maybe it would lift his spirits. Maybe it would allow him to see the good side of alternative medicine again.

"I'm amazed," she said. "You haven't said 'no' yet, and it's been fifteen seconds. I think you're thinking about it."

"I *am* thinking about it," he said.

In his mind, he heard the voice of his quack friend Royce Largo. "Go for it Harry. The place will be full of gorgeous female alternative medicine practitioners to seduce."

But Largo was Largo. Harry didn't do things like that. And all those idealists close at hand would drive him nuts.

Ashley had jumped off the massage table, and was holding her hands together in a stifled clap. "You're really thinking about it? Oh, God that's wonderful. Please, please, please keep thinking about it. But I better change the subject because, if I try to encourage you you'll come up with an argument against it, won't you?"

He laughed. "You know me pretty well."

"Well you are Mr. Argument. Didn't you say you once published an essay in a magazine and also write a rebuttal to it?"

"Yes, I did that once. I have too many planets in Gemini and Libra, I guess. I see sixteen sides to everything." Not that he believed in astrology.

"Gemini and Libra both? No wonder you're so complicated. I'm an Aries, you know, with Aquarius rising. Things are simpler for people like me."

Astrology aside, it was an interesting point. Perhaps his real problem was excessive complexity.

Ashley dragged a teak and gray leather chair so close that when she sat in it Harry could smell her organic perfume, and beneath that the freshly showered hair and skin of a young woman. He pushed his chair back to remove himself from her erotic presence. "Well, have you come with a case to ask me about?"

"Lots of cases. You know what I wish. I wish you'd see all my patients and advise me."

"You don't give yourself enough credit. But before we start on one of them, I'd like you to do something for me. I'd like you to explain, as succinctly as you can, why alternative medicine is so important."

"Harry, you don't need me to do that. You've said it better than anyone."

"Like you said, I'm too complex. I think it would do me good to hear someone say it simply."

She gave him a questioning look, searching for ulterior pedagogic motives in his strange request. He smiled innocently. She hesitated, visibly steeled herself, and touched her left thumb to her left index finger.

"We treat the whole person," she said, tentatively.

"Go on," he said, and nodded encouragement.

She touched her thumb to her middle finger. "And we're bringing people closer to nature, by using natural products instead of chemical drugs."

"Yes," he said. It was a valid aesthetic choice, if not a rational one. "Continue."

The ring finger now, with no ring on it. "We get to the root of the problem rather than just treat symptoms."

We talk about doing that. But do we really get to the root of disease? It's much easier to say than do.

"We prevent disease before it happens."

Well that was one claim, at least, with a bit of justification. In recent times at least,³ it was alternative medicine that had most championed diet and lifestyle changes as a means of enhancing health. These days, though, conventional medicine had jumped fully on board, and it was hardly a distinction between them.

She'd finished with her right hand, and continued on the left. "We're bringing back the ancient wisdom that's been forgotten in this age of technology."

Harry wondered why idealism made women so beautiful. It brought out a kind of whole-person luminosity: radiance in the lips and cheeks and eyes, music in the voice, feminine aliveness and grace everywhere.

"But," she said, and now there was an expression of deep concentration on her face, "I think the most important thing we do is humanize medicine. Conventional medicine is mechanical. It makes people see themselves as machines. We teach people to understand themselves as people."

She did have a point there. Conventional medicine was harsh and cold, given to painful injections, beeping machines, plastic tubes, bright lights and every two-hour awakenings. Medical doctors had no bedside manner anymore; they treated their patients as things rather than people, dictated to them, shamed them, poked, pinched and cut them. Alternative medicine had a much gentler touch.

If only it also *worked*.

"Besides," she added, "alternative medicine really works. We cure people all the time when conventional medicine hasn't helped them."

Her words brought Harry back to the moment on *Lunch with David Markley* when Vance Holding, his friendly neighborhood quackbuster, had called in and pretended to be an ordinary listener. “Dr. Boullard,” he’d asked, “Please tell me, how do you know whether a treatment is effective?”

Harry hadn’t taken the question seriously. Just like Ashley, he *knew* that alternative medicine works because he’d seen it work with his own eyes.

But over the subsequent ten years, the implications of Holding’s question had finally sunk in. Harry had reviewed thousands of studies and thought about the subject for endless hours, and at last understood: in medicine you can’t trust your own eyes. Only a double-blind study can distinguish between real effects and the many powerful confounding factors: the placebo effect, observer bias, the reinterpretation effect, etc. etc.⁴

But Ashley had no idea about confounding factors. She thought that if you gave a treatment to people, and they got better, you could conclude that the treatment actually worked. Most people did, regular MDs included. It’s hard to believe that you can’t believe your eyes.

Harry knew he could explain this to Ashley, given time. However, to really carry the idea across he’d have to hammer away at her preconceptions, and that would feel like assault with a deadly idea. Why should he deconstruct the belief system upon which she’d built her lovely life? For the abstract purpose of truth? To relieve his itch to say what he really felt? Those weren’t good enough reasons.

Holding had the further motivation of partisan hatred for alternative medicine. Harry hadn’t yet gone that far. Besides, he liked Ashley, and he didn’t want to hurt her.

His protégé was giving him an amused look. “I know you have something in mind, Harry.”

“Perhaps.” Not what you think, though. He’d better change the subject. “I wonder if you could help me with one of my patients. She has me confused. A fresh view might help me cut through the complexity. A fresh *single* view, not like my usual sixteen-sided one.”

“You make yourself out to be an insect, Harry. You know, with those compound eyes?” But she was obviously extremely flattered. She took a little notebook out of her embroidered Garnet Hill purse, crossed her legs, and took notes as he told her Leanne’s story.

He gave her all the details, leaving out only his exhaustion, confusion and despair. When he came to Leanne’s most recent visit, and the unexpected appearance of The Look, Ashley balanced an elbow on the uppermost knee, and rested her chin in her palms.

“Very tricky way you told me the story,” she said. She took one palm away to waggle a finger at him. “However, I’m on to you.”

This was interesting, since he wasn’t on to himself. But the mentor-student relationship had its own momentum, and he only said, “Tell me.”

Invisible Wisdom

"How about I start from the beginning, and give you my interpretations," she asked.

"Perfect."

"OK, here goes. You started with eight months of acupuncture, right? I bet you used Windows-to-the-Sky points to open up her feelings?"

Windows-to-the-Sky" points were special acupuncture points popularized by the Worsley School of acupuncture⁵ as a means to facilitate spiritual awakening through acupuncture treatment. He hadn't used any Windows-to-the-Sky points because even five years ago he'd stopped believing in them. But, so far as Ashley understood his philosophy, he would have used them, so he said, "Absolutely right. How did you know?"

"Because I know you! You'd never let a patient get away with keeping her feelings stuffed down. Since she wouldn't let them out, you used a non-verbal technique to get around the block. So what next?" As she spoke, one of her small feet alternately pointed to the top of a standing lamp and the bottom shelf of a bookcase. "Oh yes, all those diets." She faltered. "I'm not completely clear why you picked Ayurveda first. How do you know which diet to use with your patients? That always confuses me."

"So far as I know, there isn't any way to tell which dietary theory will work best. I tried three of them at random."

She waved her forefinger at him again. "No, no, no. Don't be so humble. There's an intuitive wisdom in everything you do. I'm sure she needed exactly those three diets, in that order. The Ayurvedic one balanced her, and the blood-type diet let her lectins relax.⁶ After that, you took her off her food allergens to clarify her system. And that's where you tried to trick me." The finger stopped waving and froze pointed toward the center of his face. "You never said you told her to stop the food allergy diet. So she's stayed on it ever since. I caught that!"

He hadn't caught that himself. Leanne probably *had* continued on the food allergy diet. How many foods had he made her cut out? Talk about cruel and unusual medical care. He'd have to remember to tell her she could stop it now.

"Very good catch," he said. "And what do you infer from that?"

"OK, let me think." Her legs began to bounce. "You kept her on the food allergy diet since food allergies sometimes take years to clear. In the meantime, you detoxified her. Then you had her do bodywork, to free up stored toxins, and detoxified her again. After that, you figured her system was clean enough for homeopathic remedies. You helped the homeopathy along with the cranial sacral, which goes well with homeopathy, and you also gave her ... orthotics? Those are pads you put in the shoe to support the feet, right? OK, I don't get that."

He didn't either, though he was sure it made sense at the time. He improvised, "To provide support for her transition."

"Support for her transition?" A brief look of puzzlement was rapidly replaced by an expression of profound understanding. "Oh, wow. That's brilliant. Physical support under her feet to anchor an energetic transition. You're such an artist of healing!" Her face took on a wistful, yearning expression, full of aspiration for the day when she too could think so creatively as to use orthotics to anchor energetic transitions.

From wistfulness back to concentration. "So now she's almost ready. You decide she's cleared out enough, and so you hit her with a powerful herb, butterbur. Why butterbur? Let me think. Butterbur is used for migraines. Migraine headaches have to do with low serotonin. So butterbur must raise serotonin. Antidepressants raise serotonin too." Rising triumph filled her voice. "OK, now I see it. The butterbur acts like an antidepressant and gets her emotional energy moving. She can't deal with her feelings, so the healing release comes out as physical symptoms." She looked up at him hopefully. "Does that make sense?"

No, but she had the process of nonsensical scientific reasoning down pat. She should open a supplement company.

But her face was so sincere, so earnest, and she reminded him so much of the early years of his own career, that he only said, "I think you're onto something there. What would you recommend next?"

She fell back in her chair, exhausted by her effort. "The next step would be to get her to do conscious emotional release, of course. I do so admire your patience, Harry. You spent, what, almost five years getting her to this point? That's true dedication to healing."

If one took as one's assumption that alternative medicine possesses deep wisdom, this endless fishing around in the dark would indeed make sense as a search for that wisdom. However, since Harry no longer thought alternative medicine had any deep wisdom, those four years of billing Leanne's health insurance felt like white-collar crime.

Then the thought struck him: Ashley would feel just fine about working with Leanne. *She* wouldn't feel like a white-collar criminal. She'd feel like a hero.

And she wouldn't *be* a criminal either. Ashley, unlike Harry, had no doubts about alternative medicine. Therefore, she wouldn't be behaving unethically if she provided it.

Of course, Leanne would resist if he tried to transfer care. However, if he were working at the Holistic Galleria ... Harry thought that under those circumstances he could segue Leanne over to Ashley with a little fast-talking. He'd supervise for a bit, and then gradually weasel out of seeing Leanne at all.

He could transfer all his other patients too, step back into an executive position and close his eyes to all the idiocy going on below ... then decide whether he should seduce anyone or not.

Cut it out. You're not seducing anyone.

"I'm really considering it," he said.

"Considering what?"

"Joining the Holistic Galleria."

She opened her eyes wide, and then, only half-mocking, kneeled at his feet and wrung her hands. "Oh, please do. With you there, the Holistic Galleria would be the totally greatest holistic health center in the country. You could supervise *all* our patients there ... tell us when to give them orthotics, what diets they should try. It would be my dream come true. Please, please, please."

"I am interested. However, I still need to consider it from my usual sixteen perspectives. Now get up. You're embarrassing me."

"You're leaning toward 'yes?'"

"I'm leaning toward 'yes.'"

She climbed back up off the floor and brushed down her dress. With a face now elaborately sober, she said, "Feel free to go through your process without any pressure. You'd get profit-sharing on the total income, obviously."

He glanced at his watch. "Well, it looks like our time is over now."

He stood up and moved toward the door, but she arrested him with a hand on his forearm.

"One more thing real quick?" she said. "Someone told me that there's a guy asking questions about the Holistic Galleria? Dr. Holding, I think is his name? A big, nasty looking guy. You ever heard of him?"

Harry staggered backward, felt behind him for the chair, and sank onto it.

"Oh shit," he breathed.

Section 2. The Den of the Quackbuster

The Den of the Quackbuster

Back in 1984, when Harry opened his first alternative medicine practice, in Wichita, Kansas, he had no idea he'd landed in the hometown of the celebrated quackbuster Vance Holding. Holding, on the other hand, must have known about Harry from the moment he arrived and placed his practice announcement in the *Wichita Eagle*. Nonetheless, he left Harry alone for five years. It was only when Harry moved out of his initial modest office and opened the twelve-room Harry Boullard Holistic Health Center that Holding apparently decided it was time to have a heart-to-heart with the quack in his own backyard.

The new clinic occupied much of the third floor of a six-story building in the south part of town. At the time, few alternative medicine centers anywhere reached the grandeur of Harry's clinic. He'd gathered together under one roof all the top alternative medicine talent in Wichita, a not-too-bad assortment considering the geographical location. He had two acupuncturists, three massage therapists, one chiropractor, one Feldenkrais practitioner, two Rolfers, a lay midwife and an unlicensed naturopath working alongside him. He also maintained a natural products pharmacy, stocking a complete line of vitamins, supplements and herbs, including Chinese herbal combinations.

In order to cope with the complexities of his new office, Harry hired Carol Cohen as office manager. Carol was a veteran of the alternative medicine reception desk, a motherly woman in her early fifties who was passionate about her work. She arrived early each morning to exhort the appointment book, because she apparently believed that loud exhortations to the list of names would encourage Harry's more dilatory patients to arrive on time. She also had the habit of continuing her phone conversations for a few moments after the person on the other end had hung up, in order to make a few important points she'd thought of too late. When she handed a new patient's chart to Harry, she gave a mini-presentation, based on information gleaned at the reception window: E.g., "she knows she has chronic Lyme disease so you better start by agreeing with her or she'll walk."

Harry often found these presentations more helpful than the patient's medical records mailed from a previous physician's office. However, while the records couldn't check up to see how well he followed their advice, Carol could, and if he wished to deviate from her suggestions he had to do so surreptitiously, else face a lecture.

As it turned out, Carol knew Holding well, but from superstitious fear had said nothing about him to Harry. One afternoon a year into the new office, Harry came back from lunch to find Carol in an un-Carol-like state of paralysis, arranging unfolded paperclips in autistic rows on her desk. The phone lay off the hook on the table beside her. He asked what was wrong, and she said, offhandedly, "Dr. Holding called, so I hung up on him."

Harry drew a blank. "Vance Holding? The family practitioner? Why'd you hang up on him? How long ago was it?"

"About half an hour."

"You've had the phone off the hook for half an hour?"

In a dull voice apparently addressed to the paperclips, she said, "I thought he only went after chiropractors. And lay midwives. And herbalists. Not M.D.'s. I thought you were safe." Tension drew her face into an ugly frown. "Sorry. I have a bad case of the déjà vu's."

"What are you talking about?"

She gave him sleeve an angry tug. "Holding, the quackbuster? You know what he did to my David, don't you? You must."

Harry knew that Carol had previously worked for David Abden, a chiropractor of rather mercenary reputation who'd moved out of town shortly before Harry's arrival. However, she'd never given him more than vague answers regarding why David left.

"You mean you don't know?" She rolled her eyes, and most of her head too. "You're such a babe in the woods. Come on back and I'll give you an earful."

By "around back," she meant her private territory behind the pharmacy. The Wichita Harry Boullard Holistic Health Clinic dispensed herbs and supplements out of six five-foot tall teak bookcases, each one full to bursting with white-plastic supplement bottles, tiny green-, silver- and gold-labeled Chinese herb bottles, black herbal tincture flasks

with sintered glass stoppers, gallon transparent glass jars loaded with loose herbs, and assorted scales, sticky labels and indelible markers.

The bookcases walled off a large segment of the office and created a space they used for storage. This was Carol's domain, into which Harry seldom ventured. He followed her now into this uncharted territory, and hunted around for a place to sit. When he tried a full box marked "00 gelatin capsules," he felt it squish beneath him, and squatted on a stepstool instead. Carol leaned against a cabinet full of empty medical records folders and told Harry the whole story.

She'd been David Abden's secretary for many years, and watched him develop from a plain-vanilla back-cracking chiropractor into a full-fledged holistic practitioner. During the fifth year of his practice, he expanded into a bigger clinic, and within a month Vance Holding came after him. ("That's why I didn't say anything," Carol explained. "I didn't want to jinx you, since you just moved into a big clinic too, and after five years just like my David.")

Holding, according to Carol, was a poor excuse for a doctor, fortyish, overweight, sweaty, a cigarette smoker, addicted to junk food, coffee and coca cola, and with the charm of a rattlesnake. He couldn't keep his own medical practice going -- who'd want to go to a doctor who looks like he'll either bite you or have a heart attack? -- so he made his living persecuting alternative medicine practitioners.

Holding had begun his attack against Carol's employer by hanging around their parking lot, interviewing patients on their way out, and trying to turn them against their doctor. When Carol discovered this, she notified her boss, who, after a vain attempt at friendly dialogue, had to resort to getting a court order to keep him away.

"You can't get rid of Holding that easily, though," Carol said. "He planted one of his employees *inside* David's office. A big-haired lady who came in to handle our medical billing. She hid a tape recorder in her cleavage -- top or bottom I don't know which -- and she got the insurance companies and the IRS coming after David. And she found a couple of patients with a grudge against him -- every doctor has a few like that, you included, in case you don't know -- and Holding talked them into filing complaints. Not only that, I'm sure he's the one who spread the rumor."

Harry leaned forward and did his best to project calm and confidence. Carol had an excitable approach to life. He felt certain the reality hadn't been half as bad as her rendition of it. "Which rumor was that?"

"That David slept with his patients," she said.

"Now that I recall, he married one of his patients, didn't he?"

"Yes, he married one, but who cares? Holding made him out to be some kind of Dr. Don Juan. Which was nonsense because he's not good-looking, like you. Anyway, with everyone after him, David lost weight and his hair fell out. He had two heart attacks -- two! -- and at last he gave up. The poor man's a dirt farmer in Iowa."

Mildly, with care not to sound critical, Harry asked, "And why didn't you tell me this before?"

She pulled at her hair. "I know, I know. I should've told you. It's all my fault. I never said anything because -- well, you're going to think this is silly -- but I was afraid that if I mentioned Holding's name it would ... invoke him."

"Like a demon? That's funny." He touched her on the shoulder to show he wasn't making fun of her. "But why pick on David Abden? There must be a hundred chiropractors in town."

She looked out the window. "David didn't just crack backs. He was a holistic doctor. Not as sophisticated as your kind of holistic medicine, I'll admit that. He didn't use Chinese medicine to balance the body. He mostly sold supplements. OK, maybe he pushed his own line of supplements a little too hard. But he really cared about his patients, and Holding couldn't stand that. So he had to wipe David off the face of the earth."

Harry thought there had to be more to it than that.

After a slight pause, Carol added, "Also, Jane Holding, his sister, had gone to David."

Aha! So that was it. "He thought David had treated her badly?"

"No, not exactly. More like when she stopped seeing David, David lost his protection. Holding's incredibly loyal to his sister. He's a lonely old guy, and Jane is all he has. While she was seeing David, he wouldn't have touched a hair on his head. But as soon as she stopped going, Holding jumped all over him."

Harry thought he understood what had really happened: David Abden had taken Jane for a ride, sold her shopping bags full of supplements, ripped her off. That's what it was that had triggered Holding's anger, not the mere fact that David practiced holistic medicine.

"Maybe I should treat Jane Holding, then," Harry suggested, not at all seriously. "If I help her, then I'll be safe."

Though she was Jewish, Carol crossed herself. "God forbid, Harry. You don't want to touch that lady with a twelve-foot pole. Jane's pretty nice, but she's all messed up. She fell out of a tree when she was little -- I get the feeling Holding was babysitting or something, and he feels guilty about it -- and she's past helping. Chronic pain up and down the wazoo, especially her stomach. David didn't do her a bit of good. Nobody ever does her a bit of good. If you lay a finger on Jane, and *don't* cure her, which you won't, Holding will have your hide in a second." She paused, gathered herself, burst out again. "But the thing is, he's going to have your hide anyway. You have to get a lawyer and protect yourself."

She was so dramatic. “Well I don’t know,” Harry said. “I think I should call Holding first. Try to make friends. I’m a reasonable guy. Who knows, maybe I’ll convince him?”

“Oh, Jesus.” Carol squeezed the red sabers of her fingernails against her temples. “David thought he could make nice with Holding too. Take my word for it: you can’t make friends with the devil. The guy’s a bastard and a liar and he’ll use anything you say against you. He doesn’t want to know what’s true. He wants to win, that’s all, and he plays dirty.”

Harry didn’t believe much of this. In any case, he knew that he had the force of destiny behind him. He was at the vanguard of a great historical movement, the onrushing tide of alternative medicine. If there were battles to fight on behalf of the new healing paradigm, he’d fight them, and he’d win.

Harry waited until Carol stepped out for lunch and put in a call to Holding’s office. The quackbuster answered his own phone, verifying Carol’s claim that he didn’t have much of a practice, and cut off Harry’s friendly salutations.

“Now listen to me, *Dr. Boullard*,” he said, his voice deep and rumbling. “I don’t like to go after my own kind. I prefer to take down chiros and homeos and herbos. However, if you stick your head out too far, I’ll have to knock it down. So take my advice, keep your quackery to a dull roar. Got it?”

“I’m not a quack, *Dr. Holding*. I’m a serious holistic physician. I recognize the limits of both alternative and conventional medicine, and I try to use the best parts of both. Conventional medicine is best for trauma, and acute, life-threatening conditions, while alternative medicine is good for conditions that are more gentle, varying, and subtle.”

He had gone on in this vein for some time before he realized that Holding had hung up on him.

Harry threw the headset into a nearby trashcan, enraged. Who did this guy think he was, the head of the local medical Ku Klux Klan? What right did he have to stick his face in between Harry and his patients, people who had chosen to come to him, people who wanted holistic medicine?

But Harry’s fury was short lived. He soon realized that what he should really feel was sadness for Holding. The poor man was a doomed reactionary, a physician of the past who thought he could hold back the tide of holistic medicine. He’d only get washed away.

Harry had already stepped up his advertising to support the new clinic, but Holding’s opposition inspired him to increase it further. He handed out flyers and he put up posters. He increased the size of his ads in the Wichita Eagle from little 1/8th page rectangles to half-page infomercials. He spoke at Rotary Clubs, gyms, senior centers, singles groups, health food stores and local colleges. He got himself onto local radio and cable television talk shows. He drew patients from a six-state area, and became known as the leading Midwest proponent of alternative medicine.

In 1989, he wrote *No Disease Stands a Chance*, and, over the next two years, followed this with *The Herbal Self-Care Bible* and *Eastern Healing/Western Diagnosis*. In 1993, he expanded into the psychological realm with *Nutrition for the Soul*. His books were too thoughtful to give him popular fame, but he became well known among alternative medicine practitioners, and he was invited to speak conferences all over the country.

Harry’s wife had died of breast cancer shortly after he moved to Wichita, and he was the single father of a young daughter, Emily. Harry took Emily everywhere with him when he traveled. She’d play behind the stage when he gave lectures, and sit importantly beside him afterwards when he answered questions and gave informal discourses. Looking back, he wondered that he had the courage (or the foolhardiness) to stick his neck out like that. As a single father, the last thing he needed was a battle for professional survival. He should have kept a low profile like Holding demanded, allowed the practice to grow on its own, stayed out of trouble, and even reserved some extra energy for, perhaps, dating. Instead, he put his whole soul into evangelizing alternative medicine. Some people called him the High Priest of AltMed, and he liked that.

Nonetheless, despite all this activity on Harry’s part, Holding left him alone for a surprisingly long time. When the quackbuster finally took action, he fired his first shot before a live listening audience of several hundred thousand people.

Harry on NPR

On Friday afternoons, the NPR station in Kansas City broadcast *Lunch with Justin Markley*, a live talk show that drew guests one wouldn't expect to hear on a station in the deep Midwest. Justin Markley regularly brought in gay rights activists, feminist philosophers, old guard communists, opponents of the Electoral College and the like. Harry's old friend and almost-lover Geraldine Steinberg had also appeared on the show, to speak about menstrual spirituality. However, each time Harry offered himself as a guest, Markley declined. Alternative medicine, he said, was too controversial.

Then Harry appeared on *Fresh Air* with Terry Gross. When Markley heard about this, he relented, and gave Harry a grudging OK to appear.

Markley transmitted from a station on the University campus in Kansas City, Missouri. On the day of the show, Harry left Wichita far earlier than necessary, to make sure that he arrived in plenty of time. Unfortunately, torrential rains slowed the interstate traffic to a crawl, and when Harry finally reached campus, he'd already lost half of the thirty-minute-before-showtime buffer he'd allowed himself. He dashed from overhang to overhang, blinded by a downpour, and tried in vain to match his map of the campus with the ivy-laden buildings dimly looming around him. He had only three minutes left to spare when he at last stumbled upon a four-inch sign, half hidden by a trashcan, pointing down a flight of stairs that led to a metal door beneath ground level. He hurried down the stairs, paused at the three-inch-deep lake filling the landing, leaned forward and yanked the door open.

When he jumped in ahead of the inflowing tide and pulled the door closed behind him, the sound of the rain abruptly disappeared and Harry found himself in the middle of a puddle at the edge of a silent room. It was a disheveled place, full of desks, papers, pledge drive premiums and no people. Typical for an NPR station. Harry spotted two corridors leading off from it, picked one, trotted down it, and found a solitary engineer adjusting sliders on a mixer board.

"I'm looking for Justin Markley ..." Harry said.

The engineer jabbed two fingers toward a door down the hall. Harry hurried over but paused under the flashing red "On the Air" sign. When he saw someone wave from inside the darkened room, he turned the knob and entered.

A murky cavity lay within, lit only by the tiny red and green glowing lights of electronic equipment. Harry could just make out a gnomish man at the far side of the room, fumbling among books, papers, cassettes, electronic equipment and pledge drive premiums on his cluttered desk. The fellow had a pasty, ill-favored face that completely failed to resemble the god-like image conjured up in Harry's mind by the talk-show host's radio voice.

"You're late," Markley growled. He fished a bright yellow cassette from the chaos, slammed it into a slot above the desk, and grunted as the show's theme song came on overhead (a disturbing tune that reminded Harry of the Mack-the-Knife song in Brecht's *Three-Penny Opera*).

"Put on that headset," Markley commanded, "and say something into the microphone."

"I'm sorry," Harry said, and then spoke in a slow, deliberate voice to show that he was a professional in these matters, and could carry out an apology as part of a sound check. "Your sign is a bit tiny, and I couldn't find it in the downpour."

"Have to hold a pledge drive to get a bigger one," Markley said, in a less hostile tone. "By the way. I'm expecting Holding to call. I'll warn you, if I can."

Before Harry could ask why when and how, the theme song came to its end and Markley launched into his introduction. "Harry Boullard," he said, sounding appropriately god-like at last, "is one of the new breed of doctors, a holistic physician, an MD who practices what's called 'alternative medicine.'"

He said the words "holistic" and "alternative" as if they were strange tropical beetles held up with tweezers for examination.

"He received his medical degree from Stanford medical school, and went on to take training in several forms of alternative medicine, some of which I cannot pronounce." He pulled out the list Harry had made for him, and read it off with numerous errors in emphasis and pronunciation. "Acoo-pun-ture, hoor-boe-lògey, nùtrition and cranial os-tèo-

pàth-ey. He practices in Wichita, Kansas, and runs a clinic that includes chiropractors, acupuncturists, naturopaths and a practitioner of 'Feldenkrais.' Perhaps he'll be so good as to tell us what some of those words mean, later in the show. First, though, I've asked him to explain the term 'alternative medicine,' and give us a little of its history."

"Well Justin," Harry said, in his own best radio voice, "many people make the mistake of thinking that alternative medicine is a single, integrated field, a philosophy of healing that stands as a coherent alternative to conventional medicine. In actuality, though, alternative medicine merely comprises every form of medicine that's *not* taught in medical school. As one might expect from a definition in the negative, alternative medicine includes numerous differing forms of treatment, many of which completely disagree with each other."

"That's quite interesting," Markley said, sounding quite interested. "Could you outline some of these forms of treatment for us?"

Harry said that he could, as time permitted, and would begin with naturopathy, sometimes called "natural medicine."

"Naturopathy began in the spas of early 19th century Germany, under the influence of the Romantic Movement. The industrial revolution was just underway, and the early natural medicine doctors echoed their counterparts in literature and art by calling for a return to nature. Jean Jacques Rousseau's concept of the Noble Savage was the direct antecedent of the influential natural medicine book by Jethro Kloss called *Back to Eden*, in which healthful living was portrayed as a return to the pre-industrial, even pre-agricultural periods of man's history.

"According to the original naturopathic theory, a person can achieve or recover optimum health by following 'nature's laws.' People should eat healthy natural foods instead of 'dead foods' that have been canned, dried, refined, or processed, and avoid the use of alcohol, coffee, tea, cigarettes, pickled foods and spicy sauces. The popular idea that one should drink two quarts of water daily to flush the kidneys comes from naturopathy too. Other naturopathic ideas that have entered the popular culture include sleeping with a window open, brushing down the skin after a bath, and taking a regular walk after supper, the 'constitutional.' Natural medicine proponents also endorsed taking baths in hot springs, drinking mineral water, walking barefoot for at least fifteen minutes daily, and using herbs instead of the toxic drugs popular in the conventional medicine of the day. Furthermore, based on early 19th century discoveries about digestion, some nature doctors proposed theories of food combining, theories that one can still find printed on little laminated cards in health food stores today.

"The ideals of natural medicine," he continued, "soon crossed over from Germany to America, where they were taken up by such men as Harvey Kellogg, Sylvester Graham and C.W. Post. These early proponents of natural health were particularly concerned about constipation, which they believed was the cause of many illnesses. In order to prevent constipation, they encouraged people to include a great deal of fruits and vegetables in the daily diet, and to eat fibrous whole grains for breakfast. 'Grains' are also called 'cereals,' and that's how the American tradition of the breakfast cereal began. If those men were alive today, and they saw the sugary foods now sold as Kellogg's Corn Flakes, Graham crackers and Post-Toasties, they'd surely roll over in their graves."

"Interesting," Markley said. "I didn't know cereals started out as health foods."

"Few people do. Naturopathy has also evolved a great distance from its 19th century roots. While it still promotes herbs, natural foods and exercise, it recently expanded to include vitamins and other such supplements. The founders of naturopathy would turn over in their graves if they knew that naturopaths promoted vitamins."

"Why is that?" Markley asked. "I thought vitamins and supplements were the centerpiece of alternative medicine."

"They are. But they didn't used to be. The old-time natural medicine doctors hated vitamins. Jethro Kloss described them as a vain attempt by arrogant scientists to substitute for God-given natural fruits and vegetables. Those early naturopaths had a point, too -- vitamin supplements are purified, isolated chemicals, the ultimate in refined, processed foods. Intellectual consistency would suggest that naturopathy should condemn vitamins as unhealthy, and so, for a time, it did.

"In the 1950s and 60s, though, Adelle Davis and Linus Pauling began to promote vitamins. For a decade or so, natural medicine experts dismissed vitamins as no more natural than drug medicine. However, when conventional medicine began to attack Linus Pauling for his vitamin C enthusiasm, they reversed their position. By the principle of 'an enemy of my enemy is a friend,' natural medicine turned about and embraced vitamins. Today, as you say, vitamins and supplements have become the centerpiece of much of natural medicine."

"Remarkable," Markley said, and tapped his watch. Harry turned to Chinese medicine and Ayurveda, whose grand, holistic healing systems he actually admired far more than the comparatively simplistic principles of naturopathic medicine. But he didn't have time to them justice because, under further pressure from the watch, he had to turn to the various forms of bodywork, including chiropractic, osteopathy, massage and Rolfing, and then race through a sentence or two about each of the movement therapies: Feldenkrais, Tai Chi, Pilates and Rolfing Movement Work.

He'd intended to deliver a full summation at the end, but Markley cut him off to announce that after a short break he'd open the show to the radio audience.

He slammed in a cassette and Linda Wertheimer's voice came on overhead, announcing an upcoming pledge drive.

"I shouldn't have put you off so long," Markley said to Harry. "You're good. I had a bad experience once, you see, when I let this chiropractor on the show. David Abden. You know him? The one Vance Holding ran out of town? Now there's a used-car salesman. He was all about making money. You're different. You think about things, and I appreciate that. OK, here we go."

A pause. "We're here with Harry Boullard, one of the new breed of doctors who practices alternative medicine, sometimes called holistic or integrative medicine. If you have questions for the doctor, you can call the station at _____. Now, Harry ... no, wait, it looks like we have a caller already. You're on, Mel from Oklahoma."

"Hello Justin," the voice said. "I have a bad case of neck pain. It came on gradually, over maybe five years. I finally got so bad I went to see my M.D., and he gave me some pills. The pills made me throw up. He gave me different pills, but they made me so tired I couldn't work. So he took x-rays of my back. The x-rays didn't find any arthritis, and he told me I was fine."

Markley cut in. "Do you have a question?" He was still godlike, but now a testy god.

"Well, yes, I do. I told my doctor, maybe I'm fine but I still hurt. He told me not to worry. I said I wasn't worried, but I wanted to be able to turn my neck. He told me I could go ahead and turn my neck, it wasn't dangerous. I said I didn't care if it was dangerous, I just wanted it not to hurt. He said I'd have to learn to live with it. I asked him, what about acupuncture? He slammed down my chart, told me the problem was all in my head, and walked out of the room."

"I really hate it when doctors do that," Harry said. "It's so arrogant and disrespectful! Doesn't it make you wish they'd get neck pain some time?"

"Yeah, totally."

Markley broke in. "But why does Mel hurt if his X-rays are OK?"

"Because you can't see neck pain on an x-ray. Did you know that if you take x-rays of 100 people *without* neck pain, maybe half of them will have arthritis in their neck vertebrae? And if you take x-rays of 100 people *with* neck pain, again maybe half of them will have arthritis in the neck. So, arthritis seen on x-ray has almost nothing to do with neck pain. They're independent variables. But doctors are so addicted to objective findings that they make a big deal about what those findings, even when it doesn't make sense. Here's the honest truth: conventional medicine is a dry hole for problems like neck pain, back pain, anything like that. You might as well not even go. Doctors can't help you."

"Then what should I do?"

"You mentioned acupuncture. That might be a good idea. I'd probably recommend you try chiropractic first, though. And for long term relief, I'd recommend Feldenkrais therapy."

"You mentioned that word before," Markley said. "What's Feldenkrais?"

"Feldenkrais is a sophisticated technique used for retraining the muscles of the body. Mel, you said that your neck pain came on over a long period of time. You didn't have any particular injury to your neck?"

"No, nothing I remember."

"Then chances are, the real cause of your problem is that you don't use your body just right. Maybe your posture isn't good, or maybe you hold your neck too stiffly."

"My girlfriend does say I'm kind of stiff."

"So are a lot of people today. According to the Feldenkrais method, the human body only functions properly if it's allowed to move in a free, wide-open way. Here's what I mean. You know how when you walk, you swing your arms? Now think about it, why do you do that? You don't *have* to swing your arms to walk. You could walk with your hands held completely stiff at your sides. But Feldenkrais says that if you were to walk like that, you'd end up with neck or back pain. The theory says that your body needs complicated three-dimensional movements to stay healthy. Imagine that you're really happy and you're sauntering down the street. When you saunter, you really swing your arms. They not only go back and forth, but if you pay close attention, you see that they turn in and out a little, they rotate, they bounce. You see, people don't move like robots. We're alive, we move like living things. According to Feldenkrais, we need to do that or we develop pain. So Feldenkrais therapy focuses on teaching people how to move properly again."

"That's really interesting, Dr. Boullard. You've just told me a whole lot more than my own doctor ever did."

"The problem is, Mel, that conventional medicine is stuck on viewing the body as a machine, a kind of collection of hinges and motors. It doesn't understand the subtleties of natural human motion. And that, in my opinion, is why it can't treat muscular pain."

"Very interesting indeed," Markley said. "Thank you very much for your question, Mel." He'd already switched the line off. "Cecelia from Nebraska."

Cecelia wanted to know if Harry could recommend any good alternative practitioners in the Omaha area. She knew of a few who advertised, but wanted to stay away from quacks.

"I don't know any names in Omaha," Harry said. "However, I do have some tips for finding a good alternative medicine doctor anywhere. If you wanted to find a good auto mechanic, you might ask an auto body repairman for a recommendation, right? You can use the same principle with alternative medicine. An acupuncturist can advise you on the best holistic MD in town, a chiropractor on the best massage therapist, and so on."

"That makes good sense," she said.

"Here are a few more hints. Never go to someone who markets his own product line -- that's a conflict of interest. Try to find a doctor who believes that conventional medicine has a place too because what you really need is integrative medicine, the best of both worlds, not either-or medicine. And, above all, use your ordinary human sense and decide if the doctor is sincere rather than a con artist. If you pay attention, you can tell."

He had just finished giving this advice when Markley turned up a piece of cardboard on which he'd scribbled "Helding" and mouthed, "watch out." Aloud, he said, "'Sam' from Wichita."

Harry wouldn't have recognized Helding if Markley hadn't identified him. "Sam's" voice was a gentle baritone rather than a rumbling bass, and he sounded kind-hearted and sincere. "*Dr. Boullard*. You were talking a while ago about how to pick an alternative practitioner. You said it's a conflict of interest when a doctor markets his own product line. But isn't it a conflict of interest when a doctor sells any kind of herb or supplement?"

Ouch. He had him there. "In general, yes," he said. "However, in some cases, alternative doctors have to sell their own supplements because the products aren't available anywhere else."

In a smooth, insinuating tone, Helding said, "Couldn't the doctor have a local store stock the herbs for him? That's how regular doctors work. They send people to the pharmacy -- they don't sell drugs out of the office. If they did, people might suspect they're prescribing certain things because they make money on them."

"You do have a point there," Harry said, and thought uncomfortably of his tall bookcases loaded with products. Did he ever prescribe anything just because he had an overstock? He didn't think so. At least not consciously.

"Glad we're in agreement. Now, on another issue: You said that it's important to find a practitioner who's sincere."

Harry sensed a trap and became hyperalert. "Yes, absolutely," he said, cautiously. "There are real quacks out there. You have to steer clear of them."

"But *Dr. Boullard* --" the voice was still sweet and smooth "-- members of the Flat-Earth society are sincere too, and that doesn't make them right."

Bingo!

But on second thought, not all that bingo. Helding had left himself wide open.

"You're quite correct," Harry said, and adopted Helding's neutral, insinuating tone. "A person can be perfectly sincere, and yet have absolutely no idea whatsoever what he's talking about." He paused. "Now *Dr. Helding*, I do believe that you are perfectly sincere ..."

Markley gave Harry the thumbs-up sign.

Helding's voice deepened and regained some of its natural growl. "*Dr. Boullard*, tell me, how do you know whether a treatment is effective?"

"Because I can see it works. I see people get better. And anyway, when something's been used for thousands of years, it can't be completely worthless."

"No? What about bleeding? Doctors used to bleed their patients, didn't they? Starting in ancient Greece and going on up to the 19th century. That's a couple of thousand years. Do you slit your patient's veins, *Dr. Boullard*?"

"Bleeding comes from the western conventional medicine tradition, *Dr. Helding*. The ancestor of our own current practice. The Asian healing systems are far more sophisticated."

Harry had his fingers crossed. Chinese medicine used bleeding too. He hoped Helding didn't know that.

Apparently he didn't because he switched tack. "Have you ever heard of double-blind studies, *Dr. Boullard*?"

"Yes, I've heard of double-blind studies. I went to medical school, just like you." But Harry hadn't really paid much attention to double-blind studies when he was in school. No medical student did. Double-blind studies were theoretical, academic, part of the bureaucratic approval process for drugs.

"Good," Helding said. "Then you're aware that one can only determine that a treatment works by putting it through randomized double-blind, placebo-controlled studies."

"You don't need double-blind studies when you can see the results right in front of you. If I do acupuncture on someone with neck pain, and he gets better, I know that it works, whether or not there's a double-blind study to turn to."

"Not at all," Helding said. "Have you ever heard about the placebo effect? Or observer bias? Or regression to the mean?"

"I think that if you're a person with neck pain," Markley said, "and you go to Harry you're not going to care about double-blind studies if he makes you better."

"Why not go to a witch doctor, then?"

"Yes, why not, if it helps? Next caller, please. Melba from Ohio."

After the show, Harry asked Markley how he'd recognized *Dr. Helding*.

"Caller-ID," Markley said.

Caller-ID wasn't common yet, and Markley had to explain. While he talked, his hands moved busily, putting some coarse order into the chaos on his desk: sliding cassettes and papers into pigeonholes, tossing out sheets full of scribbles, corralling loose coffee cups into a wooden in-box. "I knew he was going to call anyway," he added, "because when I announced the show a few weeks ago, he wrote me seven nasty letters telling me not to soil NPR by promoting quackery. All under assumed names. I recognized the style. Highly aggressive."

Markley placed both hands on the table, pushed himself to a standing position, and heaped papers into a briefcase. Harry noticed that he was putting all his weight on his left leg. When he finished stuffing the briefcase (a few papers were sticking out of one end), he pivoted on the left leg and limped forward. Harry's first thought was polio, but the favored right leg seemed swollen rather than atrophied.

"What happened?" he asked, pointing to the leg.

Markley waved to the engineer passing by the studio's window. "Injured in Korea. Lymphedema, they call it. The leg's no good."

"You ever try acupuncture for that? Or osteopathy? They might really help."

Markley hobbled over to a small desk in the corner, picked up a still-wet raincoat and draped it over his shoulders. "Now don't get ahead of yourself. You got me to listen, not to believe." He limped forward, and made his way past Harry to the door. When he reached it, he leaned back against the doorframe, and laboriously rotated his body so he faced Harry again. "Someday I'd like to get a guest who can talk about alternative medicine without an axe to grind. You're a thoughtful guy, but let's face it, you want to promote your practice. Holding is selling himself as a quackbuster. Isn't there anyone, anywhere, who's just interested in how well alternative medicine works? Who doesn't have an axe to grind one way or the other? That's what the consumer really needs. Is it too much to ask?"

Without waiting for an answer, he turned and limped off into a nearby restroom, leaving Harry to find his way out of the studio on his own.

A good idea in theory, Harry grumbled to himself, as he retraced his steps out of the studio. But alternative medicine is under siege. It can't afford the luxury of neutral defense. It has to fight against powerful enemies -- the medical establishment, the AMA, the FDA, the pharmaceutical companies, organizations that have money and political clout. They're willing to lie to keep alternative medicine suppressed. They do it all the time. If alternative medicine doesn't fight back the same way, its enemies will destroy it.

He'd reached the basement door. When he opened it, water sloshed over his shoes, but he was too busy arguing with Holding in his head to pay attention.

You can't patent herbs and supplements, and so no one can afford to put in the millions of dollars it costs to run formal studies. Besides, how could it be the placebo effect if someone responds to acupuncture after having not responded to chiropractic, or to an herb after not improving with a drug? And anyway, it was fundamentally wrongheaded to impose the binary format of double-blind design on the three dimensional, whole person subtleties of holistic healing.

He rehearsed these and other arguments all the way back to Wichita. When he arrived at his office, he was overflowing with the desire to debate Holding right then and there. He was polishing one particularly line out loud ("does it seem fair to you that the politics of funding rather than any *a priori* impossibility of effectiveness effectively excludes herbs and supplements from the conventional pharmacopoeia") when he passed Carol, loudly rearranging the herb racks with her back to him.

"Oh, it's you," she said, without turning around.

"Hi Carol," he said, happily. "Do you want to hear how it went?"

"I know you're not going to listen to me," she said, still without turning, "but you need to get a lawyer. Not tomorrow. Not next week. Today."

"You listened to the show?"

"You bet I listened. Everyone in the office listened. He's after you, Harry."

"Well, I thought I held up my end pretty well."

She spun around and glared at him as if he were toddler fresh from a cheerful dash across a busy street. "This isn't a game, Harry."

He wanted to pat her on the shoulder to reassure her, but she looked too fierce for that. So he only said, "I know it's not a game," and walked on to the private office where he kept his medical books. He wanted to read up on double-blind studies.

The Kidney Energy of Miss America

But he couldn't think about double-blind studies. His mind only wanted to replay his brilliant line, "Now Dr. Holding, I'm sure you're sincere ..."

When he drove home that evening, he told his daughter about it. Emily was thirteen, and beginning to show the signs of impending teenage misery, but she wasn't yet above approving her father. It became a household joke. When their incommensurately ferocious miniature schnauzer, Sergeant Gray, lunged ferociously at a rottweiler or pit-bull behind a fence, Emily would yank her back and say, "Now, Sergeant Gray, I'm sure that you're sincere. But you're an idiot."

Two weeks later, Harry remained so pleased with himself and his triumphant riposte that he hadn't yet called a lawyer.

Those were the halcyon days of Harry's practice, when he still had no doubts that he was providing effective treatments. He'd had many notable successes. Rose O'Flannery, the kickboxing podiatrist with chronic fatigue syndrome, had pronounced herself cured the day after he gave her CoQ10, and stayed well from then on; Joe Beardon, a rail-thin man in his twenties who felt called by God to start a new sect of Christianity, and whose mother's obstinate refusal to sign on with the program gave him migraines, felt better after only twenty sessions of acupuncture; and numberless people with menopausal hot flashes or neck pain or PMS reported near miracle cures with traditional Chinese herbology or Feldenkrais or Ayurvedic diet.⁸

However, as much as Harry enjoyed treating these common problems, he liked it most when people came to him with strange, hard-to-fathom symptoms, health problems that, in conventional medicine, had no name and definitely no cure.

Like Kim Muldoon's problem.

Kim was something of a character. She was a former Miss America married to a former Mr. USA. She and her husband were the founding members of the Wichita Swingers, an organization simultaneously dedicated to group-sex and the revival of the swing dance. Kim periodically invited Harry to the Swingers' weekly events. (She said he could skip the swing dance part if he didn't like to dance.) When he begged off on the excuse that the Medical Board might frown on a doctor who had sex with his patients, she said that lots of other beautiful ladies came to the meetings, and he could have sex with them instead, couldn't he? He thanked her anyway and said he thought the Board would still object. She thought the Board's attitude was medieval, and said so, but pleasantly.

In truth, the legalistic issues weren't Harry's only reservation. The orgies didn't sound all that appealing. Not that he didn't find Kim attractive. She was perfect from a physical point of view, and he believed it when she said that her friends came up to the same high standard. The real problem lay in Kim's *attitude* toward sex. She approached it with too much of a ... work ethic.

Kim regarded sexual intercourse as a health-promoting natural act that every well-balanced human being should take care to get enough of daily, along with nutritious food, outdoor exercise, and thirty-two ounces of water. Harry, though, preferred to regard his eros as a bit more important than flossing, and hid behind the Medical Board.

By the time of his confrontation with Holding on the David Markley Show, he'd been treating Kim for over a year. Her symptoms could be loosely described as "cold hands and feet," but that simple phrase didn't capture the severity of the problem. Her hands and feet were freezing cold, icy cold, painfully cold, all year round and all day long. She didn't have Raynaud's disease, a condition in which the extremities overreact to cold: her extremities were *always* cold, unless they'd been recently bathed in hot water. During the group-sex events, Kim kept a bathtub full of hot water, and frequently resorted to it. Otherwise, sex became a masochistic experience for her partner, and Kim was far too innocent in her sexuality to get into S&M.

From the perspective of conventional medicine, her condition fell into the large category called "medically unexplainable." "Cold hands and feet" is not, by itself, a known disease, and conventional medicine has no means of treating it. Not that her doctors had refrained from trying. Over the years, they'd given her steroids, thyroid supplements, birth control pills, antidepressants, anti-anxiety drugs and a dozen half-relevant diagnoses. Nothing had helped, and eventually all of Kim's doctors threw up their hands and told her to learn to live with it.

But in Kim's mind, only losers took advice like that. She *knew* she could find a solution to her problem if only she worked hard at it. She spent a year exploring her options, reading books, attending lectures, and talking to her friends. When Harry gave a lecture at her health club, and he said that Chinese medicine could fit any conceivable set of symptoms into its system, she felt sure she'd found the doctor who could help her.

In order to ensure that Harry gave her his full attention, she came to her first appointment dressed in a red miniskirt, sheer black tights and semi-transparent tight yellow nylon blouse. Carol made a snippy aside to the effect that perhaps Harry's patient could be induced to change out of her professional uniform next time she came in. However, over time, even Carol came to realize that Kim was, in her own unique way, thoroughly *wholesome*. Harry didn't feel at all attracted toward her -- she had all the sex appeal for him of a voluptuous pet rabbit -- but he admired her honesty and enjoyed her lack of pretensions.

Besides the cold hands and feet, she also had a few other miscellaneous problems: back pain, knee pain, frequent need to urinate, lifelong infertility (she regarded this as a virtue rather than a health problem), and occasional water retention. She also claimed to have low libido: She had to force herself to have sex for her own good.

When Kim recited these symptoms to Harry he had one of his many Chinese Medicine epiphanies. In Chinese Medicine, all those apparently unrelated symptoms fit together perfectly into a classic diagnostic category.

Like Harry had said on *Lunch with David Markley*, conventional medicine sees the body as a machine, and understands diseases as a breakdown in the machine. If it doesn't recognize the disease, it can't treat it. Chinese medicine, on the other hand, views illness in terms of an imbalance of subtle energies in the body: yang and yin, Qi and Xue, twelve meridians, five phases, eight principles, and the ten zang-fu organs. All the practitioner has to do is plug the patient's symptoms into the system, and arrive, almost mathematically, at a diagnosis.

For Kim, all her symptoms fit together into a single, simple pattern: a deficiency of yang energy in the kidneys.

The yang energy of the kidneys supplies the body's root warmth, and so no wonder Kim's hands and feet were cold. The kidneys control the back and the knees, and that's why her back and knees hurt. She had to get up at night to pee because the kidneys rule the bladder. Her infertility and low libido were also easily analyzed in terms of kidney yang deficiency.

Harry's ability to link all her symptoms together dazzled Kim. She was further dazzled when Harry used Chinese medical theory to predict another symptom she hadn't yet mentioned: scant menstrual periods. She had to admit that, yes, one could certainly call her periods scant at times, and how did he know that?

"Chinese medicine tells me," he said. "Deficient kidney yang leads to a condition called 'deficient Xue,' and one symptom of deficient Xue is scant periods. Another symptom is pale lips. Do you have pale lips?" He couldn't tell by looking because she wore thick lipstick.

"I don't know. I put on my makeup when I'm still half asleep."

"Never mind," he said. "I know what to do for you."

Harry proceeded to perform acupuncture to correct the problem.

Real acupuncture is not like sticking candles in a birthday cake. The acupuncturist listens, and dialogues. Harry explained this as he proceeded to work with Kim. He *listened* by taking her pulses in the traditional Chinese manner. He put three fingers on the artery by her right wrist, and alternately pushed each one to superficial, middle, and deep levels: three levels per position, three positions per wrist, eighteen positions in all, including left and right. He quieted his mind and listened to what was going on at all the layers of her body -- the deep kidney energy, the superficial skin energy, everything in between.⁹

Then he *dialogued* by inserting needles and observing how her body responded. He was looking for a change in the pulse, a shift in the energy. He inserted acupuncture needles into points on her lower back that related to the kidney yang, and rotated them clockwise to exert a tonifying, or strengthening effect. Her pulses responded, showing increased strength in the kidneys. He inserted needles into the tendinomuscular meridians of her extremities, and rotated them counterclockwise, to disperse the accumulation of cold.

Anything this subtle and complicated, Harry thought, had to be real.

Kim sighed, and said she felt blood flowing into her hands and feet. When he attached a little tray to certain of the needles, filled it with an herb called "moxa," and set the herb on fire to transmit heat into the points, she moaned with pleasure.

For self-care, he sent Kim home with moxa sticks, cigar-like herbal rods that her husband could light and hold near the proper points (a responsibility that terrified the sensitive, tender, muscle-bound man). He gave her Chinese herb pills to strengthen and warm her kidneys, and advised her to avoid consuming "cold foods," a term that, in Chinese medicine, refers not only to foods that are physically cold, like ice water, but also to those that are cold in an energetic sense, such as raw fruits and vegetables.

Kim loved it. No other doctor had ever listened to her symptoms and said they all made sense. And Harry had given her plenty to do on her own behalf. She no longer felt helpless. She felt empowered and in charge of her life, and that, Harry had to agree, was a very good thing.

However, although his patient was pleased, the results were less complete than Harry would have liked. Her hands and feet did seem to get a bit warmer right after each session, but the benefit, such as it was, quickly faded, and by the time she came back for the next session, the icicles had accumulated again on the ends of her limbs.

Kim didn't mind. She merely scheduled her treatments on Fridays, to provide coverage for the weekend orgies, and found the arrangement perfectly satisfactory. But Harry didn't find this satisfactory at all. He wanted to get to the root of the problem, not just treat the symptoms, and after six months of weekly sessions without permanent benefit, he knew he wasn't getting to the root of Kim's problems.

At about that time in her treatment, Harry attended a conference given by a noted Vietnamese acupuncturist, Dr. Nguyen. Harry presented Kim's case to the master, and received a great deal of specific advice. When he came back and tried out the new methods on Kim, she happily reported that the treatments were lasting longer. However, this added benefit faded away in a few months, and she sank back to her usual need for weekly treatment.

Later, at a holistic conference in San Francisco, Harry happened to mention this frustrating case to Royce Largo, an out-and-out quack with whom Harry had a peculiarly warm, if mutually skeptical, relationship. Largo laughed at him. "Let me get this straight. Your patient pays you good cash money, not insurance; she comes once every week; and she wants to keep on coming once a week forever. Where exactly do you see a problem?"

But Largo was an acknowledged quack. Harry wanted to help Kim, to really help her. After a few additional months of getting nowhere, he presented Kim's case in a letter to one of the foremost US acupuncturists, Frank Lewis, and asked for advice. A few days before Holding showed up at Harry's clinic, Frank's reply had finally arrived. Carol had inserted it into Kim's chart, and when Harry led Kim back to the treatment room, he took the two page single-spaced essay out of the envelope and waved it proudly toward her.

"Remember when we did that examination so we could send your case to a famous acupuncturist?" he asked. "This is his answer."

Harry's Wichita treatment room was furnished in much the same way as his later Santa Cruz clinic (not surprisingly, since Harry had hauled the furniture with him when he left Wichita). From her teak and gray leather chair, Kim said, "That's exciting." Her tone expressed no more than polite interest. She was more involved with her left breast, which apparently needed a massage because she was giving it one.

"He says here that if you want to fly out to the East Coast, he'll examine you himself. However, he thinks my examination was pretty thorough."

"I'll say," she said, switching to the other breast. "We spent two hours on it."

Harry had given her those two hours free of charge because the consultation with Frank Lewis was as much for his own education as for her care. "Still, I'm sure he could pick up some things I missed."

"You're good enough for me."

"I'm glad you like my treatment. But it's not curing you the way I hoped. And he's a much better acupuncturist than I am."

"Like I said, I think you're great."

"Thank you," he said. "Let me see ... he writes here that you probably came into the world with a mild congenital deficiency of kidney energy. There isn't any way to permanently cure that ... that's disappointing ... but you *can* minimize the drain on your kidney energy to get the most mileage out of what you have ... I like the sound of that ... Let me skim ahead and see what he suggests."

She took out a huge nail file encased in deep-green plastic, and filed away while he read ahead.

As I'm sure you know, Frank wrote, when men engage in sexual intercourse, it depletes their kidney yang. The effect in women, however, is more complex. Excessive intercourse has no direct effect on their kidney yang. However, it quenches the kidney yin, and because the yin nourishes the yang, in time this will lead to deficient yang symptoms. Most likely, Harry's patient had experienced an intermediate stage some years back during which her deficient yin caused hot flashes.

"Have you ever had hot flashes?" Harry asked.

"I have had," she said. "From time to time."

"Were they worse a few years ago than they are now?"

"Maybe."

"Aha," Harry said, gratified by this confirmation of the theory.

As Harry read further, he discovered that his approach had been too simplistic. He'd only addressed the deficient kidney yang, not the underlying yin. While that might provide some temporary symptomatic improvement, ultimately it would further weaken the yin, and thereby deepen the patient's condition.

Harry wanted to hit himself on the head. He'd treated Kim incorrectly for almost a year. He might have badly hurt her. He felt terrible.

The herb pills had been OK, Frank went on, because they contained herbs to support the yin as well as the yang. However, Harry needed to take the same kind of balanced approach with the acupuncture.

Harry read through the details. When he came to the last paragraph of Frank's advice, underlined in green, he took a whistling in-breath through pursed lips.

Kim wasn't going to like this.

In order to support the treatment, Frank wrote, the patient must refrain from *all* sexual activity for a full year. Unless she did this, she'd never fully recover, and the treatment would ultimately amount to no more than a band-aid.

She wasn't going to like this at all.

"He says here that you need to ..." Harry began.

She smiled at him encouragingly.

"He thinks ..."

"Yes?"

"According to the principles of Chinese medicine, he says that you should ..." His voice dropped and became barely intelligible. "... cut down on sex."

She stopped filing her nails, tipped her head to one side, and said, "What was that?"

"According to Chinese medicine," he said, forcing a stronger voice, "sexual intercourse drains the kidney energy. So I can't permanently strengthen your kidneys unless you moderate your activities in that way."

She straightened her neck, squared her shoulders and put her breasts straight out. "You're joking, right?"

"No," Harry said, "Frank Lewis is quite serious. You see, the ancient Chinese physicians who invented acupuncture ..."

"... must have been a bunch of superstitious prudes," she said. "I've never heard anything more ridiculous in my life. Sex is good for you. It's healthy. It keeps your organs running."

"To a certain extent, I agree. However, the ancient wisdom of Chinese medicine recommends that you take all things in moderation, just like everything else."

"Moderation in sex? That's like moderation in breathing."

He took a deep, immoderate breath, and tried again. "We're taking the rest of Chinese medicine seriously, and it's helping you. I think we should take this part seriously too, don't you?"

"No I don't. It's too stupid." She dropped her nail file in bag and snapped it shut.

"So you want me to just go on treating your symptoms," he said.

"Sounds great." She walked over to the acupuncture table and hopped up.

He walked over beside her, his fingers fretful. "Not get to the root of the problem?"

"Not if it means no sex." She lay back and modestly straightened her miniskirt. "Stick me," she said. "That's all I want."

Reverse Quackery

Looking back, he couldn't believe he'd ever taken it all so seriously. Kim was right: Chinese medicine *is* no more than ancient superstition, like astrology or alchemy, a primeval attempt to understand the universe through direct philosophical reflection. Harry shouldn't have needed Frank Lewis' death to show him this. The body is a biochemical machine, alas, not a spiritual entity composed of subtle energies, and one can't get very far without a microscope.

But at the time he still took all of Chinese medicine on faith, and wanted to practice it on the highest of levels. He was, therefore, seething with frustration when Kim Muldoon left. He stepped into his private office to reread Frank's letter, and after he'd read it three times he felt still worse. He so much wanted to provide the best and deepest form of alternative medicine, and here he'd been only treating Kim's symptoms and draining her yin.

Harry lost himself in self-criticism and lost track of the time. He was still rereading the letter when, at 2:05 pm, five minutes after his next patient was due, he heard an irritated knock at the office door. It was Carol Cohen, reminding him of the time. She handed him a shiny new manila chart with the name Jake Ransom scrawled across it in her child-like cursive, and told him to hurry up.

Harry had a standing promise that if he kept anyone waiting more than ten minutes, the visit would be free. But he couldn't stop thinking about Kim. Perhaps what he really needed to do was go one step deeper, and address her entrenched belief structure. Only, he didn't know how he could do it.

It wasn't until 2:08, with Carol hovering near the door and grumbling loudly about "doctors who throw away their money," that he jumped up, walked across the hallway to the waiting room door, opened it, and called out "Jake Ransom."

At the same moment, his eye fell on the wallpaper patch under the reception window and he noticed that it was peeling again. He knelt down involuntarily to fuss with it, to the amusement of the waiting patients.

From behind him, a hoarse voice called out, "You should round off the edges. Sharp angles always peel."

"Really, will that work?"

"Always has for me."

Harry turned to look at the speaker. He was a chubby man in a wheelchair, his legs bunched to one side in the characteristic posture of a paraplegic.

Carol, on the other side of the reception window, cleared her throat, and tapped on her watch. Harry called out the name again, and the man in the wheelchair trundled forward.

He wore a shabby jacket and a shirt slightly stained with what appeared to be dribbled food. He had a mealy, pockmarked face with a huge scar across the forehead, triple chins wedged against his chest, and rheumy, bloodshot eyes. Harry estimated his age at about fifty-five, and the chart corroborated this guess to within a year. Harry led his patient through the labyrinth of his huge office and held open the door of the main treatment room. As the wheelchair passed beneath his arm, he heard an odd whirring sound, but thought it must be the noise of the restroom fan.

Ransom rolled himself up beside a teak and gray leather chair, directly beneath a large Southwestern-style painting of a woman on a donkey. "I won't beat around the bush," he said. "My orthodox doctor says I have cancer."

Harry adopted a tone neutral enough to encompass all possible attitudes his patient might have toward cancer. "What kind of cancer?"

"No kind of cancer at all," Ransom replied. He smiled conspiratorially, and made the open-handed gestures that people use to show they're on the same wavelength. "I'm sure I don't have anything that a little immune strengthening wouldn't cure. As you and I both know, cancer is just a result of all the toxins you get from modern life."

On another occasion, Harry might have gone along. This was certainly the standard explanation given by holistic medicine. However, Frank's letter had reminded him one must always think a level or two beneath the surface.

Perhaps it was a propensity to be affected by toxins that was the real cause of cancer, he reflected, rather than the toxins themselves. That could be due to a deficiency in the liver yin, perhaps, which in turn could result from an excess of the metal element in the lung meridian.

"I was thinking of using the Gerson Diet," Ransom went on. "Carrot juice, liver extract and coffee enemas."¹⁰ Gerson says he can cure every kind of cancer that way."

"The problem with Gerson," Harry said, "is that it's too much one-size-fits-all. To tell you the truth, I've been in this field long enough to see plenty of people die on the Gerson diet. It's no cure-all."

With one pale, hairy hand, Ransom shoved his spastic legs to the other side of his wheelchair. "Well, it's better than that damn chemotherapy. If cancer is caused by toxins, what sense does it make to pour a whole lot of new toxins into your body?"

Harry was familiar with this argument, of course, and had used it himself. But in his current reflective mood he questioned it. According to Chinese medicine, intense, toxic treatments are sometimes necessary for intense, toxic diseases, as a kind of energetic match. This could theoretically justify the use of chemo for cancer.

When Harry didn't immediately say anything, Ransom went on, "Actually, I've heard that if a drug company finds a drug that doesn't cause side-effects, the AMA makes them suppress it. The AMA wants drugs to have side effects because the side effects give doctors an excuse for more visits. It's all deliberate."

"Well I wouldn't go so far as that," Harry said, finding this Ransom guy annoying. "Conventional doctors may be shortsighted and shallow, but they aren't malicious."

"No? Well they got their head up their ass, anyway, whether they mean to or not. Conventional medicine only makes people sick."

Harry knew that he should say something diplomatic, but his frustration with himself boiled over and he spoke too directly. "Look, Mr. Ransom, healing isn't such an easy thing that one should write off any options. Conventional medicine has its good points and its bad points, just like alternative medicine. In my opinion, if standard therapy has a good chance of curing your cancer -- say an eighty percent chance, or even a seventy percent chance -- I think it obviously makes the most sense to go for that. On the other hand, if the odds of success with conventional treatment are really low, say ten or twenty percent, then it's pretty reasonable to consider something alternative. It's the gray zones in between that present the biggest problem. If the odds are 25%, 50%, should you use conventional treatment or not? I'm not sure."

Ransom gave the wheels of his chair an aggressive backward turn. "I'd heard you were different, but I guess you're just a poison pusher like the rest of them."

The taunt went home. Harry wanted his patients to like and admire him. He might have corrected himself, might have found a way to agree with his patient, but Ransom's next words pushed the point too far.

"I guess they've bought you off," he said. "I mean the AMA, the pharmaceutical companies, the multinational corporations. The medical-industrial complex. You're part of their conspiracy, aren't you?"

Harry never had gone in for paranoid conspiracy theories, and certainly none that involved him as co-conspirator. "I don't see it as alternative medicine versus conventional medicine. Nobody has a monopoly on healing. I try to offer the best of both worlds."

Ransom wheeled his chair backwards until it hit the wall, and he grunted, "God damn allopathic poison pusher." He turned and wheeled forward, caught the lever-shaped door handle on an armrest, tried to wheel back and only pivoted. He was stuck. Harry moved to help him, but Ransom gestured Harry away with a free hand and freed himself. He maneuvered the door open, bumping it several times against his wheelchair, and then rolled herky-jerky toward the waiting room. One of the massage therapists happened by at that moment, and she opened the waiting room door for Ransom to pass through.

"Mr. Ransom," Carol called after him. "Your bill!"

"The guy's a quack," Ransom said as he wheeled out into the exterior hallway.

Even at the time, Harry thought it a curious reversal of the word's ordinary meaning. Ransom's complaint actually lay in Harry's *lack* of demonstrated quackery.

"Should I go after him?" Carol asked.

Harry thought about it and said that, no, it was really his own fault; he'd failed to manage the situation properly; and she should leave it be. He walked slowly back to the treatment room, upset and trying to calm himself. When he reached his room, he spied a flat chunk of plastic on the floor by the door handle. It was a piece of covering broken off from a wheelchair arm. This would be his peace offering. He stooped and grabbed it, and ran after Ransom, waving the plastic for explanation as he hurried past Carol.

He made for the stairs, hurried down them three at a time, and reached the glass airlock at the exit in time to see his patient *walk* behind his own wheelchair.

Harry dropped the arm still holding high the plastic piece, and stood there paralyzed as the supposed paraplegic folded the wheelchair into the trunk of a big blue Buick, slammed the trunk shut, and walked around to open the driver side door. When the car swung around to leave the parking lot, Harry stepped back out of sight, but he got a good view of the license plate, and memorized the number.

He called a patient who worked at the Motor Vehicle department. It didn't surprise him when she read off the owner's name as Vance Holding.

Dialogue

When his fear settled down, Harry realized that it was all pretty funny. Holding had come to his office hoping to get Harry on tape promoting alternative cancer treatment. Instead, due to Harry's mood of the moment and Holding's overplaying, he'd gotten an earful in the defense of conventional medicine.

Later that afternoon, he wrote Holding a letter.

Dear Dr. Holding,

You came to my office today, expecting to discover evidence that I abuse cancer patients with fraudulent treatments. I hope what you saw showed that I'm not the quack you thought.

I'm writing because I'd genuinely like to develop a dialogue with you. We have much to discuss, and I'm sure we can learn from each other.

For example, I know that you believe that doctors should use proven treatments only. But wouldn't you agree that it's difficult to get funding for many of the unpatented natural treatments used in alternative medicine because no one stands to make a profit on them? Should patients be deprived of potentially useful therapies simply because of an accident of financing?

I do happen to agree that in certain illnesses, such as cancer, patients become so desperate that a higher level of protection is necessary, to fend off the quacks who would prey on them. You probably know of Dr. Lane, the "hit and run healer" who goes from town to town, setting up shop in motels, and treating people for a couple of days at exorbitant prices. People like him need to be stopped. But isn't there away to harmonize medicine with the democratic traditions of our country and allow people to receive the medical treatment of their choice, while still protecting them from excesses?

Anyway, wouldn't you agree that if something has been done for thousands of years, there must be some truth to it? I think it was Mark Twain who said that if you want to know whether someone's got a good product, you just check whether there are a lot of deep ruts in the road going out to his store. People recognize quality, and they seek it out. If acupuncture didn't work, wouldn't people have stopped using it some time in the past two thousand years? I know you mentioned bleeding as a counterexample, but in my opinion that's only the exception that proves the rule.

I'd like to invite you for dinner or lunch sometime, to talk about this complex and interesting subject. I think you'll find me far more reasonable than you think, and my opinions are not set in stone. I do genuinely want to learn from you.

Sincerely,

Harry Boullard, M.D.

Holding must have responded the instant he received the letter because the reply came two days later. Harry yanked it from the pile of mail before Carol saw it, and took it back to his room to read.

Dear Dr. Boullard,

Your letter is a classic example of quack thinking. Alternative medicine is quackery and nothing but quackery, and you're nothing but a quack. I can't take care of all the medical fraud in the world, but I can clean up my own back yard. And I'm cleaning you up.

Sincerely,

Dr. Vance Holding, M.D.

Section 3. Crossing the Line

The Protection of Protégés

At the time, Holding's letter had driven Harry absolutely wild with indignation. Looking back, though, Harry understood where Holding was coming from.

Like all alternative practitioners, Harry had made a huge mistake: He'd put his trust in tradition, direct experience and testimonials. Unfortunately, when it comes to medical treatments, these sources of information are so unreliable as to mean nothing at all.

Why? Because the placebo response rate for most conditions is about thirty to fifty percent. Therefore, if you treat a thousand people using an ineffective treatment, you'll get three to five hundred testimonials. A person could practice a completely useless form of medicine all his life and never know it.

Whole cultures could practice useless forms of treatment for millennia and never know it. It was so sad.

"Is something wrong?" Ashley asked.

Harry came to himself and discovered that he'd hunched his body around his clenched fists, and was tapping them together at the knuckles.

He smiled at Ashley. She was an honest woman. She didn't know she was a liar.

"What were we talking about?" he asked. "I spaced out for a bit."

She took her seat again in the teak and gray leather chair. "We were talking about a guy named Holding. Do you know him?"

"Do I know him? A little too well. He's the guy who drove me out of Wichita. Didn't I tell you the story?"

"If you did, I can't remember it."

"It was quite the ordeal. He came into my office in disguise, carrying a hidden tape recorder, sent in investigators with their own hidden tape recorders, got patients to file complaints against me, persecuted me up and down."

"You're kidding!" she said. "He did all that?"

"And more. He's devoted his whole career to battling against what he considers quackery, and he's gotten good at it. I fought him off for years. I think I might have won if I stuck it out, but Emily was having teenager problems and the stress got to be too much for me. I finally gave up fighting and left town. That was five years ago. I came out here to open a new practice, far away from Holding. When you told me he'd been spotted in Santa Cruz, it brought back bad memories."

"Do you think he's in town to go after the Holistic Galleria?" She didn't know enough to feel terrified, but she did look slightly worried.

"I'm afraid he probably is," Harry said. "It's the most impressive alternative medicine center in the country, after all."

"You really think so?"

"Oh, definitely. The best, bar none."

Ashley practically hugged herself pleasure, but Harry frowned. As Carol Cohen said, this wasn't a game. Ashley could get in a lot of trouble.

"Look, Ashley, you have to be careful. He's dangerous."

"So what should I do?" she asked, with a smile. "Hire a lawyer?"

The best thing by far, of course, would be to shut down the Galleria and run a nice quiet practice like Harry's. Only, that wasn't possible. Like Harry years ago, Ashley viewed her work as a spiritual mission, a quest, and if any quackbusters got in her path it only meant she was going the right way.

Maybe, though, he could get her to practice at least *a little* defensive medicine, the methods he'd learned under Holding's onslaught: self-protective charting, limiting the use of treatments that pushed conventional medicine's hot buttons, picking and choosing what to say to a given patient based on your sense of the patient.

She'd resist, of course. She wouldn't want to hear it.

Perhaps if he gave the information at a public lecture it would make more of an impression ... and there was a perfect opportunity coming up. "By the way," he said, "are you going to the Natural Products Expo this weekend?"

“Of course I’m going. You can learn so much there.”

“I’m planning to give a talk there on how to defend yourself against quackbusters.” As of this instant, he was planning it. Mel Orick, the owner of the company that sponsored the expo, was a friend of Harry’s, and would work him in. “You should attend. You might learn something useful.”

“I always learn something useful from you,” she said. The toe pointed up and down again. She felt fine.

What about himself? Would Holding come after him too? He certainly would, if Harry joined the Galleria. So much for that idea.

Harry looked at his watch. “It’s late. Time for my midmorning break.” Fortunately, he’d been intelligent enough to schedule an hour break for himself after Ashley, knowing that he’d need it. “So anyway, we’ll see each other at the Expo.”

She jumped up from the chair and shook his hand. “See you then ... unless ... do you want to go out to get tea or something together?”

He patted her on the shoulder. “Thanks, Ashley, but I always take some private time during my work day. To reconnect with myself, you know. I usually go meditate at the Santa Cruz Zen center.”

The skin flushed at the corners of her eyes. “That’s so cool. You really walk the walk, Harry.” She dipped her chin when she said, “Harry.”

Women never used to fall in love with him. Or maybe they did and he never noticed. He was too busy being the High Priest of AltMed. He felt a moment of temptation ... but, no, he wasn’t about to have an affair with someone so near his daughter’s age as Ashley. And a protégé too.

He gave her a chaste hug, walked her to the door, and said goodbye from there.

The Santa Cruz Laundromat and Juice Bar

He did go to the Santa Cruz Zen Center to meditate sometimes. There was one thing he liked about Buddhism: it had relatively few beliefs. He was so sick of beliefs.

Today, though, thinking about Holding and the Gerson diet had made him want carrot juice. Harry no longer thought that carrot juice could cure cancer (with or without coffee enemas), but he did like its taste. He locked his front door, took his bike out the back and rode to the Santa Cruz Juice Bar and Laundromat.

This archetypal Santa Cruz institution belonged to Willow, a friend of Harry's and a reverend ex-acidhead. Willow had a thing about doors. He'd purchased the front door of his laundromat at an estate sale in Scotland, and claimed that it dated back to Macbeth's castle. To bring it up to date, he'd painted mandalas over the flat panels, highlighted the intricate floral carvings with bright pastels, and attached tiny white, pink and blue Christmas lights around the edges. Apparently, though, he didn't care as much about door *hinges*. The door wobbled when Harry opened it, remaining as yet un-repaired from the damage done an evening a few weeks earlier, when unknown criminal parties had pried open the door to do some after-hours laundry.

Harry passed quickly through the entryway art gallery and found Willow washing his tendonous arms at the sink behind the juice bar counter.

Like any self-respecting acidhead of long standing, Willow wore his silvery-white hair in a long pony tail, and dressed in a conservativized psychedelic style: on this particular afternoon, purple and white striped shirt, black pants, tweed vest and matching tweed beret.

"Space," Willow said, when Harry walked up.

Willow used the salutation "space" to address all people and most circumstances, and his friends automatically inferred whatever specific content seemed appropriate to the situation.

"Having a hard day, actually," Harry replied. "I'd like a carrot juice to console myself. And one of your banana muffins."

After a longish pause, during which he nodded thoughtfully, Willow draped a clean beige cloth over his left arm, ran the tap, and elaborately rewashed his hands. He rinsed off the soap with surgical thoroughness and used the cloth to dry one rubbery finger at a time. When his scrub was complete, Willow draped the cloth over a conveniently placed stainless steel rod, moved a stainless steel tray of unpeeled carrots into position, and dropped the carrots into the juicer with such care that Harry imagined he knew each one by name. The carrots went through with a sound like gears grinding in a manual transmission made of wood.

Harry noticed that Willow used the flat of his palm to push down the plunger instead of his fingers, a conspicuously awkward technique that suggested arthritis. "Fingers hurt?" he asked.

Willow deliberately finished juicing the carrots, then brought his fingers into view and gave them his full attention. "They're toast." He shook the hands a couple of times, as if that might evaporate the pain.

"You ever try glucosamine and chondroitin? It actually works, according to several double-blind studies."

"Glucosamine and chondroitin?" Willow handed Harry a chipped coffee cup full of carrot juice, wiped his fingers dry on the dishcloth, took a pen from another coffee cup, and, leaning on the countertop, laboriously wrote down the words. "Where do I get it?"

"I'll bring you some."

"Is it expensive?"

"No charge. You're a friend."

"Thank you kindly." Willow put a hand on his chest and gave a slight bow. "However, I'd not feel good about it."

"Free carrot juice then in exchange?"

Willow deliberated over the offer for half a minute, then said "space" in a business-like tone that indicated acceptance of the contract. He handed over the carrot juice and a muffin, and Harry paid for the muffin. That transaction completed, Willow pointed a tremulous finger toward the swinging double doors that led from the juice bar to the laundry room. "Your friend Gabriel's in there. Pursuing a lovely, as usual."

"Gabe?" Harry looked at the windows in the swinging doors, but they were too steamed up to see through. He looked back at Willow. "Maybe I should sneak in and watch the show, do you think?"

"He does always put on a fine show."

Harry turned but Willow stayed him with a rubbery hand.

"Space," he said. He wasn't looking at Harry. He wasn't looking at anything. "There's bad energy coming at you. A big angry guy, who speaks in tongues and changes shape, and talks in rectangles. He means you harm."

A shiver traveled down Harry's back. If one took Willow's description metaphorically ... speaking in tongues could mean false accents; changing shapes, physical disguises; talking in rectangles, a mind with no yield or softness.

It was a perfect description of Holding.

But that was ridiculous. Willow didn't know anything about Holding, and Harry didn't believe in psychic powers.

Though, Holding might have been asking around for him at the laundromat. Shit, damn, shit. When he'd left Wichita, he thought he'd escaped Holding forever. He'd had five years of peace. He didn't want to fight the quackbuster again.

Willow's gray eyes came back into focus. "Be cool, OK?"

"I'll be cool," Harry said.

Willow shook his head slowly. "You are famous for many things, Holistic Harry, yet coolness be not one of them. Take my advice and *change nothing*."

Harry patted Willow's shoulder, and took the opportunity to enter the laundry room hidden behind a college student carrying a huge basket of dirty clothes. At the far end of the laundromat, he glimpsed Gabriel stuffing underwear into a dryer painted like the Hindu goddess Kali (the door her yawning yoni), and ducked off to the side. He sidled into a rainbow-colored chair behind a detergent dispenser, took a sip of carrot juice, and settled in to watch his old friend in action.

Harry had known Gabriel for almost thirty years. They'd met first in the mid-seventies, when, after college, both of them wandered about California in search of spiritual inspiration (and, in Gabriel's case, a woman named Katie who'd flirted with him for five minutes on Haight St.). Harry later departed for the Home of the Spirit commune, but they caught up with each other years later at a lecture given by a Tibetan Lama named Chimé Rinpoche, and Harry moved into his house. The house soon became the Santa Cruz Tibetan Buddhist center, and for several years Harry took on the role of resident non-Buddhist.

In the subsequent years when Harry attended medical school, Gabriel founded Bengali Chai, the first chai company in the country. They kept up their friendship through chance meetings at natural products expos, and many years later, when Harry left Wichita to settle again in Santa Cruz, Gabriel invited him to drop medicine and become a partner in the chai business.

Harry felt tempted. Although his doubts about alternative medicine as yet remained mostly unconscious (he would not have described himself as skeptical -- only beginning to burn out), the thought of a switch into the beverage industry had a certain appeal to him. Gabriel had everything it took to create an immensely successful business, except for basic business skills. Harry was no great businessman himself, but compared to Gabriel he was Lee Iacocca, and he knew he could turn Bengali chai into a multimillion-dollar company.

After due consideration, though, he decided that he valued his friendship with Gabriel too much to risk it. Gabriel's manner of work was famously dysfunctional. Although everyone agreed that he brewed the best tasting chai in the country, he remained stubbornly uncorrupted by even a tinge of professionalism, and had repeatedly proved incapable of delivering his fine product on time or in promised quantities. If Harry attempted to impose sensible business practices on his friend's company, their friendship wouldn't survive.

Instead, Harry had opened his medical office, continued to lose faith in his work, and kept his friend. He enjoyed Gabriel's company for many reasons, one of them being comic relief. Gabriel's relationships with women were even more famously dysfunctional than his work habits, and Harry looked forward to considerable entertainment from this moment's interaction.

He moved his chair to get a better view of the young woman Gabriel was currently failing to seduce. She fit perfectly into one of his classic types, beautiful, innocent face, bracelets on the wrists and ankles, green velour skirt hanging down to her feet, lacy blue blouse decorated with silver beads, and long black hair in which the remains of a circlet of flowers could be seen.

Despite his consistent lack of success, Gabriel had never outgrown his fascination with hippie chicks. He was a good-looking guy, for a forty-eight year old, with a slim, muscular build and long straight brown hair, and he dressed in a trademark combination of rumpled dress shirt, colored T-shirt, corduroy jeans and wingtip shoes. However, despite his fine style, only a small minority of hippie chicks felt inclined to do more than tease a man twice their age. And if perchance one did show the slightest hint of such inclinations, he inevitably achieved failure by other effective means, such as disputation.

Extensive reading had made Gabriel an authority on most historical, cultural, spiritual and political topics, and he had little patience for shallow thinking and facile assumptions. Unfortunately, shallow thinking and facile assumptions characterized the hippie state. One-sided intellectual arguments were inevitable, and these did not facilitate seduction.

Harry took another sip of his carrot juice and waited for Gabriel to mess up. So far, though, things seemed to be going well. Gabriel gestured with the peculiar vitality given to a man when he's trying to impress a woman, and the young woman seemed properly impressed, following his movements with her whole body, laughing when he laughed.

Harry gathered that she'd just come back from a lecture at the Penny University. This informal local institution had become famous in the '70's for sponsoring discussions on such topics as "the antecedents of Marxism in 18th century epistolary literature," "suicide hot lines as form of emergent community," and "Plank's constant in political speech." The originality of the topics had declined in recent years, though, and when Gabriel finally let the young woman talk, it became clear that this particular lecture had merely consisted of recycled standard Jungian concepts.

"It was so cool," she said. "Professor House talked about Jung's theory of wholeness. She said we dream in four-sided mandalas because we want to complete ourselves. The mandalas give you the cues you need to become yourself, if you know how to read them."

"What did Professor Bohm say?" Gabriel asked. Gabriel preferred the slightly more conservative views of Professor Samuel Bohm to the uniformly liberal ideas of Professor Elizabeth House. The two colleagues moderated most Penny University discussions.

"Oh, you know Bohm, he mostly got, like, real heady. He went on and on with this endless quote from one of Jung's essays. It was like, all words, you know." She paused often when she talked, and made small movements between her sentences that seemed vaguely drawn from North Indian Classical dance.

Gabriel had finished heaving his laundry in the dryer. With a flourish, he dropped in dozens of quarters, and took a seat in a white plastic chair. "Well, I think that what Bohm says is usually worth listening to."

"I don't know. he gets into his big ... conceptual structures ... " (hand stretched upwards, making a little turn) "to make himself feel . . ." (lifting up her left leg and pointing the toe) "safe from having to feel anything, himself, you know. Like . . ." (putting her hands on her hips) "not wanting to do it, really. . ." (making a quarter turn and back again) " . . . become whole himself, like what Jung was saying because it might scare him."

"I'm not sure this intellectual/emotional dialectic is really valid," Gabriel said. "Jung got most of his ideas about mysticism from a bad nineteenth-century translation of the Baghavad Gita, and he got a lot of it wrong."

"Really?" The young woman tossed a pile of her laundry, unfolded, into a black trash bag, and looked down her cheeks at him.

Instead of stopping to pick up the thread of flirtation, still held out, if with decreasing certainty, Gabriel throttled forward into full lecturer mode. "Absolutely. You see, when Hindus talk about the Self they don't mean the psychological self that Jung talks about. Hinduism doesn't try to heal the psychological self because it regards it as an illusion. Freedom is sought in liberation from, not perfection of, the personality. Jung tried to build on a theory he didn't understand. He couldn't possibly understand because he was too egocentric to endure the discipline of meditation, and without disciplined meditation all mystical philosophy is simply words."

"Yeah?" the girl said. She slung a knitted purse over her shoulder. It was attached to a strap of rainbow-colored yarn so long that the purse dangled beside her ankle.

"Absolutely. Without meditational experience there's no true wisdom."

"Well I think Jung had real wisdom."

"That's because you're confusing insight with wisdom."

"That's because you're confusing insight with wisdom," she said. "That's because that's because. And you're afraid too, like Bohm."

She hoisted her bag gracefully, squeezed between plastic tables, and headed for the door.

"Blew it as usual, Gabe," Harry said.

Gabriel spun around and saw him. "You're here? You were watching? How long?"

"I came in just before she started talking about the lecture."

"I blew it bad, didn't I?"

"As always. Arguing isn't exactly the best strategy. You should have offered her a massage. Or told her she was beautiful. That is, if you wanted to get anywhere."

"She was really into me, wasn't she?"

"In this case, I would say yes."

"Damn it!" Gabriel said. "I've got to stop arguing."

"Either that, or go after women your own intellectual age."

In a self-caressing tone, Gabriel said, "Hey, don't be mean." He pulled up his chair to Harry, and said, "So what's up?"

Harry sighed. "I think I'm going to have to give up alternative medicine."

Gabriel's eyes had wandered over to another young woman entering the laundromat. "What? You can't do that. You're Holistic Harry."

Harry shrugged. "It's begun to dawn on me that I don't believe in alternative medicine any more. I think it's wishful thinking. When it's not fraud."

"Come on. Balancing the body's energy is a fraud?"

"No, it's wishful thinking."

"No way. You're just going through a phase. Hey, I got to go on a chai delivery. Want to come?"

"But you just put your laundry in the drier."

"I put in enough quarters to last." He tipped his head toward the door. "Let's go. I have a great new set of Toscanini recordings. Off wax cylinders from the '20's."

"Wax cylinders? The fidelity must be terrible."

He shook his head enthusiastically, his failure with the hippie chick long forgotten. "Not bad at all. And the performances are magnificent."

Harry wished he could go along. Gabriel's chai deliveries often turned into adventures, and along the way Harry always learned something, whether about Toscanini, Byzantine history or the Earl of Oxford as a likely candidate for the true authorship of Shakespeare's plays.

He checked his watch. He still had half an hour before his patient. But, no, it wouldn't be long enough. Time didn't exist when you were with Gabriel. He was too alive. "I have to get back to work. Are you going to NPEXPO next week?"

"Of course I'm going. If I ever remember to pay the admission fee."

"See you there, then, if not before."

Quackery by Proxy

Perhaps he was making the same mistake as Gabriel, getting distracted by content when the real interactions were going on at a different level. Maybe he could see the doctor-patient relationship as an emotional exchange, one in which the factual accuracy of what was said didn't matter.

When he returned to the beautiful old Victorian, he decided to try it. He unlocked the front door and waited patiently at his reception desk until Chris Tucker, his next patient, walked in, accompanied by his father.

Chris was fourteen, but he walked with his back held rigidly straight, as if he were wearing an invisible back brace. Was it a bad back spasm? Possibly, though something about him told Harry that the problem was more severe than that.

The father, a large red-faced man, guided his son along with a hand on his shoulder. Harry separated them at the treatment room and gave Chris a straight-backed chair. The teak and gray leather chair was far too yielding for people with back pain: they could never get up out of it without help.

"So what's the problem?" Harry asked. He addressed the son, though he knew the father would answer.

"My son Chris, he has ankylosing spondylitis."

Ankylosing spondylitis? How did this appointment slip through? Harry tried hard not to treat people with incurable diseases.

"His doctor, though, he isn't what you'd call a real talker."

"I'm sorry," Harry said. "Doctors are too often horrible communicators. A rheumatologist?"

"Yes, one of them. We keep asking him what Chris is supposed to do, and he doesn't say anything."

Because there wasn't anything to do. Though, no doubt, the doctor had said it as undiplomatically as possible.

"I mean," the father went on, "he's only a kid. Is he supposed to accept his back turning stiff as a board? According to the damn doctor, his vertebrae are going to lock together like a concrete block."

Those were probably the rheumatologist's actual words. Why couldn't MDs be at least a *little* bit human? "Ankylosing spondylitis is a very difficult disease." Harry made his voice gentle, and spoke to the boy rather than the father. "Life really isn't fair. I'm sorry you have to deal with this, Chris."

"If there's one thing I've learned, though," the father said, "it's that problems have solutions. You don't have to take 'no' for an answer. You keep pushing and struggling until you find your way through. I'm sure there's some way to completely heal my son."

Harry nodded with sympathy, and wished that he'd managed to avoid seeing these people.

"So Chris and I decided we're going to keep looking till we find someone who can solve his problem. We were asking around, when Ida, you know, the woman who runs the food coop, she mentioned you. Said you're famous." He smiled, and so did Chris. "Holistic Harry, she called you. I didn't know we had someone like you in town. So what can you tell me? Do you know the answer to my boy's problem?"

Thank you Ida.

Harry got letters and emails like this all the time, heartbreaking stories from people who were sure that alternative medicine could help them or their family. Jane Holding had even written to him for help. (He'd taken Carol's advice and avoided that one with a twelve-foot pole.) In the old days, Harry accepted everyone, and tried every possible treatment. Now, however, having failed to help a small army of people with incurable illnesses, promising to do so felt unconscionable, and he tried his best to keep people like Chris away from his office.

What should he say next?

He knew what he wanted to say: There is an answer to your boy's problem, but it's called *acceptance*.

However, if he said that, Chris's father would stomp out in disgust and go on searching. Sooner or later he'd find someone who'd promise to heal Chris. Harry's quack friend Royce Largo, for example.

"I haven't had good luck with ankylosing spondylitis myself," Harry said. Before their spirits could collapse, he added, "However, I know an expert in Chinese herbs who says he has good luck with it. Dr. Lam Chang."

Lam Chang said he had good luck with everything. Harry didn't believe a word of it, but Chang had one thing in his favor: unlike Royce Largo, his rates were reasonable.

Chris spoke up for the first time. "Have you actually seen anyone with ankylosing spondylitis get better?"

Harry waited to hear what his own mouth would say, and listened as it came up with a direct lie. "Yes. Yes, I have. It's not a sure thing, of course, but I think you'll find Dr. Chang is immensely knowledgeable."

They shook his hand and thanked him, deeply appreciative. The father wrote out a check for one hundred and twenty dollars, Harry's standard fee for an hour appointment. Harry said, no, they'd only spent half an hour. The father insisted, and Harry acquiesced. And then they were gone.

Blind Acupuncturists

Harry felt sick and depressed. He idled out the back door of his office and allowed the afternoon breeze to play over his face. One of the neighbors stored a BMW in Harry's back lot, and the cover over one headlight flapped gently, reminding Harry of the sounds on a sailboat. The branches high on top of his maple tree, also brought to life by the wind, waved and gestured toward the sky. Harry checked his watch, and decided he had time to fool around a bit in his garden.

He stepped along the flagstone steps to the iris bed, and noticed that a few weeds had grown up since his last inspection. The main weed was a small, ground-dwelling succulent called purslane. He recognized it from his organic farming days at the Home of the Spirit Commune. Harry didn't dare kneel for fear of dirtying his dress slacks, but, fortunately, during his years in the herb garden he'd perfected the ability to weed standing up. He spread his legs apart, flexed his knees, and bent over like a professional field hand.

He could still clearly remember what the herb gardener at the commune had told him about purslane. It had been twenty-five years, but he could hear Sarah's quiet, drawling voice explaining that the character of the weeds growing in a particular soil indicates specific mineral deficiencies. Purslane, she'd said, means calcium, iron and magnesium deficiency.

He'd accepted it as truth. But was it really true?

Probably not very much true. Almost nothing he'd learned back then had turned out to be true.

He straightened up and stared out sadly over the rest of his garden. He'd taken so much on faith. For example, he'd believed that if natural health authorities stood up and said something with confidence, and if what they said was accepted by thousands of cool, interesting people, it must be true.

He could live with it if, maybe, fifty percent of received natural health wisdom had proved to be true. Or even twenty-five percent. But these days he'd put the reality-content of alternative medicine beliefs at somewhere less than a tenth of a percent, and he couldn't live with that.

He should have married Sarah, become an honest organic farmer, and brought up a set of dirt-brown organically grown kids. Except that farming bored him to death. He'd felt called to serve the world in a way that used more of his talents. Hence medical school, hence holistic practice, hence his current state of despair.

Speaking of despair, he had another patient due soon. He rinsed his hands at a faucet on the side of the house, careful not to splash his jacket or shiny black shoes, and walked in the front door to his waiting room.

He hadn't straightened up the reception room for a bit, and it needed some work. He plumped the couch pillows, brushed the dust off the window ledge and moved the various waiting room chairs into a neat line. He walked across the room to square up the books and articles on his information desk, the oak table covered with informational literature he'd written during his days of belief.

Natural Treatments for Chronic Fatigue caught his eye, and he flipped through it. He was recommending the supplement CoQ10. Why?

Because CoQ10 (along with a hundred other substances) plays a role in the body's energy metabolism, along with the confirming fact that one of his patients with chronic fatigue syndrome, Rose O'Flannery, had taken some and said she felt fantastically better. Of course, he'd tried CoQ10 on two hundred other people with chronic fatigue and it hadn't helped a single one of them.

He dropped the Chronic Fatigue pamphlet into the wastebasket and picked up another article, *BodyWork: the Real Physical Therapy*. He'd written it back in the days when he believed that people with back and neck pain should get bodywork, "the subtle healing arts of the hand" as he'd called massage and Rolfing and osteopathy. Too bad studies had never shown those healing arts of the hand any more effective than laser acupuncture with the laser turned off. In fact, one study had found massage a bit *less* effective than laser acupuncture with the laser turned off.¹¹

He tossed *Bodywork* in the trash, and with an impulsive sweep of his hand, shoved all the remaining pamphlets after it. He turned next to the books laid out on the table, all written by Harry Boullard the fool: *The Herbal Self-Care Bible*, *Eastern Healing/Western Diagnosis*, *Nutrition for the Soul*. He should email Amazon and ask to reclassify all his works as fiction.

One by one, he dropped them in the wastebasket too, and then sank onto the couch. The weight of his disbelief lay on his lap like a lead apron. It had been building for a long time.

Even very early on, Harry had noticed that all alternative medicine dietary theories contradicted each other. Naturopathy endorses vegetables, while Eastern healing theories like macrobiotics and traditional Chinese medicine teach that raw vegetables cause arthritis and cancer. Ayurvedic medicine decries all fermented food as “tamasic,” intrinsically unhealthy, while a persistent movement in American natural medicine endorses apple cider vinegar as a near cure-all. Spicy food is bad, but cayenne peppers are good. Fruit causes Candida. Fruit fasting cures most illnesses. Milk is good only for young cows. Pasteurized milk is even worse, but boiled milk “is the food of the gods.” Sweets are bad. Honey is nature’s most perfect food. Proteins should not be combined with starches. Aduki beans and brown rice should always be cooked together. And so on.

Harry had once fantasized writing a universal cookbook for eating theorists. Each food would come complete with a citation from one system or authority claiming it the most divine edible ever created, and another, from an opposing view, damning it as the worst pestilence one human being ever fed to another.

Alternative medicine diets were dogmas, not discoveries. Alternative practitioners always knocked doctors for failing to know anything about nutrition, but which dietary theory should doctors learn? They couldn’t all be true.

Over time, Harry had settled this conundrum by arranging alternative medicine theories into a spectrum ranging from “profound” to “dumb.” However, over time, the “profound” category of alternative medicine theories shed members. By the time Harry moved from Wichita to Santa Cruz, it included only Traditional Chinese Medicine and certain types of bodywork.

But then Holding’s mention of double-blind studies had finally sunk in, and in 1999 Harry had undertaken a review of the evidence regarding alternative medicine. After reading more than six thousand full text studies, he now understood through and through that double-blind studies are necessary to prove a treatment really works. And from an evidence-based view, Chinese medicine and bodywork were an obvious disaster. Only supplements and herbal extracts, the staples of naturopathy, had any real supporting studies and, even there, the evidence was more negative than positive.

Anyway, Harry didn’t *like* supplements and herbal extracts. They were drugs, albeit natural drugs. They didn’t heal. They treated disease. What was so holistic about using St. John’s wort to treat depression? Unless one took on faith that God created herbs to heal, herbal medicinals were no more than evolutionary accidents, highly unlikely to heal from within. After all, plants had no reason to heal animals. More likely, they “wanted” to taste bad so wandering sheep wouldn’t graze on them. Most traditional medicinal herbs tasted bad; many were poisons. Rationally speaking, herbs were no more guaranteed to be purely safe and wholesome than any drug created in the laboratory.

And, in Harry’s view, vitamins were even worse. After having been an organic farmer, Harry couldn’t help but recognize that vitamins are the human equivalent of artificial fertilizer: chemically isolated necessary nutrients. If artificial fertilizers are evil, why are vitamins marvelous and holistic? It doesn’t make sense.

For the last few years, Harry had followed various alternative medicine theories depending on the day of the week, the month of the lunar year, or, more often, the preferences of his patients. But when, yesterday, Frank’s wife called to invite Harry to her husband’s funeral, that put an end to matters. Harry could no longer keep up his denial.

Frank had been widely regarded as one of the finest acupuncturists in the United States. Harry had consulted him for help on several patients, including Kim Muldoon, the former Miss America with cold hands and feet. Harry had also liked Frank personally. They had daughters of about the same age, and they’d consoled each other over lunch several times during their daughter’s terrible teenage years.

Last year, Frank had pulled off a coup by persuading the legendary blind acupuncturist Dr. Taheiri to give a seminar in San Francisco, the first time any blind acupuncturist had agreed to travel to the US. According to Japanese tradition, blind people make the best practitioners -- because they can’t see, they learn to sense energy. Dr. Taheiri’s reputation made him out as one of the best of the best.

Harry drove up from Santa Cruz to see the famous healer. Taheiri was a small, gray-bearded man in his seventies, energetic in a deliberate way, with eyes like cloudy marbles and a severe face that occasionally broke into a beaming smile. He had an enormous store of knowledge; he’d read, apparently, every ancient acupuncture text in existence, and he also possessed a vast stock of lore derived from family tradition and decades of personal experience. He knew a little bit about modern medicine too.

Taheiri began the seminar with a lecture, delivered in passable English, and then asked for volunteers. The audience volunteered Frank.

Frank stretched out on the acupuncture table, and Taheiri sat beside him. The blind man took Frank’s pulse with profound attention. He palpated Frank’s belly as if he were sounding an ocean. He pressed on various acupuncture points and ran his fingers along several meridians. He did all this for a very long time, and in what appeared to be a deep state of meditation. Then he rose, bowed to the audience, and gave his report.

Frank had very good energy, he said. It was marred only by the slightest of imbalances, which he likened to three cherry blossoms out of place in a well-tended garden: small energetic disturbances in the liver, spleen and lungs.

Taheiri said that by performing acupuncture to correct these disturbances he could prevent Frank from coming down with a common cold in six months and the early signs of arthritis in six years. It was an amazing tour de force of preventive medicine and the audience loved it. Even Harry was impressed.

Unfortunately, instead of three cherry blossoms out of place in the garden, the “slight disturbance” in Frank’s energy turned out to more closely resemble a bulldozer turned loose. Frank’s bones were riddled with holes caused by advanced multiple myeloma. This became evident when, ten days after Taheiri’s treatment, Frank’s spine collapsed.

This had proved a fatal blow to Harry’s still-lingering will to believe. If the best acupuncturist in the world couldn’t sense an impending spinal collapse, how could he claim to sense subtle energy disturbances? It was bullshit, pure unadulterated bullshit.

Harry had long known this with his mind; now he knew it in his gut. And yet, the inertia of decades kept him in practice for another nine months. It wasn’t until Frank’s wife called to say that her husband had died that Harry’s disenchantment at last became total.

This morning, he’d hardly been able to get himself to work. Now that he was halfway through work, he didn’t know how he could make it through the remaining half.

However, when Harry heard feet coming up the steps of the Victorian, he stood up, wiped his eyes, and adopted his customary professional demeanor. The door opened and the patient came in. He prepared to meet her in his accustomed manner.

But, to his horror, he saw that she was wearing The Look.

Crazy Acupuncture

He turned away, embarrassed, and headed toward the door in the wall. Over his shoulder, he called, “Come on back.” When they were in the corridor together, he asked whether the treatment had helped.

“Oh my, did it help,” she said. “It was incredible. My migraine headache disappeared totally, and I haven’t had another till today. It was miraculous. This one today is a doozy though.”

He turned back to give her an appropriately sympathetic look, and she pointed to her right temple.

He snagged her chart as they passed the reception desk, and walked on irritably to his treatment room. Even before she sat down in the teak and gray leather, he began the standard acupuncture “asking examination,” the list of questions used to diagnose illnesses within the system of Traditional Chinese Medicine. He didn’t really listen to her answers. He didn’t actually see her tongue either when she stuck it out on command, and when he rested three fingers on one wrist and then the other to take her pulses, he only pretended to listen.

When he completed this charade, he rummaged around in his Japanese chest until he found the box of Seirin needles with the dark green plastic handles, the thinnest and least painful needles he had. If he had to behave badly, at least, he wouldn’t hurt her.

With the appearance of grave deliberation, he inserted twenty needles in steady succession. He pretended to cogitate over the location of each one. And he did cogitate too, but only in order to ensure that he stuck all the needles in the *wrong* acupuncture points, or in places where there wasn’t any acupuncture point at all.

It was entirely fake acupuncture. However, he’d given her twice as *many* needles as usual, and she seemed perfectly happy about it. When he removed them all thirty minutes later, she gave a happy sigh, said her headache had completely disappeared, and that she didn’t know when she’d ever had such a great treatment.

Cranial Sacral Osteopathy

Before he had a chance to take a breath and despise himself for what he'd done, Harry heard the door chimes announce his next patient, Connie Wilburn.

Connie suffered from frequent sinus infections. For the last several years, she'd been coming to Harry for cranial-sacral treatment to correct this problem. Connie still had plenty of sinus infections, but she believed that without the cranial-sacral therapy, they would be worse; or, perhaps, more frequent, or twingier or deeper or in more sinuses at once. She believed this because a school of osteopathic physicians confidently stated it as fact. They stated it without having passed the tiresome intermediate stage of verifying whether or not it was true.

The philosophy of cranial-sacral sounded plausible enough. Back in 1899, William Sutherland, while dissecting a skull, examined the zigzag "sutures" that mark the connections between the various bones of the skull, and, "in a blinding flash of light," figured that the sutures were hinges designed to allow the bones of the skull to undergo a rhythmic movement.

Following this insight, Sutherland placed his hands on his own head, and sure enough felt regular expansions and contractions. He knew right then and there that he'd chanced upon a scientific advance of unparalleled moment, the discovery of a third bodily rhythm no one but he had ever noticed.

This rhythm was slower than breathing and much slower than the heart rate, and he named it the "primary respiratory mechanism." Further investigation convinced Sutherland that this primary respiratory mechanism was responsible for maintaining health throughout the body, and that many, if not most, forms of disease were caused by impediments to its free action. He proceeded to develop a subtle method of treatment to eliminate such impediments: cranial-sacral therapy (formally, "osteopathy in the cranial field," but no one called it that).

Harry had taken a forty-hour workshop in cranial sacral, and soon became embroiled in a dispute between the two major schools of cranial thought: the traditionalists, who followed William Sutherland, and the followers of a more recent and still living osteopath named Upledger, who tended toward a great many heretic innovations and loosening of the true way. The two schools said terrible things about each other, and Harry, always prone to accept the more classic of two options, sided with the Sutherland devotees.

As he brought Connie back to his treatment room, Harry thought about this dispute and sighed. Whether Sutherland-derived or Upledger-reformed, cranial sacral therapy suffered from a moderately severe problem: there never was such a thing as the cranial rhythm. Osteopathy in the cranial field was a specialized art in the loving cultivation of something that didn't exist, like unicorn husbandry.

Practitioners of cranial had never bothered to check whether two practitioners of cranial sacral who were not otherwise in communication would sense the rhythm in sync with each other. If they had, they would have failed. There was no rhythm. It was a fantasy. Neurosurgeons were constantly looking at the dura mater, the sac surrounding the brain, and it didn't pulse the way cranial theory said it would; in any case, CT-scans of the head would have detected the blur of moving parts, had there been any moving parts. The cranial-sacral Emperor had no clothes.

Harry still practiced cranial sacral therapy, though. It was easy enough, and quite relaxing.

With Connie stretched out on his massage table, he pushed his rolling stool into position at the head end of the table, relaxed his body onto it, and cupped the base of her skull in his hands. It didn't matter that he didn't believe in the cranial rhythm. He could feel it anyway, by a sort of physical imagination, like the itch one feels in the nose the moment someone asks if one's nose itches.

The hallucinated movement obediently followed the pattern he'd learned during his training: a slight outward and downward rotation of the occipital bones, followed by the reverse, about ten times a minute. He tuned into this imaginary movement for a couple of cycles, and soon noticed a restriction emanating from the region of her left forehead. To correct it, he visualized the complex interwoven movement of the cranial bones, and angularly compressed one of the bones beneath his hands. The bone wanted to expand with the rhythmic cranial rhythm, but he didn't allow it to move. He held back its impulse for several full cycles, and then released at a slightly syncopated moment, so that the pent-up energy of the frustrated bone caused it to spring forward with greater alacrity. This motion,

according to theory, would work its way through the interconnecting parts of the bony “mechanism” of the skull, and open up the restricted area.

When he took his hands off her head, she said, “That feels great.”

He’d cut short the appointment, and he had fifteen minutes free now. In a kind of angry trance, he loitered out the back door of his office again and kneeled on the gravel beside the covered BMW. Heedless of possible damage to his dress pants, he lifted up the front flap of the cover, and placed his hands on the car’s right headlight.

The cranial rhythm at once sprang into being, and he followed it. He felt the headlight bulge up and outward, and pull back as the rhythm subsided. After a few complete cycles, he detected an obstruction near the right rear tire, perhaps where the muffler attached to the chassis. No problem, he could easily fix it. He cast his mind’s eye into the car’s chassis, and mentally worked the primary automobile respiratory mechanism to find the right angularity for his pressure. He compressed the lateral surface of the headlight at a sixty-degree angle, held it through three cycles, and then let go.

The rebounding headlight sent an impulse that traveled through the chassis, and released the restriction. From now on, the muffler would move freely.

“Your headlight won’t ache anymore, either,” he said to the car. “And you’ll have more horsepower too.”

He realized that he’d said this aloud. He looked around hurriedly to see if anyone was listening.

There was no one there, but nonetheless what he’d just done scared him. Cynicism like this could make you crazy.

A Palace Revolution

The door chimed again, announcing another patient. Harry didn't feel that he had the strength to see anyone. When he discovered that the patient was Mrs. Bates, something deep inside his soul informed him that he would shortly lose his mind.

He couldn't possibly survive an hour of Mrs. Bates. Why didn't he have nice short visits like a normal doctor? Four patients an hour, six patients an hour, maybe eight. Rush them in, rush them out. What joy! What bliss!

"Well hello, Mrs. Bates," he said, pleasantly.

"Hello Dr. Boullard." She leaned her elbows onto the reception window ledge and smiled down at him.

Mrs. Bates was a handsome woman in her late fifties, fit and healthy, with large, well-shaped breasts and a tendency to overdress for her visits. Today she wore a green silk blouse, two or three gold necklaces, a couple of nice rings, and face make-up of sufficient professionalism that Harry couldn't count the layers. Harry had seen her once or twice a month for five years, and, so far as he knew, had never helped her at all.

No, that wasn't true. He'd once removed a wart on her finger. That counted for something.

It counted for more than anything else he'd done for her. Why did she come to him? Probably for his charm. He was a holistic gigolo.

The problem with helping Mrs. Bates was that she didn't need help. She enjoyed an ongoing state of health superior to that of ninety-eight percent of all human beings her age. She wanted to *stay* healthy, however. This was supposedly a laudable aim. Holistic doctors spent a great deal of effort inculcating an attitude of prevention in their patients. Unfortunately, what it did more often than not was turn previously normal people into orthorexic¹² health-obsessed maniacs.

In the service of preventive medicine, Mrs. Bates would spare no expense, grudge no time or effort, and require no logic or reason. She made the pursuit of good health the one constant theme of her life. She had no time to live, what with all the steps she took to live longer.

And she had a limitless desire for information that didn't exist. "Tell me," she'd ask, "Should I take my once-a-day chasteberry in the morning or the evening? Should my bed face north-south, or east-west? Is the grain quinoa healthier than amaranth? When they say broccoli is an alkaline food, do they mean cooked broccoli too, or only raw broccoli? Is it the same if it's steamed or stir-fried?"¹³

Is it better to use a Visa or a MasterCard? Wear boots with six lace-up holes or seven?

Health was far too fluid a matter for such intensive attention to alter the outcomes in a knowable way. If only he could get Mrs. Bates to relax. If only she'd quit worrying about it and just live.

But he'd taught her too well, during all those years in which he thought it a wonderful thing to obsess about diet and health. Besides, the world was full of alternative medicine books (some of which he'd written himself) that reinforced her fixation. Mrs. Bates did her research and came back again and again with new non-existent details to pin down, new subtleties to shade.

With all the enthusiasm of an old dog heading to the vet for a euthanasia consultation, Harry hefted her chart, and, in a pleasant voice, said, "Well, come on back."

Mrs. Bates opened the door in the wall, smiled at Harry across the return of his reception desk, and followed him into the main treatment room. She took her place in the teak and gray leather chair and held her purse in her lap, hands clasped primly downwards over its mouth, as if she had a small animal trapped inside. Possibly a ferret.

Harry sat in the other teak and gray leather chair and studied his patient. She had a hint of ferociousness about the shoulders today, the general aura of a woman about to make a momentous decision.

She lifted her chin and said, "It's time." She lifted her chin further, and amended, "It's past time."

Harry pursed his lips supportively.

"It's time, Dr. Boullard, for me to get a grip."

"Absolutely," he said. He had no idea what she was talking about.

"I must at last take control -- of my *calcium*."

"Aha," he said, with a gravity appropriate to magnitude of the situation.

"The only calcium I take right now is calcium citrate, 375mg three times daily," she said. "But I know how important calcium is for my bones. I can't keep on being so lazy about it. And, *I won't.*"

"Your dedication to your health has always impressed me," he said. He didn't say how it impressed him, as obsessive to the point of insanity.

"Thank you," she said. "For the last month, I've spent *every* spare minute researching calcium. Especially coral calcium, calcium hydroxyapatite, algae calcium, calcium citrate-malate, and that new one, anhydrous calcium aspartate."

She even pronounced "anhydrous" right. Whatever else you could say about her, Mrs. Bates managed her obsessions professionally.

"From what I can tell, each kind of calcium has its own advantages. So I decided, why not take all of them? But then I had to decide which ones to take at which time of the day. I've read that you have more stomach acid right after a meal, and so it seems to me that that's the best time to take alkaline calcium supplements. Only, I can't seem to find out which of the new calcium supplements are alkaline. And then I got to wondering, do you have more stomach acid with breakfast, lunch or dinner? I didn't have any idea how to find out, and it got me all confused."

Oh my dear Mrs. Bates, you poor thing, can't you just forget about it? I'm so sorry I ever got you started on this. "Those are good questions," he said.

"I have lots more. What about the before-meals calcium? I'd think that before breakfast you'd want a kind of calcium that gives you energy. Which sounds to me like anhydrous calcium aspartate. Your body uses aspartate to make energy, doesn't it?"

Well, yes, and cars use spark plugs to run their motors, but if you dump ground up spark plugs into the gas tank, the car won't run better.

"Yes, but ..." he began.

He would explain this to her. He would tell her honestly, accurately, that it didn't matter all that much. The differences just weren't all that great. Perhaps one form of calcium was 10% better absorbed than another. Then, why not just take 10% more? There was nothing to it beyond that.

But she didn't want accurate information. She didn't want scientifically verified advice. She wanted excitement. "And Dr. Ashley over at the Holistic Galleria," Mrs. Bates went on, "she told my friend that algae calcium is best for people with wide bones, and coral calcium for people with thin bones. But, just my luck, I have thin bones in the arm and wide bones in the hips. I thought that maybe I could help both parts of myself by lying down after I took the calcium and hanging my arms over the side of the bed? Only, I don't know if it would work. When you take a calcium pill, does the calcium flow down, or up?"

In junior high school science class, Harry had soaked a chicken bone in vinegar for a month. The vinegar leached the minerals out of the bone, mostly calcium, and turned it to something much like rubber. He recalled that experiment now, and realized that for years the bones of his spine had floated in a bath of worse stuff than vinegar.

Why did he bother to fight? Patients wanted their non-existent information, and why shouldn't he give them what they wanted?

Does calcium flow up or flow down? What a question.

And then it happened: a power far greater than himself took control (rather like when, as a teenager, he'd first touched a girl's breasts), and carried him over the line.

"You have some good points there," he heard himself say. "And I can help you. Can you handle a complicated calcium regimen? I can simplify the details if you want, but to do the job right, we'll have to get pretty complicated."

Her face lit up. "Oh yes, complicated."

"Great," he said. "Well then, let's get down to business, shall we?"

She gave her purse (and, presumably, the ferret) an excited thump. "I'll need to take notes."

"Of course you will. Here, you can use this." He seized a yellow legal pad from the small teak bookcase beside his chair, and laid it sideways in his lap. He popped the top off a fresh Bic pen, and wrote out the names of the days of the week across the top of the pad. With the help of the edge of an herbal textbook, he drew vertical lines between the days, and divided the page into neat, wide columns.

He handed over pen and pad. "The regimen I'm about to give you will take into account everything I know about you, in a fully holistic way: your food allergies, medical symptoms, blood type, lab values, Chinese medical diagnosis, Ayurvedic constitution, astrological sign, ethnic ancestry, your other supplements, the whole nine yards."

She held her pen poised over the paper like an athlete at the starting line.

"On Monday, Wednesday and Friday, at 11am," he said, "I want you to take 200 mg of algae calcium, and afterwards lie on your bed for fifteen minutes with your feet up in the air and your hands stretched above your head. On the other weekdays, take anhydrous calcium aspartate and bounce on your exercise ball for fifteen minutes, with your hands hanging down."

"Hanging down," she echoed.

“Don’t take any other supplements within an hour of the algae calcium, except for folate and magnesium, they’ll enhance the effect. With the calcium aspartate, it’s OK to take manganese and vanadium, but *not* magnesium. Definitely not magnesium. And no eggs or chicken.”

He paused to allow her to write it all down. “Ready? Good. Now, on the weekend, give the 11 am dose a holiday. At 1 pm Saturday and Sunday, take 150mg of coral calcium, and then, two hours later, 225 mg. Wednesday and Thursday at two pm, take 50mg of vitamin C, then 200 mg of calcium hydroxyapatite, followed by another 300mg exactly forty-five minutes later.”

“That’s calcium hydroxyapatite, again, the 300mg?”

“Right. Yes. Before bed during the week, take 200 mg of calcium citrate malate, but on the weekend at the same time, switch to calcium orotate. Now with citrate malate and hydroxyapatite, leave off the manganese and magnesium, but your usual borate supplement would go well with it. Orotate is better taken alone, and *definitely* don’t eat it with vegetables in the deadly nightshade family: tomatoes, potatoes, peppers, or eggplants. Yellow squash is fine. Got it?”

“This is wonderful,” she said, scribbling madly.

When he finished ranting, he asked to see what she’d written, and scribbled in a few adjustments so that each day’s calcium intake would add up to an appropriate 1200mg or so. Almost exactly the same dose as what she was taking before she came in.

He handed the pages back, and only then began to worry he’d gone too far. Surely even Mrs. Bates would notice that he’d moved into satire. With some trepidation, he asked, “Did I answer your question to your satisfaction, Mrs. Bates?”

“Oh, my goodness, yes,” she said. She glowed with pleasure. “I have never known a doctor like you. This --” she pointed at the sheet “-- this is true holistic medicine. This is real *nutrition*. This is, well I don’t know what to say it is, except that I am deeply, deeply grateful for all your help, Dr. Boullard.”

He smiled at her. He kept smiling until she walked out the door and closed it behind her. As soon as he heard the jingle of bells, though, he ran to the bathroom, closed the door, and tried to throw up. He couldn’t. He dropped back onto the cold tile floor instead, leaned his head against the moist plumbing beneath the sink, and savaged himself.

I’ve crossed the line. I’m a quack now. A complete quack. How can I live with myself?

I can’t. This goes against everything I believe in. I became a holistic MD to heal people, not defraud them. I’ll have to close down my office. I’ll bolt the front door and shutter the windows, and I’ll let my patients hurl themselves against the house like gasping whales. I’ll never see another patient again. I’ll collapse. I’ll give up.

Only, as he perfectly well knew, he couldn’t collapse.

When his mother had first come down with Alzheimer’s disease, he’d promised not to send her to a nursing home. Medicaid would pay for nursing homes, but Harry had to pay for the round the clock home health aides. And his daughter Emily was in college. It was a public college rather than a private one, but still he had to pay her living expenses in Berkeley. Not to mention Harry’s tiny house on West Cliff Drive that cost a fortune.

So he couldn’t collapse. He didn’t know any other way to make money beside the holistic doctor racket.

Section 4. Melanie

Geographical Romance

The rest of the day had gone on much the same, with Harry practicing the worst medicine he knew how and getting high marks for it. Finally, at a little past five, it was time to close down his office and escape. He turned off the various machines, locked up, got back on his bike and rode out into the late Santa Cruz afternoon.

This was his favorite time of day. The low-angled light of the setting sun threw brass and gold highlights on the neighbors' houses, and when he strayed beneath an Angel's Trumpet tree, in bloom out of season, the fragrant flowers glowed blood-orange. He was beginning to feel peaceful again when he remembered that Emily had said she meant to show up for dinner.

The thought both pleased and disturbed him. Like any father who'd raised a daughter on his own, Harry loved Emily more than anyone else in the world. However, seeing her also made him anxious. She liked to offload her worries on to him, to mention, in an off-hand way, that she had no boyfriends and never would, that she'd forgotten a forty page paper due the following morning and therefore expected to fail the one class most essential her, or that she'd been going blind in one eye on and off for a few weeks, and could it be because she never cleaned her contacts?

Once she knew she had her father worried about the appropriate issues, she relaxed, and usually solved them on her own. He knew this, but it didn't help. He was still scarred by Emily's teenage years, during which she shaved her head and wore baggy camouflage outfits, failed her classes, expressed an intellectual admiration for heroin addicts, and collected how-to books on suicide.

Emily had gotten her life together after that terrifying period. However, she still changed majors about once a semester, and would shortly graduate with a degree in general studies. Harry worried that if she didn't come up with a concrete goal soon, she'd fall back into her former state of hopelessness.

To give himself time to get psyched up for an Emily evening, Harry took a long way home. He followed Walnut St. into the neighborhoods near Mission, admired a few typically eccentric Santa Cruz houses, detoured through an alley and made his way to Laurel St. He crossed behind the Salvation Army building, with its immense avocado tree, and worked his way over to a vacant lot that gave nice views of the onion-domed houses atop Boardwalk hill. From there, Harry cut through several empty lots and followed a sidewalk whose broken concrete was springing to life with typical Santa Cruz weeds: soft and rounded, lacking all legginess, points or poison.

He reached the weeping rock wall and followed it toward Beach Street. The wall was composed of gray shale blocks linked with decaying mortar. Because it held back higher ground, a significant water table oozed through the wall's chinks, and kept alive tiny white flowers, bright green leaves and wiry red curlicues. It was beautiful.

Harry had grown up with the provincialism peculiar to Los Angeles, a sense that natural beauty and charm had died out several centuries back, and one must accept Disneyland instead. However, his first visit to Santa Cruz had freed him from these limiting notions. He'd read a favorable piece on the town in Rolling Stone, and, in the summer after his junior year in high school, driven his VW bug north to explore. During a winter dusk like this one, he'd followed a dog going for a solitary stroll along West Cliff Drive. When the dog settled on its haunches to watch the sun set over the ocean, Harry told himself that a town where even the dogs have aesthetic sense was the place for him.

Santa Cruz was Harry's great geographic romance. He'd lived there three times now: once during college, where he'd gotten together with Geraldine, again after his two years at the Home of the Spirit commune, and for the last five years, since he'd left Wichita. He wished he'd raised Emily here too. Unfortunately, the way things had worked out, he'd subjected Emily to much the same beauty deprivation that had afflicted his own childhood.

His wife Cecie had given birth to Emily shortly after Harry graduated Stanford medical school. He'd taken a residency at UCLA in Los Angeles because it allowed him to study acupuncture at the nation's only certified acupuncture program for MDs. Emily had grown up breathing much the same smog that had filled Harry's childhood lungs. He'd intended to set up practice in Santa Cruz after he finished, but in the last year of the residency, Cecie came down with aggressive ovarian cancer. There was hardly time to properly begin alternative cancer treatment before she died. After residency, he didn't feel up to attempting a practice and single fatherhood in Santa Cruz; it was one of the few places in the country where a new holistic doctor would face competition. He was casting around for somewhere

easier to start out when a former member of the Home of the Spirit Commune suggested he hang out his shingle in Wichita, Kansas.

Harry didn't at first jump to the idea. Would Wichita really appreciate a holistic doctor? His friend assured him that the demand would be high and the competition low. Besides, his wife would help with Emily's childcare.

All these predictions proved correct, and in no time Harry had a thriving medical practice and a comfortable support system for his daughter. However Wichita rated lower on the scale of natural beauty than Los Angeles. He and Emily had taken to going for walks to see what new grasses were coming to flower.

Harry ended up staying fifteen years in Wichita. By the time Holding drove him out, he'd become the famous Holistic Harry, and knew he could succeed anywhere, even in a place so overpopulated with holistic doctors as Santa Cruz. However it was too late for Emily. She was college age by then, and she got accepted to UC Santa Cruz. However, she found Harry's beloved city "too color-by-numbers" and transferred to UC Berkeley.

Oh well. You couldn't expect to pass on all your loves to your children. He and Emily shared many values and interests and were great friends, and that was more than enough.

At this point in his considerations, Harry had reached his house. He wheeled his bike around the stone Buddha in its moss-covered fountain, tapped the code to open the garage door, and saw, with mixed pleasure and anxiety, that his daughter's little car was already parked inside. He hung his bike on a hook, walked past boxes of fossils, dolls, Lego and other relics of Emily's childhood, and entered the house in the most Feng-Shui-inappropriate way possible, by way of the utility room. He was thinking of what he could throw together quickly for dinner when he heard her voice from the kitchen.

"Hi, Dad. I've made us dinner."

Dinner? She never made dinner for *him*.

No Sugar at the Birthday

He tossed his bike helmet onto the messy dining room table, and wormed his way around stacks of medical research studies to get into the kitchen. He found Emily working away at the stove, her arms moving rapidly, though perhaps a bit inexpertly, between pots, pans and cutting board. She wore one of his aprons, and it looked rather charming over her red rayon blouse, black crepe skirt and red low heels.

He asked her what she was cooking.

"This will blow you away, Dad. I'm making tofu and mixed vegetables."

She lifted a lid and he saw ragged white cubes stir-frying amongst chopped-up vegetables.

It did blow him away. "You? Mademoiselle Artificial Flavors? Cooking tofu?"

She lifted another lid. "See. Brown rice." She pointed to a bottle of Dr. Bronner's Balanced Mineral Seasoning. "Should I add some of that? Is it any good?"

"You should know. When you were little, you slavered ten tons of it at a time on your rice."

She dripped a bit of the black liquid on her palm, licked it, and pronounced it good. She took another lick and asked how much should she use.

"Maybe a tablespoon or two."

Emily squirted in a random amount, fluffed the rice with a fork, and shut off the flame on both dishes. "Done. You don't want to fry the life force out of them, right?" She gave him a sidelong glance, fishing for a look of amazement, and he willingly provided one. She never talked like this.

Although Emily had been getting her life together in recent years, nothing about her progress had included embracing a healthy diet. In childhood, Harry had inflicted so many dietary theories on her that she'd gone the other way, and lived on junk food.

When she hefted two pots at shoulder level and set off in the direction of the dining room table, Harry got ahead of her and swept away the bike helmet, books, and piles of research studies that littered the table. "So what's the matter with you?" he asked. "You've caught encephalitis or something? Why tofu? Why make me dinner at all?" He put his hand on her forehead.

She giggled. "I've changed. Remember when I talked to that People Magazine reporter?"

He wrinkled his forehead as if the recollection caused him terrible suffering. "How could I forget the day you blackened my name across America? You were how old then?"

"Nine. No, ten."

The reporter from People Magazine had had been putting together a story on alternative medicine in the Midwest. He'd traveled to Harry and Emily's home in Wichita and fired off questions while the photographer took endearing footage of the holistic doctor with his daughter in his lap. As it happened, Emily had a specific plan in mind, and she sprang it as soon as the interview wound down.

"Don't you think you should ask *me* some questions now?" she said. "Your readers will certainly want to hear the perspective of his daughter."

The reporter, a man in his late twenties, took her completely seriously. "Absolutely. Tell me your insights into this famous father of yours."

She proceeded to launch into a passionate prepared speech. Its essence was that her father had made her a guinea pig for his health food theories, and from infancy had forbade her to eat anything sweetened with sugar, colored with artificial colors, or contaminated with food preservatives, despite the fact that "I love sugar, artificial colors, and artificial preservatives above all other pleasures life can provide." (Emily also rather appreciated 19th century novels; he read them to her for bedtime stories, and could pull off a rather florid verbal style when she wanted to impress adults.)

"To confess," she went on, "I eat as much junk food as I can at my friends' houses. And I keep piles of things like beef jerky and caramel corn in my room. He'll punish me severely now that I've told, of course."

Of course, as she perfectly well knew, he couldn't possibly punish her after such a precocious speech, assuming People Magazine's instantly protective audience would have allowed it.

"I got letters about it for years," Harry said. "'What about birthday cake?' they'd ask. 'What about ice cream?'" Quite a few readers said your diet was child abuse."

She put her hand to her mouth. "Whoops. Sorry! I didn't mean to get you in trouble."

"Don't worry. It really was quite cruel to make you sit at birthday parties cradling an orange when the other kids were eating cake. Besides, you got me more attention than trouble. That interview put really me on the map."

She spooned brown rice and the tofu vegetable mix onto his plate. When he took a bite of it, he said, "That's really good," and meant it. He took another.

"Not too spicy? Hey, I have a question. Is spicy food healthy or not?"

An answer to that seemingly simple question would fill a book, and it wouldn't make sense anyway. To postpone dealing with it, he said, "First tell me what caused this revolution."

She tapped her spoon several times on the edge of the bowl and didn't answer. He wondered if perhaps she had a new boyfriend who believed in health food, and she didn't want to tell him that. "Is it a secret?"

"No, nothing like that. I'm only trying to think where it started. I never completely quit eating healthy, you know, I just didn't tell you. Didn't want to give you the satisfaction. I never stopped liking salads, and hamburgers always made me think of dead cows. When I came to Berkeley, I met lots of people who believed in natural food, and sometimes at potlucks I had no choice but to eat it. I ate brown rice this one time and it gave me a comfy feeling. Because I had it as a kid, you know."

"Pure conditioning. Whatever you ate as a kid does that to you. My British friend Leslie has to have her Marmite at least once a week or she gets lonely."

Emily shuddered with her whole body. "Oooh, Marmite. So horrible."

"Not to her. I never thought you'd eat tofu again. Did it happen gradually? First you got hooked on brown rice, then toasted nori, then tofu? Didn't they warn you about that in D.A.R.E.?"

"It was the pushers' fault, not mine!"

When he laughed, she added, "Seriously. I'm not kidding. I went to a party at Katie's house a few months ago, and the health food pushers got to me."

He listened in amazement as she told a story that matched, almost word for word, what had happened to him during his last semester of college.

Near midnight, she'd been lying on the floor beside her friend Katie, their feet kicked up on the couch, when another friend, Leila, appeared above them, and held out two cans of food. "She yelled to Tim and told him to sit on Katie's feet till she promised never to eat that stuff again. I said 'what stuff?' She waved the cans in my face. Campbell's chunky chicken and vegetable soup. I didn't get it. If she'd found Twinkies or beef jerky, OK. But, like, what's wrong with chicken soup? So I asked her why, and she gave me a speech exactly like the ones you used to give."

In awe at the persistence of this cultural meme, Harry listened to Emily's rendition of Leila's version of the classic natural health rant about canned food: Canned food has no life force, the enzymes are cooked out of the vegetables, the white flour in the noodles cakes in your colon and turns to concrete, etc., etc.

"She was getting onto the part about how meat has death energy in it, when I really blew her away. I told her I knew all about it because my dad's a famous alternative medicine doctor. She's never heard my last name, and when I say 'he's Harry Boullard' she freaks out, says you're her hero, and that I *have* to get one of your books autographed for her or she'll kill me. Which we have to do, by the way, I keep forgetting. So pretty soon I was back into eating the way you used to make me eat when I was a kid. I already stole your copy of *Laurel's Kitchen*, if you didn't notice."

"So that's where it went."

"Yup," she laughed. "I stole it. Seriously, about spicy food. I'm confused. Cayenne is supposed to be good for you, but Jethro Kloss says that Tabasco sauce destroys your health. Why is that? I'm confused."

He wanted to say: You're confused because you have a brain. The theory doesn't make sense -- that's why you can't make sense of it. Health food diets were religions, not insights.

Only he didn't dare sabotage her new enthusiasm. If she felt a desire to take good care of herself in any way shape or form, he wouldn't stand in the way.

Then how would he answer the question? With Chinese medicine, of course. You could explain absolutely anything in Chinese medicine.

"Here's how it goes. In Chinese medicine, spicy foods affect the lungs. Now ..."

If only she'd come around to appreciating his expertise *before* he stopped believing in it.

Royce Largo

A week after his daughter's revelation of her return to healthfoodism, Harry was on a flight down from San Francisco to the Natural Products Expo (NPEXPO) in Southern California. This year, New Knowledge Inc., the sponsor of NPEXPO, had decided to locate their West Coast extravaganza in Orange County. Most of the Bay Area natural product community seemed to have boarded the same plane, and the cabin echoed with natural medicine talk. Staple topics dominated, such as creatine for sports performance, red clover isoflavones for menopause, and language to evade the DSHEA-mandated limitations on labeling.¹⁴ But there were also exciting new topics, such as antelope antler for male sexual potency, emu oil for "degenerative diseases," mangosteen juice for everything, and a host of clever ways to fake adherence to the ridiculous new GMPs (Good Manufacturing Practices).

Harry mentally classified the voices into the categories created by his quack friend Royce Largo. Most of the natural medicine people on the plane sounded like PTBs, but here and there Harry thought he overheard the tones of a sucker².

In Largo's terminology, a PTB, short for P.T. Barnum, was a conscious fraud, a self-aware quack in search of the daily born sucker (a patient, or a sucker¹). Most hit-and-run healers and supplement manufacturers were PTBs, as were many chiropractors and holistic MDs. The majority of alternative medicine practitioners, however, were not PTBs. They believed in what they were doing. They took alternative medicine on faith. In other words, they'd been conned by the alternative medicine con game as much as their patients: they were suckers too.

PTBs and suckers² dealt out the same worthless treatments, but PTBs knew their treatments were phony, while suckers² believed that they really worked. Thus, PTBs were honest with themselves and dishonest with their patients, while suckers² allowed themselves to be deceived and thereby spoke from the heart.

The strangest part about it all was the way alternative medicine retroactively redeemed itself. Practitioners who believed (or lied well) conveyed confidence to their patients. This created a strong placebo effect, which in turn produced the falsely promised benefit.¹⁵ The power of placebo thus converted a factual untruth -- "this treatment is really powerful"-- into a true statement. Geraldine called this process the reverse catch-22 of alternative medicine, and also compared it to Stephen Hawking's "ultimate free lunch," the quantum mechanical process by which the universe bootstraps itself into existence.

Harry plugged his ears to shut out a suddenly audible dialogue between a PTB supplement manufacturer and a sucker² naturopath on the many uses of mangosteen juice, and allowed himself to realize that he'd finally become a PTB. He'd eaten of the knowledge of double-blind studies, and could no longer go back to Eden.

This biblical elevation of his predicament soothed him for no more than a moment. Without sincerity, this job was exhausting. How did PTBs deal with it?

He knew how Royce Largo dealt with it. Largo had taken to lecturing him on how to deal with it every time they met.

"It takes a lot out of you when you're an altmed doc," Largo would say. "All those bullshit patients. All that crap you have to sell them. Smiling all the time. It wears on you. If you don't get something back you burn out. Of course, there's money. Money is nice, and you can get by on it if you make enough. But I find that a sex helps a great deal. It's so much more *visceral*."

He said it without a trace of irony. Largo never said anything with irony. Harry had known him since childhood. They'd first met him in Cub Scouts, when the slightly older Largo had taken Harry aside and said that if they lied for each other they could collect badges more quickly. They could, for example, each swear that they'd seen the other perform an act of kindness for an old person. At that particular moment, they each coveted a Civic Duty badge, and being kind to old people was an essential means to that end. Harry said that he didn't like to lie, even for so worthwhile a goal. Largo told him that he was weird, but said it in a pleasant, jovial tone, and they walked home together as friends.

A few blocks from the suburban North Hollywood neighborhood where they both lived, a slow-moving elderly lady got in their way on a narrow sidewalk. Largo slid past her and said something that made her smile. Harry caught up and said, "I could witness that, couldn't I? You were kind to her. I saw it."

“Well, you could say that,” Largo said. “I called her a douche bag. She thought I was cute.”

On the next meeting, Largo reported this event as “cheering up a sad old lady,” and Harry, after a legalistic internal argument, backed him up. They remained friends, of a sort, from then on.

Largo’s father was an insurance salesman who bragged about forcing policies on people who didn’t need them. Despite his dishonesty, however, he never had any money, something Largo junior found puzzling. In the ninth grade, Royce told Harry that he’d figured out his father’s mistake: you had to sell out, true, but sell-out wisely.

In the first year of high school, Largo shadowed a chiropractor as part of a class in entrepreneurship. He came back from the day’s session much enriched with wisdom. The chiropractor had told him, “You can make good money in chiropractic, but an M.D. degree is a license to steal.” Largo declared himself pre-med.

In high school, Largo discovered that he had one genuine talent besides his charm: he could play tennis at semi-pro level without so much as practicing. He found this skill quite valuable as a means of having sex. He had sex with cheerleaders, sex with stuck-up beauty queens, sex even with a few of the brainy ones. However, he found the academic requirements of school a bit more difficult, and turned to Harry for help. He made the following proposal: If Harry would allow him to copy off his finals in physics, chemistry and biology, he’d help Harry go on a date with the mysteriously beautiful Teri Kane, one of the many girls Harry admired but lacked the capacity to speak to.

Harry declined. However, when he noticed that Largo had maneuvered himself into position to copy off Harry’s finals anyway, he didn’t say anything to the teacher about it. After finals, Largo kept his promise and visited Teri’s house with the best intentions of charming her in Harry’s direction, but he accidentally ended up sleeping with her himself.

“I couldn’t help it,” he said, the next morning, with his patented self-effacing shrug. “I’m a dog. Anyway, she’s not worth your while, take it from me. Any girl who’d sleep with me is beneath you. Why don’t you go after Geraldine Steinberg? She’s more your type.”

Harry was aghast at the suggestion. If he admired Teri, he worshipped Geraldine. She was cutting and brilliant and beautiful, and she dated college students. She was way out of his league.

Largo said, no, she wasn’t out of his league at all. Harry could easily sleep with Geraldine, girls like her always went for the shy types, the nerdy-looking types like Harry especially. Harry didn’t believe any of this, and paid no attention as Largo proposed various ingenious plans for successful seduction.

All three of them had matriculated to the same undergraduate school, UC Santa Cruz. After graduation, Largo set off to Stanford Medical School while Harry and Geraldine searched for God and natural health at the Home of the Spirit Commune. During the spiritual revolution that overcame Harry during that period of his life, he felt embarrassed about his crass friendship with Largo, and decided he should let go of it. Largo represented a way of being that simply could not be indulged. However, when Harry flew back to California two years later, he needed a ride from the airport, and couldn’t find anyone but Largo to pick him up.

It so happened that Harry had arrived at a critical moment in Royce Largo’s life, his one and only existential crisis. Largo had been dating a secretary at Stanford Medical School for two years, primarily in order to get advance copies of tests. When he’d finished the academic first two years of med school, he didn’t need her any more, and gently dumped her. However, despite the use of a polished exit strategy, full of high-toned flattery and drenched with flowers, she’d persisted in true love for him and took an overdose of antidepressants in an attempt at suicide that just might work.

She was still unconscious and Largo was high on Thai weed when he greeted Harry at San Francisco International. Marijuana wasn’t the best drug for escape but it was perfect for existential crises. Royce tossed Harry the keys to his corvette, threw himself in the passenger seat, opened the glove compartment door and dropped his head on it.

He had stains on his white polo shirt and his gorgeous wavy brown hair looked like it was trying to grow dreadlocks. These were particularly bad signs in a man like Largo, who ordinarily kept himself always in perfect array, having derived from his Boy Scout experience the attitude that he one should always be prepared to meet a woman in need of seduction.

Without lifting his head from the glove compartment lid he asked, “I’m confused, Harry. What’s the point? You work hard, you struggle to set yourself up so you can make money off people, and where does it get you? Your girlfriend tries to off herself. I feel like boiled shit.”

After his sojourn at the Home of the Spirit Commune, Harry had ready answers to all such metaphysical questions. He began with a long and substantive lecture on the soul’s progress through the angelic, astral and physical planes. By the time they passed the huge statue of Father Junipero Serrra overlooking Interstate 280, he’d reached the topic of karma. If Largo would seek to serve people rather than exploit them, Harry suggested, his life might flow better.

Largo listened quietly, and nodded from time to time. When Harry explained that, according to mystical Buddhism, a single consciousness animates all beings, he sat upright, and said, “no shit.” Shortly afterwards, Royce

asked Harry to stop at Taco Bell. He purchased six tacos, consumed them in the car and fell instantly asleep. Harry had to half-carry him into the bedroom of his Palo Alto apartment.

The next morning, Largo jumped out of bed shiny-faced and refreshed. "Thanks for letting me cheat off your papers again, Harry," he said.

"What are you talking about?"

Largo turned on the shower. "You do the meditation, and I get the answers," he said, and stepped in.

When he stepped out of the shower again, and stood naked before the mirror fluffing his hair, Harry asked what he meant to do.

"Make money," he said.

"But, but, but," Harry sputtered, "how's that different from what you were already after?"

Largo held up a second mirror to examine the back of his head, gave his hair another fluff, then hurried down the hall to his bedroom. Harry followed.

"It's all a matter of attitude." Largo put on a clean white polo shirt and white pleated pants, and searched in his closet for his best pair of white tennis shoes. "The way I figure it, what I need to do is stop thinking about getting things *from* people. That's too negative. I need to think about getting things *for* myself."

To the best of Harry's knowledge, spiritual doubt never again troubled Largo's life. He became a dermatologist instead of a plastic surgeon and set up a dermatology/cosmetology clinic that performed physician-supervised facial rejuvenation. Close interaction with his clients, many of whom were Hollywood celebrities, taught Largo the value of dietary supplements, and he sideslipped into the alternative medicine world. He started a health newsletter and made a killing on spirulina, Pycnogenol™ and coenzyme Q10. After a few years, he staged a well publicized "Jog for Health" from Los Angeles to New York, and attributed his stamina to a brand of Korean Red Ginseng he was currently promoting.

Besides earning him a killing in Korean Red Ginseng sales, this stunt opened the way to many lucrative endorsements. He met Kim Muldoon through Harry, and, after building the personal connection by attending a few orgies, they teamed up to advertise breast enhancement herbs. When the competition in that field got too tough, he moved on to life-extension supplements, and, later, brain-boosters.

Royce Largo's voice and presence instilled profound trust in his customers, a fact that struck Harry as strange, until he realized most of Largo's customers derived their sense of authenticity in life by watching soap operas. Harry utterly disapproved of Largo's career, but, like everyone else, he couldn't help liking him. The fellow was supernaturally comfortable with himself, and the feeling was infectious. He was like a living Philosopher's Stone: he could convert base actions into something that looked like gold.

And Royce, in his own way, was faithful to Harry. Lately, his friendship had taken the form of suggestions on the gentle art of seduction.

Royce Largo spent most his time at the Expos going after female natural product retailers (he called it "whole grain sex"), and he had much to say on the subject. Harry must begin by displaying his manifold healing wisdom because it was that, along with his moderate fame, that would get him laid. However, he also had to honor the woman's own beliefs. What he should do, therefore, was to praise the woman's healing intuitions, and at the same time insinuate that her insights, true as they were, represented only one beautiful color in the rainbow of his own vast understanding. She'd snuggle into his profundity, simple green enfolded between the blue-green and yellow-green of his grand spectrum. "She'll be honored to sleep with you, Harry, uplifted really."

Harry always laughed off Largo's advice as too cynical to take seriously. However, at the last natural products Expo, he'd finally argued back, perhaps because, subconsciously, he'd begun to consider the merits of this particular bit of advice.

"But women don't like it when you just have sex with them, and then leave. It hurts their feelings. They hate it. They feel exploited."

In his warm, generous voice, Largo had replied, "I'll tell you how it is, Harry. It's true that women aren't happy about it the next morning. They feel gypped and used. However, they like it fine during the evening. Now, I ask you, what rule says that unhappiness the next morning is more important than happiness in the night? What about Be-Here-Now?"

Harry had dismissed this as the typical outrageous reasoning of an unrepentant scoundrel. Now on the plane to NPEXPO, though, he wondered whether he should take the argument more seriously. One thing Harry knew about himself was that he suffered from an excessive attachment to purity. He'd been aware of this as a possible problem ever since the day at the Home of the Spirit Commune when Sardar had given Harry and Geraldine a demonstration on the need to accept life's impurity. Geraldine had taken Sardar's lesson to heart years ago. Harry had resisted, but from time to time he did wonder whether he suffered from excessive scruples.

It certainly wasn't normal that he'd never gotten into a relationship since his wife Cecie died, hardly even dated. Perhaps his intrusive thoughts about his protégé were trying to tell him something. Maybe it would do him good to follow his instincts rather than suppress them with automatic high-mindedness.

He wouldn't go there with Ashley. But there might be other candidates right here on the plane.

What Would Largo Do?

After arguing over the matter with himself for forty-five minutes, Harry took a trip to the restroom with a half-serious eye for women to seduce. His gaze turned first to two natural product retailers sitting directly behind him. The woman in the aisle seat was a rather attractive businesswoman wearing a brown business suit and black nylons. She was drinking whiskey sours and talking up red clover isoflavones to her neighbor in the center seat, a younger woman who seemed to be her subordinate.

He didn't like either one. The assistant was too young, and the executive too nylon-stockings-and-whiskey-ish.

A woman in the next row back checked *him* out. However, Harry found her necklaces gaudy. He smiled his accustomed platonic smile and looked away.

Two rows back, though ...

Something about the woman in 31C caught his imagination. Maybe it was the purplish tinge to her eyelids. Harry had always idealized purple-tinged eyelids. She had beautiful long black hair too, and wore a fall-toned flowery dress that gestured in the hippie direction, but with more sophistication. When she looked up as he passed, Harry felt a definite hint of connection.

But how old was she? Late twenties? Far too young for a serious relationship. He should just forget about it.

Though, if he meant to imitate Largo, he shouldn't think about relationships. He should just think about sex.

Harry stepped into a vacant restroom and attempted to frame seduction as a possibly wholesome step forward in his psychological life. It took a while. Once he'd made up his mind, he took a further moment to strategize. It struck him that woman in 31C had been reading a book. He could glance at it over her shoulder and make a friendly comment. That would start a dialogue, and he'd take it from there.

However, when he saw *what* she was reading he hurried past, horrified. *The Emu Oil 9 Day Miracle Cure*.

Harry didn't have much experience in the art of seduction, but he sensed intuitively that if you told a woman she was a complete idiot it wouldn't start things off on the right foot.

She had such creamy white skin, though. Her hair was draped over her right shoulder, and when he passed he saw soft black hairs on the nape of her neck.

Back in his seat, Harry decided the woman's beauty was more too formed, too inhabited for someone in her twenties. She had to be early thirties, more appropriately within his range. This realization lowered his resistance.

And he reflected on the mysterious way that sincere belief in holistic medicine brought out beauty in a woman. He considered various dreamy herbalists he'd felt attracted to, the acupuncturists whose subtle intellectuality had intrigued him, the energy healers whose floating spirituality took his breath away. What was it about them?

Yet, though he found such women beautiful, he couldn't possibly date them. If he tried, he'd pull a Gabriel: start an argument and torpedo the whole thing. So generally he didn't try.

He set off on another trip to the restroom, worrying halfway through that 31C would categorize him as an old guy with prostrate trouble. But she was too engrossed in the moronic book to notice him at all, drawing an index finger down the page and muttering to herself as if she wanted to memorize an important moronic passage.

The plane gave a lurch on Harry's second return trip from the restroom and threw him into a vacant seat.

When the captain's came on overhead and asked the passengers to remain seated until they landed, a nearby voice said, "That one's empty. You could stay there."

It was a woman in the center seat. Harry smiled without looking at her. His first girlfriend in Santa Cruz had drummed it into him that one must never sexually objectify a woman by looking her over. But then he recollected that he was on a mission to become a quack in all dimensions, and that he should therefore take "What would Largo do?" as his mantra. Largo took advantage of every opportunity for seduction.

The seats were very close together it was next to impossible to look at the woman beside putting his mouth in her ear. After some consideration, Harry shifted himself as far as he could toward the aisle, then turned and pretended to look out the window.

She was an elegantly dressed woman, in her early forties, with a well-put-together face, coiffed blond hair, and tasteful earrings. Something about her expression struck him as intelligent. The soul of Largo must have channeled

itself through his being at that moment, for he heard himself speak to her. "Are you here for the Natural Products Expo?" he said.

"Oh God, no," she said. "I'm a scientist. Solid state physics."

A female scientist ... it might be promising. "But if you're not going, then how do you know about it?"

"Because I got my ear talked off about it by my neighbor on the first leg of the trip. Are you going?"

What a relief to find someone he could be honest with. "Yes, but actually, I don't believe in natural medicine either. I practiced alternative medicine for many years, as an M.D. I've lost faith, though. These days, I'm really mostly an opponent of alternative medicine."

"Really! That's so interesting. I'm always hearing about doctors going the other way. You know, getting into alternative medicine. What happened to change your mind?"

"No one thing, really. Cumulative experience. Mostly, though, I suppose it's what I learned from studying double-blind placebo-controlled studies. It turns out that in medicine it's impossible to determine whether a treatment works just by trying it. You have to use objective methods, or all you see are confounding factors. The placebo effect, expectation bias, that sort of thing. Alternative medicine is *built* on confounding factors."

"Amen, brother," she said. Then she touched his shoulder and added, "I only mean that as an expression. I don't believe in God."

"There's definitely no double-blind studies about God," he said.

"I'm so glad to meet another skeptic! Isn't it awful how belief is on the rise? My veterinarian wanted to give my cat acupuncture. And my local hospital has a 'Wellness Clinic.' Everyone seems to believe in alternative medicine these days. Along with astrology, the occult and psychic powers. And religion. There's Christians everywhere you look. I read a poll that says more Americans believe in Satan than in evolution ... Though I'm making an assumption. I didn't ask where you stand on all that."

"You made a correct assumption," he said. "I'm not a Christian."

She leaned over and whispered into his ear. "Don't say that so loud. We might get lynched or something." She leaned back, and, in a normal tone, added, "I'm an atheist through and through. I think religious belief is the worst thing in the world. Don't you agree?"

He didn't agree. True, he no longer embraced spirituality the way he had for several years after the Home of the Spirit commune, but he didn't entirely reject it either. "Yes and no," he said. "If you take religion as poetry, much of it is quite beautiful."

"Well, I'm not so sure about poetry either. People have a hard enough time accepting the facts. Poetry doesn't help. They need more science. I sometimes think that in an ideal world the authorities would ban poetry."

Ban poetry? His enthusiasm for this woman was fading fast. "What about music?"

"Ban popular music for sure. Some classical music is OK. Not Beethoven, though. Or Schubert. They're as bad as poetry -- too sentimental. Mozart's fine. It helps the brain develop. People need to develop their brains, so they can separate fact from fantasy."

"Do you think everything has to relate to facts?"

"Facts are real. And they're beautiful enough without having to make up any ridiculous fantasies. The distribution of stars in the galaxy. The crystalline arrangement of the atoms in a silicon chip. Even the laws of economics are fascinating."

As she expounded further paeans to the objective, Harry found himself casting furtive glances ahead toward the woman with the purple-tinged eyelids, from whom radiant beams of faith emanated throughout the nearby cabin. He didn't believe anymore, but he still loved the beauty of belief. This solid-state physicist lived in soulless, rigid world, all rectangular rebar. He could hardly listen to her talk.

When she said she had nothing on her agenda that night, and wouldn't at all mind going out for a drink when they landed, he made a clumsy excuse about marriage and why he wasn't wearing a ring, and lurched back to his seat. The woman in 31C smiled up at him as he passed. He smiled back, utterly charmed.

After the plane landed, Harry fussed around in the terminal until she passed him. He followed her to baggage claim, and when she came to a halt at the carousel he sidled beside her. Unfortunately, the spirit of Largo refused to channel itself through his mouth and he couldn't think of anything to say. When her first bag came, he almost lifted it off for her and then reflected that it would be rather inappropriate since they'd not yet spoken to each other. He did catch the name on the tag, though: Melanie Karnitine. Funny. Like carnitine, the supplement.

Melanie worked her way further along to pick up a second bag. Harry moved to follow her, then saw his own bags trundling down the ramp. By the time he'd wrestled off both his suitcases, Melanie had gone.

Seduction

It was already eight o'clock by the time Harry stepped out of the cab at the entrance to the convention Hilton. He peered through the lobby windows and saw hordes of people networking in little knots. Many of the men sported ponytails and pastel suits, but not the sports supplements retailers, who bulged like bodyguards in pinstripes and wore buzzcuts, nor the chiropractors, who had learned that the path to respectability is paved in gray silk. The female supervisors and entrepreneurs wore brown business suits, and their underlings wore breast-filled blouses designed to attract floaters to the booths. These underlings were already practicing their attractive skills, especially on the men with ponytails.

In the far past, Harry had waded eagerly into crowds like this, eager to greet old friends and catch up on the alternative medicine news. More recently, the level of pseudoscience and dishonesty at these conventions had begun to bother him, and he'd become standoffish. Today, though, he realized with some bitterness that he could no longer set himself above the others. He was a PTB now, a conscious quack. He ought to sally forth with a breezy hail-quack-well-met.

The thought nauseated him, and he hurried toward the check-in desk with his head down. He didn't look up until he reached the end of the line, and found Melanie directly before him, willowy and radiant.

He felt mute and dumbfounded, and had to work hard to come out with anything at all. "So what brings you to the Expo?" he asked. Not brilliant, but serviceable.

She turned around and met his eyes with a less guarded look than she would have given a total stranger, but guarded nonetheless. "I own a natural food store in a little town called Felton. I'm shopping for new products. How about you?"

He loved her voice at first sight. "The natural food store in Felton! I know that place. With the river out back, and all those redwoods. It's like a picture postcard."

"Thank you," she said, and then wrinkled her forehead. "Wait a sec ... you're not Holistic Harry, are you?"

He felt the first slight rush of celebrity-energy. "Guilty as charged," he said.

"How exciting." She brushed back a strand of long black hair, and gracefully held out her hand.

He shook it. Her palm was warm, even hot.

"I've heard about you forever," she said. "I always wanted to make an appointment to see you. Only, I go to Dr. Tinsdale, and he'd be hurt if I switched. Do you know him?"

Mark Tinsdale practiced Framework Chiropractic, an impressive treatment approach that seamlessly blended modern pseudoscience with ancient con-artistry. "Mark's a fine chiropractor," Harry said. "I'm sure he's treating you well."

A position opened at the front desk and Melanie carried her bags toward it. Another position opened up, and Harry stepped forward too.

The clerk lighted up at the mention of his name. "Harry Boullard? Author of *The Herbal Self-care Bible*?"

"That's me," Harry said.

Melanie's voice traveled coolly over the granite countertop. "He wrote *Nutrition for the Soul*, too."

Two fans pulled down twice as much celebrity energy as one. Harry felt larger and more colorful. His mind filled with quotable profundities. Usually, he fought to retain his self-identity against the inflationary effects of stardom, but now he remembered what Largo had once told him, that fame worked like a pheromone, and allowed his pseudo-self to swell.

Harry's clerk could work quickly while he gushed, a rare talent, and he completed Harry's check-in before Melanie's clerk had even begun to program her plastic room key. Harry's mind cast about for an excuse to delay going up to his room, and found it in a nearby poster of the next morning's events. He bent over the Plexiglas stand and pretended to scan the titles with interest.

Actually, the titles caused him physical pain. Speakers at NPEXPO had to pass a rigorous peer-review conducted by the convention's biggest advertisers, and most of the scheduled seminars were transparent infomercials.

Then Harry remembered that he'd promised Ashley to give a lecture on quackbuster evasion, and he was searching the listings for an empty timeslot when he spied Melanie's long black hair approaching.

"Which of these lectures do you think you might want go to?" he asked.

She leaned in close, and he got an intoxicating waft of female body. "I don't know. There's so much to learn." She pointed to a lecture on Amazonian herbs. "This one sounds interesting."

"That's my old friend Tommy Nagler. He spends all his time in South America. He's a real sweetheart." So much the sweetheart, in fact, that he believed everything he heard. "I'm going to give a lecture too. It's not scheduled. I'm sure Mel will fit me in, though."

Mel Orick was the wealthy entrepreneur who hosted the NPEXPO events, and the founder of New Knowledge, Inc. Harry knew that his casual use of Mel's first name would impress Melanie. As soon as he'd said the words, though, he felt embarrassed for having taken such a cheap shot.

Cheap but effective. She touched his forearm and said, "I love your book on bodywork, *The Healing Arts of the Hand*. It's so inspiring."

Of all the possible ways to flatter him, she'd picked the one that would work best. He'd put all of his deepest alternative medicine idealism into that book, and his best writing efforts. Not that he agreed anymore with anything it said.

"I'm so glad you liked that one," he said. "Where did you find it?"

"At a garage sale." Hastily, she added, "Right next to *Anna Karenina*. It was a great garage sale."

Nice save. He tapped his finger against another title. "Are you interested in Chinese herbs? My old friend Professor Lam Chang is giving this lecture. You might get new ideas for your store."

"Chinese herbs? Are they so different from other herbs? I don't know much about them."

"Chinese medicine is a whole universe of its own. Western herbs are used in the same way as western drugs. They treat symptoms. Chinese herbs treat the whole body."

She smiled up at him. "Thanks for the tip. I think I'll go."

"I think you'll like it." He thought about what to say next; he paused, he agonized, and then he came out with the intensely original: "Do you want to meet for breakfast tomorrow?"

She didn't hesitate, because, Harry guessed, if she had, that would signify the beginning of an affair. She crossed the line so lightly that she could plausibly pretend there hadn't been any line to cross. "I'd love to," she said.

Pumping Iron

The next morning, Harry lay awake in bed and wondered what the hell he thought he was doing. He didn't have affairs. He didn't seduce women. He didn't play off his celebrity. And he certainly didn't present a false persona to manipulate people's feelings. That wasn't him.

Oh no? Then how do you describe what you do all day in your clinic?

Harry's ever-argumentative mind had a point. But, he argued back, when I put on a persona at work, or manipulate anyone, it's for the purpose of healing, not my own personal benefit.

Would you keep on doing it if you didn't get paid?

He didn't have any good answer to that.

Nonetheless, sometime later, he found his thoughts drifting toward the proper outfit for a male health guru. After due consideration, he settled on a maroon dress shirt and black cotton pants, color-linked with a black silk tie and maroon socks. He examined himself in the mirror, and concluded that for optimum balance of wisdom and authority he also needed a natural-fabric sweater. Fortunately he'd brought one, all cotton and linen, in maroon-harmonious tones.

When he put on the sweater, though, Harry thought he detected a hint of floweriness in its abstract design, and doubted whether the effect was sufficiently masculine. He wished he had someone to advise him, perhaps his daughter, or Mrs. Bates. He removed the sweater, put it on again, took it off, and decided on a black silk jacket instead.

He slipped on his Danish Eccos, sprinkled a bit of water over his curly hair to encourage the curls, and wondered where to pin on his conference badge. He'd prefer not to wear it at all; it felt demeaning. However, he did need to bring it along if he wanted to get into the Expo, so he pinned it for safekeeping on the inside of his jacket, showing only a small hint of metal bar.

He had only one companion on the elevator ride down, a slim man about his own age, with a salesman's smile and the words "pumping iron" written across the bottom of his conference badge. Obviously a chiropractor. In chiropractic parlance, "pumping iron" was a code word for a torrid style of practice that could achieve a seven-figure income. The top iron pumpers earned two million dollars a year, running a dozen tables at once, spending no more than ninety seconds per patient, and using massage chairs and ultrasound and iontophoresis to rack up insurance charges. For those few iron pumpers in need of a supporting rationalization, their practice management gurus had one all ready: "You can feel good about it. The more people you see, the more people you know are being helped."

In the past, Harry had always placed pumping-iron chiropractors in the lowest circles of PTBdom. The chiropractors he respected approached their work as a hands-on healing art, and spent twenty or thirty minutes with each patient. Pumping iron wasn't holistic medicine -- it was industrial-scale quackery. But Harry remembered that he too was now a quack, and had no business judging anyone else for being one as well. "So what brings you to NPEXPO?" he asked.

The chiropractor replied with obvious caution. "Several industry groups are giving a presentation on incorporating herbs and supplements into a chiropractic practice. I'm here to learn."

"Aha! Pumping supplements. Hey, I have an idea. If you recommend iron supplements, I guess you really are pumping iron."

The chiropractor drew a long index finger along the corner of his mouth. "You could put it that way. Are you a chiropractor too?"

Harry remembered that he didn't have his badge on. No wonder the guy was being careful. "No, I'm a holistic M.D." The next words burst out in a kind of lumpish ecstasy. "I pump supplements. Two hundred dollars worth per patient month. Pump those dietary supplements in so fast they'll need a stomach pump."

After two decades of agonizing sincerity, it felt marvelous to talk like this. The chiropractor burst out laughing, and Harry joined in. The two were still laughing, Harry a bit hysterically, when the elevator doors opened. He saw Melanie just ahead, once again examining the display of the day's events.

She seemed even more beautiful this morning, and Harry wondered whether she'd dressed up for him too. She wore a white, tight-fitting short-sleeve cotton blouse with vertical ridges, flaring slightly at the waist to expose a bit of midriff, and beneath that a full length crepe skirt in orange, yellow and red fall tones. Between the cascades of her long

black hair, a topaz set in filigreed silver hung from a silver necklace against the smooth, pale skin of her neck. She wore sandals without socks, and her toenails were painted a subtle shade of red.

Utterly beautiful. And she wasn't a protégé or a patient -- he could desire her to his heart's content.

"Well, hello Melanie," he said. "Sleep well? Are you hungry?"

She responded with a serious, perceptive look that made him nervous. Gradually, though, the penetrating expression ripened into a smile, much the way warm red patches bloom out in August on a sun-drenched green bell pepper. "Starving," she said. "Do you know anywhere to go to eat? I mean, other than sweet things? I don't like Continental breakfasts."

"You've never stayed at the Hilton before?"

"No," she said. "I'm splurging this year."

"Well you're in luck. They bring in a marvelous natural food chef for these conferences. You'll love it."

He'd nearly placed his arm through hers to escort her along when he realized that the natural gesture would make her see him as a sweet older man. He didn't want to place himself in that familiar platonic position.

His next impulse was still more inappropriate: to take her in his arms and sweep her mouth with a kiss. Luckily, a Japanese family traipsed by in dripping bathing suits and towels, and the fragrant odor of chlorine restored him to his senses. He abandoned the impulse but kept one of its gestures: he placed a hand between her shoulder blades, but instead of guiding her toward his lips, gently directed her toward the spread of natural food in the adjacent breakfast room.

He gestured with both arms toward the banquet table, as if he'd created it, Prospero-like, just for her.

It was a bit more than a continental breakfast. The table was a cornucopia of natural food: whole grain blueberry scones, apple muffins, almond milk, bulging toasted mochi squares, fresh mango juice, vanilla soy milk, organic pineapple, quinoa cereal and an air-pot that pumped steaming Peruvian maté tea. Melanie didn't know how to work the air-pot, but Harry pushed down expertly on the black plastic circle set into the black plastic top, and filled a cup for her.

They walked together to the only empty table, a circular affair covered with white linen and set for at least eight. Now that they had nothing to do but look at each other, Harry felt awkward and nervous, and almost asked her tell him her symptoms. Nor would it do to follow his next spontaneous impulse and say that she reminded him of his daughter.

He felt newfound sympathy for Gabriel and all his failures -- this seduction business wasn't so easy.

In fact, though, Melanie didn't remind him of Emily at all. Now that he saw her in the morning light, he sensed a subtle maturity, and revised her age upward to thirty-five. A youthful, perfectly lovely thirty-five. She was only thirteen years younger than he was, and more than ten years older than Emily. Not at all too young for him.

The silence had become embarrassing by the time he came out with anything at all say. "So did you do well here last year?"

"Pretty well. I met some amazing people."

"Who?"

Her face lit up as she remembered. "There was this guy who sells water that comes from a cave filled with quartz crystals ..."

"Oh I know him! Ultra -water he calls it."

"Did he tell you about...?"

"The Native American healer who was lost in the caves?"

"Yeah, that one." She laughed. "The healer's essence is in each molecule of the water. Now that's going too far, even for me."

"You could call it homeopathic cannibalism," Harry said, glad to have found his wit again.

She gave a wonderfully pure, clear laugh.

"Anyone else?" he asked.

She took a sip of mango juice. "Well, I met someone who says he's the man who brought chai tea to America."

"Was his name Gabriel?"

"Yes. You know him?"

"He's one of my closest friends. He happens to be telling the truth. Gabriel really is the man who brought chai to America."

She hesitated. "He's a bit ..."

"Immature? He rather defines the term 'Peter Pan.' Still, I love him dearly. You know how it is with friends. You love them despite their faults. Or maybe because of their faults."

She gave him another of her penetrating looks, and he felt the room go out of focus behind him, like a photo with low depth of field. "That's a sweet thing to say," she said. "I hope my friends love me that way."

"May I sit, please?"

Annoyed by the interruption, Harry reluctantly lifted his eyes from Melanie, and saw Professor Lam Chang at the far side of the table, carrying a bowl temperately half-filled with oatmeal.

"Of course you can," Harry said. "Melanie, this is Dr. Chang, the expert on Chinese herbs I told you about. I've known him for years -- I've referred quite a few of my patients to him. Chang, this is Melanie Karnitine. She owns a health food store. I told her that Chinese herbs are the next new thing, and said she should go to your lecture."

Chang held the oatmeal bowl before him with both hands, and bowed at Melanie and Harry, as if he were making a gruel offering.

"A natural food store, not a health food store," Melanie said.

"Right, that's what I meant," Harry said.

Professor Chang took a seat on the opposite side of the table, and studied them with alert black eyes.

"It's not really right of me to call Chinese herbs 'the next new thing,'" Harry added, "since they've been around for millennia."

"But they are new here," Chang said. "So it is not wrong to call them next new thing." He methodically spread his napkin in his lap, and bowed at both of them again, over the centerpiece.

Melanie bowed back. "Dr. Boullard here tells me that Chinese herbs are quite different from Western herbs."

Chang, who had lightly touched a spoon, now put both hands under the table. "That is true."

"How are they different? Oh but excuse me. I should go to your lecture, not interrupt your breakfast. Please, go ahead and eat."

"No problem," Dr. Chang said, his hands still out of sight. "I love to talk about Chinese herbs. They treat whole person. They balance body's energy. Western herbs are like western drugs. They treat only symptoms."

Harry cut his scone to butter it, and then decided that a proper holistic guru shouldn't use butter. He ate the half-slices dry and got so much flour stuck on the roof of his mouth he had to drink a whole glass of water to wash it free.

Two more conference attendees arrived at the table, male and female bodybuilders, wearing badges that identified them as representatives of a sports nutrition company. The man's muscles threatened to burst his pinstripe suit. His partner, a woman with bleached blond hair, wore blue and white striped Lycra and had fair-sized muscles herself, but it was her breasts that threatened to burst their bounds. She sized up Melanie as a potential outlet for her products, and launched into a presentation on UltraWhey supplements. Dr. Chang took the opportunity to get in a few spoons of oatmeal.

Harry felt Melanie's hand touch his forearm, soft and warm. "I'm sorry," she said, "but I have to go. You see that woman over there?" She pointed deep into the crowded dining room. "She's one of my suppliers. I told her we'd talk at breakfast."

Harry couldn't see whom she meant, but he heard "woman" instead of "man," and felt bold enough to give Melanie's hand a squeeze goodbye.

After she left, he analyzed his performance, and decided that he hadn't done too badly. His brain had alternatively gone blank or hectic, but he hadn't made any *major* mistakes. And she did seem to like him.

Into NPEXPO

Harry said farewell to Chang and left the breakfast room. Once outside, he followed the long corridor that led to the exhibit hall entrances. He found one door with no queue, and presented his badge to the middle-aged black woman guarding it. She adjusted her glasses and read the words aloud.

“Harry Boullard, MD. Special Guest.” Her eyes moved up to his face. “All right. What makes you so special?”

He wanted to say that he’d helped slaughter all the snakes they’d killed to make the mountains of snake oil they sold here, but he kept it to himself.

“Not so special, anymore,” he said, sadly.

Inside, it was a madhouse as usual. Exhibits stretched out endlessly on a convention floor packed with vendors, buyers, journalists and roving salespeople. Up above, a giant placard hung from the ceiling: “NPEXPO ‘2004: Catch the Wave.” Most of the exhibits were modest fifteen by fifteen foot structures, set out in parallel rows like small streets, but a dozen or so exhibitors had paid for much larger private spaces. These local habitats were staked out by means of multiple prefabricated vertical planes for walls, soaring surfaces for roofs, sensuous music, raised flooring, and brand-proclaiming colors.

Directly before him, Harry saw the mini-world set up by UltraWhey, the product represented by the bodybuilders at breakfast. The UltraWhey booth was an enormous affair, at least 20 standard booths in size, composed of chrome-and-black poles, vast Plexiglas sheets, and a raised hardwood platform that resembled a never-used gym floor. Radial spokes divided the UltraWhey booth into three separate segments.

In one segment, a twelve-foot projection TV displayed a rotating stick-and-ball molecule while a British-toned voice extolled the chemical virtues of UltraWhey and cleverly designed nooks held posters that presented the results of “scientific studies.” The second wedge featured an information desk serviced by several muscular pinstriped sales reps, and a glassed-in room for closing sales. The booth’s architectural design, however, drew the visitor’s eye most forcefully to the third wedge, where two half-naked demonstrators, male and female, displayed the living fruits of UltraWhey consumption.

The woman wore a tight fitting silver costume that resembled a bikini spacesuit, and lofted two substantial silver one-hand barbells. Her male partner wore silver underwear and stood with one foot poised on an enormous iron free weight, which he’d apparently beaten into submission. Both demonstrators wore silver sneakers. Behind them, clear plastic cases of the type used to sell Slurpies or Frappuccino bubbled with brown sludge labeled “Chocolate UltraWhey,” “Mango UltraWhey,” and “Plain UltraWhey.” The latter, Harry knew, tasted much like raw soy powder. Elegantly arranged stacks of blue, green or silver UltraWhey containers ranged around the floor like half-completed brick foundations. High above, a fifteen-foot banner that read “Ultra-Amino Whey for Ultra-Strength” waved in the breeze emitted by a speaker blaring optimistic music.

Harry tried to stretch his newfound quackery to embrace the scene, failed, and reverted to his usual NPEXPO state of simmering frustration. He hurried away into the nearest row of standard sized booths, but found no relief. “Ultra” appeared to be theme of this particular locale: Ultra Crystalline Water, its molecules polarized by laser beams; Ultra Isoflavones, guaranteed to make women more feminine and men free of prostate trouble; Ultra Ginseng, made from the most rare and refined ginseng stock (and selling for such a low price that it probably contained no real ginseng at all); and Ultra Green Tea concentrate, guaranteed to provide “Ultra-Efficient Protection from Ultra-Violet Rays.”

He squeezed through a throng of people watching a live colonic demonstration at the Ultra-Cleanse High Enema booth, dodged a man-sized walking supplement bottle bearing the words, “Ultra-Multi: Vitamins that Move You,” and turned into the next row over, the lane of publishers.

The operant word here was “Miracle.” He came to a display of Melanie’s book, *The Emu Oil 9 Day Miracle Cure*, and after that a rack holding *The Miracle on Herb Street*. Harry hurried away, but came to a halt behind a knot of people browsing through a series of books titled “*Miraculous Cures for _____*”.

He recognized the blaring color scheme of the series as typical for Shelly Publishing, and realized he had to get out of there -- but it was too late. The Editor-in-Chief spotted Harry, and came out from behind the booth to take him by the arm.

"Hey, Harry," he said. "I have another book for you to write."

The summer before, Harry had written them a short volume on the year's big supplement, the herb noni. Without consulting him, Shelly's well-trained editors had added "miracle," "amazing" and "incredible" wherever the laws of grammar permitted, and in a few cases where, strictly speaking, they did not. Harry complained bitterly, but they'd already printed 30,000 copies.

But Harry reminded himself that he'd become a P.T. Barnum himself, and now no longer had the right to feel superior. "A book about what?" he asked.

"Mangosteen juice. It's the next big supplement." He handed Harry a sheaf of literature.

The topmost article claimed mangosteen juice could cure ankylosing spondylitis. It was all Harry could do not to hit the guy, but he behaved decently, and escaped without neither a book contract nor an assault charge.

He decided he couldn't deal with the exhibits anymore and walked over to the one part of NPEXPO that didn't cause him much psychic pain, the row of natural edibles. There wasn't anything particularly healthy about any of these foods, but the booth holders didn't push the health point too far. Mostly, they bragged about the good taste of their products, and with that at least Harry could usually agree, having learned to like this kind of food during his long period of idealistic eating.

He strolled along sampling the wares: various dried exotic fruits, newly discovered grains, fortified soy drinks, and freeze-dried vegetable snacks covered with sea salt. He particularly liked the crispy amaranth/yam/seaweed chips dipped in purple potato/yellow tomato salsa. However, after sampling a bit of fermented black bean fondue, he walked off urgently in search of something neutral to wash it away. When he spied a row of small Dixie cups set out on a counter, each half filled with water and labeled "one ounce," he tossed down three, and settled to a more leisurely swish and swallow of a fourth while he watched the booth-holders chop carrots in deadly earnest.

This, he recognized, was the land of macrobiotics,¹⁶ where all water is weighed and all vegetables are properly sliced. The founder of macrobiotics, Georges Ohsawa, said that the Western diet made all westerners sick and it showed on their faces.¹⁷ But Harry thought it was the macrobiotic practitioners who looked sick. Their complexion reminded him of scrubbed root vegetables. They had protruding cheekbones, the tenting skin of dehydration, and a kind of expressionless rigidity that reminded Harry of early Parkinson's disease.

One of the macros noticed Harry watching, wiped his hands on his apron, and came forward with a stiff smile. "You're Harry Boullard," he said. "We met in Wichita." He extended his hand for Harry to shake. "John Enoch. Do you remember?"

Before he could say anything, a movement caught Harry's eye, and he turned to see his ancient enemy, Vance Holding, coming full tilt around the corner.

Helding among the NPEXPOites

Although Ashley had told him that Helding had been spotted snooping around the Holistic Galleria, Harry still thought of the quackbuster as a purely midwestern phenomenon. He seemed weirdly out of place in the cornucopian chaos of NPEXPO, a grim Lutheran minister peering into the bedrooms of a bordello, face tight-lipped and tense, trailing clouds of righteous anger. Unexpectedly, Harry felt an urge to shake his hand.

Instead, he said, “Dr. Helding, I believe. Scouting for alternative practitioners to persecute?”

Helding pulled up short. He’d lost some weight since Harry last saw him, and his skin had a pasty cast. His badge read “Kyle Patterson.”

Harry saw John Enoch’s angular, anorexic jaw drop, and remembered where he knew the macrobiotic practitioner from: Helding had closed down the Wichita macrobiotic center at the same time he chased Harry out of town. Enoch and he were quackbusted brothers.

Helding started forward again and passed around Enoch’s far side, catching the slight macro’s shoulder and knocking him off balance. Harry heard his own voice shout, “Watch out for this guy,” and vaguely wondered whether he was having some kind of a manic episode. “He’s a quackbuster,” he continued. “Vance Helding. Dr. Vance Helding.”

The floor erupted in commotion. Exhibitors and floorwalkers broke out into an excited babble. For a moment, Harry thought they might tackle Helding, especially when the Ultra-Multi-Vitamins-that-Move-You guy came around the corner and blocked his path. But the health food junkies of natural snack row weren’t up to it, and Helding barreled through them and disappeared.

Enoch caught up with Harry. “Do you think he’s after me? He threw me out of Wichita, you know.”

“I remember. He threw me out too.” Harry put his big arm around the macro, and squeezed a bony shoulder. “I don’t think he’s after you in particular.”

A young, earnest looking man came up to them, wearing a badge that identified him as a professor at Bandler College of Naturopathy.

“Helding was here?” he asked. “Vance Helding, of the American Alliance Against Medical Fraud?”

“That’s him,” Harry said.

“I saw him on *Sixty Minutes*. He’s a real heavy.”

“You saw him on *national TV*?” Harry asked. “I didn’t know he’d gotten that big.”

“On *20/20* too,” Enoch said.

Maybe he should watch TV some time, so he’d know these things. “What did he say? What’s he up to?”

“The usual,” the naturopath said. “That alternative medicine is nothing but quackery, and we should all be thrown in jail for practicing it.”

Well he did have a point there.

“What about ginkgo for Alzheimer’s?” This was another earnest young person, holding a clipboard and wearing a badge that read *Today’s Knowledge: The Daily Newspaper of NPEXPO*. “He has to admit that ginkgo works, at least.”¹⁸

This must be the guy who’d recently interviewed him for a feature on ginkgo, Harry thought.

“No, he doesn’t give an inch, not even on ginkgo,” the naturopathic professor said. “He says herbs are more dangerous than drugs. He says people shouldn’t even take multivitamins.”

“He always did like extreme positions,” Harry said.

“Do you know him?” the journalist asked.

He and Enoch shared a glance and laughed. “Oh, we know him,” Harry said.

“Why do you suppose he’s here?”

“I suppose to learn about new trends in alternative medicine,” Harry said, “so he can find new ways to attack us.”

“You think he’s after someone in particular?”

“I don’t think so. When he wants to nail an individual practitioner, he comes in disguise as a patient.”

Enoch nodded his head. "That's how he got me in Wichita." After he said this, he kept on nodding. He's chewing on an idea, Harry thought. He'll chew on it fifty times before he swallows it, if he's the real macrobiotic practitioner I think he is.

"In disguise as a patient?" the journalist asked. "Really? That's so slimy."

"When you're on his target list, you have to consider every client of yours as a potential undercover agent. He sends them in with hidden tape recorders."

"That's horrifying," a new voice said. "What happened to free speech?"

Harry turned and saw a woman with long black hair. For an instant, he thought she was Melanie, and his heart began to pound, but it was Chelsea Crow, a Native American holistic MD and a close friend of Ashley's.

John Enoch had finished chewing on his idea. "I wonder what it is that sets people like him off. If we knew, couldn't we just avoid pushing his buttons?"

"Why should we?" Chelsea asked. "Why shouldn't we push his buttons as much as we want to?"

Harry and Enoch looked at each other again. "There are a few practical reasons," Harry said. "For one, the conventional medicine establishment is a lot stronger than we are. Until we have more political power, I think it makes sense to avoid the hottest hot buttons, at least. Funny thing is, I had it in mind to give a lecture here on that very topic."

"I want you to give that lecture." It was Linda McRearson, one of the higher-ups in the New Knowledge organization, and a former patient of Harry's. "When? Tomorrow morning?"

He didn't dare. Talk about sticking your neck out. Holding would take it as an act of war.

"What if Holding shows up and takes notes?" Enoch asked. "Then he'll know the strategies we're going to use."

"But of course we wouldn't let him into the lecture," Linda said.

"How would you know?" This was Chelsea. "If he wears disguises, how could you tell?"

In a drawn-out, all-problems-are-solvable voice, Linda replied, "Well ... we could only let in people we know are legitimate."

"Are you going to fingerprint them?" Chelsea asked.

"You have a point. OK, here's an idea. He's probably left the convention now, wouldn't you think, since he's been discovered? It'll take him a while to get in a new disguise. If Harry gives his lecture soon, say in an hour, Holding won't have time to show up. He won't even know its happening."

The hell with it, Harry thought. "That should work. But how will you get the word out on such short notice?"

"We'll print up flyers and have the whole staff distribute them. What do you want to call the lecture?"

"How about 'Red Flags and Hot Buttons: how to avoid medical harassment.'"

"That's perfect." She scribbled down the title. "You know the main lecture hall?" She pointed across the expo floor. "Back in that corner. Show up at five minutes to eleven. OK, I'm off. Anyone who wants to help distribute flyers, come with me."

Several people followed, but a substantial crowd remained behind to ask Harry more questions. He smiled and said they should come to his lecture. He set his watch to beep at ten minutes before the hour. When he turned to leave, he saw Melanie, leaning against a partition and studying him.

"Is that fun, or does it suck?" she asked.

Above Belief

Although the mere sight of long black hair had set his heart pounding a few minutes earlier, Melanie in person didn't have that effect. Harry knew why -- he was now too pumped up with celebrity energy. Public moments separated him from himself. He enjoyed the energy but he hated the disassociation.

"Being the center of attention like that, I mean," she said. "I wouldn't like to be a celebrity.

"I like it and I don't like it," he said. He made an attempt to really feel her presence, and failed. He could only feel himself.

"I saw Vance Holding on TV too," she said. "He loves being a celebrity. He thinks he's God on a mountain."

He saw that she was reaching out toward him, and wished he could respond. He knew from experience, though, that he couldn't make this state go away. The flood would have to subside by itself.

He reached for something appropriate to say. "Doctors always think they're God."

"You're a doctor."

"A renegade one."

Melanie's hands played nervously, one set of fingers climbing the other like a ladder.

"Can I tell you a joke?" he asked.

A pause. "You're feeling pretty hyper, aren't you?"

"After all that excitement, I can't help it."

"If it will help you relax, go ahead, tell me a joke."

Her voice had a soothing quality that made him feel somewhat better.

A joke. He said he would tell a joke. He'd told it a million times, he could do it no matter what his state.

He started walking and she followed alongside. "OK, this guy, you see he's died, and he meets St. Peter at the gate. St. Peter takes him inside and shows him around heaven. After about an eternity of sightseeing, he gets hungry, so he asks St. Peter to take him to heaven's cafeteria. The place is gorgeous, heavenly. There are stacks of fruit everywhere, amazing fruit, fruits he's never seen before. Pastries to die for. Sandwiches with halos. There's a long line, though. But it's not so bad. After all, they have eternity, and besides, the all-harp jazz quartet in the corner is quite good."

She laughed, and he tried without success to tune in to her. He was still riding too high.

"Suddenly," he continued, "up comes this guy in hospital greens. He pushes his way through the line as if he owns the place. He squeezes the fruit. He lifts off the top of the sandwiches to check the lettuce. He dips his finger in the double-chocolate ambrosia.

"Our friend who's just died, this bothers him. He asks St. Peter, 'who's that guy?'

"'Oh, don't worry,' St. Peter replies. 'That's just God. He thinks he's a doctor.'"

She really did have a beautiful laugh, and by now he'd relaxed enough to hear it. He could see the world now too, at least in little snatches. They were leaving Vitamin Alley, and were passing the booths for Vitamin City, Vitamins for Christians, and Vital Vita-Vitamins.

"Not only doctors," she said. "All healers take themselves too seriously." She tapped her fingertips together, but didn't climb one set up the other. "They shouldn't. We all die eventually, no matter what, so they might as well lighten up. That's what I think."

"How can you say that?" he asked. "You run a natural food store. People who eat organic produce will live forever, won't they?"

He shouldn't have said it. He wasn't connected enough to attempt something so conversationally daring. He might have blown it already.

The tone of her voice said that he hadn't blown it. "I know exactly what you mean. That's one thing that bothers me about owning a natural food store. How about eating healthy because you like it, not because it makes you live longer? What matters most are the degrees of freedom in your life, not the number of years."

She came into focus for him as a person who had something to say. Degrees of freedom? Interesting. And it sounded like she too had doubts about her particular alternative medicine career.

He felt an urge to blurt out his entire story, to tell her how he'd come to see his life's work as a fraud and a lie, and that now he didn't know what he should do.

"Look at that," she said. "It's really funny."

She was pointing to a booth with a shimmering electric sign above it that read *Natural Virtual Reality*. A demonstrator wore bulky high-tech goggles and lounged in a recliner, while behind him a huge video screen showed airborne views of the Himalayas. The man in the goggles pointed a finger to his right, and the perspective veered off to the right. When he turned his hands palm outward, the movement stopped. He settled his hands to his lap, and the point-of-view dropped from the sky to a vantage point just inches above the alpine tundra.

"That's hilarious," Harry said. "Natural Virtual Reality?"

"Like genuine phony," she said.

"Or authentic ersatz."

"Wearing a goggle is definitely an inferior way to see the Himalayas," she said. "I once spent two years trekking up there."

They began walking again. "Really? Where?"

"Touring Tibetan monasteries. Sikkim, Bhutan, Nepal."

"Are you a Tibetan Buddhist?"

She shook her head. "No. I respect it, but it's too dry for me."

Emily had said the same thing about Buddhism. "Like offering pure mathematics to a starving person. Your hunger is elsewhere."

"Exactly! But it's not ersatz. Buddhism is *real*. I love that about it. And I love Tibetan monks. They're so sweet."

They'd reached a small door in the wall of the Expo floor, half-hidden by stacks of Astroturf squares. When Harry pushed down the bar and leaned his weight into the door, it moved reluctantly, as if unused to opening. The door closed behind them and they found themselves in a half-lit, silent hotel hallway. After the wildness and noise of the Expo, Harry felt eerily alone with Melanie.

They walked past conference rooms with creative names like "Conference Room A," "Conference Room B," and "The Ambassador's Room." In Conference Room C, they saw a group of young caterers lay out silver service on white linen, their laughter muffled by sound-absorbing curtains.

"What a weird place," she said. "Like something in *The Shining*."

"I agree. Let's get out of here."

They half-ran down the corridor, laughing, toward a door marked "Exit." When Harry pushed it open he expected an alarm to go off. None did.

They came out on a thin sidewalk beside blindingly white cinderblock walls. The air was warm, perhaps eighty. A wide new-asphalt road curved past them toward a concrete barrier, where two security guards stood sentry. Across the road, Harry saw a weedy, empty lot, and felt an urge to go walking in it, but he looked at Melanie's bare feet in her sandals and decided not to make the suggestion.

The sun shone hard on her white blouse and the topaz hanging from her necklace, and she seemed more beautiful than ever.

"What a place," he said. "The world between the worlds."

She pointed down the road in the direction opposite the guards. "I think if we walk around that way we'll end up at the hotel lobby. You have to get back for your lecture, don't you?"

"Soon," he said. "Not yet." Her hand brushed his, and he caught it and gave it a squeeze.

She acknowledged the touch with a half-turn toward him. "My turn to tell a story. OK?"

"I'd love that."

He dropped her hand and they walked along the road together, close enough to occasionally bump shoulders.

"This one's a true story. It happened to me in my early twenties. I don't know why I'm telling it to you, except I think you might like it."

"I'm sure I will," he said.

"We'll see. I had some health problems then, fatigue mostly, and my doctor couldn't help me. So I got into haunting the health food stores. I figured there had to be a cure for me, somewhere. I mean, every problem has a solution, doesn't it? If one person doesn't know the answer, someone else must."

He didn't say anything.

"This one day, I felt pretty bad. I was driving around Boulder, all depressed, when I saw another health food store, one I'd never seen before. It had a poster with colorful pills floating in the air above a Caribbean beach -- you know the one I mean? I still remember what the store was called: 'Abundant Life Health and Diet Products Store.' I stopped and walked in. When the smell hit me -- health food stores have this smell, you know -- I got even more depressed."

"Vitamin B complex and potato bread."

"I call it 'dried wrinkles.' My store doesn't smell like that. Anyway, I walked over to the wall of pamphlets, the way you do in those stores, and looked over them for something new."

"Did you see the pamphlet with the half-starved bald guy on the front? One of the anti-mucous diets, I think."

"Yes, that one." She laughed. "Those pamphlets make it all sound so easy. Medical science has lost sight of nature's healing wisdom. You know. Only, I'd already tried dozens of things that were supposed to work, herbs and supplements, fasting and cleansing, and I still felt exhausted. I didn't see anything new here."

"After a while, the owner came up and asked if I needed help. She was an elderly lady with one of those shiny orange faces you get from drinking too much carrot juice. I told her, no I was fine, but she didn't leave. She hovered around, fiddling with things on the shelf, following me everywhere. I've always looked a bit young for my age, and she probably took me for a teenager. Maybe she was afraid I would shoplift, though I don't know what."

She's taking a lot of risks with me, Harry realized. She's admitting that she has health problems and that she's older than she looks.

It touched him, and he felt a notch closer to his normal self.

"Finally, she annoyed me so much, I decided to leave and go to a spiritual bookstore. I used to go to them a lot too, looking for spiritual healing. When I asked her if she knew any nearby, she looked at me all suspicious. She said, 'Do you mean a Christian spiritual bookstore? Or a *New Age* one?' She said 'New Age' like it was infected."

"Abundant Life.' I get it. You were in a Christian health food store."

"Exactly. It bugged me, so I decided to tease her. I put my hand over a bottle of supplements, and then I did this."

She held her right hand over an imaginary bottle, put the thumb of her other hand over her left nostril, and took a loud in-breath through the right nostril. She switched nostrils and took another loud in-breath.

"Like a yogic breathing exercises," he said. "Pranayama."

"Like nonsense pranayama." Melanie's voice was a controlled giggle. "But I acted really serious. The owner tried not to stare at me. I kept on doing it, bottle after bottle. There was no one else in the store. She walked back to her desk and leafed through piles of product literature to show me she wasn't paying attention. Her curiosity finally got the better of her, and she broke down and asked me what I was doing. I said I believed in homeopathy, and I was getting homeopathic doses of her supplements, if she didn't mind."

"That's hilarious!" Harry said.

"She didn't think so. She looked mad, or scared. But then something changed. She reached across to me with her heart, if you know what I mean, and she said, 'I wonder how I should charge you, then. Should I sniff your checkbook?' We stared at each other for a sec', and then we both burst into giggles. It probably doesn't sound funny, hearing it."

"Oh yes it does," Harry said.

"The part that matters is that we'd gotten way above our politics. We were soul to soul. I just love it when that happens."

They'd come to a stop a while ago, and were standing close to each other. "That's beautiful," he said.

Her eyes were searching his. The bright sunlight made her hair glow and turned the bare skin of her arms to ivory. He wondered whether he'd known her a sufficient number of hours to kiss her. Whether or not he had, his arms were already reaching down and around her. As his left hand passed her ear his watch beeped and she jumped back.

Perfect-pitch Kitsch

"It's the alarm for my talk," he said.
She seemed relieved, the way women often do when intimate matters don't move along as fast as they'd hoped.

"I wish I hadn't promised to give the lecture," he said. "I'd much rather stay here with you."

"That's sweet! But your lecture is important. You have to give it."

She took his hand, and that was a considerable consolation. They hurried along the road hand in hand, around the corner and down the sidewalk. When they came in sight of the convention center entrance, they dropped hands by unspoken consent. They flashed their badges at an entryway guard and worked their way through the Expo floor to the lecture hall.

Dozens of people were milling around the door. Linda McRearson was at the edge of the crowd, looking anxious. She saw Harry and waved.

"Go on ahead," Melanie said. "We'll talk later."

"Do you have a cell phone?"

"No, I don't," she said, and stepped away. "Call me at the hotel at five."

He should have kissed her, but by the time he had the thought, she'd vanished into the crowd.

Linda led Harry into the lecture hall and down the central corridor between two separate groups of brown folding chairs. Despite the short notice, perhaps two hundred people filled the room. A great many tried to speak with Harry, but Linda blocked for him, and took him safely to the front row. He sat in an empty seat beside the naturopath from Bandolier College of Naturopathy, who promptly pitched a class he wanted Harry to teach. Harry listened to the proposal with a few spare neurons as Linda walked on to the lectern, tapped the microphone a couple of times and cleared her throat. An overhead spotlight switched on and Harry could see even from this distance that she'd licked half her lipstick off. She tapped the microphone a couple of times and cleared her throat until the chairs stopped scraping and the audience settled down.

"Thanks for coming to this event at such short notice," she said. Harry caught her eye and nodded supportively. "When we're all gathered here together at NPEXPO, among friends and colleagues, it's easy to think that the whole world is on our side. Unfortunately, that isn't true. We have many powerful enemies. As some of you may have heard, one of these enemies came to NPEXPO today. His name is Dr. Vance Holding. Dr. Holding considers himself a quackbuster. For all I know, he may be in this room right now because he likes to wear disguises. He likes to carry a hidden tape recorder too, I've heard. Dr. Holding are you here?"

The possibility of an infiltrator titillated the audience. In the row behind Harry, a man asked a woman beside him if she were Dr. Holding, and she giggled. When he offered to search her for a tape recorder, she giggled louder. Harry's neighbor, the naturopath from Bandolier, said indignantly, "as if we were criminals."

Linda continued. "Our speaker today knows all about Vance Holding. Five years ago, Holding forced Harry Boullard out of a thriving practice in Wichita Kansas. Although he's an M.D., Harry is a true holistic healer. He was an organic farmer and an herbalist before he decided to go to medical school. Some of you may find this hard to believe, but the experience didn't corrupt him."

The audience tittered again.

"Harry's practice exemplifies what we at New Knowledge like to call integrative medicine. He brings together nature and technology, traditional wisdom and modern science. Not only is he a wonderful doctor for his patients, he's been a steady friend to the alternative community. He teaches classes, he gives public lectures, he writes books, and he testifies on behalf of alternative practitioners when orthodox authorities take him to court. Today, we've asked Harry to give us his insights on how we can protect ourselves against Holding and people like him. Harry, come on up."

Harry had sprung to his feet and reached her side without noticing the intervening steps, already riding the flow of celebrity energy. He nodded to the applauding audience, and looked around for friends. In the third row, he spotted Michael Elmore, the skeletal director of clinical services at Deep Wisdom Clinical Laboratory. Further back, Royce

Largo was chatting up the woman who'd been drinking whiskey sours on the plane. He also saw Ashley Wayland whispering to her neighbor and pointing at Harry. She was probably bragging that she knew him.

He searched for Melanie and finally found her in the last row. She gave him a serene smile. He tried to feel it but he couldn't -- he was fully a public person now and not himself.

He raised his hands and the clapping died down. "I was wondering what I should call today's topic," he said. "Holistic martial arts? Quackbuster Jyu Jiyutsu?"

The audience laughed.

"Really, though, this is a serious subject. Like Linda said, it's easy to feel confident while we're here at NPEXPO, but let's be honest with ourselves: we're second-class citizens. Conventional medicine -- allopathic medicine¹⁹ -- is in charge, and it despises us.

"However, allopathic medicine didn't always run the show. Back in the 19th century, many schools of medicine flourished. Osteopathy, homeopathy, chiropractic and naturopathy competed on an equal footing with allopathic medicine. By the late 1800s, though, allopathic medicine had pulled ahead and become the dominant form of healing. This status was clinched in the early 1900s, when a government commission issued what was called the Flexner report, and made allopathic medicine simply, 'Medicine.'

"Why did allopathic medicine take over? How did it elevate itself from one among many to the sole authority? Not because it was more effective than its competitors. Back in the 1900s, conventional medicine had virtually no effective treatments to offer patients, beside surgery. Effective conventional medicine treatments didn't really appear until World War II. Was it a conspiracy on the part of the American Medical Association? Well, they did their best to conspire."

The audience laughed again.

"As far back as the 1850s, the AMA had become a highly effective professional organization and it lobbied for the advancement of its members with considerable skill. Just like your own professional organizations are lobbying for your profession's advancement. The AMA did a particularly good job at this. But that wasn't the ultimate reason for allopathic medicine's success. The most important factor lies much deeper. By the mid 19th century, the Western scientific tradition had taken its modern shape and was achieving great successes. Allopathic medicine identified itself with Western science. Medical doctors were some of the most prominent social activists against what science saw as the superstitious beliefs of the past. They tried to teach people to be rational, modern, and oriented toward facts.

"The other schools of medicine didn't work this way. In fact, some, such as naturopathy, were intrinsically a reaction *against* science. They sought a more subtle, spiritual form of healing, full of respect for ancient traditions. This approach simply didn't fit in with the way the world was going.

"The early 20th century was the beginning of what one might call scientific triumphalism. People everywhere saw science as the savior of the world, the hope for the future. Around the time of World War Two, medicine began to develop truly effective treatments, such as penicillin. By the 1950s, the public had so much faith in the magic of conventional medicine that all the forms of medicine were teetering on the brink of extinction.

"And then came the great medical and technological disasters, one after the other. Thalidomide caused thousands of children to be born with flippers instead of arms. DDT killed off songbirds. Nuclear testing put strontium-90 in mother's milk. Diethylstilbestrol caused girls to be born with double uteruses -- the so-called DES daughters. Factory workers were found to have been poisoned by exposure to lead, radium and other toxins.

"The public's honeymoon with science and technology ended. People began to suspect that science might not always save, that better living might not be found through chemistry and nuclear power, that technology could be a curse as well as a blessing. The ecology movement was born. At the same time, the natural medicine movement was reborn. People felt there had to be a better way. A gentler, more natural way to heal."

While the audience clapped, Harry thought: and that's where we made our mistake. We assumed that because scientific medicine was imperfect, there had to be an alternative form of medicine that was perfect. It doesn't follow, alas, alas.

"Natural food coops sprouted up around the country, and sold herbs and whole, organic foods. Schools of naturopathy re-opened. Acupuncturists and naturopaths obtained the right to practice state after state. Chiropractic flourished again, homeopathy returned, and osteopathy, which had nearly surrendered its whole soul to conventional medicine, began to emphasize osteopathic manipulation again. All these schools of medicine emphasized spirituality, the wisdom of the past, and the limitations of science. Conventional medicine hates this. Why do you think it does?"

"Because they don't want to lose their monopoly," someone shouted.

"Lose their monopoly?" Harry repeated. "Partly. No one wants to lose a juicy monopoly. But there's another issue that's more important. Conventional medicine sees alternative medicine as a step backward. They regard what we do as the return of ancient superstition. To them, we're cockroaches reappearing in a fumigated house. We try to honor ancient wisdom, but they feel that science has shown the ancients wrong. We try to support nature, while they believe that nature must be conquered. We prefer organic solutions to technological fixes. What we do, how we think,

it all *feels* wrong to conventional physicians. Conventional medicine's attitude toward us may be off-base, but it comes from their idealism much more than their greed."

He had their attention. He'd carried them to a new place, and they were seeing their enemy as possibly well intentioned.

That was a start. Could he take this trust further? Could he bridge the gap, open them up enough so they could really hear the scientific side of the story?

He didn't see how. This wasn't like Melanie's Christian health food store story. Sometimes differing perspectives are compatible, but sometimes they're not. For this audience to truly understand what he could tell them, they'd have to accept that what they did for a living was a fraud. They couldn't possibly accept that. No one could. It was asking too much.

His mouth ran on, animated by the circumstances rather than his convictions, channeling the person the crowd supposed him to be. "So our enemies are more sincere than we tend to give them credit. But that doesn't make them right. This time, history is on *our* side. Alternative medicine is growing stronger. The public wants what we have to offer, and we are providing it to them on an ever-increasing scale. Even physicians are now joining the holistic medicine fold. We are winning, my friends. We are winning."

He was pandering to them. Why? So they'd love him?

The audience cheered. He saw Melanie clap along with the rest of them. He felt alone.

"Although we will win in time, the AMA and the FDA and the pharmaceutical companies are still much more powerful than we are. So at present we have to tread carefully. What I'm going to do now is describe some steps we can take to protect ourselves.

He went on to cover the specific hot buttons that triggered the strongest reaction from conventional medicine -- cancer, HIV and vaccinations -- and how to dance around them. He gave advice for each profession in the alternative spectrum. He told stories, he joked, he became serious again. The audience's energy filled him. His overweight body felt lithe, almost weightless, his mind effortlessly alert. While the talk lasted, he couldn't feel his despair.

Medical Crimes

After he finished the lecture, he fielded questions for half an hour, and then said he had to go. However, when he tried to leave, he discovered that a line had already formed for private questions. Melanie came up a dozen feet away, caught his eye and mimed a phone call. He smiled and nodded, though in his current state he couldn't feel anything so personal as a possible relationship.

Many of the questions boiled down to requests for medical advice, and it was a full additional half-hour before Harry managed to escape the lecture room into the brightly anonymous fluorescent lights of the Expo. He stood around with his hands in his pockets and wondered whether he was hungry. He was too elevated to know.

Maybe he needed a massage. Or an hour or two with Gabriel at his chai booth. Gabriel would bring him back down to earth, or at least down to the level of flirting with twenty-three-year-old women.

He fished around in his jacket pockets and found the conference book, a glossy eighty-page listing of booths and participants. He searched through it for Bengali Chai, couldn't find it, and then remembered that Gabriel always failed to sign up for these conferences until the last second. Bengali Chai never made the book.

He'd be in the addendum, though. Harry searched his pockets. Where was the damn thing? He knew he'd put it somewhere, a three-page set of stapled sheets that he clearly remembered folding in quarters.

A familiar voice boomed out, "So, my friend, how's the quackery business going?"

Harry cringed. Largo had recently taken to greeting Harry this way in public. Harry hated it. What if someone overheard?

He turned and saw the chiseled and charming face of his friend, ruddy and handsome as usual, in his typical white sport coat, powder blue shirt, white pants and white shoes.

"How many times have I told you ..." Harry said.

Largo held out his arms in self-forgiven innocence. It was an effective, disarming gesture, the one he'd used back in high school the morning after he'd slept with Teri Kane.

A female voice said, "The quackery business? That's an interesting expression."

So someone *had* overheard.

Someone wearing a badge that read, "Time Magazine."

Oh shit.

She was a woman in her late twenties, rather beautiful in a tightly wound way. From the expression on her face, Harry knew that she knew that she'd heard something she hadn't been meant to hear, and that she wouldn't let go easily.

Harry hardly had time to panic before Largo took the matter in hand, and explained that he'd meant the expression ironically. "The *quackery business*. Sigh. That's how Harry's enemies describe his work. He's the sincerest, most dedicated man in the world, and they want to smear his reputation. It just isn't fair. It just isn't right. I like to tease him about it, but it's really a tragedy."

The reporter fell for this clever spin on "so how's the quackery business going?" but now she was interested in the subject from the opposite angle. "So who calls him a quack, and why? I'd love to know more about it."

Largo did something with his body language that Harry recognized but couldn't possibly imitate. It said, "I'm a rich and sophisticated man, not given to sudden infatuations but your beauty has overwhelmed me. I'm confused and disturbed. I'm half in love with you. I'm ready to drop everything to know you." At the same time, he signaled that he was ready to withdraw his infatuation and retreat back into his private dignity (and riches and sophistication, etc.) if she found his interest unwelcome. It was thus an opportunity open only for a moment, and if she failed to respond to it immediately she'd lose it forever.

He stepped closer, awkwardly, off-balance, and her expression became less professional.

"My dear Clarissa," Largo said, reading the name off her tag. "In your considerable experience as a reporter, I'm sure you've noticed that authorities are sometimes more interested in protecting themselves than in telling the strict truth. People in government, perhaps? I can see you know what I mean. But perhaps you've assumed that medical authorities are more impartial than politicians. That they're only focused on helping their patients. Now, I never like to

disillusion anyone, but in the truth is, my dear, that the medical industrial complex is even more self-serving than the military industrial complex. I'm referring to the FDA, the AMA, and the pharmaceutical companies. They see Harry as a threat to their monopoly. They don't admit this, of course. They pretend that they take exception to his work only because the treatments he uses haven't been proven effective in double-blind studies. But that's highly disingenuous. Do you know that only 10% of conventional medical therapies have been proven effective? It's a real case of the pot calling the kettle black."

"That 10% is an outdated figure, Royce," Harry said. "All drugs approved since the '70s have pretty solid evidence for their primary uses."

"See what I mean?" Largo said. He put an arm around Harry. "He even defends conventional medicine."

"I defend it where it deserves to be defended," Harry said. "However, I agree with Dr. Largo that conventional medicine has many areas where its evidence is pretty weak. For example, once a drug has been FDA approved for one purpose, it can be used for any other purpose a doctor wants. Most of these so-called 'off-label' uses aren't scientifically supported at all."

"Is that so?" the reporter said, scribbling it down.

"Absolutely," Largo said. "However, what should really get your lovely dander up is back surgery."

"Back surgery?"

"Absolutely. Your readers may be interested to know that there's not an ounce of evidence to show that back surgery helps back pain."

"My sister got back surgery," she said, "and you're right, she didn't get better."

"You see?" Royce said, and took the reporter gently by the arm. "And back surgery isn't like one of Harry's harmless little herbs. The surgeon dives in and messes around with the patient's body, without any proof that it will help her."

While the reporter processed this odd double entendre, Harry looked at his friend with new interest. Largo actually seemed angry. Sincerely, genuinely angry. He didn't know Largo had it in him.

"In my opinion," Royce said, "fusing someone's vertebrae together without knowing that it works, why, that's criminal. It should be illegal. People should go to jail for it. Or here's another outrageous example: estrogen. There never was any real evidence that estrogen therapy prevents heart disease, but conventional medicine used to give it out like candy."

In a quiet voice, because Largo was standing only a foot from her mouth, the reporter asked, "What do you mean there never was a shred of evidence? We had a cover story on hormone replacement therapy only a few months ago. Sure, the Women's Health Initiative study changed things, but up until then doctors were acting on the best evidence they had, weren't they?"

"Dr. Largo is right. There never was anything beyond circumstantial evidence for estrogen," Harry said. "The case was entirely based on observational studies and other indirect evidence."²⁰

"And if you're going to give a treatment to millions of healthy women," Largo said, "wouldn't you agree that you need the *highest* standards of evidence, not the lowest. In my opinion, hormone replacement therapy was a form of criminal quackery, a medical conspiracy that killed who knows how many women. And, even now, the OB/GYNs are still prescribing it. No there's a story for you. Criminal quackery in conventional medicine."

"That's really interesting," the reporter breathed.

Largo had his arm around her now, and Harry could hear the unspoken, "Stick around with me, and you'll learn all kinds of interesting things."

Apparently, though, Largo had been seducing only out of habit because when the Time Magazine reporter visibly melted, he turned businesslike again, and said, "well, see you again some time." He took Harry's shoulder and steered him away.

"How did you know all that about estrogen?" Harry asked, when they'd moved far enough away to be out of earshot. "You're not usually so erudite."

"A friend of yours told me about it. She was one of the people behind the Women's Health Initiative. She'd been trying to get someone to do a double-blind study on hormone replacement therapy for years."

"What friend of mine?"

"Geraldine Steinberg."

"Oh, yes. She would know."

Royce had been leading them toward one of the convention floor's walls, and now they'd reached a plywood barricade blocking their way to a half-open door. He slid back the plywood, stepped delicately over a tarp spattered with dry paint, and peered through the opening. "The coast is clear. Let's go." He vanished through the opening.

Harry followed, and found himself in a utility corridor lined with boxes, plastic crates and metal racks. Largo was already walking rapidly along the corridor, and Harry hurried to catch up. "When did you last talk to Geraldine?"

"The other day," Royce said. "By the way, that was a great lecture. If I didn't know you better, I would have sworn you think alternative medicine is worth a shit."

"Well I used to think it was worth two shits, not very long ago," Harry said.

"No you didn't. You quit believing in alternative medicine years ago. You were just too sincere to admit it to yourself. When you called last week to tell me about that calcium supplement stunt you pulled with your patient, I said to myself, well, at last, Harry's finally getting real. You're one of the brightest guys I know. How could you possibly have believed all that idiotic stuff all those years? Yin and yang, Qi and Xue, the twelve partridges in the five pear trees? Now where's the damn room?"

They'd left the industrial corridors behind, and were now wandering through a region of somber green-wallpapered hallways populated by doors marked with incomprehensible acronyms. "A.P.B.T. room." "Sos. Dep. Condim. Clipmot." "13L13."

"I believed because I wanted to believe," Harry said. "I *still* wish it were true. What if all faith stands together, and once you lose some of it, you lose it all?"

"You always did think too much, Harry. What's that saying? 'You can get more stinking from thinking than you can from drinking.'"

"No, seriously, I met a female scientist on the plane who told me that poetry should be banned. She wanted to go out drinking with me, but I lied and said I was married."

"Was she good-looking?"

"Yes, maybe, I guess so."

"You screwed up. When a woman doesn't have anything else to believe in, Harry, she puts her faith in orgasms. Oh, this is better."

Welcoming brass nameplates had begun to appear on doors, indicating conference spaces, meeting rooms and lecture halls. "It should be around this corner," Largo said. "OK, here we are." He pushed open a door labeled "Conference Room C," and Harry followed him in.

This must be the room he'd passed when he went walking with Melanie, the room with the caterers. The caterers were gone now, but they'd left behind a banquet table loaded with covered platters that smelled of hot food. Behind them, a brass and stainless steel espresso machine gleamed fetchingly. A few feet over, there was a dining table elegantly set for four, with a jug of ice water and a bouquet of flowers placed between the settings. The walls were elegantly done up in a dark-blue equivalent of the corridor's green industrial wallpaper, with the addition of little brown dots that harmonized with the holes in the acoustic ceiling tiles. In the far corner, which was not all that far, an easel held large sheets of blank white paper. The remainder of the room was bare except for a few small stands and extra chairs.

"You want some cappuccino?" Largo asked. "Let's see if I can figure out how to run this thing."

"Sure. Though I wish you'd tell me what this is all about."

Largo bent to fiddle with the espresso machine. When a jet of steam came out, he pulled away his fingers with a jerk and put them to his mouth.

"Why am I here, Royce? Please tell me."

Largo attempted the espresso machine again, and this time pulled his hand away in time.

"I've brought you here for a criminal conspiracy." He looked at his watch. "Which begins in a couple of minutes. Now go sit down."

Section 5. Geraldine

A Conspiracy of PTBs

Harry took a chair on the far side of the dining table, facing Largo, and drummed his hands on the linen tablecloth. The door opened a crack and a head peeked in. It was Michael Elmore, the director of Deep Wisdom Clinical Laboratory, the stiff blond hairs of his buzz-cut glowing in the light of a fluttering fluorescent behind him.

"This is the place," Largo said. "Come on in."

Michael slipped his thin body through the crack and closed the door behind him. "Close call," he said, nodding to Harry. "Your protégé or whatever, Ashley Wayland, she saw you walking this way with Largo, and wanted to come along. I told her we were having a private investors meeting for a new medical information company."

"Quick thinking," Largo said. "Though what if she wants to join?" He'd finally managed to make a cup of cappuccino, and was now sloshing it randomly with a white-handled silver spoon.

"I said the investment opportunity was limited at present to the founders, but we'd take applications for junior partners later. Where's Geraldine?"

"She's coming," Largo said.

Michael dropped himself in a chair, and drew his knees up in his lap, making a credible imitation, Harry thought, of the letter "N" in mirror image. Michael folded his long, thin arms around his legs and looked acutely uncomfortable.

There'd been a brain-lag, but now Harry reacted. "Geraldine? You don't mean ..."

Largo handed Harry his cappuccino. "Want one too, Michael?" The lab director shook his head.

The door opened again, and in walked Geraldine Steinberg.

Geraldine Steinberg, M.D. New Age Healer and Wise Woman. She of Naropa and Oprah, of fire-walking and macrobiotics and natural hormones, of menstrual spirituality and menopausal spirituality.

She was dressed modestly, like a psychotherapist, in a long paisley dress, black cotton stockings, black sweater and non-descript black-rimmed glasses. She had hair of middle-length, straight, attractive in a respectable sort of way. There was nothing about her designed to arouse, but Harry felt his old erotic ache.

He hadn't seen Geraldine for half a decade, but he'd never stopped longing for her. He'd longed for her ever since high school. They'd traveled across country together, and never made love, lived at the Home of the Spirit Commune together, never made love, and crossed paths endlessly in their careers and never made love. He stood up and hooked his thumbs in his pockets, glad for the table between them.

She put her hands on her hips, echoing his thumbs, and looked at him with more layers of irony than he could count.

"Well, Holistic Harry," she said. "How long has it been since we last met face to face?"

Didn't she remember? Was it possible she'd forgotten?

Five years earlier, Harry had been visiting Portland, Oregon, where she'd lived at the time. They'd met for lunch in a local whole foods café. Harry had sensed some new tension, some disturbance in their long friendship that he couldn't at first identify. Its essence became clear when he mentioned a friend they'd had in common, a lawyer who'd gone through a midlife crisis and left a high-paid, low-integrity corporate law firm to work for the Environmental Defense Fund.

"That's charming," Geraldine said. "Extremely noble. You know what I'd do if I were an environmental lawyer?"

"What?" He smiled at the thought of the endless idealism they'd shared in their commune days, and imagined Geraldine taking on whole industries.

"Why, I'd defend polluting companies, of course. That's where the money is."

It brought him up sharp.

"But I'm only a Wise Woman," she added, "not a lawyer. So the best I can do is rip off my followers."

He'd never heard her say anything so directly cynical. Ever since the days of Sardar's cow demonstration on the commune, Geraldine had espoused a form of spirituality less pure than Harry's own style, but this statement passed all bounds. Geraldine, he realized, had fallen off the path.

He'd tried to hide his judgmental feelings, but she saw them anyway, and it pissed her off. She'd refused to meet with him ever since, or even talk to him for more than a few minutes on the phone.

And she didn't remember?

"We last met five years ago in Portland," he said. "We talked about environmental law."

"Oh, that." She bent her head down first on the right then the left, a picture of contrition. "I'm sorry for baiting you."

She squeezed her eyebrows together and sounded very much sorry. She walked around the table, held him by the shoulders, said he was a dear friend, and gave him a hug that crushed both her breasts against his chest.

An instant later, she released him and became someone different. In a voice like a spoiled Greta Garbo, she said, "God, I'm tired. Do we have stimulants?"

She'd always been like this, he remembered, lived in modes instead of moods, held up alternate personas like masks on a stick.

"Maté?" Largo suggested, gesturing graciously. "Guarana? Ginseng with suma and eleuthero?"

"Be a good boy and shut up," she said. "You know what I mean. Coffee. There's no real coffee in this whole damn Expo. Just chicory and roasted dandelion root and other crimes against humanity."

"In that you're wrong," Largo said. He swept his arm toward the espresso machine.

Her eyes widened, and she took a step closer to him. "Largo, you're a dear. But does anyone know how to work it?"

"I do, of course. Does your lab still recommend espresso enemas for cancer, Michael? Have you met Michael Elmore, Geraldine? He's the laboratory director at Deep Wisdom labs, and a member of our criminal conspiracy."

Michael, still squatting in his chair with his arms around his knees, unfolded his body and, without rising, extended a lanky arm toward Geraldine. She took his hand, but instead of shaking it brought it to her lips for a kiss. The kiss sent a visible jerk through his body, and when she dropped his hand, it hung in the air for at least ten seconds before it fell.

She kept her piercing eyes fixed on him. "Espresso enemas?" The arch manner in which she pronounced the words made them sound like an obscure come-on.

"He me-me-means coffee enemas," Michael stuttered. "Not espresso enemas. Coffee enemas supposedly detoxify you. We recommend them when our tests show up heavy metals."

"Oh, *Deep Wisdom* lab," she said. "I place you now. The guys who can figure out all about parasites and mercury and aluminum from a fingernail clipping and a snip of hair. What can you really tell from hair analysis?"

"Hair color," Harry said.

She turned and pointed at him. "Very good!"

Harry realized he could match her cynicism for cynicism now. The realization was both liberating and depressing.

"Are you a doctor?" Michael asked her.

"Yes. No, not really. More freelance Wise Woman. Though I do have an M.D. degree."

When Michael gave her a blank look, she patted him on the shoulder and, in therapeutic, nurturing tones, said, "I'm a quack. Like you and the others." She patted his shoulder again. "It's OK."

He shuddered.

"What's the matter?" Geraldine said, with a provocative drawing-out of "matter."

"I'm just not u- u - used to it," Michael said. "You people here being so direct. When we have meetings at Deep Wisdom, we never let on that we all know we're lying. We pretend to believe, even when no one else is listening."

"That's shockingly dishonest," she said.

Harry and Royce Largo laughed. Michael twisted his arms around each other, the way children do when they play "point at my finger and I'll try to wiggle the right one." Michael too was just learning that his life's work was a fraud, and Harry felt sorry for him.

Michael had once been an intensely sincere Santa Cruz naturopath, a colleague of Harry's. In 2002, two years ago, he'd taken the job of lab director at Deep Wisdom Labs. It had taken Michael a couple of years to realize that this "alternative" medical laboratory was a fraud, that its tests were designed to fill marketing niches rather than reflect any reliable knowledge. His recent despairing phone calls about one phony test or another had contributed to Harry's own final loss of faith. Harry wanted to walk over and gently disentangle Michael's arms, but he only looked at him sympathetically.

Largo dragged a small table to block the entrance door, and set a boom box on it. When he inserted a CD, and turned it on, annoying New Age music poured out of the speakers. "I would have put on something more pleasant," he explained, "except that this'll blend in better. We don't want to draw attention to our little conspiracy with *good* music. OK, time for coffee."

He danced his way over to the espresso maker, a John Travolta in Ambient Night Fever. Geraldine flopped in a chair beside Michael, and Harry sat back down, on her other side. Largo bent over the handles, muttered a genial “goddamn douche bag jerk-off machine” while steam spit and metal banged, and came up with a steaming twelve-ounce cup.

“Triple shot cappuccino, Madame,” he said, and bowed. He handed it to her, and she took a several ounce gulp. “How about food?” Largo asked the rest of them. He lifted a stainless steel lid from a filigreed silver serving dish. “B.L.T. sandwiches made with authentic Wonder Bread.”

“Bacon at NPEXPO?” Harry said. “White bread? You could get lynched for less.”

Geraldine, evidently revived by her cappuccino, asked, “Do you think that politicians who kiss babies on the street slap them around in the back rooms?”

“That’s what we’re doing, slapping around healthy diet?” Harry said. “Very funny.”

Largo brought the serving dishes over and set them on the table. “Enough wasting time. Let’s get down to work.”

“Get down to work at what, Royce?” Harry asked.

Largo took the remaining seat. “At what we’re here to do today.”

“I’ll have to kick him if he doesn’t stop being so mysterious,” Harry said to Geraldine. “Do you know what we’re doing?”

Geraldine held her cup of cappuccino to her cheek. “We’re here today to invent theories of alternative medicine so rich and lovely that they’ll spread o’er the world and long outlive us.”

“And enrich *us* during our brief sojourn on this plane of relative existence,” Largo added.

“That’s why I called them ‘rich’ theories, Royce,” she said.

Geraldine set her feet on a rung between the legs of Harry’s chair, and the odor of her sweat behind her nylons reminded him of their smelly three-day trip across country on the Blue Turtle bus.

“How did you get to be so cynical at your age?” Largo asked. “What are you? Thirty-five?”

“Hah. I’m forty-eight, just like Harry. And I don’t owe my eternal youthfulness to supplements.”

“To what, then?”

“To sex with younger men. They give you so much life force.”

“There you have it,” Largo said, spreading out his arms. “Life extension through sex with young people. Only, how does one persuade the young people?”

“I never seem to have a problem.”

“A tribute to you, my dear,” Largo sighed. “Anyway, let’s get down to business. We have only an hour or so to develop an entire theory of alternative medicine.”

When no one said anything, Harry asked, “Do you have anything in mind for us to invent, exactly?”

“A diet.”

Again, no one else said anything. “Any particular diet? Do you mean for weight loss? Or for health?”

Largo shrugged. “Whatever.”

“For health,” Geraldine said. “There are too many weight loss diets. What we need is a diet to ensure perfect health, cure cancer, enhance spiritual well being, etc. I think there’s more money in that.”

“Don’t forget it has to use Deep Wisdom’s new line of salivary hormone tests,” Michael said. “That’s why I’m here.” He looked over his shoulder as if to make sure the door was still closed, and took another BLT.

“Just create a diet out of absolutely nowhere?” Harry said. This was pretty funny. “No new bogus discoveries? No distant culture whose wisdom we can mine? The healing diet of the Sakhalin Islands perhaps?”

Geraldine waved a napkin in his direction, and in a parody of a sexy, throaty voice, said, “None of that is necessary for a man like Harry Boullard. Out of thin air he will conjure our diet, out of thin air.”

“Why me?”

She fixed a glance at him, half ironic, half compassionate. “To take gentle revenge on all those patients who have, for so many years, demanded of you endless lies.”

Revenge. It sounded terrible.

Could he really do this? His mind riffled back through two decades of medical practice, and before that, through the years of his great, deep dreams.

Revenge. It *felt* wonderful.

A Prolegomena to Any Future Diet

He gently detached Geraldine's nylon-clad legs from where she'd placed them on the rungs of his chair, lingered with her hands on his legs for a moment more than absolutely necessary, and then walked over to the stand of white paper sheets. A red plastic bucket screwed to the side held markers. He fetched out a healthy-looking black one, and wrote,

"The Four Principles of any Alternative Medicine Diet."

The paper had a slick surface, and the marker slid smoothly against it. The words flowed from his fingers like platonic ideals eager to manifest themselves in the contingent world.

- (1) Complexity and Specificity
- (2) Individualization
- (3) Scientific justification
- (4) Spirituality

He dragged up a spare chair, set it obliquely, sat in it, and turned to his friends. Geraldine looked wryly amused, as if she already understood everything he was about to say. Largo set a notebook on the table before him and waited for the details. Michael glanced over his shoulder at the door again.

"Let's think of the really successful alternative medicine healing diets," Harry asked. "Macrobiotics. The Zone. The Blood Type diet. Raw foods theory and its cousins like fruitarianism and the Cave Man diet."²¹ Anything else?"

"Food allergy diets," Michael said.

"Ayurvedic body type diets," Geraldine said. She put on an authentic-sounding Hindi accent, and wobbled her head side-to-side Indian style as she recited the words. "Three doshas, kapha-pitta-vata. Twenty attributes. Four states of Agni. Five subdoshas, seven tissues, and fourteen bodily systems. A different food for each combination. Three times twenty times four times five times seven times fourteen. We are reaching a substantial number. That is complexity for you."

"Ayurvedic diet does have complexity going for it. So does Traditional Chinese Medicine, but no one seems to know about TCM diet in the US yet."

"I don't fancy its chances above half," Geraldine said, now high-tone British. "Have you ever attempted pork kidney? Or placenta?"

"They could tone down the rules," Harry said. "Ayurveda recommends drinking urine, but I doubt the folks pushing the Ayurvedic body type diet stress that part. Anyway, to get back to the four principles. We'll begin with 'complexity and specificity.'"

Largo pulled out wire frame glasses from a jacket pocket, adjusted them on his eyes, and began writing.

"You look rather elegant with those," Geraldine said. "Rather emotionally vulnerable. Either charismatic or aged and pitiful, depending on one's perspective."

"Shut up and let Harry talk," Largo replied, pleasantly.

She mouthed a kiss at him, and Harry remembered his almost-kiss with Melanie by the cinderblock wall. Only an hour and a half ago. He'd been at his most sincere then, even wondered for a moment whether he was falling in love. Here it seemed a silly fantasy, yet another reaching for an ideal that didn't exist.

"*Complexity and specificity* are the first principles of any diet," Harry said. "The more rules the better. Theories, lists, complicated tables, descriptions, calculations. People love it. It makes the diet substantial and interesting. Take macrobiotics for example. It has opinions whether a red lentil is more yin than a black lentil, and how many ounces of water a day someone should consume in Santa Fe as compared to Portland. Weighty issues here. Food

for thought. Having such matters to cogitate over gives dietary followers the feeling that they belong to something meaningful.”

“But doesn’t there have to be some truth behind all those details?” Michael asked. “You can’t just make a diet complicated for the heck of it.”

“You do need a bit of truth, of course,” Geraldine said, now imitating Harry’s voice. “You sprinkle facts over your content like a condiment. A bit of biochemistry, a few actual studies, some general health information and a testimonial or two.”

“Exactly,” Harry said. “I call them ‘anchor facts.’ You drop in your anchor facts, state your conclusion, and the reader connects the dots. The conclusion doesn’t have to *follow* from the anchor facts; it just has to echo them.”

“Anchor facts,” Largo said. “I like that.” He scribbled it down.

“I’m not saying that this is good,” Harry said. “It’s not good. It’s thoroughly dishonest. It’s unethical.”

“Why?” Geraldine asked. “There’s no victim.”

“What about the truth?” Harry asked. “Isn’t that a victim?”

“As you perfectly well know, Harry,” she said, “medicine and truth aren’t compatible. The placebo effect only works if you lie.”

“You’re so cynical,” Harry said.

“No I’m not! The placebo effect is a wonderful thing, Harry. If doctors lie to their patients, and say a fake treatment really works, the treatment *will* work and the patients will benefit. If doctors lie to themselves, if they actually convince themselves the fake treatment works, they’ll lie more convincingly to their patients, and the placebo effect will work even better. An honest doctor is a bad doctor.”

“Getting back to that list on the board there,” Largo said.

“Yes,” Geraldine said. “I really like Harry’s number two principle: *Individualization*. It’s another word for ‘love.’”

Interesting. “You could look at it that way, yes. People yearn to be seen as individuals. A properly designed dietary theory fulfills the need. Take the Ayurvedic diet, for example. Ayurveda divides people into three primary body types: vata, pitta and kapha. A vata person -- I’m oversimplifying -- is generally thin, has a tendency to over-analyze things, likes to walk around restlessly, and easily drifts into melancholy. A kapha person, on the other hand, is large-framed, enjoys food and other sensual pleasures, and takes life easily. Michael is pretty much vata, Largo is definitely kapha. I’m kapha-vata because I have both tendencies. If I look up kapha-vata in an Ayurvedic text, I see that people like me like to ride bicycles but they also like to sit at home and watch movies. That’s me in a nutshell! I feel good. I’ve been seen and understood.”

“But if it’s all made up, as you seem to think,” Michael said, “wouldn’t you run into statements that don’t fit?”

Largo was writing furiously, and it reminded Harry of the old days, when he would ask Harry to tell him what to study for a test, write it all down, and then cheat off Harry’s exam anyway.

“Not at all,” Geraldine said. “It’s like astrology. People manage to imagine their chart fits them even when it doesn’t. Take Harry’s chart, for example. It says he’s an easy-going, tolerant person. That’s not true at all. As all his friends know, Harry’s a judgmental, critical know-it-all.”

“He’s more critical of himself than of anyone else,” Largo said.

“That’s true,” she said, and they both looked fondly at Harry. “But when an astrologer tells Harry he’s easygoing and tolerant, he feels oh-so-flattered. He tells himself that it must be true at some deep, deep level. It must be a testament to some beautiful part of his own character he’s accidentally happened to miss. But if something the astrologer says is too off the wall to claim for himself, he just ignores that part.”

Harry blushed. Something much like this had actually happened to him, a long time ago in Santa Cruz. He didn’t remember telling Geraldine, though he might have. “Do you know,” he said, “that they’ve done double-blind studies where you give an astrologer a live person and two astrological charts, and the astrologer has to pick which one fits the person? They can’t do it any better than chance.”²²

“No shit,” Largo said. “Someone did a study like that?”

“Several studies,” Harry said. “Still, like Geraldine says, when people read their own chart, they get a strong sense that it fits them perfectly. The same thing happens with an individualized diet. People experience a profound sense of being understood, an intuitive experience that if a diet can peer so deeply into their lives, it *must* embody wisdom. You could call this phenomenon an intuition-jerker.”

Geraldine laughed, and gave him a look so wholeheartedly appreciative that he felt a childish urge to shine for her. He was making this up as he went along, but at the same time he’d known it for years. “Like a tear-jerker. If you see a movie where a boy is separated from his mother and he thinks she’s abandoned him deliberately, but she hasn’t, and after many adventures they’re finally restored to each other, tears come to your eyes automatically. It’s a reflex. An intuition-jerker does the same thing, only instead of tears it stimulates an ‘aha moment.’ A sense of recognition of truth. It lights up the layers of your consciousness that signal honesty and coherence and depth. You get a chill. Your

horizons expand, scattered ideas and facts settle into place. You say ‘Aha, *now* I understand,’ even though it’s all nonsense.”

Michael looked miserable. Largo curled his left arm expansively around him. No effect. Largo’s hand delivered several supportive thumps. After the third or fourth thump, Michael smiled slightly. Largo converted the thumping into a prolonged squeeze. After a bit, Michael shook himself and sat up straighter.

For no particular reason, Harry’s brain chose that moment to tune in the ambient music that had been playing all along. It now consisted of a techno-style loop repeating the Sanskrit word “Aum,” while in the background sampled sitar sounded like the soundtrack to a horror movie. “That’s an awful tape,” Harry said.

“It’s a best seller,” Largo said. “I could turn it off, but what if someone overhears us? The early stages of any great creation must be sheltered and hidden from view. You told me that yourself once.”

“I was referring to high art when I said that,” Harry said, “not bogus diets.”

“Same thing. We’re creating an artful diet for artful diet doctors. You and Gerrie write the book, Michael’s lab will do the testing, and I’ll open a chain of diet centers and sell a line of products.”

“How about you put your name on the book instead of me?” Harry said. “The whole idea embarrasses me to death.”

“That’s fine,” Largo said.

“Harry gets half the royalties anyway,” Geraldine said.

“Of course he will,” Largo said, and opened his arms grandly.

“And Harry and I each get twenty-five percent profit-sharing on the diet centers,” Geraldine said.

The arms dropped. “You don’t think the royalties from the book will be enough?”

She gave him a long stare down her eyeglasses.

Largo spread his arms again, this time more with resignation than generosity. “OK, twenty-five percent of the diet center’s profit it is.”

“What about inventing the diet before you divide up the profits?” Michael asked.

“That would be terribly backwards,” Geraldine said. “Profit structure first, rhetoric second, content last.”

“I don’t know about this,” Michael said, twisting his arms around each other again. “Your anchor facts, and all. Yes, we do things like this all the time at Deep Wisdom. But is it OK? Shouldn’t we really stick to what’s true? At least a little bit?”

Geraldine rose from her chair. She was a spiritual teacher now. She paced back and forth in the little room, her small hands sometimes clasped, sometimes spread out. Her voice had a lovely, fascinating power. “Facts are dull. They’re dead things. People live by stories. It’s imagination that makes us human. There’s a passage in Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* that shows what I mean. Don Quixote is talking about a character in a book he’s read, a certain Queen Madasima. To Quixote, the fictional Madasima embodies female perfection. She’s wise, kind, virtuous and chaste. If she were a real person, he’d devote himself utterly to her.

“But another character in *Don Quixote*, a crazy young man, doesn’t share this view of the fictional Queen Madasima. He says that, in his opinion, she was sleeping around with another person in her book. Hearing this, Quixote flies into a rage. He gets in a terrible fight with the young man over Queen Madasima’s honor, and ends up badly beaten, almost killed.

“After the fight, while he’s tending his master, Sancho Panza asks why in the world would Quixote bother to defend the honor of a woman who doesn’t exist? Quixote’s replies that it doesn’t matter whether she exists, it’s the *idea* of a Queen Madasima that must be defended. Without ideals like that, life wouldn’t be worth living.

“Facts don’t feed the soul. In the Narnia stories, C.S. Lewis says that if there were no God and no heaven, it would still be better to live as if there were a God and a heaven. In the same way, it’s better to live in a world where healing wisdom exists. If it doesn’t exist, someone has to make it up. What are we going to do otherwise? Think of ourselves as biological machines? That’s true, but it destroys the human spirit. It’s far better to lie.”

Harry wondered whether she believed any of this. Did Geraldine have convictions? Or did her ideas flow from her mind as a kind of performance art?

“So you see,” she said, “what we’re doing now is a holy thing. We’re building a myth, a healing myth. When we’ve finished building it, people will come to live in it, and their lives will be richer for the work we’ve done.”

“Bravo,” Largo said. “Well said. Anyway, here’s my idea. Harry writes the fake science part and the testimonials. Geraldine fleshes out the book with philosophic bullshit. It will be a best seller.”

Michael had sunk halfway under the table. He had his hands in his pockets, and now one arm jerked upward, slamming his elbow against the wood. He rubbed it and presumably grimaced, but he’d already been grimacing so badly that the expression on his face hardly changed.

“Ouch,” Geraldine said for him. She stood behind him and put her hands on his shoulders. He looked around urgently. “It’s OK,” she said. “You just stay put, and I’ll work on you.”

She kneaded the muscles of his neck and shoulders. Michael looked stiff enough that if Geraldine grabbed his head and rotated him upward, he'd stick straight out like the shaft of a ball peen hammer held out by the ball peen. You could use him to brush the plates off a table, or batter down a door.

"Go on, Harry," Geraldine said. "He'll be fine. Keep talking. You're almost there."

Geraldine's hands traveled along the edge of Michael's hairline, and the black sleeve of her dress trailed over his shoulder. The sight fascinated Harry, but he tore his eyes away, and said, "Principle three, *Scientific Justification*. Science is an important element of any natural product marketing campaign. A successful diet has to cite studies that prove it works. This is easy because hardly anyone can tell the difference between meaningful research and research so theoretical it couldn't prove a schnauzer has fur."

In a sweet, almost girlish voice, Geraldine asked, "You still have your little schnauzer? That little black one?" "My schnauzer? She died years ago. I don't have anyone to pet these days."

Geraldine gave Harry a steady look over the top of Michael's head, and, while continuing to massage, indicated her interest in his proposition by showing no interest.

"Finally," Harry said, "there's principle number four, *Spirituality*. Every diet has a spiritual element. In some diets, it's overt. Macrobiotics is the one of the best examples. When you're a macro, you believe that choosing appropriate foods will not only enhance your health, it will also bring about a fundamental realignment of yin and yang in every aspect of your life, create world peace, solve poverty, etc., etc..

"The Zone is another good example. Followers of the Zone diet attach mystical significance to eating the right mix of carbohydrates, fats and proteins. If you stay near 40%/30%/30%, you're in 'The Zone,' a kind of metabolic state of grace. You'll attain your optimum weight and achieve maximum performance, your mind will come clear, creativity will flow, and all your relationship problems will solve themselves."

"Speaking of a metabolic state of grace," Largo said, "you haven't eaten a thing. You look like you're going to keel over. You're done talking, right? Come and eat."

Now that Largo mentioned it, Harry realized he was starving.

"In a moment. I'm almost done. Some diets, like food allergy avoidance, don't seem to have any spirituality to them. But actually, they do. It's a persistent theme I call 'Food Puritanism.' People have an innate belief that if they forego pleasures in the moment they'll receive a reward later. I suspect that it's a biologically based core intuition in the Steven Pinker sense, a mechanism designed to allow delayed gratification.²³ In any case, people instinctively believe that foods they like must be bad for them. Food Puritanism plays on this instinct. Notice how natural medicine doctors condemn anything that tastes good. Coffee, black tea, fat, beef, Tabasco sauce. Even conventional doctors play the same game, without realizing it. Doctors are sure that cutting down on saturated fat helps prevent heart disease, although the evidence for this idea is about as weak as the evidence for hormone replacement therapy.²⁴ But people like fat, and therefore fat must be bad."

"Food puritanism," Largo said, writing it down. "You're an aphorism a minute today, Harry. Now eat."

"Am I done? I guess so." He noticed that he staggered a little on his way back to the table, and when Largo handed him a sandwich, he downed the whole thing before he realized he was making a pig of himself. He felt embarrassed and looked at Geraldine to see if she'd noticed. She'd stopped massaging Michael and was smiling at him. The smile said not to worry. She'd forgotten the last five years of hard feelings between them, and had accepted him back.

"These principles of yours are fine," Michael said, "but how do you propose we do all this? Pick foods at random?"

Geraldine placed her hands beneath Michael's ears, and stroked downward in a long, symmetrical glide that traveled along his neck, over the tops of his shoulders and down into his forearms. Her hands flew away like twin butterflies. "Do you feel better?"

"Better, yes, thanks," Michael said. He craned his neck around to look up at her, and said, "much better." He sat up straighter. "I don't know why I'm being so critical. I'm the lab director of a rip-off lab. It's just that at Deep Wisdom we use ideas that people make up somewhere else. It feels worse, somehow, watching it happen right in front of me."

"A timeworn ethical principle," Geraldine said. "If you quote someone else's lies, you're not lying. Bullshit. Let's have a little courage here. Anyway, the placebo effect is real, and our diet will really help people. Is there any *a priori* reason we should have to make ourselves stupid to pull it off? Why not be honest with ourselves?"

"Definitely," Largo said. "Honesty with yourself is good. So all we need now is for Michael to tell us what lab test he'd like to push."

"Like I said, we have a new series of tests that measure hormone levels in saliva," Michael said, grumpily. "If the diet requires salivary hormone testing, the lab will make a bundle."

"Not a problem," Largo said. "Harry will come up with a diet based on salivary hormones."

"Oh I will, will I?" Harry asked.

"Of course you will," Geraldine said.

He *did* ache to pay back all his patients for believing his lies. And she was also right when she said that there wasn't any victim. People would thank him for this. This diet would really heal people.

He stepped back to the easel. "What if we measure eight hormone levels? Then we can call it the 'EightFoldWayDiet.'"

Geraldine laughed, and Harry remembered that she'd sat beside him at the Home of the Spirit Commune when a visiting Tibetan Lama had presented the principles of the Buddhist Eightfold Way.

"Do you have eight hormones to measure, Michael?" This was Geraldine.

"Estradiol, testosterone, estriol, progesterone, DHEA, pregnenolone, and androstenedione. That's only seven."

"How about cortisol?" Harry asked.

"Well, we don't have a test for cortisol levels just now, but I'm sure there's some cortisol in saliva and you can measure it."

"Would it have much to do with levels in the body?" Geraldine asked.

Michael made a gesture toward twisting his arms around each other again, but dropped them properly in his lap."

Harry had turned down a fresh piece of paper and written the eight hormones in a row on the page. To the right of each word, he'd placed a "+" above and a "-" below. Now he began to fill in definitions.

Estrogen(+) High-energy, high-libido, emotional. Tendency toward PMS. E.g. Marilyn Monroe

Estrogen(-) Inward, serene, thoughtful. Emily Dickinson.

Testosterone(+) Aggressive, hard driving, muscular. Arnold Schwarzenegger. If female, possible butch lesbian.

Testosterone(-) Gentle, feminine, New Age male.

"You get the idea," he said. "Once we've written the characteristics of each type, then we come up with descriptions for combinations: testosterone negative, estrogen positive, DHEA negative. That sort of thing. There are thousands of possible combinations, so we'll have individualization up the wazoo."

"What you've written so far isn't so ridiculous," Michael said. "That *is* what those hormones do, right? High estrogen does mean highly feminine, doesn't it?"

"Not at all," Harry said. "Personality is far too complicated for any simple biochemical connections. But the idea has enough truth to serve as an anchor fact. Any suggestions for cortisol?"

Geraldine jumped in. "Cortisol-negative people are tense, nervy, wriggly, hypoglycemic. E.g., the lab director of Deep Wisdom labs."

"Why *those* symptoms?" Michael asked. "What does it have to do with cortisol?"

"People with no cortisol at all get terrible muscle and joint aches," Harry said, intuiting Geraldine's line of reasoning. "So maybe people with subtly low cortisol levels get some muscle and joint aches. And the body uses cortisol to raise blood sugar. Ergo, a cortisol deficient person should have low blood sugar attacks."

"Are you sure?" Michael asked.

"Actually, I'm sure it's not true at all. But it *sounds* logical."

"People who are cortisol deficient," Michael said, his voice suddenly stronger, "will therefore have to pay special attention to their carbohydrates. So they'll have to follow the rules of low-carb or low G-I diet."

The New Age music had apparently stopped some time ago because when the room fell silent after this statement, it was completely silent.

"That's brilliant!" This was Geraldine. "You're a genius. We can work *all* of the famous diets into the Eightfold Way diet. People who are cortisol negative should follow a low-carb diet, like you said. Cortisol positive people should eat a low-fat diet. People with low pregnenolone need to follow the rules of the blood type diet because ...Harry, help me, why should they do this?"

"Because pregnenolone acts to suppress adverse biochemical reactions based on blood type so if you have high pregnenolone, you don't need to pay attention, but if your levels are low, you do need to pay attention."

“And why would pregnenolone affect that?” Michael asked.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Harry said. “Give me a day and I’ll come up with a good reason.”

“Up until Royce Largo developed the Eightfold Way diet,” Geraldine intoned, “diet gurus had only seen one piece of the elephant. One leg was low-carb. Another low-fat. Yet another blood-type. But the Eightfold Way diet reached deeper, found the wisdom behind all the other diets, drew them all together in one comprehensive system.”

“Well, we’re done then,” Largo said. “Harry, you write out basic descriptions of ten or twenty types and their diets, together with some science and three testimonials each -- you’re going to have to make up a lot of the diets from scratch, you realize -- and then send your draft to Geraldine to flesh it out with spiritual stuff. I’ll open EightFoldWayDiet.com tomorrow afternoon, and we’ll get the advance marketing going.”

“A website?” Harry asked.

“With testimonials, products, listings of EightFoldWayDiet centers, as soon as there are any. Chatrooms too, of course. Anyone need more caffeine?”

The Blue Turtle

Michael had departed first and alone, afraid to be seen in public with his co-conspirators. Largo followed a few minutes later, but not before brewing another cappuccino for Geraldine. Geraldine was sipping silently at it now in a chair beside Harry.

They hadn't been alone together for years. "It's really good to see you after so long," he said.

Geraldine held up her right hand and moved its fingers as if it were a puppet. "Geraldine is glad to see you too," she made the hand say. "Geraldine says let's forgive and forget."

It was grotesque, almost a caricature of her mask-on-a-stick way of being in the world, and it made Harry long for Melanie. Melanie had been real with him even when he'd been too hyped up with celebrity to be real with himself.

"You don't need the puppet," he said. "You're marvelous enough as yourself."

"You don't like her? OK, I'll put her to sleep." Geraldine flopped her hand on the table. "Satisfied? Saritsfied?"

He smiled despite himself. "Saritsfied" was one of her private words. "I remember the first time you said that to me, on the Blue Turtle bus."

"We spiritual pilgrims journeyed forth in search of the soul." She made wave motions with her outstretched hands, like a kindergartner pantomiming a boat traveling over water. "By the way, Harry, I've become a lesbian."

"You have?"

"Just kidding." She removed her high-heeled shoes and kicked her feet up in his lap. "Would you work on my feet?"

Her small feet were sweaty, but lust overcame fastidiousness, and he took her right foot in his hands. With his middle finger on the bottom and his thumb on top, he probed the bones of her feet through the thin cotton stockings. He ran a finger along the hard edge of her first metatarsal bone, spreading the connecting tissue, and thought about how amazing it was that they'd never slept together.

Back in high school when Royce Largo had suggested Harry go after Geraldine instead of Teri Kane, Harry had felt too intimidated to speak to her. He still didn't speak to her even when they both matriculated to UC Santa Cruz, Harry a mathematics major and Geraldine a philosophy/comparative religion double major. Harry continued to avoid Geraldine throughout their freshman, sophomore, junior and senior years. However, nine days before college graduation, they found themselves on a couch together at a party, and began talking as if they'd been deep in conversation all their lives.

Harry couldn't understand why he'd waited so long to get to know Geraldine. She was brilliant, witty and polished, but not all out of his reach. He loved talking with her. She was the first woman he'd ever met who challenged him in the world of ideas. She quoted Kabbalah, Augustine and Hildegard of Bingen, and when later he looked up a couple of the quotations, he found that she'd gotten almost every word right.

They went out walking at four a.m., and she amazed him. She was several people in one, sometimes a detached observer, a moment later a wild woman who ran into the ocean with her clothes on, and then an erudite romantic talking about the deep spiritual significance of Valentine's Day. It wasn't so much that she had many sides to her personality, and certainly not that she had multiple personality disorder. It was more that she crafted beautiful personas and brought them out at will. Each persona was polished and perfect, and Harry fell in love with all of them. She seemed to like him too, although he only had one persona, hardly polished at all.

They saw each other almost daily for the remaining week of the semester. Their relationship confirmed all Harry's doubts about his future career choice. He'd done well in mathematics, and even published an original paper (a highly unusual accomplishment for an undergraduate) but the field had come to seem too cold and remote. He loved its austere beauty, but he sensed that life had possibilities math professors knew little about. He wanted to live a full life, like Geraldine. He wanted to feel his feelings raw, like Geraldine. He wanted to have sex with Geraldine.

However, they didn't sleep together. On the night it should have happened, they were cuddled together on the floor of Harry's living room, on LSD again and feeling romantic, when Harry reached over to his nearby floor-level stereo and attempted to play *Tupelo Honey*. Had he succeeded, their subsequent lives might have taken an altogether

different turn. However, by accident, he grabbed the wrong vinyl and put *Be Here Now* on the turntable; when Ram Dass' voice came on the bookshelf speakers, the door to sex closed and a gateway to God opened instead. Under the combined influence of LSD, *Be Here Now* and their growing romance, it was mathematically inevitable that they should have a spiritual experience.

They went for a long walk by the ocean together at dawn, aroused by eternity rather than each other, and watched the sun rise over Monterey Bay. They watched the clouds transform from gray-orange to orange-red to red-white, and tried to separate the smells of iodine and bromine in the sea air. It was settled: they would become mystics.

Hunger finally impinged on spiritual awakening, and they wandered over to Sugar Magnolia's for breakfast. Sugar Magnolia's was a Grateful-Dead-themed café, set a little way back from Beach St., in a tiny white Victorian surrounded by its own miniature picket fence and flower garden. Willow, the acidhead owner of the café, had installed five doors in free-standing frames in the garden, and claimed that, when he opened one of these doors and gazed through it, he saw into the future.

He was standing stock-still at one door now, his hand on the knob, when Harry and Geraldine arrived. He gave them a long stare and the salutation "space." He stared at them again, and then led them inside, washed his hands for a full minute, and cooked them breakfast burritos in whole-grain chapattis.

When they'd eaten as much as LSD and a recent mystical experience would allow, Willow glided over to their table and handed Geraldine a folded brochure. "I believe this is yours," he said.

"No," she said. "It's not mine."

"Not yet," he said, "but it will be."

The brochure was titled "Home of the Spirit Commune," and pictured an old man with a long silver beard and a white robe staring into the infinite distance. A quote from the guru stated that the Home of the Spirit commune was "the Spirit's abode for Our Time."

Reading the inside pages of the flyer, Harry and Geraldine learned that the commune occupied the grounds of what had once been a Shaker village, in rural Massachusetts, but now belonged to followers of Pir Selim Chisti, a spiritual leader from India who taught a form of multi-religious mysticism. The Home of the Spirit was seeking spiritual seekers who wished to learn organic farming and other arts compatible with the spiritual life.

"I can see myself going there," Geraldine said. "It's either that or live with Dad." She'd discovered, lately, that the job prospects for a philosophy major were limited.

Harry agreed that it was a great time for something completely different. The day after graduation, they boarded the Blue Turtle bus and traveled across country to the Home of the Spirit commune.

The Blue Turtle bus service offered long-distance transportation by means of a fleet of blue-painted school buses whose seats had been removed and replaced by mattresses. The passengers were a mixture of hippies and the genuinely impoverished. There were so many felt berets, embroidered jean jackets and tie-died cloaks among the mattresses that Harry felt seriously underdressed in his t-shirt and jeans.

During the day, while people were sitting up, the space was comfortable enough. Wannabe Joni Mitchels and Bob Dylans played guitar, children tried to do circle dances over the adults' legs, and the genuinely impoverished took out hip flasks. It was a community. At night, though, the Blue Turtle became something more like a sardine can, with passengers arrayed crosswise for sleep alternately head-to-foot and foot-to-head. Harry had the choice of Geraldine's deliciously feminine toes or the corned and callous clodhoppers belonging to his neighbor on the other side, an ex-minister in his sixties who drank Southern Comfort and didn't wash too often. Harry chose her toes over his toes, held them against his chest, and gave her a foot massage until they fell asleep.

Due to the public nature of the environment, this was the greatest level of physical intimacy they achieved on that Blue Turtle bus trip. Harry did, however, manage to deflower Geraldine's dietary innocence. When they stopped for lunch at a diner and she ordered burgers, he wondered aloud whether she knew that such food was evil.

Somehow, in their two weeks of friendship, they'd missed this central topic of existence. Harry had assumed that Geraldine, being a philosophy major, knew all about the Manichean nature of food, and, in the vegetarian paradise of Santa Cruz restaurants, the issue hadn't come up. Harry himself had only recently become acquainted with the good/evil typology of edibles. Up through most of his senior year in college, he'd eaten much the way his mother had taught him, a dietary system founded mostly on quantity of protein. A couple of months before his mystical experience with Geraldine, though, he'd discovered that his food habits were barbaric. This insight had occurred to him during a potluck dinner party, one that he'd hosted at his own apartment in downtown Santa Cruz. Harry had been enjoying himself well enough when, suddenly, he heard a scream from the kitchen.

He ran to see what was wrong, and found Marla pointing into his cupboards. Marla was an alumna of Waldorf education, and wore complicated clothing that consisted of dozens of vests, blouses, skirts, and pants worn simultaneously.

"Look what's in here," she cried to the gathering crowd. Harry peered forward, expecting to find a nest of black widow spiders or perhaps a dead rat. All he saw was canned food and packages of macaroni.

"See what he has in his cupboards," Marla declaimed again.

Gasps of disgust issued from the onlookers packing his kitchen. "Harry," another woman said, "you don't really eat this garbage, do you?"

His mind went blank. He knew he must be doing something horribly wrong, but he didn't have a clue what it was. Still, he recognized the fundamental pattern of the situation: a woman was teaching him how to live properly. Women were supposed to do that.

Marla reached for one of the cans and hefted it sorrowfully. "Beef stew. Nalley's beef stew, ohmygod can you believe it. Don't you know what this stuff does to you?"

"Gives me protein?" he suggested.

It was a conversion experience. By the end of the evening, all Harry's evil food stood in a pile by the door, ready for shipment to the Salvation Army. By the end of the next day, his cupboards were newly stocked with food of nobler provenance, unrecognizable but quite pretty beans, grains and seaweeds. (He had to chuck them all when, a few months later, he took the Blue Turtle).

During the subsequent months, he devoured the major sourcebooks of rawfoodist dietary wisdom: *Back to Eden*, *Arnold Ehret's Mucusless Diet*, and *The Essene Gospel of Peace*. Canned food, he discovered, lacks life force. Meat ferments in the colon and clogs the chakras. If a person truly wished to become spiritually evolved, he must become a total vegetarian, preferably a raw foods vegetarian.

When they returned to the Blue Turtle bus from the diner, Harry brought Geraldine back to the rear corner of the bus to enlighten her. The mattresses were broken down and the engine noisiest there, but at least they had some privacy. Their only neighbors were the bathroom and a man who looked like an Elvis impersonator. He wore sun-bleached velour clothes that might have once been a Santa Claus outfit.

"Here's how I understand it," Harry said. "A raw carrot will grow if it is planted in the ground. That's because it possesses life energy. A hamburger, on the other hand, won't grow if it's planted in the ground. This shows that it doesn't have life energy."

"Of course, a cow won't grow if you plant it in the ground either," Geraldine respectfully pointed out.

His books hadn't addressed that point, and Harry paused to consider. "Still, you have to admit that a hamburger is a deader thing than a carrot. It isn't good to eat dead things. It's like taking death into your body. It lowers your physical energy. It clouds your spiritual body. Besides, it gives you mucous and intestinal gas. When you eat living food, on the other hand, your life-energy increases. Nuts, seeds, vegetables, whole grains and fruits are the best of all possible foods.

"What about eating live insects?" Geraldine asked. She asked it in a spirit of sincere inquiry. "That should give you lots of life."

Elvis said something like "Ho Ho."

This seemed to be another point his books hadn't addressed. Harry didn't find it tenable that the authors had simply overlooked or suppressed the possibility of a raw-meat solution to the equations. There must simply be some refutation of the idea so obvious it didn't need mentioning.

Unfortunately, he couldn't think right off what it might be, so he temporized by stroking the back of Geraldine's head.

"I really do appreciate you teaching me about this," she said. She leaned back into his stroking hand, and the embroidered top of her white blouse brushed against his arm. "Please go on."

"I think it's just that plants have purer energy than animals," Harry said. "Because they're lower on the evolutionary ladder, they're closer to the original state of creation. Like fish. They come before birds and mammals, and they're less harmful than chicken or beef."

"That makes sense," she said.

"And besides," he added, "when you kill and eat an animal, you draw violent energy into your soul. If the world became vegetarian, or at least limited itself to fish and vegetables, there wouldn't be any more wars."

"A perfectly satisfying answer," she said, and snuggled closer.

He stroked her absently while his mind quietly provided an annoying counterargument: The samurai and shoguns of Japan had eaten mostly vegetables, fish and tofu, and yet *they'd* achieved a respectable level of brutality. He kept this line of thought to himself.

The Blue Turtle's stops were seldom well suited to raw foods vegetarianism. When the bus pulled into Salt Lake City, Harry and Geraldine raced down the street to a supermarket and filled a shopping bag with superior food. Harry found it a bit agonizing to confine himself to raw carrots and almonds while Elvis chewed away on roast beef sandwiches, but in compensation he experienced a delightful sense of spiritual superiority.

Three days later, the bus dropped them off at Penn Station in New York City. Harry had about \$100 with him, making him the wealthier one (a comparative relationship that would generally persist until Geraldine first appeared on Oprah), and they decided to explore around a bit before catching a bus or train up north. This was a mistake. Neither Harry nor Geraldine had much experience with big cities, and they found New York overwhelming, especially after days of little sleep and nothing to eat but raw food.

They took subways and walked cross-town for hours, cleverly guided in circles by the locals, until they were utterly worn out and exhausted. Harry must have lost consciousness for a bit because he awoke to find himself scarfing down curly fries and a hot dog in a state of semi-stupor. When the food raised Harry's blood sugar high enough so that he could think straight, he froze in mid-chew, emptied the contents of his mouth into a napkin, and tossed that and the remaining food into a nearby trashcan. Geraldine tapped the heel of her hand on her forehead, and followed suit, though more demurely.

This spontaneous act of renunciation enraged the owner of the hot dog stand, a scrawny but tough-looking guy who didn't appreciate seeing his food tossed in the trash. "Hey, whaddaya trying to say, something wrong with my dogs? My dogs ain't good enough for you? Never hoit nobody yet."

"They're great hot dogs," Harry agreed. "The problem is that we're vegetarians."

"Veggie-fucking-tarians?" the man said, stepping toward them. "Is that the way it is?"

They stepped backward away from the angry hot dog proponent and ran off through the crowd. By good luck, they stumbled across an Indian restaurant that served vegetarian cuisine, and, with blood sugar levels fully restored, they were able to find transportation north toward the commune. That evening, they got off the bus at Pittsfield, Massachusetts, and phoned the number on the flyer.

The Home of the Spirit

The commune phone rang for so long that Harry hung up and redialed. On the second call, a woman picked it up after only five rings, and identified herself as Sarah Sunrise. Over the sound of people shouting, said that she'd love to "get away from this insane place for a minute" and would come fetch them.

Twenty minutes later, she pulled up alongside the phone booth in a beat-up white Ford pickup. Mud had splashed halfway up the door on the passenger side, and the bright odor of chicken manure emanated from the bed. Sarah hopped out of the truck and came around to shake their hands. She was a big-boned person, almost as tall as Harry, and wore an unbuttoned red-and-black checkered Woolrich jacket over a clean brown sweatshirt and blue jeans. Even a city so small as Pittsfield seemed to overwhelm her. She turned to look each time a car drove by, and politely greeted every stranger who passed them on the sidewalk. Her voice was warm and slightly drawling. She had a way of pouring her whole self into her words that Harry found appealing.

"You all wouldn't be coming to farm, would you?" she asked.

"That's exactly what we're planning to do," Harry said.

"Tell the admissions committee you want to work in the herb garden," she urged. Her voice was hearty, humble but deeply sincere. "We have a vegetable garden too, but it's a scruffy old thing." She laughed. "I'm biased. It's *my* herb garden I'm pushing for."

"I've read that every herb has its own special spiritual affinity," Geraldine said. "For example, the herb borage, as I recall, relates to the Hesed level on the Kabbalistic tree of life."

Where'd she get that? But she was probably right. Geraldine was always right.

"I'm not smart enough to know about that," Sarah said. "All I know is I feel good when I sit next to my borage bed."

"That's exactly the effect of an influence at the Hesed level," Geraldine said. Harry thought she sounded brittle and academic against Sarah's earthy simplicity, but he knew she'd soon come up with a persona appropriate to commune life.

Sarah wouldn't let them toss their packs in the bed of the truck until she spread a clean tarp over the manure. They climbed into the wide front seat of the pickup, Geraldine in the middle. Sarah drove like she'd driven trucks all her life, which, as it turned out, she had, on her father's dairy farm, where she'd worked since high school. A flyer for the commune had made its way to the one natural food store in her part of rural Kentucky, and the day after she saw it, she was on her way.

"Do you like it here?" Geraldine asked.

"Oh yes," Sarah said, heartily. "Only ..."

"Only what?"

"Well, I shouldn't judge. It's not right to judge."

Neither Harry nor Geraldine said anything, and the silence forced Sarah to spill. "They have what they call 'family meetings' every week, but it's like no kind of family I know about. They fight like cats and dogs. They're having one of their catfights right now. Was I glad to come pick you two up?"

"What do they fight about?" Geraldine asked. "Spiritual theories?"

"Oh no." She gave a rich chuckle. "Not that. They squawk about food, all day and all night."

Geraldine looked at Harry, and they both laughed. Harry worried that Sarah might feel laughed *at*, but when she said, "What's so funny?" she sounded warm and supportive, as if it pleased her that her guests were happy.

"I don't think Harry and I have talked about anything *but* food for the last two days," Geraldine explained.

"Isn't it something? Food does that to people. When I came here, I thought I knew about eating healthy, but I didn't know there were so many rules. The other day, they had one of their macrobiotic seminars here, and the leader, a mister Dr. Lee, he told us that milk gives you cancer and arthritis and I don't know what. I had a shock, growing up on a dairy farm, like I did. Funny not to know milk is poison till your old age."

"Your old age?" Geraldine asked. "You don't look more than twenty-five."

"Now you're sweet, but you wouldn't win the prize at an age-guessing contest. I'm pushing thirty-seven. I don't know but milk's kept me looking young, whatever Dr. Lee says."

They had reached the outskirts of Pittsfield, and were now driving along a small wooded highway. It was full brown summer in Santa Cruz already, but here the trees were riotously green. Here and there, the landscape opened out to show a farmhouse and a barn beside fields or pasture. Most of the barns had strange red symbols painted just beneath the roof. Sarah explained they were traditional hex signs for warding off evil spirits.

Further along, they came to a cluster of Shaker-style buildings. Harry remembered that the commune occupied an old Shaker village, and asked whether this was the commune.

"I wish. This is a museum, Hancock Shaker Village. The museum people have the money to keep their buildings looking perfect. Our place is a wreck. We can't even keep the septic system working."

A couple of miles later, she turned off the highway onto a narrow dirt road. The woods soon closed in on both sides of the road, densely uniform except for the occasional tumbledown shed or water tank. The road took them across a plank bridge over a creek, and then to a T-intersection where they came to a stop.

"Off to the left is the Barrow School," Sarah said. "A bushel of spoiled rich kids." She sped off to the right, down a narrow road that paralleled the creek. "You have your seat belts on? We have to build up speed here."

Angled tree-trunks and low-hanging branches came alarmingly close as they raced along. Up ahead, the woods opened at a crossroads

"That's Sardar's eyesore," Sarah said. She pointed at a rust-colored metal tank at the bottom of a hill. "To gas up the tractor. I asked him to hide it behind some trees but he wouldn't."

"So you use machines?" Harry asked.

"Not in my herb garden, but on the farm. Pir Selim says that machines belong to the New Age. It has something to do with Kabbalah, like you were saying, Geraldine. To me, they're just noisy."

"I bet it's wonderfully quiet here," Geraldine said.

Sarah gunned the engine, and they roared through the crossroads. Halfway up the hill, they hit a muddy spot, and the truck fishtailed, its tires spitting gouts of gravel, but it caught its traction again and shot up to the top. They passed a cluster of white buildings on the left, and turned right to park beside a Shaker barn. The barn had its own icon in red: a mountain with a heart at the summit, the commune's mystical symbol.

Harry stepped out of the truck and surveyed his new life. It was getting dark, and as he studied the white Shaker buildings an array of incandescent lights came on, illuminating plastic sheets covering the windows. A wooded hill rose behind the buildings, and halfway up Harry thought he saw a small cabin belching out white smoke.

Sarah followed his eye and said, "That's Pir Selim's house. Most of us live down here, in those nice old white buildings. I have my own cabin up in the woods. You can't see it from here."

"I'd very much like to go to the family meeting," Geraldine said. "Would I be allowed?"

"You're allowed," Sarah said, in a motherly tone. "But you'll probably hightail it home when you see the way we go at each other."

"I think conflict's a good thing," Geraldine said. "It's healthy."

"That's as may be," Sarah said, "but it hurts my ears."

Harry hauled their packs out from the truck bed. Sarah led them up wooden stairs set in a rising lawn. When they reached the top, they turned to follow a flagstone path that led them to an open grassy space framed by three Shaker buildings. A tall wrought iron lamp stood at the edge of the lawn, reminding Harry of the lamp in the Narnia stories. Beside it, a shirtless man in baggy white pants stood in the tree pose, balancing on one foot, the other foot in his crotch and his hands stretching skywards, palms together.

Voices raised in argument spilled from a half-open door across the lawn. While Harry was estimating the number of shoes on the deck outside the door (at perhaps two hundred) a slow, loud voice rose above the general din. "I don't remember God saying anything about not eating hamburgers. I think the Supreme Being won't mind if we serve beef once a week."

"Oh my," Sarah said. "Now he's done it."

"That's Sardar for you," the yogi said. "Always throwing hand grenades. He'll be lucky to get out of there without being butchered by the vegetarians."

The din of voices doubled its decibels. Sarah looked pained and put her hands over her ears, but Geraldine strained to listen.

"I can just go inside?" she asked.

"It is permitted, if not advised," the yogi said.

Geraldine tapped Harry on the shoulder, skipped lightly to the deck, dropped her shoes among the others, and disappeared in the door.

Harry didn't follow. "How long have you been running the herb garden?" he asked Sarah.

"Almost since the day I arrived. I did some farming back home, so they made me the boss."

The yogi bent forward, stretching his arms horizontally, palms still together, and put his free leg out behind like the balancing tail of a dinosaur. "That's how it is at communes," he said. "You don't have to know what you're doing. You just have to know the name of what you're doing, and they put you in charge."

"Oh Ayub, is my herb garden all that bad?" Sarah asked.

"Not *too* bad. The beds are too wide, and I wish you had purple flowers at the north end, not white. Purple goes better at the north end of a garden than the south end, you know. But you're a much better herb gardener than Farishta is a head cook. The other day, I told her that apple pie needs pepper to energetically balance the sweetness, and she looked at me like I was crazy. She has no sense of subtle energies."

"I'd like to see your garden," Harry said to Sarah. He wanted to get away from this hypersensitive yogi as soon as possible. How could he ever hold his own among people who were so exquisitely subtle that they viewed purple as a *northern* color?

"We'll need a flashlight," Sarah said.

Another voice called out above the background noise of the family meeting. "This is a SPIRITUAL commune, haven't you heard?"

"You can leave your pack here," Sarah said. "No one steals things."

As they walked back along the path, Harry asked Sarah why people here had such unusual names, like Ayub and Farishta. She explained that Pir Selim gave everyone a special name designed to bring out some hidden spiritual quality.

"Why are you just Sarah, then?"

"He said I have a Sarah-like quality."

She stepped into the barn for a second, and came out wielding the biggest flashlight Harry had ever seen, an industrial device nearly half her size. She switched it on and pointed the beam on a white fingerpost beside the road. In elegant black calligraphied letters, it read, "The Herb Garden."

"Ayub wrote that," she said. "He's quite artistic."

The fingerpost pointed to a set of stairs cut in the dirt of the descending hill. Harry followed Sarah down to a swinging wooden gate that she pushed open.

"Here it is," she sighed. "My old clunky herb garden." She pointed the flashlight around. "Twenty raised beds. Ayub says they're too wide. All I know is it says three feet in my biodynamic gardening book."

"Biodynamic gardening?"

"It's a special kind of organic farming. Some of it is pretty weird." She said "pretty weird" with relish. "Rudolf Steiner invented it. You pack yarrow in a stag's bladder, and oak bark in a cow's skull, and chamomile and dandelion in a cow's intestine. Then you bury them. On Michaelmas (that's some German holiday) you dig it all up, add a bunch more herbs, and then make a homeopathic kind of thing out of it.²⁵ You add it to your compost, and after a month the compost turns so nice and sweet you want to rub your face in it."

Harry made a resolution: by Michaelmas, whenever that was, he would attain a stage of spiritual realization sufficiently high that he could *want* to rub his face in compost. At the moment, though, it seemed terribly advanced.

Sarah pointed the flashlight toward the far side of the garden. "That's my borage bed. Want to see?"

He said he did, and followed as she threaded her way between the raised beds. A small wooden bench faced the borage, and they sat together.

"I collect the seeds in the wild. You cross a swamp full of skunk cabbage down the road a little bit, and there's wild borage everywhere." Her tone indicated that she considered it a luscious and privileged experience to cross a swamp in search of borage, like borrowing someone's Porsche.

The moon had now come out, and it was almost full. Harry surreptitiously studied Sarah's face in the silvery light, and decided that she was as beautiful as Geraldine, though in a different way: woody instead of electric, hearty rather than sharp-edged, with a pervasive sweetness like sweet-smelling compost. He wondered whether he could fall in love with someone like her.

Sarah bent down and pulled up a small, succulent weed. "Purslane," she said. "It means I have to add more calcium, iron and magnesium to the soil." She laughed. "I'm such a gardener. Always talking about dirt. Here look at this."

She broke off a sprig of borage and handed Harry the flashlight. "If you shine the light on my rough old hand, I'll show you something amazing."

He pointed the light at her palm. She ran a calloused finger up the stalk and along a spray of tiny stems. "See how the color of the body changes little by little into the color of the flower? I love the way it does that."

The stalk was greenish black, the stem purplish black, and the flowers blackish purple. An interesting progression, perhaps, but not amazing.

Harry was disappointed. He'd hoped for a life of magic at the commune, but having heard their family meeting and seen the best they could do in the way of flowers, he wasn't so sure he'd find what he wanted.

"It's a very *subtle* change of color," he said.

“Yes, I think so. I wish ...”

“What do you wish?”

She sighed. “I wish that people could be like that -- change slow and gentle.” She rubbed the borage between her hands. “People are too ... clanky. They have to shout about it when they change. Plants don’t shout. They just grow, one little tendril at a time. They’re growing right now. You can hear them if you listen.”

She closed her eyes and listened. Harry listened too, but all he heard was wind, plus an occasional groan above them as tree trunks ground together.

“Listen under the wind,” she said. “Listen like you’re a little child.”

That wasn’t particularly helpful advice because Harry had grown up in Los Angeles, and you didn’t go around listening there. You might hear things you didn’t want to hear: people rioting, gunshots, sirens.

At the present moment, rushing thoughts took the place of sirens, insecure worries about his lack of the skills necessary to flourish at a commune. He couldn’t do yoga, he couldn’t see the significance of the colors of flowers, and he couldn’t listen to plants grow. He was a hopeless case.

He opened his eyes to take a peek at Sarah. She looked rapt, her eyes loosely shut, her face avid. Something about her state must have been communicable because when he shut his eyes again he felt more attuned. He thought he could hear the plants grow now; or, rather, he could feel them grow, an outward, upward motion sketched into the space around. Was it just his imagination?

“It sounds like hundreds of pill bugs crawling on velvet,” he said, and at once felt stupid for saying it.

“Yes,” Sarah sighed. “That’s *just* what it sounds like.”

They listened for several more minutes. Then, from somewhere far out in the darkness, a female voice shrieked in fear and pain. Harry jumped up, imagining a young woman set upon by rapists. “What’s that? What’s going on?”

“It sounds horrible, doesn’t it?” To Harry’s horror and disbelief, Sarah was utterly unconcerned.

It came again, and this time he visualized a child who’d stumbled across a dismembered corpse lying across the forest floor.

“It’s only our neighbor’s peacock,” Sarah added. “They sound almost human, don’t they?”

He heard the cry once more, and now that he thought of it as a bird, it didn’t disturb him at all.

“It’s celebrating the night,” she said. “That’s how a peacock says it’s happy.”

Harry felt happy too. Commune life wouldn’t be drab after all. It had peacocks, peacocks that celebrated the world by screeching at it.

Sardar's Cow

This reminiscence of his early commune years depressed Harry.

He'd begun with so much idealism. And now it had come to this: he practiced a form of medicine he despised, he attended trade shows dedicated to the goal of natural medicine profiteering, and he'd just helped his natural medicine cronies invent a phony, cynical, profiteering diet. Harry could feel his young self staring at him from the past, and young Harry wasn't pleased.

He'd finished massaging Geraldine's right foot, and was now working on the left one. "All those theoretical questions seemed to matter so much back then. Whether to eat meat or not eat meat. Whether foods should be eaten raw or cooked. So much hinged on the answer. And now it seems like a fantasy world."

"We were caught up in the eros of the absolute." She tickled his stomach with her right foot. "We thought it was possible to know The Truth. It's a developmentally appropriate state for young people."

He took hold of the foot and held it fast, though absently. "But it's not just young people. All the suckers² at NPEXPO think they know The Truth. Most of them aren't young."

"Much is given to those whom life has spared critical thinking skills."

He laughed, then ran the heel of his hand down her inner calf. He could see the sexual response run through her.

How long had it been since he'd first wanted to sleep with Geraldine? Thirty years. A long time.

It had never worked out between them.

Shortly after arriving at the commune, Harry had become celibate, and regarded all women as sisters. Geraldine thought this quite admirable, tried on the same philosophy for at least a week before she moved in with Sardar.

When Harry recovered from this attack of celibacy, Geraldine was still living with Sardar. She broke up with him a few years later, but by then Harry had married Emily's mother.

Geraldine had once played at seducing Harry during his marriage, but after an intensely erotic fully clothed close call at a holistic health conference, he turned back from the brink. This annoyed her, and for the next year she refused to return his phone calls. Two years after his wife died, he called again, and this time she did call back, but only to say that she'd begun a relationship with a man ten years younger than herself, and it had changed her life.

He phoned again a year later to see how it was going. The relationship with the younger man was already an event in the distant past, but she'd recently fallen in love with a married man, and thought that perhaps she might forever prefer the role of a mistress to that of partner. By the time this experiment ended in a break-up, Harry was taking a leave of absence from High-Priest-of-AltMeddom to date a woman with whom he had nothing in common, and now *he* wasn't available. The pattern had never altered since. On each of the rare occasions when Geraldine found herself between relationships, Harry was in one of his rare post-marriage attempts at relationship.

Three decades. Quite a while to long for someone.

He ran his hand down her leg again, beginning at mid thigh, but this time she showed no erotic response. She was wearing her philosopher's look now, remote and cold and analytic.

"We shouldn't make fun of believers," she said. "If a child pretends a stick on blue carpet is a boat on water, no decent person would say, 'That's not a boat. That's a stick.' No, one must respect the spirit of the thing and say, 'Nice boat there.' The same is true when grownups play their make-believe games. One must say, 'Nice system of healing there,' even though if it's clear that what they're doing is no more a true form of healing than the blue carpet is a real lake. They're enjoying the fantasy. Only a boor would criticize it."

"But these are adults, Geraldine. I thought you stop playing games when you grow up."

"That's a good one! Most of life is a game of let's-pretend. You and I are just as caught up in it as anyone else. Only, we can't see it because it's our own let's-pretend."

"Well, I agree with you, at least in principle. But, here's a different point. When a sucker² like Ashley tells people that acupuncture balances the body's energy, at least she's believes it. We're lying consciously. Doesn't that put us in the wrong?"

"Not at all. In medicine, lying is a virtue. It powers the placebo effect."

"Can lying ever be a virtue?"

"Of course. You always did tend to confuse morality and purity. Do you remember Sardar's cow, back at the commune? Sardar gave us the definitive talk on the topic. Remember?"

Harry did remember. He couldn't exactly forget.

Sardar ran the commune's organic beef farm, one of its most successful cottage industries. The Home of the Spirit's organic beef sold all around New England and made the commune a great deal of money.

Naturally enough, Sardar wanted the commune to serve his meat once in a while. But almost every communalist was dead set against it. According to prevailing opinion at the Home of the Spirit, once meat is cooked in a pan, that pan is forever contaminated, and whosoever eats from it imbibes the energy of death.²⁶

They'd accept the income he brought in, but not the product he used to create the income. It bothered Sardar a great deal.

Sardar was tall and gaunt, almost Lincolnesque, and over thirty. Much to Harry's annoyance, Geraldine took a liking to him. On the third day after their arrival at the commune, she charmed Sardar into giving her and Harry a tour of the organic beef farm.

Sardar drove them there in a huge red pickup truck decorated with swathes of gray primer. They bounced over the bridge that crossed the creek, passed a large ploughed field covered with tomato plants staked to wooden posts, and drove by a lake at which several women sat pounding something in metal bowls. Sardar explained it was mochi, sweet brown rice, a Japanese food said to be healthful during pregnancy. He said he thought beef was better.

After the lake, Sardar pulled off onto a rough road cut into the woods, drove a hundred yards and parked beside a small barn. This barn was no more than half the size of the old Shaker barn up at the commune, but it was newly made of fresh pine boards.

"The first time I had to do this," Sardar said, "I didn't know if I could stand it. You look at them, and they're alive. They're like you. They have eyes that see you, and they don't want to die."

It took a moment, and then Harry realized what Sardar was talking about. He looked at Geraldine, and saw that she'd caught it too. She had her hands pushed down on her knees and lips squeezed tight together, but her eyes glittered.

"That's one of the arguments for vegetarianism," Harry said. "What was it Stephen Gaskin said? 'Only eat things that don't try to run away from you.'"

"I will not deny that there's a difference between killing vegetables and killing cattle," Sardar said. "And I do not deny that it's a moral issue." He shut off the ignition but made no move to get out of the truck. "Here's the way I think about it." He held up his enormous hands and looked straight ahead as if he were lecturing to the windshield. "I once took a twenty-foot motorboat off the Maine coast to see whales. I found one, a big gray whale with a newborn calf. While I was watching, a group of orcas swam up. The mother gray tried to protect her baby, but she couldn't. After they'd torn the calf to pieces, the remaining orcas took chunks out of the mother's stomach. She was so big, they didn't cut her down much, and she wasn't dead when they left. I watched her bleed to death."

He paused for longer than Harry had ever known anyone to pause, and then said, "That's how nature is. It's violent. Animals eat each other alive. If we want to live according to nature's laws, we should do as nature does." He paused again. "You're free to disagree, of course."

Sardar threw his weight against the driver's door and climbed out. Harry followed Geraldine out the other side, and stood around feeling useless while Sardar hefted what looked like a heavy drill from the back of his truck.

"Are you sure you want to see this?" he asked. A weeping willow overhead filtered the light and cast tiny moving shadows on his face. "Cause if you don't, that's OK. You can wait out here. Or you can walk back. We're not that far."

"I don't have a problem watching," Geraldine said. Harry could feel Geraldine's visceral attraction for what was coming. It drew her.

It didn't draw Harry. He longed to slog back up the road to Sarah's herb garden, help her weed the borage, and kill nothing more than a few clumps of grass. But he said that he didn't have a problem either, and followed them through the barn door.

The barn smelled sour, but it was clean and neat to look at, and the floor was covered with fresh straw. Sardar took a loop of rope down from the wall and opened the door of a stall. There was a cow in it, a huge solid-black creature with rounded shoulders and a dull, sullen look, nothing like the placid milk cows on the organic farm at UC Santa Cruz. The cow stared at Harry, and he moved his eyes away.

Sardar threw the rope around the cow's neck, and it promptly bent its head to take a mouthful of straw.

"Do you think it knows it's going to die?" Geraldine asked.

"I don't think she does," Sardar said. "I'll tell her in a minute."

He hauled on the rope and the cow followed him across the barn. Geraldine walked beside him and Harry lagged behind. They passed through an open archway and entered a large room walled with cinderblocks and floored with clean concrete. A neatly coiled hose hung on one wall near a faucet, and in a corner sat an adjustable stool on wheels and a small metal bucket. On the wall opposite the hose, blue plastic aprons hung on a hook beside something that resembled a stainless steel built-in ironing board. A sling-like contraption hung from a pulley on the ceiling. The cow resisted walking in, and Sardar slapped her on the rump. She started forward and stood in the center of the concrete room. One front leg trembled.

Sardar dressed himself in one of the aprons. He plugged his machine into a 220-volt outlet by the ironing board, pulled up the stool, and sat at eye level with the cow. "I'm going to kill you now," he said. "That's the way of it. I'm sorry."

He tugged on a loop of chain dangling from the pulley, and the sling dropped to the ground beside the cow. He kicked the sling between the cow's legs, and asked Harry to hook it around back up to the pulley. Glad for something to do, Harry knelt carefully by the sling, wary of the cow's hooves, and found a chain coiled in it with a hook at the end. He lifted the hook and attached it where Sardar indicated, a metal loop hanging from the pulley. Sardar worked the chain again and the sling drew up tight against the cow's belly. It stamped its feet but didn't fight.

Sardar fondled the drill in his lap. "This is a bolt gun. It shoots a bolt into her head and kills her instantly. You'll have to stand behind me now. She might move and I could miss."

The cow continued to chew her cud placidly as Sardar centered the bolt gun on her forehead. Harry and Geraldine moved behind Sardar, and Harry held his breath. Sardar mumbled under his breath. Harry caught a few words and realized he was saying the Our Father. Then three sounds occurred in succession: a click, a thud like a rubber hammer pounding on a wall, and a gasping sigh. The cow's knees buckled and the sling held her up. A small circle of blood oozed from her skull.

"She's not all the way dead yet," Sardar said, "but she doesn't have a brain to suffer with." He kicked the bucket into position, pulled a knife from a sheath at his belt, and slit the animal's neck. Blood spurted into the bucket and some splashed onto the floor.

Harry stepped back. Geraldine had her hands to her mouth but she stepped forward.

"Better stay away," Sardar said. "You don't have an apron on. You'll get blood all over you."

Sardar reeled in the hanging chain until the sling lifted the cow several feet off the floor. He unlatched the stainless steel iron board and unfolded it from the wall. A set of sturdy legs locked into position, and Harry realized it was a butchering table. Sardar grunted with effort as he worked the cow into position on the table with one hand while he manipulated the chain and pulley with another. Geraldine took an apron from the wall, tied it on, and helped him move the carcass. When he had it in place to his satisfaction, he smiled and offered to teach them to butcher.

"You wouldn't mind if I walked back?" Harry said. "That was a lot to take in."

"I agree," Sardar said. "It's a lot to take in."

"I'll stay," Geraldine said.

Compassionate Revenge

Looking back, Harry realized that he and Geraldine had followed different spiritual paths ever since. He'd hiked back up the road and joined Sarah in her herb garden. Geraldine became Sardar's assistant, and later his lover. He'd always felt like a naïve idealist compared to her.

Perhaps she hadn't fallen off the path. Perhaps she'd just fully embraced her own understanding of spirituality.

"So what you're saying," Harry asked, "is that lying is like killing cows, perfectly natural, and just fine?"

"You have to accept life in all its ugliness, Harry. In the case of medicine, that means deceiving your patients."

"Are you sure that's all right with you?"

She nodded, but she looked away, and pulled her feet out of his lap. She slipped them back in her shoes, pulled a brush out of her purse and gave her hair a few strokes. She looked perfectly self-content for five seconds, and then she changed. "No it's not all right. I feel like a prostitute. A fucking prostitute. It sucks."

He leaned forward and took both her arms. "Why don't you just quit? You have enough money."

"Because I hate the way this all turned out. It was supposed to be true, not fucking bullshit." She pulled away from him, found a napkin on the table, and dabbed at her eyes, laughing the way women sometimes do when they cry but don't want to lose themselves in it. "I *am* going to quit. But I need to have some kind of closure, Harry. That's what this diet means to me. Closure."

"How about you tell the truth and get closure that way? You could write an exposé, something like 'Confessions of a Quack.' It might be a best seller. At least, it would be true."

She seemed genuinely appalled. "How can you be so cruel and callous, Harry? Patients *benefit* from the placebo effect. They benefit a great deal. Do you want it on your conscience that you took it away from them?"

Taken aback by the paradox of what she'd said, he thought for a while before saying anything. "So what we know, you and I, we can't tell it to anyone?"

"Yes. It's orphan knowledge. No one wants to claim it. Not the patients, for sure. Not the doctors either. Who wants to admit that their life's work is bullshit?"

She dabbed her eyes again, put away the tissue. The anger and sadness had disappeared. Geraldine was herself again: cynical, deep, unreachable.

"So how long do you think it will take you to write your first draft of the EightFoldWayDiet book," she asked. "A couple of months?"

"Weeks, not months. Bullshit alternative medicine is easy."

"I'm not as fast as you. Two hundred pages of inspired wisdom will take me at least six weeks to crank out. There's a lot to cover. The Inner Spoiled Child. Pop-Taoism. Pop-Kabala. Pop-Buddhism. The you-create-your-own-reality blah-blah-blahism. Yoga, of course, because it's coming in fashion. And a whole dictionary full of illness puns. I told someone the other day her skin rash meant she was making rash decisions. She took it as profound."

Harry paced over to study the dried-up food on the banquet table. He wished they were in a real room, a place where people lived. He couldn't properly sense himself in this faceless hotel conference room, let alone connect with Geraldine. "The fact is, I'm not at all sure I'm going to write that book. Largo dragged me in here. Yes, I played along. I wanted to impress you, I think. And I do have a certain desire for revenge. But I don't think I really want to go this far. The EightFoldWayDiet is a great joke, but that's all it is."

She ran up to him, and made her face a pleading clown's mask. "A joke? All that genius, all that knowledge, a joke? You don't get abilities like that for nothing, Harry. Gifts like yours need to be used."

"That line won't work on me, Gerrie. I've been all the same places you have."

She turned demure, flirtatious. "Well, at least it was nice you wanted to impress me."

She took his hand, but he kept his eyes focused down at the table.

"Please look at me, Harry," she said.

He lifted up his eyes, and saw a more authentic-looking Geraldine than he could ever remember seeing before.

"You think I'm shallow, don't you?" she said. "Because I'm always taking on one way of being and then another. But what I do isn't any different than what you do. Remember that essay you wrote in the UC Santa Cruz paper, and then wrote two separate rebuttals? You think about things from ten different perspectives. I *live* things from ten different perspectives. I want to understand from the inside."

"And what have you found out by doing all that?" he asked.

"That all fucking beliefs are fucking arbitrary and all the pretty stories are fucking make-believe. We live on the edge of the abyss, end of story. All I want to do now is retire. I want to live somewhere alone, with a schnauzer like the one you had, and go for walks on the beach by myself."

She really *was* sincere. He'd never seen her so sincere.

She laughed, and dabbed at her eyes again. "What about you? How long can you go on faking, Harry?"

"Not much longer, it's true," he murmured.

"Think about it this way."

"If you're going to give me a rationalization, don't bother. Rationalizations don't help me."

"Poor thing. That's a serious disability." She touched his cheek.

The erotic attraction had dissolved, but he felt close to her. They'd exhausted themselves in parallel, run through the same spiritual romance.

"How about a summary instead of a rationalization," she suggested.

He didn't argue.

"We've spent our lives getting here, and we've found that there's nothing here. Nothing for us. Yes, that's true, and that's sad. But there is something here for our patients. They project their desires onto us, and those *desires* are real. They dream us into being as holy healers. We're their work of art. Well then, don't we owe it to them to give one last really great performance?"

"That's not a rationalization?"

"I don't think so," she said. "It's the best way I know to look at the last twenty-five years. Any other way and I'll get cynical."

"You're serious?"

"Yes I'm serious. Look, Harry, our patients want to have it all: treatments that are as effective as those of scientific medicine, but also soft, humane and gentle. Ancient wisdom magically free from ancient superstition. Reliability without the trouble of research. It isn't possible, but they want it anyway. So why not pretend to give it to them? If they believe, then it will be real."

"So what you're saying is that even if the EightFoldWayDiet is revenge, it's compassionate revenge?"

"Exactly."

Compassionate revenge. It fit with the name of the diet.

And he had to admit that it sounded like a great deal of fun.

Section 6. Dreams, Fantasies and Romance

In Which Gabriel Adds Zero to his Score

A few moments after he and Geraldine had returned to the Expo floor together, she'd seen some people she needed to talk to and ran off to talk to them. Harry was now alone again. It was four o'clock.

Melanie had said he should call her at five. Having nothing particular to do for the next hour, Harry walked aimlessly along the NPEXPO aisles running up mental totals of his living expenses.

The care of his mother formed by far the largest figure. Back before her Alzheimer's disease had accelerated, she'd made him promise never to send her to a nursing home, and now he had to pay for round-the-clock health aides. That, along with medication costs and everything else, added up to \$70,000 a year.

His own personal expenses were relatively low, perhaps another \$50,000, much of which was the mortgage on his modest home. His daughter lived a proper student's existence and needed only \$30,000 a year in subsidy. Thank God she went to a public college. Still, considering the taxes, and the rent on the Victorian, he needed to gross almost \$250,000 to keep up. He earned maybe \$50,000 a year in royalty income from his various books, but to earn the remainder he would have to continue holistic doctoring.

But he couldn't continue holistic doctoring. He couldn't stand it. If something didn't change, he'd either assault one of his patients or himself.

Which led his mind back to the Holistic Galleria. Perhaps he should really consider that supervisory position he'd discussed with Ashley. Perhaps he could live with that.

Possibly. Given a little distance, the supervisory remove, perhaps he could maintain a philosophical perspective, and keep in mind that, although most of the specific treatments practiced under his auspices were worthless in themselves, their placebo effect did offer a genuine benefit.

On the other hand, if he joined the Galleria, he'd find himself directly in Holding's sights. Holding would love to take down both Holistic Harry *and* the Holistic Galleria. Did he really want to fight Holding again?

His mind responded with a resounding, "no." Forget it. Play it safe and keep your head down.

But his body and heart said, "Absolutely. Go for it."

Body and heart versus mind. Two out of three votes in favor. And he *ached* for a fight with someone. A good battle against Holding would serve perfectly.

He felt confident he could win this time. He'd mentally fought and re-fought all his past encounters with Holding, and he knew exactly what he should have said and done in each of them. Besides, this was California, not Kansas, and 2004 rather than the '90s. Public opinion favored alternative medicine now, and medical boards were anything but immune to outside pressure. With any luck, Harry would hand the quackbuster his first big loss, and follow it up with a countersuit for harassment.

Then, too, Holding's persecution would put the Galleria on the map in a big way. Patients would flood in after a public battle. With his profit sharing, he could make enough to pay his living expenses twice over, and finally save something.

An affectionate roll of laughter broke his mind out of its calculations. "What the hell are you doing?"

Harry returned to present awareness and found that he was staring at a ceiling support post as if the Astroturf crawling up its sides had something personal to say to him. It was Gabriel, greatly amused, and struggling not to drop the six cardboard boxes of chai bottles he was holding three to an arm.

Harry said, "Here let me help you with that," and took a few boxes. "I was thinking about how to make money. What are you up to?"

Gabriel gave a delicious, self-caressing laugh. "Thinking about how to lose money. I'm bringing chai samples to Mountain Folks, the natural foods distributors. I'm going to talk them into signing a distribution agreement. They'll probably take such a big cut I won't make a penny."

"That sounds like a terrible idea. What's your profit margin?"

Gabriel shrugged. "I have no idea."

"Then how do you know how much you can afford to pay them for distribution?"

"I don't know. I was just planning to let them distribute my chai for a bit, and if it seems like I'm losing money, I'll stop."

"Wouldn't it make more sense to calculate the percentages in advance?" But even as he said it, Harry knew he shouldn't bother. He might as well ask an alternative practitioner to hold off providing a new treatment until *after* it was proved effective as ask Gabriel to follow sane business practices. "Never mind. How's the Expo going for you?"

"Fantastic. This girl came by the booth an hour ago, and whoa, talk about beautiful. How do I look, by the way?" He spread his arms so Harry could inspect him.

"Pretty nice," Harry said. It wasn't one of Gabriel's better dressing days. He wore a wrinkled grey and black striped dress shirt that shrieked Salvation Army, and under it a yellow T-shirt with gaping holes between the neckline and the rest of the fabric. He looked good otherwise, though, fit, and vital, his face clear of the boils that sometimes flared up like oversized acne.

"Oh my God," Gabriel said, "There's the girl I was telling you about." He pointed covertly at a woman walking a few yards away. "Is she too beautiful, or what?"

Harry glanced at a dark complexioned young woman of perhaps twenty-two, possibly Indonesian, undoubtedly somewhat pretty.

"She really is beautiful," Harry said. "You know, if you hired an accountant, they could figure out exactly how much of a cut you could afford to pay your distributors."

"Accountants are expensive," he said. "Isn't she amazing? I can't believe how gorgeous she is."

The Indonesian woman had come to a stop beside a booth titled "Triple Traditionals." It was a company with an interesting marketing angle. Triple Traditionals sent traditional Navajo seeds to Australia to be planted and harvested by aborigines; from there, the herbs were shipped to the Amazon, where Yanomami tribesmen dried them and boxed them up. The final product was thus blessed by three primal peoples.

"Why don't you go talk to her again?" Harry said. "She doesn't look busy."

"I'm too shy," Gabriel said, prolonging the "y" in "shy." His voice was warm with sweetness for himself. "She has to come to me. I gave her my card. Maybe she'll call."

They walked on, but were arrested a few yards later when Gabriel called out another sighting. Harry had no idea precisely which woman he was supposed to be looking at, but he threw a checking-out glance in the right direction, and supplied an appropriately appreciative comment. "Oh, by the way," he added, "I met someone you know. Melanie Karnitine."

"Melanie who?"

"She runs the natural food store in Felton."

"Oh." Gabriel tore his eyes away from the distant figure. "That Melanie. We had quite a thing going last Expo. She was really into me."

Of course she was. "Do you mind if I go after her this time? If I have the story right, you never called her afterwards."

"Of course I didn't call her. I never call. Anyway, she's too old for me. You know I can't really go for anyone who's only ten years younger than me." He stared after someone else in the crowd. "Wow, is this place full of beautiful women. I have a good feeling about this. I'm sure to get laid this week."

In his fantasy life, Gabriel was a marvelous womanizer, but in real life, he never got anywhere. Harry called him a "secondary virgin," someone who had regained his youthful virginity by a sufficiently long period of celibacy. Despite his best intentions, Gabriel hadn't had sex with a woman for years. Harry at least had sex from time to time. It was relationships he couldn't do.

Gabriel dropped a box. He bent forward to pick it up, froze in a bent-over position, and said, "Hold on a second." He put his hand on his lower back, and grimaced as he gradually straightened up.

"You OK?"

"Yeah, just threw my back out the other day. It still hurts."

"You should see a chiropractor for that," Harry said.

Gabriel bent to one side and then the other. He put his thumbs on his sacrum and leaned back into them. "I thought you don't believe in alternative medicine."

"I believe the parts that have evidence. There just aren't many parts that do have evidence. Studies suggest that chiropractic spinal manipulation really does relieve back pain to a certain extent."

"What about acupuncture? I was thinking of asking *you* to give me a treatment."

"There's not much evidence for acupuncture and back pain. Most of the studies failed to find real acupuncture more effective for back pain than fake acupuncture."

"I can't believe it. You've become such a cynic," Gabriel said.

"I'm not cynical. I've just read all the studies. Acupuncture doesn't do a whole lot, except maybe for tendonitis and post-surgical nausea."

"But I've gotten acupuncture, and I know it works."

"The placebo effect is a marvelous thing."

"It can't be the placebo effect," Gabriel said. He looked pained, his vitality crimped by what Harry was saying. "I would know if it was only a placebo."

"No you wouldn't. No one believes it's the placebo effect when it happens to them. When it comes to medical treatments, one's personal sense of knowing isn't reliable. People in the placebo group of double-blind studies often think the treatment is so effective that they'd recommend it to their friends."

This was all true, but Gabriel looked so personally hurt, his natural joy so oppressed, that Harry wished he hadn't said a word of this.

"I can't argue with you," Gabriel said. "You quote all these double-blind studies, and how do I know? If I talked to an acupuncturist, he'd quote studies that show acupuncture works. Besides sometimes you just have to believe. If you start distrusting ancient wisdom, then where do you stop?"

That's what it really is, Harry realized. He's afraid that if he begins to doubt alternative medicine then he'll have to doubt everything else. If the ancients could have been so totally wrong about medicine, they might also be totally wrong about life after death, synchronicities, God, Enlightenment, any of the things that made life rich and magical for Gabriel.

Harry looked for a way to back out of the whole topic. "You're right," he said, "science does have limits. Sometimes you have to trust your intuition. After all, from a scientific point of view, a beautiful woman is just an example of anatomy."

"That's it exactly! Science is deadly to everything that really matters. Wow, look at her! A beautiful woman with a cello -- that's classic. But why would someone carry a cello at NPEXPO?"

Harry caught a faint glimpse of a woman in a dark black coat holding some kind of big case, but she disappeared into the crowd. He handed Gabriel his dropped chai boxes. "Maybe she was a great cello player in her last life, and she's trying to find someone here to do a past life regression so she can get her skills back."

Gabriel's face lit up. "Did I tell you about my reincarnation theory? Or did you make that up yourself?"

Harry feigned incomprehension. "What theory do you mean?" Actually, he knew perfectly well. Gabriel had alluded to this theory several times, though only in passing. Harry had brought it up on purpose to wipe out their previous conversation.

Instantly revived, Gabriel launched into the subject with enthusiasm. "I've been working out a theory about the reincarnation of musical prodigies. Mozart's the perfect example. He came into the world as a fully formed musical genius. Obviously, a reincarnation, but of whom? That's an unsolved mystery. But it's easy to see who he became next. Schubert was born only about five years after Mozart died, and that's the right length of time, according to the Tibetans. He was the same kind of prodigy as Mozart, and he composed some of his most beautiful melodies when he was a child. Now, get this: his earliest music sounds so much like Mozart you can't tell them apart."

"He could have been influenced musically by Mozart, couldn't he? I mean, in the ordinary musical way?"

"The music is too similar. Schubert's early music is *identical*. He *was* Mozart. It all fits. Schubert had the kind of life Mozart always wanted. Mozart was a freakshow, a one of a kind, always lonely. He craved ordinariness. So he took a rebirth as Schubert. Schubert grew up in a big happy family, with lots of friends and a real life. Mozart's dream. Then he went and died young just like Mozart. Another really obvious reincarnation is Emanuel Feuermann being reborn as Jacques DuPret. They were conductors, not composers, but the connections are incredible."

Harry didn't believe a word of the underlying theory, but Gabriel was a walking encyclopedia on the details of musicians' biographies and artistic accomplishments and musical styles, and Harry loved to hear him talk. It was like taking a really good college course. Besides, he liked to see his friend so happy.

"Excuse me, is that *Bengali* chai you're holding?"

Gabriel and Harry turned around and saw an extremely striking woman, maybe twenty-nine, thirty, with long straight brown hair, olive-toned skin, and a delicate, fine-featured face. She was so beautiful even Harry noticed it.

"I've only sampled Bengali chai on one occasion," she said, "but I judge it greatly better than any other kind. Where do you purchase it?"

"He makes it himself," Harry said, pointing to Gabriel. "This is Mr. Bengali Chai you're talking to."

Her eyes opened wide, and then she transformed her amazement into controlled irony. "How do you do, Mr. Chai?" She took Gabriel's free hand and shook it gracefully. "I'm Lorena Betsimisarakas, and most honored to meet you."

When Gabriel didn't say anything, too tongue-tied by the woman's beauty to get a word out, Harry covered for him. "His name is Gabriel Benjamin, not Mr. Chai. And I'm Harry Boullard. So now I've done the introductions. What kind of name is Betsimisarakas, if you don't mind my asking?"

"It's a Madagascan name," Gabriel said. "Related to the ruling family."

"I'm amazed you know that," she said. "As you say, I am a member of what was once Madagascan aristocracy. My branch has come down a ways, though, from its vicious, exploitative roots. Today, I'm a mere acupuncturist in Marin County. But how did you know?"

"He knows everything," Harry said.

"No I don't," Gabriel said. "I've just been everywhere. I visited Madagascar several years ago." He fumbled with his boxes, and pulled out a small chai bottle, one with a pink label. "Here. You can have some chai as a present." She read the label and gave him an arch smile. "Female Tonic chai? So what will it do to me?"

Gabriel looked at Harry and they both laughed.

"It acts as a love potion," Harry said. "At least, according to one of Gabriel's customers. A dissatisfied customer, I might add."

Gabriel took up the story. "It's true. There's a woman in New York City who blames my chai for getting her in a relationship she didn't want to get into. She was a regular at a coffeehouse that serves my chai. They'd run out of the regular chai flavor, so they substituted Female Tonic chai without telling anyone. One day, she drank some, and fell in love with the guy sitting next to her."

"Entirely due to the chai?" the acupuncturist asked.

"Listen to the rest of the story. So they spent the night together. In the morning, she realized he was a jerk and made him leave. But the next night, she'd had two cups of chai at the coffeehouse before he showed up, and again they ended up in bed. This kept going for two weeks. Then, I finally brought the café a new supply of regular chai. She heard me talking to the owner about the difference between the two kinds of chai, and she told me her story."

"That afternoon, when she drank regular chai only, and he sat next to her, she told him to fuck off. She blamed me for those two wasted weeks."

"I don't know, then," the Madagascan acupuncturist said. "Are you doing me a favor by giving me this, or not? Perhaps you should affix a warning label to this female tonic chai."

"Maybe I should," Gabriel said. He frowned, and seemed genuinely worried.

"You and I could make the experiment," she said. "We could drink chai together."

She said it so archly that to Harry the telepathic message was as loud as if it were broadcast over the expo PA system: Invite me to your motel room for a cup of chai, and we'll go from there.

But Gabriel was as clueless as always. "I've already drunk all the chai I can handle this morning. But you could go to my booth. My partner Gary is there. He can give you samples."

"I already know I like it. What I want to know is where I can buy some."

This time Harry sent his own telepathic message: She lives in Marin County, remember? That's only a couple of hours from Santa Cruz. You can deliver her a bottle in person. That's what she wants you to offer. Don't you get it?

"You want to buy some chai?" Gabriel asked. "I'll give you my card." He fumbled in his pockets but couldn't find a card.

She pulled out her conference book and found a pen in her purse. He recited his number and she scribbled it down. It was Gabriel's turn to ask for her number, and when he didn't, Harry could see that she took it as a rejection.

"Call me, and we'll get together sometime," Gabriel said.

"Yeah, sure," she said. "Sometime."

After she left, Gabriel said, "My God, What did you think of her?"

"I liked her. And she liked you."

"She was flirting with me like crazy, wasn't she?"

"So you *did* notice. Why didn't you respond?"

"What do you mean?" he asked, indignantly. "I responded. I melted." He drew out the first "e" in "melted."

"You didn't ask for her phone number."

"I gave her my number, didn't I? I'm sure she'll call."

"Do they ever call, Gabriel? Think about it? Has it ever happened?"

"Naah, she will. She was really into me." He started walking again.

"She felt rejected."

With a tone of patent disbelief, as if he were humoring Harry, Gabriel said, "Why would she feel rejected?"

"Because you didn't ask for her number. You hurt her feelings."

"Really?" He didn't believe it. His voice was full of sweetness. He was positively glowing.

He's amazing, Harry thought. He only sees what he expects to see. His fantasies are more real to him than the real world. He gets in a five-minute flirtation and he feels like he's had a five-year relationship.

Completely out of touch with reality. Just like a sucker². Yet, it was rather charming.

Harry was considering whether he should have asked for the Madagascan acupuncturist's number on Gabriel's behalf, when, no more than a dozen feet away, he spied Melanie deep in conversation with the proprietor of an emu oil booth. The idea of dealing with Melanie and Gabriel at the same time made Harry anxious, and he tried to angle Gabriel away. Too late. Melanie saw them and waved.

Feldenkrais

She moved with a beautiful self-contained balance, as if a Leonardo de Vinci circle were drawn around her, her arms and legs moving in perfect geometrical proportion.

He hadn't noticed this about her before. Was she a dancer? A practitioner of Alexander technique?

"Hello again, Harry," she said. "Hello Gabriel. Remember me? We flirted a little last year."

"Of course I remember you," Gabriel said, and laughed nervously.

"Do you sell Gabriel's chai at your store?" Harry asked.

Melanie had come to a halt far enough away from Harry that a floorwalker hurrying by forced his way between them. Once he'd passed, she moved up closer. "I used to sell it. I still would if he'd bother to send me new supplies once in a while."

"Uh-oh. Am I in trouble?"

"We ran out months ago. You've promised to send me more at least three times."

Gabriel managed to look sheepish and sly at the same time. "We've had ... a shortage for a bit. I'll get you some."

"Gabriel doesn't stoop to mass production," Harry said. "Each limited edition of Bengali chai is made lovingly by a master chai brewer, in small quantities, for the discerning drinker."

"I like that," Gabriel said. "It's almost right. Only, I *would* stoop to mass production if the equipment didn't cost so much."

"That's all very well," Melanie said, "but what am I supposed to do between limited editions? Sell Oregon Chai?"

The mention of Gabriel's great enemy settled it. "I'll get you some," Gabriel said authoritatively. "This week."

"That's great," she said. She had her hands clasped behind her crepe skirt, and she rocked side-to-side using them as the fulcrum. It was a childlike movement, and it signified that Gabriel's slate was now wiped clean. "Anyone want to go eat? I'm starved."

"I could eat," Gabriel said.

Harry didn't feel perfectly optimistic about interlacing the worlds of Gabriel and Melanie throughout an entire dinner. However, when Melanie took Harry by the arm and led them toward a nearby exit, Harry felt drawn into the bubble of her balance, and he stopped worrying.

While Gabriel answered Melanie's questions about chai and its history, they threaded their way through the forest of Plexiglas announcement posts crowding the space just outside the Expo floor, and came to the T-intersection where a long corridor stretched off right and left toward the two hotels connected directly to the Convention Center. They turned right, and had gone on a little way, talking now of Celtic folk songs, when a young woman in blond hair and white clothes ran up to them carrying a stack of Hawaiian leis. They were real leis, made of flowers, not of plastic. She called out, "want to get lei-ed?" and threw a lei around Gabriel's neck. She kissed him on the cheek, and dashed away.

"Amazing!" Gabriel said. He stopped to watch her disappear around a corner, and then began walking again. "What was that about?"

"Women always flirt with Gabriel," Harry said, "and he always thinks it means more than it does."

"Believe me, I know," Melanie said.

"Oh come on," Gabriel said. "Don't tell me she wasn't interested."

"Maybe you can explain it to him, Melanie," Harry said.

"I don't think I want to hear this," Gabriel said.

"Consider it market research," Harry said.

Melanie put her hand on Gabriel's shoulder, pivoted around, and brought him to a full stop facing her. Definitely a dancer, Harry decided. She had her head perfectly balanced on her body, her body supported gracefully by her legs, her feet in harmony with the floor.

She studied Gabriel diagnostically. "Women can't help flirting with him because he looks so alive." She brushed back a bit of his hair. "He doesn't have any worry lines on his face. His natural state is joy." She turned to Harry. "Whereas, you worry all the time. It's written all over your face." She drew a finger along Harry's forehead and down his left temple. "Gabriel doesn't worry. He just lives. Its hard not to flirt with him."

"Is all that true?" Gabriel said, delighted.

"Totally," she said.

Harry said, "But tell him that it doesn't mean a woman's in love with him when she flirts with him."

Before she could answer, another young woman holding leis ran up to them; or, rather, ran up to Gabriel. She saw that Gabriel already had one on and said, "Oh no, you've already gotten lei-ed."

"He could get lei-ed again," Harry said.

She threw two more leis around Gabriel's neck and ran off giggling.

While Gabriel stared at the departing figure of the latest lei-giver, Harry asked Melanie if she was a dancer.

"What makes you think that?"

"The way you stand. It's like you have a carpenter's level in your body, and the bubble's always between the lines. If not dance, then Alexander Technique?"

"I'm impressed, and flattered too, of course. Not Alexander or dance, but close -- Feldenkrais. I'm a certified Feldenkrais practitioner."

"That's amazing," Gabriel said, in a distant voice. "All those flowers! You think NPEXPO's paying for it? It must cost a fortune. Uh-oh. Look over there."

It was yet another extraordinarily beautiful woman, Ethiopian, perhaps.

"I gotta go," Gabriel said. With no other farewell, he hurried after her.

To Trust One's Weakness

"He means it as a sign of trust when he leaves without saying goodbye," Harry said.

"I figured that," Melanie said.

They walked on together. "There's a great Korean restaurant a couple of blocks away," Harry said. "It doesn't have any atmosphere, but the food's great."

She didn't reply.

"You don't like Korean food?" he asked.

"Oh no, nothing like that. I'm just feeling hypoglycemic. Low blood sugar, you know. When I have to eat, I have to eat. I'm about to pass out."

"We could go to the NPEXPO dinner at the Hilton instead," he suggested. "It's closer."

She shook her head. "Too crowded and noisy. I'll just ..." She opened her purse, took out a handful of small wrapped chocolates, and offered Harry one. When he declined, she swallowed one and then another. "That's a little better," she said. "I can make it a couple of blocks now."

They left the Convention Center by the main entrance. Crowds of people flowed out the building with them, peeling off badges and business attitudes as they went. Orange County itself might not be particularly remarkable for its nightlife, but NPEXPO itself put on quite a show in the evenings. There would be cooperative games, Sufi dancing, meditation sessions with itinerant enlightened beings, juice bars where the juice was spiked with kava, tantric eye-to-eye staring workshops (the New Age equivalent of a pickup joint, a sort of meat-market for the astral body), and every other sort of natural-medicine-friendly excitement.

Up ahead they saw the huge tent set up in the Hilton parking lot, where later on a Cuban band would play and organic tequila would be served. Melanie asked Harry if he'd heard about the spectacle at the NPEXPO two years earlier, when Mel Orick, the founder and owner of New Knowledge Inc., had gotten plastered on kava and fallen off the podium. The crowd had carried him hand over hand mosh-pit style, to the back of the room, where an acupuncturist who served as the convention medic revived him with a needle just above the upper lip.²⁷

Not only had Harry heard about it, he'd been standing nearby and discussed the case with the acupuncturist afterwards. That coincidence set off a long comparison of memories to see if Harry and Melanie had been in the same place at the same time at any previous NPEXPOs. They didn't come up with any episodes of actual simultaneity, but they did come across many shared memories of displays, events and stories.

They followed the sidewalk until they reached a point where a huge van labeled "Sports Power" blocked their way. Crowds of enormous men and wiry women milled vigorously around the van and in and out of its many doors. The feeling here was unfriendly -- sports supplement people didn't really get along with alternative medicine people -- so rather than work their way through the obstruction they detoured around into the Hilton parking lot. It had fewer SUVs than most parking lots, and far more Volvos, according to the widely held belief that a gas-guzzling Volvo is more eco-friendly than a gas-guzzling SUV.

Toward the far end of the parking lot, they came to a row of painted school buses. A young woman dressed in a long satin skirt and ankle bracelets hung laundry on a side-view mirror. Harry said the school buses looked like a hippie echo of the Sports Power van, and Melanie laughed. He hoped Gabriel didn't find this place; he'd fall in love and get in an argument within minutes.

A little further on, the parking lot ended at a vacant field traversed by a slim concrete sidewalk. The field might have been charming, a touch of the rural in the midst of the city, if Harry didn't know from past inspections that the weeds thriving natural and free in the parched ground were clogged with condoms, needles and broken vodka bottles. They followed the sidewalk and came out at a stoplight that pierced a major boulevard in the middle of the block. Before them, suburbia stretched out forever. The Convention center was less than a quarter mile behind them, but already they'd reached a place without any character whatsoever. This was, after all, Orange County.

"We're almost there," Harry said, and pointed across the street to a short strip mall, where a sign read, "Kim's Korean Kuisine."

"I know it looks bad," he said, "but the food is good."

"I love this sort of place," Melanie said.

As they crossed the street, her shoulder brushed his, and he put his arm around her.

The restaurant was filled with Koreans. A hostess in a flowered blouse led them to a booth, and they took seats opposite each other. Spreading cracks marred the white laminate of the table, and the red vinyl of the seat backs leaked foam rubber through small ragged tears.

"Look at the duct tape on your seat," Melanie said. "It's quite original."

Harry bent around and saw rows of peeling tape holding back the bursting foam rubber of a large torn patch. The duct tape wasn't the usual silver gray: it had a hibiscus pattern that was almost pretty. Must be an Asian brand. "Like flowers growing between blocks of broken sidewalk," he said.

"That's such a beautiful description!" she said.

He couldn't think of anything else to match it though, so he fiddled with a covered crucible that held chili peppers in oil. She ripped open a red and white paper tube and separated the chopsticks.

"Now that we're together," he said, "I feel as shy as Gabriel."

"I don't think so. He's the shyest flirt I've ever met." She looked pale.

"Let's order appetizers right away," he said, "before you faint."

She nodded gratefully.

"How about kujulpan?" he asked. When she gave him a blank look, he said, "That's strips of meat and vegetables wrapped in thin pancakes."

"You go ahead and order for both of us," she said. "I'm not picky."

He did all the talking until the appetizers arrived, and a few bites restored her color.

"I had no idea you practice Feldenkrais," Harry said. "Do you have an office somewhere?"

"Mmm," she said, and wiped her fingers on a napkin. "This is *really* good. You're right about this place. I don't practice yet. I just graduated the training a few months ago. I've been procrastinating. Going into practice isn't like opening a store. You have to sell *yourself* to people. I guess that's where Melanie Karnitine gets shy."

"I might be able to help you get your practice started. I like Feldenkrais a lot. I often recommend it to my patients, but the only practitioner in Santa Cruz is booked up two years ahead."

"Mary Marble, I know. I left her a message, but she didn't return my call. Maybe she feels competitive. Why do you like Feldenkrais so much?"

That made him wonder. According to Moshe Feldenkrais, the founder of the Feldenkrais Method, incorrect movement habits are the true underlying cause of neck pain, back pain and the like. The Feldenkrais method involves increasing clients' awareness of movement so they can rediscover healthy movement patterns.

Perhaps it was Feldenkrais' subtle notions of what constituted proper movement that so appealed to him. Like Harry had said on *Lunch with David Markley*, conventional medicine sees the body as a collection of hinges and motors -- a machine, in other words -- but Feldenkrais approaches movement in a more artistic, organic fashion. It views the body as a living, organic thing designed to work with many degrees of freedom. This philosophy had always struck Harry as full of wisdom.

And yet, come to think of it, Feldenkrais therapy didn't have any better scientific support than any other form of alternative medicine. Maybe less. Certainly, as a kind of dance training, or a form of internal awareness, it had its own merit. But Feldenkrais was marketed as far more than that. It was supposedly able to enhance recovery from all kinds of medical problems: back pain, shoulder pain, knee pain, even Parkinson's disease and multiple sclerosis.

Did it really do anything, as it self, or was it just another complicated placebo?

No one had ever compared Feldenkrais to, say, fake ultrasound therapy, which in itself was highly effective.

Now that he reflected on it, Harry realized he had no more reason to believe in Feldenkrais than any other unproven nice-sounding alternative therapy.

In other words, he'd been sucker2ed into believing in it: The old subtle-and-complicated-must-be-true routine.

He couldn't say any of this out loud, though. Melanie had studied Feldenkrais, and it was her dream to practice it. He had to say something supportive. "I guess I like Feldenkrais because it's so subtle," he said. And I really love some of Moshe Feldenkrais' sayings."

"What's your favorite one?" she asked.

"The one about not using your strength to overcome your weakness."

"Find your true weakness and surrender to it," she quoted. "Most people spend their lives using their strengths to overcome or cover up their weaknesses.' It sounds paradoxical, doesn't it?"

"It's certainly opposite to conventional wisdom. I know that on one level Moshe Feldenkrais was just talking about the Feldenkrais Method itself, the way it teaches people to explore the weaker muscles of their body, rather than ride over the weak muscles with the stronger ones. But, of course, he also meant it philosophically. I get a feeling that it has a particular meaning for me." He continued the quote. "Those few who use their strengths to incorporate their weaknesses, who don't divide themselves, those people are very rare. In any generation there are a few and they lead their generation."

“Is being rare important to you?” she asked.

She really *was* perceptive. “That is one of my faults. I can’t deny it. I have always enjoyed being special, being unique.”

“The one and only Holistic Harry. You *have* led your generation, part of it, anyway.”

He shrugged. “A minor leader. But the quote has more significance for me than vanity. ‘Find your true weakness and surrender to it.’ Like you say, it sounds wrong, paradoxical, and yet I can feel some wisdom there.”

He did feel some wisdom there. Perhaps he was at last giving up on being strong, searching for his true weakness.

Her eyes were searching his again. “What does it say to you?”

“I’m not sure. It just tickles something. You know what I mean?”

“I think I do. Like it’s speaking some words that are hidden deep inside you?”

He was about to tell her she had it just right when the bustling arrival of the waiter with a tray holding a dozen small dishes interrupted the moment.

Grapes of the Moment

For the next several minutes, they did little but eat, interrupting this serious work only for appreciative murmurs and occasional brief comments. When Melanie spooned some bean threads onto her plate, Harry warned her that they were hard to eat without scissors. They would seem to run on forever as one long, single noodle, and she'd end up with a never-ending waterfall attached to her mouth.

She looked up at him, alarmed. "What do you suggest, then?"

"Allow your self to behave with unconscionable lack of delicacy. Grab the noodles with your fingers like a rope and bite off a piece."

She spooned some bean threads into her mouth, remained connected to the plate by an ongoing flow, drew in some more, looked at him with wide-eyed horror and, as he'd advised, took the stream of bean threads in one hand and nibbled her way out of the predicament.

"I think I could help you get a Feldenkrais practice started," he said, after dealing similarly with his own flow of bean threads. "Have you heard of the Holistic Galleria?"

"Ashley Wayland's new place? You know, I really admire Ashley. She seems to be a woman who really knows what she wants, and goes for it."

"Your impression is right, she really is like that. I'm going to be working with her in the Galleria. I happen to know she has rooms for rent, and I also know they don't have a Feldenkrais practitioner lined up."

Melanie seemed strangely cool to the idea. She ate a little more and said, "I'm not so sure that I want to practice yet."

"You could just teach the public classes then, rather than do the one on one therapy. You know, lead an Awareness through Movement group."

"I hope you didn't bring me here just to talk business," she said, but softened it with a smile.

He apologized. "I just happen to like Feldenkrais, a lot, and I want to be able to provide it to my patients. You'd be doing *me* a favor."

"I do appreciate the offer. I guess I'm just a little scared of going into practice. Mmm," she said, chewing on a forkful of *kyujachae* salad. "The food is really great here. I'm so glad you brought me."

"I'm so glad I'm here with you," he said. Then he added, "I love being with you."

The words rocked her balance point, shifted her center of gravity closer to him.

"Me too," she said.

Harry felt a sense of opportunity in the moment, waiting like a bunch of red grapes to be plucked. He should say something romantic. Anything at all would do so long as it strengthened and prolonged this moment's feeling of connection.

But what he really wanted to do was tell her that he'd lost the real love of his life, alternative medicine, and that he didn't know what to do.

He fought to keep the words back. After all, she ran a natural food store. She read books on emu oil. He didn't dare say this to her.

On the other hand, he thought of what Moishe Feldenkrais had said, and wondered whether it would be better to allow his weakness to overcome his strength. Maybe his self-restraint was the kind of strength he needed to overcome, and what he really needed to do was blurt out what he really felt.

Unfortunately, Harry had vast resources in the self-restraint department. By the time he had made any progress against his internal censor, the opportunity for romance had passed, and she'd left for the rest room.

Having lost the intangible, he settled for the tangible instead. When she returned, he asked, "So what are you doing this evening? Do you want to go dancing? If this year's band is as good as last year's ..."

"I'd love to go dancing with you, Harry." She'd been smiling but now her face clouded. "But I have to go back to my room and make a few phone calls first. My mother's sick. I almost didn't make it here because of it. I need to check up on her."

He thought of offering her his cell phone, and then realized he hadn't brought it with him. "What's wrong with her? Is it serious?"

"It's very serious," she said.

He gave her a chance to say more, and when she didn't, he said, "My mother has severe Alzheimer's. So I understand. Anyway, I have to make some calls too. Let's do that, and then hook up again, OK?"

They didn't talk much on the way back. Melanie was contained within herself, a walking still-point, but he felt close to her.

A Career is Born

When Harry opened the door to his room, he felt exhausted, and sank onto the edge of the bed. Romance was hard work. He had removed one shoe when he noticed his cell phone on the bedside table. He tipped the screen toward him and saw that he'd missed three calls.

He called in for his messages, and found two: one from Ashley, saying that she'd thought of another reason why he should join the Holistic Galleria, and two from Emily, demanding to know where he was and why he hadn't answered his cell phone or called her back and would he please hurry up and call her now, and not make her wait forever because it was VERY important.

He took off his other shoe, arranged pillows so he could sit comfortably on the bed against the headboard, and composed himself for a typically stressful conversation with his beloved daughter.

She was in one of her engaging, cheery moods. He could picture her lying on her back on the floor, holding her cat up in the air with one hand and the phone with the other. "Hey dad, what do you think about this idea?"

He translated the request to, "Hey, Dad, I want you to tell me that what I'm about to say is a great idea."

"Tell me," he said.

"I've been confused, you know, about what I should do with my life."

"I'd be confused if you weren't confused," he said.

"I know. You're *so* understanding about it. I *really* appreciate that. But I have to figure it out sometime. Basically, I don't want to live on student loans forever. Or sponge off of you."

"That's an extremely laudable goal," he said.

She laughed, and then her voice became clipped, decisive. "I need to find a way to make money, and I'm not going to get anywhere with General Studies. I have to admit that to myself."

He made an affirmative noise.

"So I've been thinking ... what if I go to naturopathic school? That way I can do the kind of work you do, only with the right license. Doctor of Naturopathy, N.D. No offense, but that's really better than an M.D. And I think I'd love it."

Harry had long since learned how to drop the sense of himself when Emily needed his full attention. He willed his circulation to continue, and with a sublime spiritual fortitude that took its inspiration, perhaps, from St. Francis kissing the leper, he said, with feigned enthusiasm, "That could be a great idea."

"I've been thinking about it a lot, and you know, I'm pretty sure it's what I want to do. I mean, I got natural medicine care my whole life, from you. I didn't even know what the other kind was. Now that I've been out on my own, and I've been to a bunch of regular doctors, I can really tell the difference. What you did was way better. Way, way better."

"I'm glad you think so," Harry said. He'd had time now to adapt, and he'd entered a contemplative state in which all the needs and desires of the person named "Harry Boullard" were suspended.

"Regular doctors only give you pills," she was saying. "It's really true, like you said. It's gross, filling yourself with chemicals. And surgery. They actually cut you open! It's barbaric. Medicine should be about healing, not cutting! Anyway, I didn't waste that year I spent in Asian studies. That's partly how I got here. I learned about Ayurveda and Chinese medicine in class, all those things you used to tell me about my whole life, but I paid no attention, only this time I paid attention. And that year I was a biology major, that helped too, because it turns out I have almost all the pre-requisites."

"If you're missing a couple, they'll probably let you take them concurrently."

"That's true. Anyway, I've been thinking about it for a while, but I resisted for a long time, maybe a month, because I didn't want to do just what you do, only now I think that's a stupid reason not to do what I want to do."

"In other words, you're getting older, and you don't have to prove your point."

"Now don't start talking like a dad. Anyway, where do you think I should apply, Traditional Naturopathic College in Maine, or Bandolier in New Mexico?"

She wasn't really asking him. He listened affirmatively, while in the background amorphous thoughts rose from his deep unconscious: Jungian mandalas in the shape of spreadsheets, ancient budgetary symbols that totaled up how much more he'd have to make to pay for a private university.

When they got off, he decided that this was absolute confirmation of his Holistic Galleria plan. If he supervised some of the more lucrative forms of alternative medicine there, such as chelation therapy, he could easily make enough money to pay for private naturopathic school.

He made up his mind and called Ashley. He got her voicemail instead of her, but he left a message to the effect that she didn't need to convince him to join the Galleria anymore because he'd already decided to accept her invitation, and he couldn't wait to get started.

Having made this exciting career decision by voicemail, Harry took off his socks, worked his way under the covers, and pulled the covers over his head. He was just beginning to add up budgetary figures again when the phone rang.

It was Melanie.

He'd forgotten all about her, and at first he didn't recognize her voice.

"Harry. I'm sorry. I know I said we'd go out tonight, but I just called and found out that my mother's really sick. I think I have to fly out to Boston tonight."

"What's happened to her?"

"She had breast cancer a while back, and now it's returned. There are two big spots on her liver. She's pretty worried about it."

He could hear that she was crying, and it touched him that she would open up to him this much. "I wish I could come over and hug you," he said.

"I wish you could too," she said. "But I already called the airlines, and if I leave almost instantly there's a flight I can get. Otherwise I have to wait until tomorrow."

He couldn't get himself to say, "I hope everything's OK," because he knew it wasn't OK. Recurrent breast cancer metastasized to the liver was a guaranteed death sentence. Melanie would go out to Boston worried and come back motherless. He didn't think she knew yet.

"Call and tell me how it's going," he said.

She said she would.

Section 7. The Holistic Galleria

The Gerson Diet

Harry had started writing the EightFoldWayDiet book immediately upon return from NPEXPO, and since then he'd been working on it every spare moment between patients. He had to finish quickly. Largo had lined up Shelley Publishing for the book because they could put a book on the shelves faster than almost any other publisher. However, Shelley needed to receive the completed manuscript by mid-April. It was now early March. If Harry and Geraldine missed the deadline, the EightFoldWayDiet book wouldn't come out until the following year because a *Miraculous Healing For ____* series would soon occupy the full attention of all the publisher's editors.

So far as Harry was concerned, it didn't matter whether the book came out early or late, but he'd promised to cooperate and he meant to keep his promise. Besides, he had a personal reason to move quickly. Now that he'd made the decision to change his style of practice, he had no patience left for the occupants of his teak and gray leather chair.

They were always couching their questions in such a way as to assume his agreement with alternative medicine theories or techniques he regarded as pure drivel. "What's the best way to detoxify my liver? Which is more purifying, lemon or lime? How can I remove the damp heat from my spleen? What's the best way to realign my DNA?" It was too much work to explain that the basis for their questions had no basis in reality. All he wanted to do was take them by the collar and bounce them out into the street.

Fortunately, he managed, if just barely, to behave with decency. He reminded himself that his patients were struggling to make it through life just like he was. Perhaps their choice of coping mechanism left something to be desired, but an obsession with alternative medicine was certainly better than, say, heroin addiction. Besides, they trusted him, and he had to honor that trust.

So he continued to smile and nod and say agreeable things, and work on the book in every spare instant. Once he was done, he would pack up his office and move to the Holistic Galleria.

All his hopes rested on the move. He felt optimistic that his new supervisory role would restore his patience for patients. Ashley and the other practitioners would provide the kind of touchy-feely, up-close care that Harry couldn't stand any more. He'd have only to dispense brief dribblets of wisdom, and that he thought he could manage.

And the work on the book was going well. He'd already chosen the twenty hormone patterns he would call primary, and sketched out the prescribed regimen of diet, exercise and lifestyle suited to each one. (The system actually allowed for 6561 possible patterns, depending on whether each of the eight hormones measured high, low or normal, but they could be described in subsequent books. Harry imagined titles like *The Advanced EightfoldWay-Diet*, *The EightfoldWay-Diet through the Elementary School Years* and, *The EightfoldWay-Diet for Republicans*.) He was now busy sprinkling in scientific studies to give the appearance that all these prescriptions made sense. When he finished that, he'd turn to inventing supportive testimonials.

He was busily working in a study to prove that androstenedione(+), DHEA(-) people are prone to arthritis (the study involved hamster ovary cells in a test tube) when a ringing phone shattered the tranquility of this scientific work. Assuming that it would be an annoying patient, he let it ring. But when the answering machine picked up, he heard Melanie's voice over the speakerphone, and he grabbed the handset before she could hang up. "Hi, Melanie? I'm here."

"This isn't your answering machine?"

"No, it's me. I was screening my calls. I'm glad to hear your voice."

"I'm glad to hear your voice too," she said.

"How's your mother doing?"

Her responses arrived with the slight lag of a person processing deep emotion. "The news isn't good." Pause. "The doctors are trying a new form of chemo, but I get the impression they're not too hopeful." Pause.

Of course they weren't. "How bad is she feeling?" he asked.

"Not too bad, considering. I wonder if you can help me with something?"

"I'd be glad to try."

"A friend of mine tells me that her mother had great results with something called the Gerson Diet. She says I should take my mom off her chemo and try that instead. Have you heard of Gerson?"

He managed not to choke. "Yes, of course," he said.

"What do you think of it?"

How could he answer? "That's a complicated question," he said.

"Tell me."

"I wish I were there in person to explain it," he stalled. In his head, a tiny Judy Garland broke into song: "Carrot juice, liver extract and coffee enemas, oh my. Carrot juice, liver extract and coffee enemas, oh my."

"I wish you were here in person too," she said.

"I'll fly out."

"Really? Would you do that?" He could see the smile on her face.

He shouldn't have offered. He had to finish the book. "I'd be happy to fly out," he said.

"That's so sweet, but it's too much to ask. Could you just answer one simple question? Do you think the Gerson treatment works, or is it a fraud?"

If only that were a simple question.

The only way to accurately answer such a question would be to perform a placebo-controlled study on the Gerson technique, and of course none had ever been done. Harry was morally certain that if anyone ever did undertake the challenging task of comparing the Gerson technique to an equally complicated placebo treatment, the placebo would do just as well.

On the other hand, he'd heard a few testimonials so remarkable that moved even his skeptical heart. What if for some people, the magical reputation of Gerson acted as a particularly powerful placebo, and actually did help the cancer? It was at least possible.

Her seemingly simple question, therefore, backed him into a corner. If he told Melanie he didn't believe in Gerson, that would undercut its placebo power, and reduce the admittedly slim chance that the treatment might help her mother. On the other hand, if he lied and said Gerson worked, Melanie's mother might just possibly respond, at least to some extent. Thus, from an ethical point of view, the answer was simple: he should lie. But Harry didn't like to lie, especially not to people with whom he had personal relationships.

"I've seen successes with Gerson," he said, cautiously. "I knew a woman who had a diagnosis of liver cancer, guaranteed to be fatal in a year, but she took the treatment and survived. She's still fine five years later."

"Alive five years later?" Melanie said. "That sounds pretty good."

He felt compelled to add, "There haven't been any proper studies on the Gerson diet, though."

"Is that necessary?"

"Now you're asking a really complicated question."

"OK," she laughed. "We'll save that for later. Look, you've been a big help." She was speaking faster now, having broken through her impasse. "I have to go and talk with my mom about it. I'll call you in a day or so, OK?"

"Please do," he said.

"You've been a really big help. Let's talk soon."

After they hung up, he sublimated his anxieties by further dousing the EightFoldWayDiet book with studies. Once he finished that, he'd start inventing testimonials. He had a lot of work to do.

The Holistic Galleria

It was March 1st. Harry had finished his part of the book and sent the manuscript to Geraldine for completion. He'd also explained the move and the new setup to all of his active patients, some of whom required a great deal of convincing, and packed up his office. Today would be his first day of work at the Holistic Galleria.

The Galleria occupied an elegant two-story building at the north end of Pacific Avenue, built on the earthquake-destroyed site of the old Bookshop Santa Cruz. Bulging out from high up on the building's side, a curved stained glass façade of green, blue and brown announced the center's name in elegant calligraphy. A stairway flanked by a wheelchair-accessible ramp led to the great glass doors beneath the façade, and on each concrete square of the ramp a spiritual symbol from a world religion had been engraved. Harry locked up his bike and, in case anyone was watching, took the stairs two at a time like a proper holistic doctor.

The Galleria's long entryway was fronted on the right by a juice bar and on the left by a store selling all-natural-fabric clothes. Twenty feet further on, the space opened up into a piazza-like square, in whose center a sculpture of the goddess Hygeia rose amidst a fountain, her pitcher cascading water kept clean by ozone generation rather than chlorine. The Galleria had two floors, and wisteria and ivy spilled over from flower baskets on the second floor balcony. Ashley thought this touch made the Galleria seem cultured and European, but it gave Harry bad memories of the Topanga Canyon Shopping Mall in L.A. The mural behind the fountain added to the mallish effect, a nauseating mixture of humpback whales, a frizzy-haired Einstein, and a vast cornucopia spilling forth herbs and supplements.

Doors within the mural opened into a warren of offices and treatment rooms used by the ancillary providers of the Galleria: acupuncturists, chiropractors, massage therapists, and, perhaps soon, a certain Feldenkrais practitioner. A natural pharmacy on the left wall of the piazza sold expensive supplements and natural sexual aids, but it was the opposite wall that held the real nerve center of the Galleria: the physician clinic, where Harry would be supervising the work of Ashley and her recently hired associate, Chelsea Crow.

Harry entered the physician clinic by means of a door set beneath a faux arch of faux stone, and hurried through a waiting room already half full of patients. He waved to a group of children playing with the Waldorf-style natural toys in a corner, and walked around the counter to get the list of his day's appointments from the Galleria's receptionist, Judy. He rejoiced in this: He didn't have to keep his own appointments any more. It was a step toward a healthier, happier life.

Harry smiled when he saw the first name on the appointment sheet. How appropriate that his first patient at the Holistic Galleria should be the woman who had clinched his conversion to quackdom: Mrs. Bates of the calcium supplements. She'd already had one visit with Ashley while Harry was still writing the book. He hoped that the appointment had gone well.

"Your first patient is in room three, Dr. Harry." This was Gordon, a young, sweet, blond gay man who served as their primary nurse. Gordon believed that it was the herbs and not the drugs he was taking that kept his HIV under control.

Harry thanked Gordon, and, after some hunting, found the designated room. Mrs. Bates' chart was attached to the door by means of a clear plastic pocket. Harry ran his fingers along the plastic pocket, and found it satisfyingly formal and professional. He'd never been so formal and professional himself, not in any of the incarnations of his practice. This too would be healthier for him.

He opened the door and walked into a room far smaller and considerably more sterile than his old office. No teak and gray leather chairs here. Ashley wanted mainstream people to feel comfortable in the Galleria, and, despite its reputation, Santa Cruz had plenty of those. She calculated that a more medical ambience would inspire trust.

Intellectually, Harry agreed with the strategy, but years of fighting against the clinical ambience of modern medicine made him feel vaguely ashamed to offer his services in a room laced with so much stainless steel and vinyl.

He felt less than fully real here, somewhat anonymous and distant. However, as he reminded himself, this was a good thing. He wanted anonymity and distance.

Mrs. Bates was sitting in an orange-backed vinyl chair, gripping her familiar ferret-infested purse. "It's not as pretty as your old office," she said, without looking around.

She wouldn't need to look around. She'd already had at least fifteen minutes to study her surroundings because the Galleria was more of a normal doctor's office in another way too: it kept its patients waiting.

"What did you think of Dr. Wayland?" Harry asked.

Mrs. Bates chewed on her lips to consider her answer. "I was suspicious at first because she's not you. But, you know, I think you made a good choice. She's a good doctor."

Harry said he was glad she felt that way, and looked in the chart to see what Ashley had written in it for the visit.

The style of Ashley's notes showed the influence of Harry's lecture on self-protection from quackbusters. Under "A" for Assessment she'd written, "S. Can." Harry understood instantly that the abbreviation stood for 'Systemic Candidiasis,' but Board wouldn't know that. This could come in handy for plausible deniability. (Though what else she could claim it meant eluded him. "Sergeant Can-do?" "Streptococcus Cantata?")

He admired Ashley's charting, but he felt bad that Mrs. Bates had been started on this particular obsession. The whole ridiculous Candida concept was a life and a half.²⁸ Otherwise known as "Yeast Hypersensitivity Syndrome," "The Yeast Connection," or simply "Candida," the term referred to a wildly popular alternative medicine theory that attributed half the illnesses in the civilized world to an overgrowth-of and an allergy-to *Candida albicans* yeast. Not only did the theory have no meaningful foundation, it forced its believers to spend vast amounts of money and time on an impossible quest for its Holy Grail: total Candida eradication. It couldn't be done, even if it would make a difference. Harry had only met about two people who seemed to really improve by obeying the rules of the theory. All they gained was a new health obsession.

But he had no right to object. He'd written Systemic Candidiasis into the EightFoldWayDiet as a common problem plaguing cortisol(-) people. And, in any case, Mrs. Bates was obviously pleased with the prospect of a new set of dietary restrictions. Therefore, he smiled and expressed whole-hearted support for Ashley's diagnosis. He continued to smile and continued to express support for about five minutes and then clapped his hands together and said, "Well. So I'd like to see you again in three months."

A blessedly short session, and a blessedly long interval before the next one. The time stretched out endlessly, a whole season of Bates-free breathing room.

"But how will I make it so long without you?" she said, distressed. "How about *one* month?"

In a pious voice, he said that he wished he could see her sooner, every week in fact, but he felt a duty to help as many people as he could, and for that reason he had to confine himself to a supervisory position.

Since such noble motivations were unanswerable. Mrs. Bates put on her meek and accepting face, passive to the will of God and doctors, and said she'd wait three months then.

Harry remembered that he no longer needed to walk his patients back to the clinic entrance, as had been his habit with patients for fifteen years, and instead he could say goodbye right there and then.

He shut the door behind him and sauntered on down the hall to where a chart on door four signaled his next patient. The brief passage exhilarated him. He had legs. He was a free man in Paris. He could slide into contact and slide out of it again. He didn't have to welcome each patient into his whole heart, and let them live there.

The Practitioner's Conference

Lunchtime came, and with it a formal Practitioner's Conference in the main meeting room. This feature of the Holistic Galleria was one of Ashley's dreams come true, a weekly time for broad sharing of knowledge between holistic medicine colleagues.

Ashley was the only person in the meeting room when Harry stepped in. She was sitting on the edge of the walnut conference table, swinging her legs and shining with happiness. Her pleasure filled the entire space, which was otherwise a featureless rectangle that looked much like the meeting room at NPEXPO. Its banquet table, however, held a juicer and natural food rather than an espresso-maker and BLTs.

"This is so great," Ashley said. "Having you here, I mean. Having everyone here. I can't get over how great it is." She hopped off the table and stood close to Harry, her hands nervously clasped. "Oh, by the way, was it OK what I did with your Mrs. Bates?"

"It's more than OK, Ashley," he lied. "It was brilliant. I've known her too long, and she needed a fresh pair of eyes. What I'm thinking is that when I first started with Mrs. Bates, years ago, she had too many layers of disease overlying her Systemic Candidiasis for me to see it. It was necessary to clear away the top layers before the Candida problem could show itself. By the time it did manifest, though, I was too blinded by my preconceptions to take notice. Then you stepped in and saw it immediately. Once you get rid of her Candida, which will probably take a year or so, then you'll be able to look for the next layer below that. And so on. You can keep on clearing her out at deeper levels probably forever."

A hint of sarcasm had inflected his last sentence, but she didn't notice. "That's so wonderful," she said. "This is what real healing is about. It's so much my dream."

The door opened again, and other practitioners began to file in: two acupuncturists, two massage therapists, a Rolfer, a nutritionist and a reflexologist. Judy, the receptionist arrived next. (Ashley believed that the staff, too, played a healing role at the Galleria, especially if they didn't ask for a raise.) After that came Gordon the nurse, Shelly the medical records clerk and Chelsea Crow, the other holistic MD. They were now complete except for Paul Barnes, the chiropractor.

People were foraging among the food when the door opened again and Paul Barnes slipped inside. He closed the door behind him and leaned back against it, his face drawn and white as if he'd just seen Banquo's ghost.

"He's come here," Paul said. "At least I think it was him. No, I'm sure it was him."

"Who's him?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Paul, you look awful."

Harry, who understood exactly what Paul was talking about, took a forkful of soy-cheese artichoke-pasta lasagna and affected nonchalance.

"Helding," Paul said. "Helding came to see me."

"Why do you think it's him?" This was Ashley, half-rising in her seat. "What did he look like?"

Paul painted a picture in the air with his hands. "He's a big guy, like so. He had long white hair in a ponytail down to here, and a big scar down his cheek going this way. He'd heard that I use a pendulum to dowse people for their supplements, and that's what he wanted me to do."

Chelsea looked fierce, Ashley anxious, the rest of them plain scared. Harry spread out in his chair to project an atmosphere of unconcern. "He wore a scar for me too. Go on, Paul."

"The scar is what gave it away. I always give my patients an adjustment before I dowse them, just to clear the energy. When I got him up on my table, and leaned over him to adjust his thoracics, I saw the scar from up close. I used to do theatre, and I could tell right away it was makeup. I think his hair was a wig, too."

Harry took a muscular chew on his tofu and brown rice burrito, and, with his mouth half-full, asked, "Did he get anything on you?"

Paul grinned. “No, I don’t think so. I hadn’t said much yet, and when I realized who it was, I gave him that speech about how we only use treatments that are supported by scientific evidence. Like detoxification. I think it confused him.”

Trust an alternative practitioner to think that detoxification was a method of treatment supported by scientific evidence. “Not the best example, Paul. Detoxification is more a traditional technique than a scientifically supported one.”

“Really? Haven’t they done studies? ... I thought I read...”

Harry had gotten himself off track by mentioning this. “No meaningful studies, but it doesn’t matter. It’s interesting that he’s come in.”

“But did I blow it?” Paul asked. “By telling him about detoxification? Should I have said something different, like chelation therapy?”²⁹

From bad to worse. Chelation therapy, the use of intravenous EDTA to remove calcium from the arteries, didn’t make any more scientific sense than detoxification, and, worse, it was a hot button, one of the alternative therapies that conventional medicine hated most passionately.

Chelsea Crow waved her hand for attention. “I don’t like all this kowtowing to Holding. I have several patients who need chelation. We should just do what we know is right, and trust to that. ”

What you know is right is wrong, Harry thought.

But, as he reflected further, he realized chelation therapy did have one thing in its favor: it was great placebo theatre. The sight of its intravenous drip could cure many symptoms. As it happened, placebo intravenous treatment provided the same benefits as EDTA chelation, but what the heck. Besides, chelation therapy helped the doctor too: you could charge a hundred and fifty dollars a treatment and not do any more than wave your hand at the patient after the nurse hung the IV bag. A full-time chelationist could make five times as much money as a pumping-iron chiropractor.

And Harry would get a percentage of all of it. Come to think of it, back at NPEXPO when he’d finally decided to join the Galleria, he’d already considered the benefits of supervising lucrative methods such as chelation. He needed the money badly.

But, on the other hand, chelation could get the Galleria in serious trouble. The Medical Board hated chelation, not only because chelationists made so much money, but also because chelation therapy’s false (or at least, unproven) promises could divert patients from effective treatment for severe heart disease.

What should he say? Chelsea’s appeal had obviously stirred Ashley. His protégé’s eyes were radiant and her face flushed. If Harry stood in the way, he’d lose credibility with her, and if he lost too much credibility, he wouldn’t be able to protect her at all.

“I think Chelsea has the right attitude,” he said. “Doctors have to do what they think is best for their patients. If you know in your heart that a patient needs chelation therapy, you should do chelation therapy. Just document the use of proper safety precautions.”

Ashley nodded her head solemnly. “You’re so right. We have to trust what we know in our hearts.”

They were really asking for it now. Holding would love this.

The Spoor of the Enemy

Harry's first skirmish with the quackbuster occurred on one of Harry's lunch breaks, and through the medium of a book.

Because Harry's new supervisory role freed him from the tight emotional grip of his patients, he was often able to give himself an unhurried two-hour lunch. During these intervals, he usually strolled along the Pacific Garden Mall. It was a place full of memories for him. Back in the early seventies, he'd spent half his waking life on this open-air street of shops. His old friends the Flying Dostoevsky Brothers had begun their career on the Mall, as had other famed street performers of the West Coast, such as the Reverend Frumley (also known as The Flaming Eggplant), Smeagol the spoons player and Gavriel Cohen, later to play the fool in *The Fool of the Nile*.

It was also here that his friend Charlie Graydon had opened Secret Wisdom, a little storefront that offered the world its first subliminal healing tapes. Charlie's little business had later morphed into the world's largest retailer of subliminal recordings. Back in the late '80s, though, Charlie had gone through a severe disillusionment that prefigured Harry's. A back-of-the-envelope calculation convinced Charlie that the laws of physics and the signal-to-noise ratio of audiotapes ensured that the subliminal messages on his products were physically inaudible. After an inner struggle, he took this realization to heart, and on his next subliminal production, *Beat Depression with Sacred Words*, he left off the subliminals. The tape supposedly contained the voices of monks chanting selections from all the world's scriptures, but Charlie had saved money on monks by not hiring any. To his horror, *Beat Depression* beat all previous sales records for any subliminal tape, and continued to bring in money for over a decade. This sent Charlie into a deep depression, one that Harry now understood very well.

He wondered what Charlie was doing these days. He'd have to look him up.

Besides losing Charlie, the Mall had gone downhill in many other ways since the '70s. The Loma Prieta earthquake had destroyed several of the more classic landmarks of the Mall -- the Cooperhouse, the original Bookshop Santa Cruz, Café Pergolase -- and several chain stores had metastasized onto the previously pure street. Nonetheless, the Mall still gave Harry comfort, and it was an unusual workday when he didn't stroll along it for at least twenty minutes.

It was on one of these walks during the third week of Harry's practice at the Galleria, that he first personally encountered signs of Holding's presence. Harry had a particular task in mind that day: he intended to purchase *Père Goriot* by Balzac at the new Bookshop Santa Cruz.

Geraldine had advised him to read Balzac as a form of psychotherapy. Balzac, she said, viewed everyone in the world as a cheat and a liar and loved them anyway. She thought it might help relieve Harry's suffering if he placed himself under Balzac's gaze for a bit.

Like all modern bookstores, Bookshop Santa Cruz had taken on many of the annoying trappings of Barnes and Noble. Harry hurried past the table displays at the front of the bookstore, with their orange-stickered coffee-table books, commodified classics and other abominations, and headed toward the towering, quiet stacks in the back where they kept the real books. On his way, though, he passed the health section, and his eye lighted on a new book by Vance Holding: *The Return of the Dark Ages: The Fraud and Fantasy of Alternative Medicine*.

His eye had lighted on the book because it was turned cover-outward rather than spine-outward. This gave Harry pause. In a modern bookstore, no book faced cover-outward unless the publisher paid for special treatment. Holding's book was no bestseller, and therefore wouldn't likely rate the expense. This could only mean one thing: an author on the prowl. Holding had been here.

It was a famous habit of authors to turn their books cover outward. Back when Harry felt proud of his own books, he'd regularly cruised through bookstores and crammed neighboring books on top of one other to make his own precious creations more visible. The bookstore staff assigned to manage the paid book promotions would quickly restore order, but at least for a day or two his books would shine out in the manner he thought they deserved.

Unable to resist, Harry leafed through *Dark Ages*, and found that it contained an unexpected note of sensitivity. The quackbuster's previous books were screeds, diatribes, one-sided rants that never failed to annoy Harry despite his own waning faith. He always thought that Holding took too much *pleasure* in bashing alternative medicine.

However, the introduction to this new book showed an unprecedented level of self-awareness and self-criticism. Holding confessed that as he'd gotten older he'd gradually lost his taste for playing the bully. He'd come to realize that what he'd spent his life doing was essentially negative, destructive work, and it had begun to depress him.

Apparently, he'd actually considered giving up his life as a full-time quackbuster and going back into practice. However, after meditating on it for some time, he'd decided that he had a duty to continue. He truly believed that the scientific revolution in medicine had been a major advance, one that moved medicine from its history as a largely ineffective and often purposefully mystifying profession toward something far more open, honest and real. Alternative medicine claimed to be the coming new thing, but it was actually a step backward, a return to the medical style of the 19th century and earlier. If left unchecked, it would reverse a century of dramatic progress, and bring back the bad old days when any doctor could concoct a treatment of his own design and market it to a credulous public that wanted miracle cures.

Nonetheless, Holding stressed, he didn't wish ill to those who practiced alternative medicine. In fact, he applauded the sincerity of the sincere, and at times admired the cleverness of the insincere. He derived no pleasure from taking people's livelihoods away from them. Still, he reminded the reader, it often happened that the defense of important values causes pain, and he thought that was the case here.

The book's introduction left Harry with a warm feeling toward Holding, but it quickly vanished when he leafed through the body of book and realized that the quackbuster hadn't really departed from his usual extremely partisan line. If Holding were really so hot on defending the truth he claimed, why didn't he ever condemn the unscientific parts of *conventional* medicine? Like all of Holding's previous books, *Return of the Dark Ages* left conventional medicine entirely off the hook. Nowhere did it mention back fusion surgery, hormone replacement therapy, off-label use of approved medications, or any of the other unscientific and possibly dangerous therapies commonly used by regular doctors.

And where Holding presented his case against alternative medicine, he never failed to over-argue the story, exaggerating the negative evidence and failing to mention the positive evidence that it did exist. This was still a screed, not a piece of fair intellectual inquiry, and Harry found it irritating.

But then, Harry wondered whether he too had crossed the line and become a one-sided partisan. If a vast series of studies were to come out that validated acupuncture, would he welcome them? Would he say, "well, hurray then, acupuncture really does work!"

If he was honest with himself, the answer was "no." He now *wanted* alternative medicine to be wrong. He wanted studies to come out negative.

Why?

Because he felt betrayed. Betrayed by all those alternative medicine authorities who spoke as if they knew what they were talking about when they didn't know a thing. He'd trusted them for so many years, only to find out that they'd mislead him on almost every point.

How often had he read a citation of fact in an alternative medicine book and traced down the origin, to find that the first book was only quoting another book, which in turn was quoting yet another, and so on? When he finally reached the origin of the statement of fact he found that it was either a mere opinion propounded by a 19th century crank, or, if an actual fact, one that had been twisted or even reversed by the subsequent game of telephone. Alternative medicine wasn't just bad science: it was terrible journalism too.

He'd been hurt by it, he was furious, and he wanted to get even by proving them all wrong. Revenge, as Geraldine said. It wasn't a laudable motivation.

Though he'd certainly earned the right to his anger. This wasn't some instant disillusionment. He'd spent many years trying to hold onto his belief in alternative medicine, and had only abandoned it after deep consideration and intense internal struggle. But the fact that he was so angry meant that he couldn't fully trust his own judgment anymore.

Harry was reflecting on the distorting nature of partisanship in general when he felt a hand on his shoulder and he turned around to see who it was.

It was Blake Johnson, the store's pony-tailed ex-hippie manager. "Hi Harry," Blake said. "What're you looking at?"

When Harry showed him the cover, Blake took the book from his hand. "Vance Holding? Isn't that the guy who's after the Holistic Galleria?"

"That's him."

"I can't sell this kind of crap, Harry. I don't want to support someone like him."

"He has a right to say what he says," Harry said.

"Not when he's trying to dig up dirt on you guys at the Galleria to put you out of business."

“He believes he’s doing the right thing.”

Blake laughed, as if Harry meant it facetiously. “Yeah, the right thing to get on the payroll of the FDA, the AMA and the pharmaceutical companies. How idealistic he is! But I have an idea.”

He gave Harry a conspiratorial look and re-inserted the book in the shelves the thin way, and backwards at that: page ends facing out.

“He’ll notice that,” Blake said. “When he fixes it, I’ll do it again. And when he makes a stink about it, I’ll out him.”

Recruitment

A week later, Harry returned to Bookshop Santa Cruz in search of additional healing Balzac, and a pleased-looking Blake emerged from his inner office to tell Harry what had happened.

Blake had inverted Holding's book six times, and Holding had corrected it six times, but after the seventh inversion, the outraged quackbuster had stormed up to the counter to demand an explanation for the persistent ill display of his great work. According to a pre-arranged plan, the desk clerk paged Blake, who stepped out of his inner office and hailed Holding from across the store.

"Why, if it isn't the famous *enemy of all alternative medicine*? The one who's trying to *close down the Holistic Galleria*? I'm so glad you're here." He'd walked slowly, so he could plausibly keep up his speaking volume. "I've never met someone who *hates alternative medicine*, and I'm curious to know what makes you tick. I have so many questions. Is it true that you're *paid off by the pharmaceutical companies*? And is it true that you're the one who *drove our own Holistic Harry out of Kansas*?"

It had much the same effect, Blake said, as if a noted abortion-provider had been hailed as such at an evangelical Christian convention. People in the store gathered to stare, others came in from the street. By the time Holding fled the scene, puffing and wheezing loudly, at least fifty people had seen his face, and knew that this was the person who intended to harm Santa Cruz's own Holistic Galleria. The Holistic Galleria now had a competent early warning system against Holding attacks.

The system activated a couple of weeks later when Harry was on his way to work and dreadlocked Rasta hailed him from his post on the sidewalk. Although it wasn't more than sixty-five degrees, the Rasta wore no shirt or shoes, and his bronze skin glistened above his white baggy cotton pants. He sat against a parking meter on a square of purple fabric that displayed bongos and hash pipes for sale, and his hand-rolled cigarette smelled rather sweet. His name was Marcus. Harry knew him slightly.

"Guidance," Marcus said.

"Guidance," Harry replied. He moved to walk on, but the Rasta waved a bronze hash pipe at him to get his attention. "What is it, Marcus?"

"I and I saw de outformer, de downpressor of Babylon."

Harry had enough experience with Rastatalk to translate this. "I and I" meant "I and God," a typical salutation from a Rasta to a person he respected. Harry felt honored. "Outformer" was a substitution for "informer," according to the standard Rasta practice of adjusting the sound of words to match their spiritual connotations. (The direction "in" was holy to a Rastaman, and therefore couldn't possibly participate in a word used to denote something so negative as an informer. Changing the "in" to "out" corrected this, and "outformer" actually expressed the sense of the word better -- at least, from the point of view of the group being outformed on). On the same principles, he analyzed "downpressor" as a neologism for "oppressor." (The first syllable of "oppressor" would sound too much like "up" to a Rasta, and since up is a spiritually positive direction the meaning and the sound couldn't coexist in a single word. Substituting "down" solved the problem, and again actually expressed the meaning better.) "Babylon" was standard Rastatalk for the dominant culture, which would include conventional medicine.

In other words, Marcus had seen Vance Holding.

"Where'd you see him, Marcus? When?"

So far as Harry could decipher what the Rasta said, it appeared that Holding had collared a patient coming out of the Galleria, an older woman wearing a blue dress ("sky high color"), and engaged her in earnest conversation for some minutes. After this, he shook the woman's hand, smiled, and departed, seeming happy "as a donkey he find ganja in de grass."

Harry shook Marcus' hand and hurried to the Galleria.

The receptionist identified the patient in the blue dress as Margaret Boniface, one of Dr. Ashley's patients, a woman who'd left from an early appointment just a few minutes ago. Harry had seen Margaret once for a brief supervision appointment, but he didn't have a clear memory of the encounter. He looked for her chart in the medical records room, found it, and carried it into his office.

Ashley had given Harry a huge, formal office in the Galleria, with a big mahogany desk and mahogany bookcases with glass covers. He pushed aside scattered research papers, flopped in the chair, and flipped through Boniface's chart.

To his relief, he discovered that Margaret Boniface had been a client of Ashley's for several years. This ruled out the most worrisome possibility: that she could have been a mole already planted by Holding. And anyway, Holding wouldn't have risked exposing one of his agents by conversing with her so near the Galleria.

Therefore, what Marcus had seen was an attempt at recruitment. This too was dangerous. In the past, Holding had shown considerable skill at taking reasonably satisfied patients and converting them to dissatisfied patients, patients who might file complaints with the medical board.

Harry was looking through the chart for possible doubtful encounters when Ashley knocked on the door. She must have heard; her eyes glittered with excitement and anxiety.

"Do you think Margaret Boniface would consider helping Holding?"

"No, of course not. I'm her doctor. I've treated her for years."

"Yes, but Holding's very persuasive. If he can find any conflict, any dissatisfaction, he'll build on it. Think back. Did you and she have any issues? Anything simmering under the surface?"

Ashley shook her head too quickly to have properly considered.

Harry pressed. "Ever sell her a product she thought was too expensive? Does she have any health problem you've failed to help her with? Have you missed a diagnosis? Have you kept her waiting too long?"

"No, I don't think so, not any of those things. Margaret and I are like this." She bent her middle finger over her forefinger. "She'd forgive me for anything."

Why didn't he feel reassured?

Harry folded back a thick wad of charting and pointed to a line on Boniface's initial intake form. "The first day she came in she complained about frequent bladder infections," Harry said. He let the pages drop down, keeping his thumb in place. "And here on the last visit, she also had a bladder infection. You've been seeing her for three years. Did your treatment help? Is she having fewer bladder infections than she used to?"

Ashley bent over Harry's desk. "Yes I think so. Well, no maybe not. It's her own fault. She won't cut wheat out of her diet, and she knows that perfectly well."

"She agrees with you that's the problem?"

"Of course she does."

"Well that's OK then."

That was the great thing about practicing alternative medicine: it provided sufficiently difficult rules that you could always blame your patients when they didn't improve.

Harry pointed to the bottom of the page. "I see here that you're recommending chelation therapy for her on the next visit. She's only forty. Does she have heart disease already?"

"No signs yet. But she has heart disease in her family. I did it to help keep her healthy."

"Great thinking," he said. Largo's father would approve. It was like selling someone an insurance policy they didn't need.

There was a problem though. Something he'd noticed on the first page. "Was it her birth family who had the heart disease or her adopted family?"

Ashley's face fell. "I didn't know she was adopted."

"It says so on the initial intake. Next time Margaret comes in, you should check to see if the heart disease occurred in her birth family, not in her adoptive family."

"I'll look into it," she said, downcast.

"Don't feel bad," Harry said. "I've made that kind of mistake myself many times. I'm just trying to help."

"I know that," she said.

"Really, I mean it. I'm not criticizing you. I'm just looking out for you. The Board often nitpicks like that when they're trying to get you."

"Thanks," she said, and looked thankful. She sat in an empty chair, and her toe began a nervous toggle between the floor and the ceiling. Harry noticed that he wasn't searching Ashley's outfit for a bra, and hadn't done so for some time. He took it as a good sign.

"One more concern comes to mind. Was she enthusiastic about getting chelation therapy?"

Ashley considered. "No, not at first. I had to talk her into it. Now I remember, she asked me kind of an interesting question. When I told her that chelation therapy uses intravenous infusions of EDTA to clean out the arteries, she said that EDTA is just a chemical, not something natural, so why would she want to put it in her veins?"

Very good question. Smart Boniface. "What did you say to that?"

"I told her not to worry, that EDTA is perfectly natural. Was I right?"

"Well ... no. EDTA is definitely a chemical."

"It really is a chemical? That's strange. So why is it alternative medicine?"

“Because conventional medicine rejects it.”

“Well that’s a good enough reason,” Ashley said, obviously relieved.

The fact that she could say this with a straight face disturbed Harry, but he let it pass. “Just keep an eye on Margaret. Make sure to keep her happy. If I know Holding, he’s told her something to sow doubt in her mind.”

“I think it will be OK,” she said. “Margaret likes me.”

She didn’t seem properly worried, and Harry had a sudden intuition: if he didn’t help her, Ashley would lose her license.

From a legal, rational point of view, of course, she *should* lose her license. She was a quack and a fraud. But she was such a sincere fraud, and she meant nothing but well. He didn’t want it to happen to her.

While Harry struggled to think of some way to protect Ashley from herself, she caught sight of the galleys for the EightFoldWayDiet book lying on Harry’s desk. The book was almost ready to be printed. Ashley took up the vello-bound stack of pages and asked, “What’s this?”

“It’s a book I’m reviewing,” Harry said. “Two colleagues of mine wrote it, Royce Largo and Geraldine Steinberg.” He’d made sure that no hint of his authorship could be found anywhere in the pages.

“Oh, I love Dr. Steinberg. She’s so profound. Could I take a look at it?”

Why hadn’t he anticipated this. Now Ashley would want to open an EightFoldWayDiet center at the Galleria. He’d have to live right there in its presence, denying all knowledge, pretending to approve.

But he couldn’t do anything about it. “Sure. But I need the galleys back in a couple of days.”

She left the room clutching the manuscript as if it were a holy text.

Truthbegone

After Ashley left, Harry still had fifteen minutes before his first patient of the day would arrive. He decided to put in a call to Melanie.

Melanie had been out in Boston with her mother for two months now (having left the store in the hands of a close friend). Despite offering several times, Harry had never flown out to see her because she was always about to fly home. However, each time she said this, a new crisis would come up and keep her out there.

Mrs. Karnitine had gone through two more rounds of chemotherapy, but the cancer was still growing. Because she had no more conventional options left, she'd finally agreed to give the Gerson diet a look. Melanie had scheduled a conference call with the Gerson cancer clinic in Tijuana this very morning. Given the difference in time zones, the conference call should have already finished. Melanie would want to talk with him about it.

Harry didn't really want to talk to her about *that*, but he did want to support her. When Melanie picked up the phone, he asked how the call had gone.

"I thought it went well," she said, sounding doubtful. "What they told us made a lot of sense. At least to me. I'm not sure what my mom thought, though."

"She didn't seem convinced?"

"Not really. I was wondering if you could you talk to her? Maybe settle some of her doubts?"

There was no graceful way to get out of it, so he said he would.

"Hello. Is this Dr. Boullard?" Mrs. Karnitine's voice had a hard edge to it, much harder than her daughter's.

"Yes, this is Dr. Boullard. Melanie says you have questions for me?"

"My daughter seems to believe that you can convince me to get this Gerson treatment of hers. Hold on." He heard a more distant but not muffled voice say, "Melanie, will you please go out. I want to talk to him without you staring at me."

It occurred to Harry that he liked Mrs. Karnitine. When she came back on the line, he said, "I'm not going to try to talk you into anything, you know. It's your life, not mine."

"Well that's an unusual perspective. I was beginning to think I didn't have any rights in the matter. So tell me honestly, what do you really think of this Gerson crap? I didn't get the impression from my Melanie that you're what I'd call a fervent supporter."

"Well, actually, that's true. How astute of you to figure it out second-hand. How did you know?"

"I can read between the lines when my own daughter talks to me. I think you were tactfully telling her not to bother, but she didn't want to get the message. My Melanie's smart as a whip, but when she doesn't want to hear something, she goes deaf. Same as anyone. Would you do me a favor, and act like a bookie instead of a doctor?"

"Pardon?"

"A bookie. Tell me my odds. Your gut sense of my odds. What's the chance I go to Mexico, spend half of Melanie's inheritance on this whole Gerson program, and I'm still alive a year from now to thank her for it?"

"Maybe one in a ... hundred."

"One in a million, that's what you wanted to say. Thank you *very* much, Dr. Boullard. You've confirmed my suspicions. Oh, and one more thing. Can I give you a piece of advice?"

"I'd greatly appreciate it."

"My daughter likes you a lot, and you like her. Something could happen between you, maybe. Now I'm a blunt person. Too blunt, sometimes. That's OK between me and her. Me and you too. But when a man and woman are in a relationship, it's not a good idea to be blunt. You have to be kind to each other. I pushed away Melanie's father by always telling him what I thought was the truth, and, looking back, I regret it.

"I can tell that you and my Melanie don't see eye to eye on some things either. Well, that's OK. You don't have to. I know this probably sounds corny, but if an old woman who's about to kick the bucket isn't allowed to get corny, then I don't know who is. So here's my advice: remember that relationships are about feelings, and don't get hung up on ideas."

He was thanking her for her perceptive advice when he realized that Mrs. Karnitine had handed the phone back to Melanie.

"How did it go?" Melanie asked.

"I didn't exactly convince her," he said.

Melanie groaned. "She's so hardheaded. What should I do?"

"I once heard someone say that death with dignity means you keep up your personal style right to the end."

It was the right thing to say. "Well in that case, she's doing great." She laughed. "She'll probably give the mortician a hard time too."

Harry had a mental image of the green bubble on a carpenter's level moving back to its balanced position between the lines. Melanie was already at peace with herself. Her interior balance was amazing.

"So can I fly out and see you now?" he asked. "You've been gone a long time. I miss you."

"I miss you too," she said.

Neither of them said anything, and it was like staring into each other's eyes.

She turned practical again. "But, you know, if mom's not going to get the Gerson treatment, then I think I'll come back home. I need to get my store in order so I can sell it. I'll go back when she's getting close."

"Sell your business? Since when did you decide to do that?"

"Since you offered to help me go into practice as a Feldenkrais practitioner. You did mean that, didn't you?"

"Yes, of course. But somehow I didn't think you'd sell your store. That's so drastic."

"I've had time to think, and, you know, I'm done with retail. Selling people natural food is OK, but I want to really dig in and help people in a deep way. If I sell the store, I'll have enough money to live on while I grow my Feldenkrais practice. I'd particularly like to work with sports injuries."

Harry remembered what Melanie's mother had said, and kept his mouth shut.

Truth be gone.

Truthbegone -- it sounded like a folk name for an herb.

Ceremonial Medicine

On the morning of the day Melanie would arrive at the airport, Geraldine called to invite Harry for breakfast. She was in town shopping for beach cabins.

Harry met her at the bottom of the Pacific Garden Mall and walked up toward Geraldine's favorite café. She was in high spirits. Though the *EightFoldWayDiet* book wouldn't hit the shelves for another two weeks, it had already made quite a splash. Geraldine had given prepublication interviews to *Self*, *Health*, and *Oprah*, and for the next few months, her time was packed with lectures at the major alternative medicine schools, along with book signings, talk shows and other lectures.

She was wearing summer clothes now because it was June: a straw hat, white cotton blouse and off-white cotton pants, light and baggy. Harry thought she was extremely sexy, and a variety of ideas crossed his mind. To forestall them, he told her that he was dating someone; that, in fact, he was going to pick her up at the airport that afternoon.

"Of course you're dating someone, Harry. It's our pattern." She took his arm. "I love you anyway."

The café was a standard American diner, unpretentious except for a slightly pretentious self-awareness of its unpretentiousness. The tables were full, and they sat on red vinyl stools by the bar.

"You know, this is a lot like the place where you first lectured me about raw foods," she said. "On the Blue Turtle, remember?"

"I do remember," he said. He thought of all the confident lectures on diet he'd given her, and how the Elvis impersonator in the Santa Claus outfit had laughed at him. He felt embarrassed. "I was such a know-it-all then."

"You still are, Harry. Only now, you think you know that alternative medicine is all wrong, rather than all right."

"You agree, though, don't you?"

"No, I don't. People have a ceremonial need for doctors. What we say to our patients is a kind of liturgy. Whether it's factually true or not is beside the point. Oh, by the way, I saw Jane Holding the other day."

"You're kidding! Vance Holding's sister?"

"The very one. They're an interesting pair. Their father left when they were young, and their mother was a little insane. Vance Holding pretty much raised her. They're quite close, even though she's into alternative medicine. He puts up with it in her."

"Actually, I knew that. She has some kind of chronic pain syndrome."

"Mostly abdominal pain. She has a lot of scar tissue in her abdomen from physical trauma as a child."

"She fell out of a tree while her brother was taking care of her?"

"Something like that. She's vague about the details. Anyway, she made an appointment with me, and when she came in I started giving her some line about leaky gut syndrome, and how glutamine could help her, and a bunch of related bullshit, when suddenly I thought, fuck the medium, I can help her. I know how to reach her. All the bullshit alternative medicine is just ritual magic. And it works."

"The lying doesn't bother you?"

"Not at all."

"It bothers me."

She gave him one of her triple-weighted ironic stares. "That's because you're an honesty-prude."

He shook his head. "You're so cynical."

"Acceptance isn't cynical, Harry." She put on her hat. "Now it's time for you to go pick up your girlfriend."

Idea-bombs

Melanie had been in Boston for nine weeks now. During the interval, they'd spoken almost every night, and her soft voice on the telephone had become a soothing need for him.

He knew enough not to trust any prognostications made during the luminous phase of a relationship, especially when it was spring, and even more especially when you were a man and you hadn't yet slept with the woman, but nonetheless he had a good feeling about this. On an intuitive level, he sensed that he really did have a chance of going somewhere with Melanie.

How strange that it had come about through his one and only attempt at casual seduction.

He was meditating on the irony of it as he crested the summit of Highway 17 and entered a winding stretch of highway known locally as Death Alley because of its extraordinarily high rate of fatal accidents. Many a careening car had flown off the road into the lush woods of madrone and manzanita that spilled down almost to the shoulder. Harry's thoughts took a macabre turn when he reflected that madrone and manzanita were the two trees whose bark most resembled human skin, but his mind soon shifted away to recollections of the pleasant spring a few years back when he and Gabriel had come out here almost daily to explore.

Numerous old roads crisscrossed the mountains near the summit, strips of asphalt that wound their way from one flowery valley to the other. In some places, the forest entirely extinguished the roads, and the pavement gave off into paths or hillside stairways. They had often stopped the car to walk in the woods, and, even without the benefit of hallucinogens, it felt as if they were exploring Middle Earth. The woods here abounded in wild flowers, berries, gorgeous yellow banana slugs and the ever-present manzanita and madrone. It was a place for elves or wood fairies.

As Harry passed a turnout and glimpsed a path leading out of it into the deeper forest, he imagined he saw the child Melanie standing there and beckoning to him. For much of her childhood, she'd lived rather like a sprite or wood fairy. Her father was a poet, a dreamy lyrical man who'd left Melanie's mother shortly after Melanie was born, but took care of his daughter over the summer. Lyle Karnitine traveled constantly, and Melanie spent the summer months in Scotland, Patagonia, Finland and Katmandu. He took the vocation of poetry as a kind of religion, Melanie said, and expressed his beliefs by allowing his daughter to run wild. She spent whole days in the tops of trees, took solitary tea in caves accompanied only by bats, and rode bareback on white goats that she fancied unicorns.

During the school year, she lived with her mother in Colorado and had a normal life, but the magical influence of the time with her father had made a deep mark on her character. She had a kind of magic in her soul he found intoxicating.

"It's not like I'm having some mid-life crisis and falling for a young girl," he said aloud. "She's thirty-eight." But, having said it, he felt unsure.

Highway 17 shortly dropped its elevation and lost its character, becoming just another freeway. The smog of Silicon Valley began to obscure the air, and something like smog infiltrated his optimism. Despite what Melanie's mother had advised, his lack of honesty with Melanie still disturbed him.

In all the stories he'd told of his own life, he'd carefully left out any hint that he'd lost his faith in alternative medicine. He didn't want to undermine her dreams, and he so much enjoyed talking to a grown-up woman who still had unspoiled dreams. But could he keep his true feelings hidden forever?

By the time he reached the forbidding stone statue of Father Junipero Serra on Interstate 280, he'd decided that it wasn't possible. She was a believer, he was a non-believer, and he was the worst kind of non-believer at that: one who had once believed, and who knew the road from faith to non-faith so well that he could scarcely fail to lead others along it.

He was a toxic person for Melanie. He carried dangerous idea-bombs in his head. What he really should do was stay away from her. He should break up with her now, and never see her again.

But he *wanted* to see Melanie. He wanted to date her. He wanted to make love with her, and possibly (infinitely far off, but nonetheless on his mind) live with her and marry her. It seemed unfair that mere beliefs should stand in the way.

And when he spotted Melanie at baggage claim, tired and lovely, stretching forward with perfect grace to haul a bag off the carousel, he knew he loved her, and he thought maybe it was possible after all.

Placebo Love

He shut off his cell phone, parted his way through the herd of suitcases surrounding Melanie and hugged her. "Thank you for everything you did," she whispered. "You helped me so much."

Above the hemline of her dark-blue raw silk blouse, the naked skin of her neck bared its softness at him, and he kissed the concavity above her collarbone.

He played the he-man in the parking garage, lofting her suitcases into his trunk as if they were Kleenex boxes. When he backed out of the parking space, he put his arm behind her seat to help him turn around and look over his shoulder, and his fingers stroked her hair. She reached up and touched his hand.

They took the coast road down from San Francisco, riding high above the water, and on this cloudless day the views of the ocean with its black offshore rocks were stunning. To Harry, though, the Pacific was no more than a blue-toned backdrop for Melanie. She had the window open, and the wind tossed back her long black hair fetchingly. He noticed how fine her features were, her tiny nose, her delicate chin, a perfectly shaped ear with its jade earring. Most of the delicate women Harry had known in the past existed somewhere between the unstable and completely psychotic, but Melanie was the opposite -- if anything, more stable than he was. This excited him. Apparently, he'd reached a point in life where he found lack of psychosis sexy.

About ten miles from Santa Cruz, Harry pulled off the highway. His car fishtailed as it dropped speed over the gravel of a small parking area off the shoulder and came to a stop beside a grassy rise.

"This is the most beautiful beach in the world," he said. "Do you want to see it?"

"Is it the one with the offshore rock?" she asked.

"Yes, that one." So she already knew about his secret beach. How disappointing.

"Someone took me there once," she said, "but I couldn't ever find it again. I'd love to see it with you."

She turned and reached back between the seats to get into her luggage. The angle showed her shoulder blades to advantage, angular and sensuous beneath the silk blouse, and he rubbed his palm gently in the space between them. She looked up from her fumbling to give him a quick smile before returning to the hunt for proper clothing.

She hauled out a set of boots, charmingly clunky hiking boots like a real backpacker would use, and a blue Gortex windbreaker. Harry didn't need to put anything over his black short-sleeve T-shirt to keep warm, one of the advantages of being slightly overweight, and it also showed off his biceps, which weren't too badly developed. They walked up over the rise, crossed a set of railroad tracks, and followed a pathway through a field of brussel sprouts.

"I think it smells like udon noodle soup," Harry said. "The cabbagey smell and the sea water together, you know?"

"I love udon noodle soup," Melanie said.

They reached the far side of the field and looked down. They were standing on a cliff, a flat stratum of rock about eighty feet high that lined much of Northern California coast. Immediately below them and to the left, erosion had taken a large circular bite out of the cliff, creating an inlet. A large chunk of cliff had resisted erosion, though, and stood just offshore at the mouth of the inlet, solitary and massive in the bright sun like a rocky iceberg calved from the shoreline. Grass and ice plants covered its surface, and a gray weather-beaten old seagull stood sentry at one edge.

At extreme low tides, Harry explained, one could wade out to the rock and climb up onto its skirts. Now, though, the tide was running high, and dangerous-looking dark black waves raced around both its sides. On the nearer face, the waves expended themselves against the gentle slope of a white sandy beach, while on the other they broke against large black boulders and a stony shelf that extended from the shore.

Harry led Melanie to a trail that led down to the beach, and they climbed down. He warned her of the stands of poison oak that guarded each switchback, and gave her unnecessary assistance over a particularly slippery gravel-covered slope. At the first switchback, he lost his own balance, fell, and narrowly avoided sliding into a large stand of poison oak himself. To recover his physical dignity, he took Melanie's waist for the final three-foot jump at the bottom of the trail, and levitated her down like a doll on a parachute. A thin stream of sand and pebbles set loose by their passage flowed down after them.

Harry took Melanie's hand and led her across the sand to an archway that perfectly framed the towering offshore rock and its dependent boulders. They stood in the arch and stared at the gorgeous scene for at least five minutes, their shoulders touching, their hands clasped together, a slight breeze ruffling their hair.

They passed through the arch into a sunken, sandy passage between two shelves of stone. Melanie jumped up nimbly onto the rightmost shelf and Harry followed after. The gnarled stone stretched out ahead of them a dozen yards before it touched the sea.

Harry led them to a natural seat cut into the rock, and they sat close together on it. Harry realized that he should kiss her.

He would have kissed her, too, but a vision of Geraldine blocked the impulse. She was gazing at him with her usual ironic expression. In a tone of gentle mockery, she asked, "In a place like this, how can you tell placebo love from the real thing?"

The imaginary Geraldine had a point. This scene was too perfect. It practically enforced romance.

"I love watching waves," Melanie said, dreamily. "I can watch them forever."

"They're especially great here because the rocks set off reflections." Harry explained how the waves bouncing off the rock-berg and some of the larger boulders formed interference patterns. He pointed to one composite wave racing along almost parallel to the beach, and said, "That one's going to hit the sea cave. Listen for a hollow sound."

It came a moment later, like a bass note played on a whale-sized tuba.

"There's a nice cave over there," he said. "At low tide you can climb inside. The seaweed is rainbow colored. Right now, I don't think we could even peek in."

The light from the waves made moving lines on Melanie's face. When one alighted on her lips, he at last took the hint and kissed her.

Most women didn't open up as much while making love as Melanie opened up when she kissed. She melted into him completely, dissolved into his arms. He held the whole of her back in his hands, and lost himself in the feel of her hair, the smell of her skin, and the touch of her body against his body. It was a wonderfully sensual kiss, and it included, among its many sensory aspects, the stone beneath them, the deep booming of the waves beyond, and the sun on the water.

Her breasts were pressing against his chest, and her hands were stroking the back of his head. Her body bloomed in his embrace, and they caressed with greater passion. Then he held her back a little ways and gazed into her lovely eyes.

He wanted to whisper "I love you," but the words only hovered on his lips.

He must have made her nervous by looking into her eyes for too long without saying anything romantic because her expression lost its expectant focus and she came out with a thoroughly off-topic question.

"I remember what I was going to ask you," she said. "I was reading *Health Magazine*, and I saw an excerpt of a book written by your friend Dr. Steinberg. And also someone named Dr. Largo. It's called the EightFoldWayDiet. What do you know about it?"

Faith

"What do I know about it?" he echoed.

Damn Royce and his crescendo marketing campaigns. It would have to come up some time, but why now?

"It sounds really amazing," she said. "They've put a fabulous amount of research into it. Largo says he spent twenty years testing the diet on his patients. And the testimonials are incredible. Like the person who'd had M.S. for twenty years, and when Largo put her on the diet, the MS went right into remission?"

Harry remembered exactly when he'd invented that particular testimonial: it was a Wednesday afternoon, about 4:15, during one of Santa Cruz's rare thundershowers. He'd just finished seeing one of his own patients with M.S., a young man he'd thoroughly failed to help.

"Yes, well you can't trust testimonials, you know," Harry said. "You need double-blind, placebo-controlled studies to know whether a treatment really works. There's a lot of guesswork in the EightFoldWayDiet."

She tipped her head to the side and gave him one of her penetrating glances. "You're more comfortable when something's really proven?" she asked.

"I have to admit it, yes."

"Don't you think you have to take some things on faith?"

"I do," he said, with enthusiasm. "Life is practically impossible without faith."

It was true. If only there were some selective brain damage he could give himself, remove his knowledge of double-blind studies, allow him to start believing again.

"What *do* you believe in, Harry?" she asked. "What do you really know in your heart?"

He leaned back against the rock and stared out into the water. Clouds had now blocked the sun, and the ocean seemed deep black. "I believe that it's right to treat everyone with kindness because life is hard for all of us."

"Yes, that's right," she said.

"I know I love my daughter."

"I bet you're a great father."

"I try. I screw up a lot."

When he didn't say any more, she said, "What else do you believe in?"

"I believe in telling the truth," he said. He did, too, though he hadn't done a lot of truth-telling lately.

"I believe in telling the truth too," she said.

Her face was close beside his, innocent and urgent. He knew what he was supposed to say next. He was supposed to say, "I know I love you."

But if he said that, she'd sleep with him that afternoon, as sure as double-blind studies. If only his right hand could ignore what his left hand knew. He knew that he knew, and he knew that he knew that he knew, and therefore if he told her he loved her it would be a kind of manipulation.

He also knew that this was ridiculously analytical, and he should get over it, but he couldn't.

Melanie cried out and pointed toward the water. An enormous wave was passing through the boulders racing directly toward them. Its top was ten feet high at least, and it had not yet begun to curl over.

She made a movement to run back toward the arch, but Harry stopped her. "It's safer to stay up here. We'll be OK." He wrapped his arms around her and added, "But we will get wet."

When the wave struck, it threw a curtain of water high up in the air and sent a current of water two-foot deep racing toward them on the ledge. Melanie squeezed her head against his shoulders. Salt rain splattered down on both of them, but by the time the onrushing current reached the base of their stone seat the water had diminished to a thin film, and then it was over.

Harry pointed to the passageway leading to the arch where Melanie had tried to escape through. It was now filled with churning water so deep it really might have drowned her. When the water raced back out and left the pathway clear, he told her that while they weren't in any danger, they should probably leave now, and she agreed eagerly. He followed her down the side of the rock and together they squelched through the wet sand under the arch.

When they'd reached the safety of the higher beach, they hugged fiercely. The hug became a long passionate kiss. Her wet hair got in the way several times, and she pushed it back. Somewhere in the middle of kissing, he heard himself say that he loved her. The words didn't come precisely from his center, but perhaps from somewhere nearby.

She marked his avowal with a long deep look, followed by another kiss, and from then on her hair didn't get in the way.

But soon the wind rose, and he felt Melanie shiver. They agreed it was time to go. When they reached the car, Harry opened the passenger door for her, and she leaned over to unlock the driver door. It was a ritual of coupledness he hadn't experienced for a long time.

They drove on in affectionate silence until they reached the mural at the entrance to Santa Cruz. Then Harry asked her where she lived, and she told him that she had a house up Branciforte.

"I love Branciforte Canyon," Harry said. "It's incredibly beautiful."

"Me too. I inherited my house from my aunt. I couldn't ever have afforded to live up there otherwise."

When they reached the Branciforte road, they drove another fifteen minutes before Melanie pointed to a driveway. Harry turned onto it, and followed the gravel drive across a creek, around a large boulder and through a stand of redwoods. The house stood alone in a circular clearing. Although it was modest in size, it was a pleasure to look at, with roofs at four different levels and one new-looking section that departed from the main house at a thirty-degree angle. Obviously, the place had been added onto over many years. It had a living, organic feel, and Harry liked it.

Harry carried Melanie's two largest suitcases to her porch, and admired the decorations she had on display outside the door: tarnished copper wind chimes, a Tibetan prayer wheel, sand dollars in a brass bowl and a statue of Quan Yin. When he walked back along the path to help with the rest of her baggage, they met halfway and kissed. She dropped the two bags she was holding and again opened up her entire being to him. But this time she pulled back, and said she was having one of her hypoglycemic attacks. She needed to eat.

In his twenties, Harry had visited many homes that belonged to grown-up hippies, and formed an ambition to decorate his own house in the same colorful style. On his own, though, he'd never managed to exceed the spartan. When Melanie opened the door, a wave of nostalgia for that period of lush residential yearnings rushed through him. There were crystals everywhere, small purple quartz pyramids, giant amethysts like broken-open watermelons, opalescent crystals with second and third layers beneath the surface like natural cloisonné, and polished geodes whose colors were unnamable and sublime. The floors were hardwood and the walls were delicately sponge-painted. A poster in the entryway portrayed a man and woman with their chakras showing.

He followed her into the kitchen, and while she rummaged around for food that had survived her long absence, he turned slowly and admired the room, with its hanging rolls of garlic and dried red pepper, maple cabinets fronted with stained glass, a counter of blue and yellow tiles, a Euro-style range on a floating island, and jars of colorful dried beans, fruit, nuts and grains. A handmade oak cabinet by the kitchen door held the *Moosewood Cookbook* and *Laurel's Kitchen*, and texts on topics related to natural food cooking, such as astrology, affirmations and alchemy. She even had *The Way of the Wise Woman* by Geraldine Steinberg.

If only he'd met her twenty years earlier. He would have loved all this unreservedly. But now it was as if they didn't live in the same world. Melanie believed in so many things, while Harry no longer even believed in belief. He should speak his mind now, not wait until the needs and attachments piled up, and breaking up would hurt them far more than it would now.

But it seemed boorish to interrupt their harmonious mood. She was singing to herself as she fixed snacks of whole-wheat crackers with cheese, dried fruit and sesame butter, and poured them glasses of sulfite-free wine. They ate together in the living room, sitting on a luxurious white couch facing a gas fireplace. Melanie put on music, and Harry recognized it as a New Age composition by his friend Charlie Graydon. It was one of Charlie's best compositions, though, melodically beautiful despite its lack of subliminal messages.

The couch was unusually deep and long, and Harry soon discovered that he found Melanie still more attractive naked than clothed. They made love with passion, poetry, and, on Harry's part, pain. This was wrong.

Double-Blind Fortune Cookies

Afterwards, he slept restlessly, troubled by a prolonged dream in which he and Holding wielded sledgehammers and smashed small violet quartz pyramids in Melanie's living room. The pyramids were like fortune cookies, except that the fortunes they held were double-blind studies, full texts rolled up into little strips. There were thousands of the pyramids, and one of them, Harry believed, contained a study that would prove once and for all that everything in alternative medicine is true.

It would be his salvation. But he couldn't find the right pyramid. Each time he reached into the shards of shattered quartz to read the text, he found negative results, evidence to disprove the existence of Qi, prana, the soul, God, karma, synchronicities, astrological influences, psychic communication and happy marriages through couples counseling. Not one study supported the faith he yearned for.

Each crash of the sledge destroyed a belief. Holding smashed the pyramids with joyful vengeance, Harry with grief, but they both crushed in profusion, a deafening massacre of faith.

Over time, they began to run out of pyramids, and the crashes became episodic, like the popping of microwave popcorn when the bag is almost done. Harry was leaning on the shaft of his sledge to rest his aching muscles, and Holding had left the room in search of other surviving beliefs to kill.

Melanie now entered the dream, walking barefoot through the broken shards. Harry warned her to stop -- she'd cut herself -- but she only smiled and kept on walking without injuring herself. Her sense of balance filled the room, and while she remained, Harry felt peace in his heart. But when she departed through a door on the other side, his despair returned, and he once more turned to hunting wildly among the wreckage.

Maybe he'd read one of the studies incorrectly. Maybe he'd already found the saving scripture, and missed it.

He had missed it. There it was, a strip of glowing paper lying amid broken crystals. A shard of quartz overlying the paper magnified the writing on it, and Harry read the words "proof of efficacy." Holding now raced into the room to destroy the scroll before Harry could read it, but Harry grabbed the paper first, and used his bulk to fend off Holding's snatching fingers.

Harry had lacerated himself, and his hand dripped blood on the study as he unrolled it. The article was twenty pages long. It was indeed the right study, the one he'd been looking for all along. It set out to prove once and for all that alternative medicine possesses the secret of all knowledge, and that, by implication, all other faiths are true too.

According to the abstract, the researchers had conclusively proved their hypothesis. Only, there was something essential they failed to mention in the abstract. It must be a simple error, an accidental omission. He read through the full text, at first confidently, and then with increasing desperation. Certainly, they couldn't have left out...

But they had.

The researchers had forgotten to use a placebo group, and so the study meant nothing at all.

Harry must have been sobbing in his sleep because when he awoke, it was with an apneic gasp. He sat up in bed to catch his breath. Melanie was sound asleep beside him, her long hair draped over her naked shoulders. He leaned over to kiss her, and she sighed without awakening. Outside the window, dawn raised the darkness, and he watched the light awaken Melanie's bedroom.

He'd always loved the dawn. Although the knowledge of double-blind studies had deleted much that was miraculous from Harry's world, crepuscular light still held magic for him. He'd opened his eyes to a world of gray, but the growing light of dawn now re-infused it with color. The stained-glass hanging lamp above a little desk turned purple, blue and yellows. The hand-woven blankets and shawls transformed from patterns in charcoal to understated natural hues of red, turquoise, and rich brown. It was a beautiful room, its walls painted in varying shades that flowed and merged, and its crystals, original watercolors and other decorations were placed with great sensitivity. Even the switch plates were beautiful: instead of the usual beige grooved plastic, they were made of copper with ornate painted carvings that resembled the illuminated margins of a medieval manuscript.

It was a truly lovely room, yet what had bothered him the night before still bothered him. He appreciated the beauty of her faith, but he was an atheist himself. This difference squatted between them like a teenage boy in dirty socks playing noisy games on a computer.

Why couldn't he bridge the gap? Melanie's mother had reminded him that relationships are about feelings, not ideas. Geraldine had eloquently explained that facts are dead things. And Melanie herself had told Harry that story about the Abundant Life Health Food store, when she and the storeowner had connected on a level transcending personal politics.

Could he do something of the same? Could he see through Melanie's New Age knick-knacks, and respond to what they represented to *her*, rather than what they meant to *him*?

That purple crystal pyramid on her windowsill, for example. To Melanie, it spoke of a desire to live in balance, and Harry couldn't argue with the intention. He wished he could live in balance himself. It was only the connotations of crystals that caused the problem, all those inane sappy articles on their healing powers. He didn't find Melanie herself inane or sappy. Why should he let these details bother him?

And her Feldenkrais. Even if he didn't believe that Feldenkrais actually cured back or neck pain, surely people would benefit from Melanie's kind touch. They'd feel better for seeing her, comforted by her kind presence if nothing else. That alone was worth her fee. And Feldenkrais certainly taught a kind of grace and balance. Why did he have to make an issue of it?

He kissed Melanie again, and this time she opened her eyes. When she saw him looking at her fondly, she sat up straight in bed, the covers partly wrapped around her. She wasn't newly made, like the twenty-three-year-olds Gabriel chased after, but she inhabited herself to an extent none of them could even imagine. Time had marred her into greater beauty. He embraced her and kissed her neck. He kissed her lips, her breasts, and her stomach. She pulled him back and he fell over top of her. Their legs intertwined. They fit together marvelously.

But he still felt the wall, the blockade between them, their fundamental disagreement. He tried to stretch his real affection around the block, but without a connection through the center he felt cut off.

Yet raw sensuality carried him forward. For at least a minute, he knew he loved her, and then, in the afterglow, he yearned to get away.

Courage

Fortunately, they were both in a rush to get somewhere, Harry to work and Melanie to her store, and he didn't have to pass the gauntlet of a leisurely breakfast. He kissed her goodbye in the room and then at the front door. With a piece of his heart, he noticed how beautiful she looked in her nightgown, and he let that piece do the kissing. He waved to her as he pulled out of her driveway, and continued to wave until the road carried him safely out of sight behind Branciforte's wooded canopy. Then he told himself he was a coward.

A courageous person would never have gone this far, never compromised so much.

If he had any real strength in his character, he'd chuck everything right now. He would stand firm, rigid, undeterred, following the logic of his beliefs wherever they led him.

He leaned on the horn to stop a car from turning out of a driveway onto the road ahead of him. When he passed her, he saw it was a woman of at least eighty, now backing up in alarm.

So now he was bullying old ladies. If that wasn't a sign, he didn't know what was.

He'd tell Ashley that he didn't believe anymore, and quit. He'd get a job at some regular medical clinic, treat sore throats and ear infections. He'd tell his mother's uncomprehending ears that sorry, he just couldn't keep his promise, that he didn't have the money, and she'd have to go on Medicaid and live in a nursing home. He'd tell Melanie he didn't believe in Feldenkrais and lose her too.

He'd reached his house on West Cliff Drive now. He took a shower, and, to the tune of one of Gabriel's Toscanini recordings, sang, "I'll ... go back to school ... and become an ... anes-the-siol-o-gist."

After the shower, he threw on fresh clothes, gobbled a muffin, turned his cell phone on and picked up his voicemail messages.

The first message was from Largo, advising Harry that the advance sales of the EightFoldWayDiet book were huge. The second message came from Geraldine, pointing out that if he stopped thinking of it as selling his soul to the devil, Harry could quit his practice entirely and live on the proceeds of the Diet.

The third call was from Emily.

Emily.

She'd had her interview at Bandler Naturopathic College and taken a tour afterwards. "This is it, Dad," her voice said. "I love the school. I love the people here. This time it's really it. I know what I'm going to do with the rest of my life."

She'd never said anything like that before. He replayed the message twice. Her voice had an unprecedented confidence in it.

He played the message again, and knew with the nightmarish clarity of parental understanding that he had an Emily Boullard, Doctor of Naturopathy in his future.

Which meant that he didn't dare flirt with raw honesty. Losing his practice, hurting his trusting patients, his lover and his protégé, letting down his mother: those were consequences that one could face off with courage and humility. But to destroy your daughter's dream? A daughter who'd been lost without a dream for years?

With Emily in the picture, the requirements reversed. He'd have to find the courage to compromise, not to tear himself free.

He brushed muffin crumbs off his shirt, and polished his shoes with Zen-like deliberation. He walked slowly and deliberately into the garage, and slowly and deliberately drove his car toward work. He would play his part.

Only, what was he going to do with all this rage?

The Empire Strikes Back (At Last!)

He'd often told his patients to transform rage into determination, but by the time he reached the Holistic Galleria, he'd only managed sullen acceptance. When he locked up his car and walked toward the entrance, he noticed that he was walking with a limp for no reason other than pure moodiness. He stopped limping, sped up his pace, and took the stairs to the Galleria doors two at a time. He trotted angrily through the entryway, passed the fountain, and pushed open the door under the faux stone arch. In this mood, he might easily pick a fight with Judy, the meek receptionist, and he commanded himself not to.

Judy, though, wasn't at her usual post. This itself might have been adequate cause for a fight had not Harry sensed with interest that the office was in some kind of uproar.

He found Judy bobbing at the door to the medical records room like a float tied to a rock in a spring. Behind her, Ashley and Chelsea conversed intensely among the manila folders. Ashley leaned back against a row of charts, and repeatedly compressed the color-coded edges of a particularly fat one with the back of her head. Chelsea raised a hand in expostulation, but when she saw Harry she dropped her hand and turned toward him.

Ashley turned too. "Harry," she called. "Harry, we're screwed."

He squeezed past Judy into the narrow aisle between the racks of charts and asked what was up.

"Margaret Boniface didn't show for her appointment yesterday."

In the voice of someone who is repeating an argument she'd made already, Chelsea said, "Don't worry about it, Ashley. You didn't do anything wrong."

It took him a moment to put it together. "You're talking about the patient Holding met outside the Galleria?"

"Yes, that one."

This is it, he thought. It's starting. He felt weirdly jubilant. "Did anyone call her?"

"I did," Ashley said. "Yesterday and today. This morning, she picked up the phone then hung up again when she heard my voice."

"That's worrisome," he said. He tried not to sound as cheerful as he felt.

"And now look what's happened. This came by certified mail this morning." Ashley held out a sealed envelope, blank side up.

He took it and turned it over. In pugnacious official type, the return address read "Office of the Chief Attorney, Medical Board of California, Medical Quality Division."

"You haven't opened it?" he asked.

"I thought maybe I should return it unopened."

Well, that worked for ostriches. "I don't think that's a good idea. May I open it?"

After a delay, she said, "I suppose so." One flap of her blouse had become untucked from her skirt, and her hair was disarrayed. Her round face was pale and drawn.

Harry ripped the seal, and read the letter aloud.

"Dear Ashley Wayland, M.D. Our department is investigating allegations of fraudulent medical practice at your clinic. Please hereby and without delay provide the Board with any and all records regarding the medical treatment of one Margaret Boniface, especially those pertaining to your use of "chelation therapy." In the event that records are not received by such and such a date the full subpoena power of so on and so forth will be brought to bear, and the case remanded to etc. etc."

"They're so incredibly nasty about it," Ashley said, and further disarrayed her hair with a free hand.

He patted her on the shoulder, though it was awkward to do so and his elbow pushed into a row of charts. "Don't worry. This is par for the course. I've been through it all before. Do I have a letter too?"

"Yes, though it wasn't certified."

He wanted to put his arm reassuringly around her, but decided it wasn't possible in the narrow space. He scanned through the letter silently, and noticed the contrast with Ashley's. His letter was written in mild, non-confrontational language, and referred only to collecting background information relevant to a case the department was now investigating.

So the attack was directed entirely at Ashley, and not at him. Not surprising, considering how carefully he charted. Holding must have found this quite frustrating.

Harry allowed himself no more than a moment's pleasure at Holding's imagined frustration and turned to the more important consideration of what he could do to save his protégé from doom.

"I shouldn't have done chelation therapy," Ashley wailed. "I knew I shouldn't have done it."

"Now Ashley," Chelsea said, "we already knew they were oppressors. Oppressors oppress. That's what oppressors do. We decided to follow our heart and take what comes. So don't lose faith."

Braced by this remark for a full five seconds, Ashley nodded and stuck out her chin, a gesture of defiance that soon collapsed into open fear, "But what if they crush me? Oppressors often crush people, don't they? I don't want to get crushed."

She had every reason to worry. Unbelievers like Largo could pull off chelation therapy because they knew that what they were doing was wrong and took proper precautions. Idealists like Ashley hung themselves.

And it was all his fault. He'd gotten her into this, on so many levels.

Then Harry realized what he had to do, and felt a shiver go through him.

This was one of those nodal moments, a turning point when the soundtrack of one's life plays atonal music. Harry felt a chill.

But it wasn't a chill of dread. It was more a thrill of pleasure.

He would be released. This was his way out. This was his salvation.

He *wanted* to lose his medical license. Without a license, he couldn't practice. If he couldn't practice, Emily wouldn't hold it against him if he didn't practice. His patients wouldn't hold it against him either, nor would Ashley or Chelsea. They'd all think of him as a hero. He could take his passive income from the EightFoldWayDiet, and retire as an elder statesman.

"I'll take total responsibility for everything," he said, in a voice brooking no dispute. "I did see Margaret once. I'll say the chelation therapy was my idea. I *am* the supervising physician here. It's all properly my fault, not yours."

"But that's like suicide," Ashley protested, though not quite convincingly. "It's me they're after, not you. Why should you get yourself in trouble?"

No wonder he hadn't been afraid to join the Galleria. He must have known intuitively that it would set him free.

"Don't worry about it," he said. He put his arm around her, knocking half a dozen charts to the floor in the process. "I know how to handle Holding. He attacked me once before, and I bowed out. This time, I mean to take him on, and he'll never know what hit him."

"You'd really do that?"

"Absolutely. No problem." He squeezed her consolingly. "Things will work out. Really they will. I'll fight him and win."

Chelsea's face shone approval. "I know you'll win. This will be the case that breaks the back of the medical monopoly. It's going to go down in history. It's going to change the world."

"Really?" Ashley asked. "You think it will go up to the Supreme Court?"

Harry hoped not. That sounded like way, way too much work.

Section 8. A New Life

The Forest of Nisene Marks

That afternoon, Harry sent a letter to the Medical Board in which he took full responsibility for all treatments performed at the Galleria. Having set into action the slow but irresistible bureaucratic mechanism that would destroy his career, Harry felt at peace for the first time in many years. When, shortly after, Melanie called to invite Harry for a picnic dinner, his heart opened, and the objections that had so obsessed him in the morning and the day before no longer seemed to matter.

She picked him up at his house, and they drove to an old-growth redwood preserve several miles from downtown Santa Cruz, the Forest of Nisene Marks. They parked at Melanie's favorite trailhead. The trail began by crossing a wide clearing and then dove deep into a dense wood. Harry pointed to a gigantic monster of a redwood towering over its neighbors in the wood and suggested that they try to find that particular tree from inside the forest. Melanie agreed, adorned herself with a small purple backpack, and they walked hand in hand along the trail.

Inside the redwood forest, the light was dimmed, and a cathedral stillness spread around them. The trunks of the redwoods rose like architectural pillars, branchless for twenty feet or more before breaking out into a dense canopy. The trees shaded out all other underbrush, and nothing foreign rose from the ground: all was redwood, living, dead or dying.

The sun had not fallen low enough to turn red, and shafts of yellow light penetrated the canopy at a steep angle. Melanie held Harry's hand and walked beside him with all the solemnity of a pre-Vatican 2 church mouse. At the sight of one particularly dramatic shaft of light, she let go Harry's hand and ran to stand in the magic circle made by its beams. She posed in its center, hands outstretched to touch the dust motes that fell or whirled slowly around her.

"You look like Luthien," Harry said, "when Beren found her singing alone in the forests of old Middle Earth."

"What's that from?" she asked.

"*The Silmarillion*. It's a book by Tolkien that tells the story of what came before *The Lord of the Rings*."

"Like a prequel?"

"Yes, sort of," he said, though that wasn't quite right.

Back in college, he and Geraldine had practically memorized *The Silmarillion*, and at the commune they often quoted it to each other. Tolkien's world had a raw mythical power, a power that at the time seemed to charge everything in their world too.

Things had become so mundane since then. But at the moment he felt that he'd begun to find his way back.

A half a mile further on they saw it: a solitary mound that rose from the forest floor like a small volcano giving forth an immense redwood tree from its peak. Tangled, gigantic roots poured down the sides of the mound and clamped into the surrounding mulch. No other trees stood within a dozen yards, as if this enormous tree were as inimical to the other redwoods as the redwood forest in general was to all other plants.

They sat together against one of the great tree's roots, and spread out the food that Melanie had packed: hemp burgers in whole-wheat buns, green pepper and blue corn salad and Evian water.

When Melanie had finished most of a sandwich, she said, "OK, I feel better now," and set down the remainder on the flat, horizontal surface of a root. "Did I ever tell you how I got into Feldenkrais?" she asked.

"No, you never did. You should."

"It all started with rock climbing. Remember how I said that when I was in my twenties I was always tired?"

"That's why you haunted health food stores. And spiritual bookstores."

"Yes, exactly. But they didn't help me very much. What really helped was rock climbing. It did more than help -- it changed my life. I was still living in Colorado at the time. The first time I climbed, I knew this was me. I'd never felt so alive before. I felt fully within my body for the first time ever."

"You used to feel disembodied? It's hard to believe. I would have said that Melanie Karnitine lives more in her body than anyone else I've ever known."

"That's so sweet of you to say! I didn't use to, though. I used to feel numb, like my body didn't belong to me."

Harry guessed where this was going, and he took her hand.

"I think it's because I was sexually molested," she said.

He nodded.

"I can't remember for sure, but I get a vague sense about it? It might have been my father, or maybe it was one of my father's poet friends? Anyway, I was completely out of touch with my body. That's why I was so tired. Then I took up rock climbing. It was so wonderful what happened."

She'd discovered that she had a native talent for climbing, an intuitive feeling for which hand- and footholds to use, a trustworthy sense of balance, and strength in the right places. She loved it like nothing she'd ever done before. When she was extending her legs to reach the right ledges, or forcing her fingers into cracks she felt at one with the rock and at one with her bodily senses. She loved it so much that it became almost an addiction. She had to climb at least twice a week, and preferably more.

"But I had an issue about who I climbed with," she said. "I would only go out with women. If I found out that a man was coming along too, I'd cancel. I thought it was just insecurity, the typical fear of women rock climbers that male climbers will make fun of them. After a while, though, I realized it was more than that. It was the abuse issues. I couldn't let a man into my climbing space until I felt strong enough."

"That makes sense."

"Eventually, I did feel strong enough, and I invited a man climbing. Only, I sabotaged myself by picking a guy who wasn't really any good. I used to have a habit of that: picking men who would hurt me. You know, to re-create my original hurt?"

I hope you haven't done that again, Harry thought, by picking me.

"So I let him lead the climb, and he picked out a route that was too hard for him. He fell on the second pitch, and dragged me down too. I fell more than twenty feet."

"That's awful. What happened?"

"Not too much. I lucked out. I was pretty banged up, that was all. At least, that's how it seemed at first. A month later, though, it turned out I'd done something bad to my shoulder. It still really hurt, and I couldn't raise it higher than this."

She held her hand out horizontally, and he leaned over to kiss her fingertips.

"So I went to the doctor, stupid me, and he prescribed me some anti-inflammatory drug. I immediately went into kidney failure."

Harry went into a defensive reaction on behalf of anti-inflammatory drugs. "That's a very rare side effect."

"I know. But I always have rare side effects. My doctor gave me muscle relaxants next, and they made me hallucinate. I pretty much stay away from all drugs, now. Anyway, once I got over the kidney failure, my shoulder was in even worse shape from lying in the hospital bed. I'd seen a surgeon and even scheduled the date of surgery when a friend of mine invited me to a Feldenkrais Awareness Through Movement class. I went, and in ten minutes I knew: This is my future."

Harry had once taken an Awareness through Movement class, and it had driven him nearly mad. They spent half an hour slowly moving their wrists around in circles, paying attention to the action of each tiny muscle. It had bored him out of his mind.

"I just loved it," Melanie said. "You get so deep inside your body, feeling your muscles and your bones. I took a dozen of the group classes, and then I started private sessions. And it healed me! Not only my shoulder, but my abuse issues too. Without a single session of psychotherapy. You can heal yourself through your body better than through your mind."

He agreed that sometimes it happened. He'd seen it before, in some of his patients.

"I think that's really why I want to practice Feldenkrais," Melanie went on. "People will come to me for their neck or back pain, and I'll end up healing them as a whole person."

"I understand," he said. He did understand, even if he didn't believe. He did believe in it, for *her*.

Idyll

It was the beginning of a long idyll for Harry, one that lasted through both summer and fall.

At the Holistic Galleria, the quiet hiss of tape recorders was often heard or imagined, and nine longstanding patients failed to show up for their appointments or return phone calls. But no one minded. As Chelsea Crowe said, Harry had right and truth on his side. He was entering an epic battle, and he would win.

Harry knew that he would lose, and he felt equally happy about it. He rose each morning in blissful contemplation of the day, perhaps as soon as Christmas, when the Board would strip away his right to practice, and he could roast his medical license over an open fire. It was a conflagration most devoutly to be wished, the jubilee day, when the golden bowl of supplements was broken and the colloidal silver cord was loosed, when Hygeia's pitcher was broken at the fountain and the wheel of placebo's reverse Catch-22 spilled into the cistern.

Not only did his imminent demise as a doctor inspire Harry to grandiose misappropriation of Biblical quotations, it also allowed him, at times, to enjoy seeing his patients. He could sometimes take Geraldine's attitude, and see their interactions as ceremony -- though only because he knew it would end soon.

Meanwhile, the EightFoldWayDiet was going gangbusters. The book had come out at the end of June, and, due to Largo's advance work, it was an overnight success. By the end of July, there were three EightFoldWayDiet centers. Six more centers were in the works.

The EightFoldWayDiet website now sported chatrooms where people with similar hormone patterns could support each other in their dietary travails, a shop selling a wide range of EightFoldWayDiet products, and an online singles group where, for example, androstenedione(-), testosterone(+) men could meet their compatible pregnenolone(-), estrogen(+) countertypes.

Each week, the website highlighted the story of a real-life person who had achieved success through use of the EightFoldWayDiet. The testimonials Harry had originally concocted for the book had supplied the seed, and, now, far more dramatic true stories were crystallizing around it: exciting cures of multiple sclerosis, cancer, lupus, chronic fatigue, acne, and everything else. In turn, each testimonial led to still more stirring testimonials, a kind of placebo snowball that grew as it moved along.

Soon celebrities jumped on board. One of the comedians on *Saturday Night Live* overcame his addiction to raunchy jokes about molecular biologists, and publicly credited the EightFoldWayDiet for his recovery. The star of a popular soap opera took up the Diet: both in real life and on the show. A prominent senator announced that the Diet had cured him of impotence, and sponsored a bill asking the National Institute of Health to investigate the EightFoldWayDiet as a male sexual aid. (Royce Largo appeared before his committee to testify on behalf of the bill, and came back with a new set of celebrity patients to add to his stable of Hollywood stars. He also slept with a couple of interns who'd been left unmolested during the senator's period of disability.)

Across the Atlantic, a member of the British royal family lobbied to get EightFoldWayDiet counseling covered under the British healthcare system. Not to be outdone, the president of France declared that the citizens of his country didn't need much counseling: all French men were extraordinarily testosterone positive and all French women equally estrogen positive, and thus the matter was simple for them.

Closer to home, the Galleria's fawning receptionist Judy overcame her chronic shyness by going on the diet, Melanie used it to rid herself of her hypoglycemic attacks, and Gordon now credited the Diet and not his medications for keeping his HIV under control.

Things were going well for everyone else in Harry's life too.

Gabriel claimed to have met a woman who was really into him, a dazzling twenty-three-year-old Armenian he'd met on the steps of the Holistic Galleria.

Emily started naturopathic school, and loved it with a passion. This was really, truly *her*, just like she'd hoped.

Ashley was happy because Geraldine had finally found a space in her busy schedule to do a book signing for the Holistic Galleria's EightFoldWayDiet Center. Sandy Owen, Harry's positive thinking patient, died without guilt. Melanie's mother died peacefully too, a week later, and Harry went to the funeral. The only truly dark note was struck by Willow, who, while washing his hands, now frequently muttered of "successes that are worse than failure."

October passed, and November came in, with California's usual jolting switch to winter weather. It rained all day for weeks on end, and the mercury plummeted by two and a half degrees. The AMA, the American Dietetic Association and the American Heart Association jointly condemned the EightFoldWayDiet, and in consequence the book sales tripled. There were now nine EightFoldWayDiet centers, and the book was still on the top of the New York Times bestseller list. The profit sharing checks were pouring in.

Then, on December fourth, the Medical Board summoned Harry to its inquisition. The date of his proposed death was December eleventh. He had only one more week to go.

Friends in All Places

But first there was Geraldine's book signing. Harry could have gotten Geraldine's signature for Melanie privately, but Melanie wanted to stand in line like anyone else.

They arrived early but the Holistic Galleria was already packed. The line snaked full circle around the fountain, dipped into the natural-fabric clothing store and stretched to within five feet of the great glass entry doors. Harry and Melanie joined the line where it passed the coffee house/juice bar. The *EightFoldWayDiet* book had endorsed Gabriel's Female Tonic chai for DHEA(+), estrogen(-) women, one of the more common patterns, and many of the women in line were drinking it.

When the line advanced and brought them through the natural-fabric clothing store, Harry discovered with some surprise that the store sold a line of *EightFoldWayDiet*-compatible lingerie. He wondered just precisely how they justified that. Perhaps based on color and fabric? He'd assigned optimum color and fabric choices for each of the hormone patterns.

People returning from the signing table often spotted Harry and asked him to add his signature to the book beside Geraldine's, not because they knew he'd written it, but simply because they'd fallen into an addled state of holistic health star admiration. In turn, Harry found himself slipping into one of his addled states of celebrity.

After signing a dozen or more books, he saw, with a dreamlike half-awareness, that Mrs. Bates was coming toward him, with an energetic elderly gentleman in tow. Harry began the introductions, speaking loudly to be heard above the swoosh of the fountain and the throbbing conversation of the crowd. "This is my girlfriend Melanie," he said. "Melanie, this is Mrs. Bates, my oldest patient in Santa Cruz."

"Not that old," Mrs. Bates said.

"I meant in years coming to my office, of course. Not in personal age. Mrs. Bates has kept herself ageless by taking such good care of herself."

"Gallantly spoken." This was the elderly companion. He extended his hand to Harry. "I'm her husband, Donald Bates. I don't believe we've ever met, though we've communicated by email and phone."

Harry did a double take. "*The* Donald Bates? The legendary alternative medicine attorney? I had no idea you two were"

Don Bates looked at least seventy, but he had a strong grip and fierce black eyes. "The devil in person, and pleased to meet you. I'm not surprised she didn't tell you we were man and wife. She doesn't like to let on about her rogue of a husband."

"That's not why, Don, and you know it," Mrs. Bates protested, blandishing her fingers down his cheek. "I just want to be my own person, not the wife of the famous Don Bates. Besides, maybe Dr. Boullard would worry I meant to sue over the chemicals in his carpet, or something."

"True enough," Don Bates said. "I do specialize in that line of work. Not that I'd ever dream of suing the great Holistic Harry. Quite the contrary. My wife tells me you're having troubles with the Medical Board. I'd like to help."

Harry's heart skipped a beat. Don Bates was the Johnnie Cochran, the David Boies of alternative medicine. He'd been known to make the Social Security Administration give total disability benefits for chronic fatigue syndrome, a feat akin to getting Medicare coverage for exorcism. He'd also forced a major health insurance company to cover Gerson cancer therapy, won a lawsuit against Home Depot for selling buildings materials that sickened people with multiple chemical sensitivities, and worst of all, successfully defended three outrageous quacks against much-needed licensure revocation by their local state Medical Boards.

He desperately needed to wriggle out of this offer of assistance. With Don Bates beside him, he might win.

Mrs. Bates misinterpreted Harry's hesitation. "Don's not going to charge you for the help, of course, if that's what you're worried about. You're my doctor. He's grateful to you for how much you've helped me. Isn't that right, honey?"

"Absolutely right," her husband said.

"I don't know what to say," Harry said.

"Quite so, quite so," Don Bates said. "We'll meet later today to plan your strategy. Let's say four o'clock at the Marriott? I have some of my assistants working on the details already, and they'll present what they've found."

This was moving much too fast. Harry looked to Melanie for help. She wouldn't understand his predicament, of course, but they'd been planning to spend the afternoon together, shopping for chatchkas, and he hoped that she'd object.

"Don't worry, Harry," she said. "This is much more important than shopping. You should definitely meet with Mr. Bates. We'll run that errand another time."

Don Bates took Harry's hand again. "Then it's settled. I'm looking forward to this fight. The California Medical Board will never know what hit them."

Harry had time to emit a frail exclamation of gratitude before the line advanced forward again, and the two Bates left their side.

"Well, that's a lucky break," Melanie said. "No, not lucky. It's a tribute to your work that you have patients who want so much to help you."

Harry needed to talk about this with someone, to develop a strategy to evade Don Bates' assistance. Melanie would have been perfect except that she didn't have a clue about any of this.

Who else could he talk to? Royce Largo? No help there. Harry could safely tell his feelings to Largo, but Largo wouldn't understand them. He lived at a plane far above matters of ethical nuance.

Gabriel? He wouldn't help either. Gabriel still regarded Harry's rejection of alternative medicine as a silly passing phase, and would shift the subject to the nearest twenty-three-year-old.

Michael of Deep Wisdom Labs would sympathize, but he was too hopelessly compromised himself to offer anything beyond gloom.

Then who?

It was obvious. Geraldine.

Geraldine would understand the entire situation, and if there were any way through, she'd help him find it. She was right at hand too, now just thirty feet ahead in the rapidly moving line. If only he could get alone with her somehow before the meeting with Don Bates.

But that wouldn't be easy. Melanie admired Geraldine, yet she also knew something of Harry's long history with her, and she'd guessed considerably more. She wouldn't acquiesce passively to any private meeting between the two of them; she'd maneuver to make it a safe threesome, and that wouldn't help Harry at all.

The line had advanced far enough that Harry could see Geraldine now, furiously signing books at her little table. She wore the proper accoutrements of a modern wise-woman: brown business suit, dark flowery blouse, dangling gold earrings, and profound, piercing eyes. Melanie's concerns would be well founded. He felt his old erotic ache for Geraldine again, perhaps stronger than ever.

The line continued to move forward, and now they were passing the other side of the fountain, a point where the line came in proximity to the earlier segment of itself. Harry looked up and saw Gabriel standing only a few feet away.

Gabriel didn't see Harry, though; he was too busy fondling the shoulders of a young, foreign-looking woman. She was a real beauty, with hair blacker and longer than Melanie's, large, long-lashed brown eyes, almond skin, and large, movie star lips. Gabriel's fondling escalated into a kiss, so passionate that Harry felt embarrassed and looked away.

Like an afterimage, though, the significance of what he'd just seen developed in Harry's mind, and shook him out of his bad mood. Gabriel *never* got this far with the objects of his infatuation. The wonder of it overcame Harry's embarrassment, and he interrupted their public display of affection to call out, "Hey Gabriel. Why so impolite? Introduce your old friend to your new one."

Gabriel and the woman turned toward Harry at the same moment. Gabriel gave a broad smile. The woman's features, however, shaped into something much like horror before they fixed into a rigid smile. The briefly distorted expression delayed Harry's recognition, but he realized he'd seen her before. She was a patient of Chelsea's scheduled to undergo intravenous vitamin C therapy to prevent cancer.

Why the horror? Was she ashamed to be seen by one of her doctors in the arms of so much older a man?

"Shoushan," Gabriel said, "this is my best friend, Harry and his girlfriend Melanie. Harry and Melanie, this is Shoushan, my new girlfriend."

Harry said, "Pleased to meet you," and put out his hand. Shoushan shook it limply.

"You didn't tell me you had a girlfriend," Harry said.

"Yes I did," Gabriel said. "Shoushan's from Armenia. Remember?"

"Oh yes, of course, now I do," Harry said. "How could I have forgotten?"

Easily. It had been months ago. Gabriel never maintained a relationship with a woman for months.

The universe truly *had* changed. Maybe a shift in the cosmological constant, or something.

Gabriel gave a subtle nod, and Harry decrypted its entire non-verbal meaning in an instant: Yes I really did sleep with her, it said. My run of bad luck is over. Ohmygod, was she hot. It was incredible. I'll tell you all about it later.

But while Gabriel silently signaled his triumph, Shoushan continued to behave strangely, tugging at his arm, and now whispering something in his ear. Gabriel bent over, took her arm, and abruptly walked off with her.

"What was that about?" Melanie said, after they left.

"I have no idea. You think maybe she had a sudden urge to sleep with him?"

Melanie gave Harry an affectionate smile on behalf of his friend. "They *are* sleeping together, aren't they? I got that impression too. So Gabriel's long frustration is over? That's an auspicious omen, Harry."

Auspicious, maybe, yet in what way?

Harry silently begged of the universe: Please get this straight. I want to fail when I meet the Medical Board, not win.

When the line brought Harry and Melanie within five feet of the book-signing table, another omen appeared, this one indisputably bad. It was Ashley Wayland, in radiant good humor, holding a sheaf of papers with names printed out on them.

"I've hired a phone bank to call all the Galleria's patients," she said. "I think we can get hundreds of people out there demonstrating for you. Chelsea says that the Medical Board in California is fairly political, and if there's a big enough demonstration, she thinks it will affect them."

Shit, damn, and shit. But surely they wouldn't get many demonstrators on this short notice.

"That's marvelous," Melanie said. "Isn't it marvelous, Harry?"

"It should be a big help," Harry said.

"I wonder if anyone from your Wichita days would come out," Melanie suggested. "Like that secretary of yours you told me about, Carol Cohen? I bet she's kept in touch with some of your patients, and maybe they'd come out to demonstrate too."

Harry heard his voice respond with the required enthusiasm. "That's a great idea. I'll get you Carol's phone number. Thanks for doing all this, Ashley. It's well, totally unexpected."

"Unexpected? That your friends would help you?"

Melanie kissed Ashley, and Ashley kissed Melanie, and both of them kissed Harry. Although none of this was to Harry's good, he felt an involuntary sense of gratitude for their solidarity.

The stark disconnection between his feelings and his own best interest increased Harry's sense that he better find another head to think this through with him. His urgent concern must have shown on his face because when Geraldine looked up and saw him, she locked eyes for a moment and nodded.

When she finished signing a book for a woman holding a sickly infant (as Harry knew, the mother had put the baby on a vegan diet since birth to prevent allergies), and another for a vigorous marathon runner type who didn't look like he needed any kind of diet, it was Melanie and Harry's turn.

Geraldine stood up, reached over the table and gripped Melanie's whole hand in both of hers. "I am deeply pleased to meet you at last," she said. "Harry has told me how much he cares about you, and now that I see you, I understand why."

So much attention from a celebrity she admired upset Melanie's balance, and when Geraldine released her hand she stumbled a little, the first time Harry had ever seen her do so. But Geraldine was already writing a note on the inside cover of an EightFoldWayDiet book. When she handed it up to Melanie, Harry read over her shoulder.

"To Melanie:" the note said. "The beloved of my dear friend Harry is beloved to me as well. Just remember that he doesn't know it all, and you have wisdom too. Best wishes in all ways -- Geraldine Steinberg."

Melanie blushed, put the book to her chest, and held it close as she and Harry turned to go. They'd only made it a couple of feet when Geraldine added, "Oh, by the way Melanie, would it be OK if I borrowed Harry for a bit. In, say, an hour? We need to talk over some dull business details about the book."

Melanie was too off-balance to argue, as Geraldine obviously intended. "Oh, yes, that would be fine. Harry and I were going to go to the Jupiter Café. Do you think you could meet us there, maybe? Or should we come back here and meet you?"

"No, don't come back," Geraldine said. "I'd feel much happier about things if you were in a place where it didn't matter if this line goes on longer than I expect."

Her face was pure poker, but Harry read through it, and he wanted to kiss her. And not on the cheek.

S&M Barbies

The Jupiter Café was a Santa Cruz fixture and one of Harry and Melanie's favorite spots. It had begun as a glorified ice cream parlor, but morphed over the years into a full service restaurant. Or at least, a restaurant: the management only hired servers of attitude, generally of surly attitude. The Jupiter served great food, though, an eclectic selection that ranged from traditional natural food mush to post-modernist mega-decadent cuisine.

The Jupiter reflected the evolution of Santa Cruz in its décor as well as its range of food. On one wall, a mural reflected the spirit of old Santa Cruz: dolphins, idyllic earth mothers and young boys carrying flowers. The mural on the opposite wall showed a heavily pierced man with a green Mohawk dancing with a woman tattooed from the scalp down. The counter that, in any other restaurant, would have been used by people in a hurry who didn't need a private table, drooped under a burden of literature: eco-terrorist booklets, flyers announcing darshan with Hindu gurus, and a petition requesting the President to launch a full scale military invasion of the offshore island that was home to a certain obnoxious spammer.

The tables were arranged in a circle around a central dais. The dais was empty now, but it often held entertainers: mandolin players, slam poets and the like. A flyer on Harry and Melanie's table announced an unusual appearance the day after next: a twice-transgendered performance artist, who, in order to understand the essence of human existence apart from gender, had had himself surgically transformed from a man to a woman and then back to a man again. (His wife had been a great sport about it.)

Harry and Melanie had finished their meal of construction-grade nut loaf, and were now moving on to quintuple chocolate raspberry kiwi fruit coconut cream cappuccino mousse dessert. It was about time for Geraldine to arrive. But it was Gabriel, not Geraldine, who burst through the door at the appointed hour. He looked around wildly, spotted them and rushed over.

"God I'm glad I've found you. I've been searching all over town. Harry, you won't believe this. You know my girlfriend Shoushan, well she ---"

"Hi Gabriel," Melanie said.

"Oh hi," Gabriel said. "When she pulled me out of ---"

"Have a seat," Melanie said. She moved over, and patted the booth beside her.

Gabriel settled in where she indicated, and awkwardly rested his hands on the table. Like all the other tables at the Jupiter, this one was a boxlike clear plastic affair with thematic objects arranged in a collage on the bottom face of the box. The next table over featured smiley faces and other variations on the theme of "all you need is love," but this one displayed a team of Barbie dolls engaged in complex S&M practices. Harry thoughtfully spread out a napkin to hide the scene. Although Gabriel never stopped dreaming about sex, his dreams were sweet and wholesome, not gagged and studded with leather.

"So you've been sleeping with this Shoushan of yours, haven't you?" Melanie said.

Gabriel tried to look innocent, but a rip in the collar of his yellow t-shirt popped open further. "What makes you think that?"

"Perhaps the deep public kissing."

"You think?" He gave a shy laugh and tucked his head sheepishly. "Yeah. It seems my losing streak's over. We're in love. Unspeakably."

"In love or in lust?" she asked.

"What kind of guy do you think I am?"

"The kind of guy who falls in lust."

"Nooo," he said, in his most drawn-out, self-caressing way. "She's cured me. I really do love her." His voice quickened. "But Harry, you won't believe this. Guess what Shoushan does for work?"

"Sells Oregon chai?"

He burst out laughing. "No, not that! Worse. She's an agent for the Medical Board."

Deep weariness filled Harry.

"I'm not kidding. She's infiltrated the Holistic Galleria, as part of some investigation into you."

He hadn't told Gabriel about the summons from the Board. He'd wanted to keep his friendship with Gabriel out of that world. Why did everything in his life have to converge?

"That's terrible," Melanie said. "I can't believe it. What an awful thing to do for a living."

"Don't be too hard on her," Gabriel said. "She just needed a job. Now that she knows Harry's my friend, she's going to switch sides. She'll screw up her testimony, or something like that. I didn't get the details."

"She should meet with Donald Bates," Melanie said, thoughtfully. "Don't you agree, Harry?"

Harry felt too slaughtered by the circumstances to do anything but agree.

"Who's Don Bates?" Gabriel asked.

"A lawyer who defends alternative medicine doctors," Melanie said.

"She'd be happy to meet with him. Shoushan doesn't have anything against alternative medicine personally. Like I said, it was just a job. They always hire beautiful young girls when they want to entrap alternative medicine physicians, apparently."

"Beautiful young girls are good at that," Geraldine said.

Harry hadn't noticed her arrival, but there she was, erect by the table, full of presence, as transcendent to the punk-hippie ambiance of the Jupiter as Albert Einstein would be at a bowling alley, Mother Theresa on the Riviera.

"Get up Gabriel," Melanie said. "Let's find Shoushan and bring her to Don Bates. They need to meet." To Geraldine, she said, "How long do you think you'll need?"

Harry wished he could say, "all night."

"An hour will do," Geraldine said.

He kissed Melanie goodbye. When they left, Geraldine sat opposite him, and said nothing.

"So how do you feel about it?" Harry asked, suddenly uncomfortable. "The book doing so well and all."

"I feel great about it," she said. "We'll help more people with the EightFoldWayDiet than we could ever have done seeing people one on one for a lifetime."

"I know. Isn't it bizarre?"

She took off her glasses, laid them on the table, and rubbed her palms over her eyes. "It is a bit bizarre."

"Don't tell me it bothers even you?"

She put her glasses back on. "Of course it does. Cynicism is just wounded idealism, Harry. I try to take a philosophical attitude, but I've been hurt by these last twenty-five years, same as you. I'm going to take my money and spend the rest of my life in my beach house with my schnauzer, trying to figure out what it all meant. I found a beach house, by the way. Not too far from Santa Cruz."

"You think you'll ever write about what you really feel? There have to be other people who've been hurt the way we have. It might help them."

"I'll bring my neighbors a cup of sugar when they run out. That's the most I ever want to help anyone ever again."

"I love you," he said.

"Of course you do, Harry. And with good reason."

"I've longed for you ever since high school."

She smiled and patted his hand. "We've known each other too long, Harry, for anything to work out. Don't get me wrong: I'd sleep with you anytime. But only as a friend."

He was trying to make sense of this when she asked him what he'd brought her here to talk about. It took him a moment to remember, but he only had to say a few words before she understood.

"I get it. You want to lose your license, retire from practice, never admit what you think, and live happily ever after. That's what you have in mind?"

"Something like that."

"And you're afraid that with all the help you're getting, you might win instead of lose?"

"Exactly."

"I wish you luck, my dear. Only, you have a big problem."

"What's that?"

"Sweetie, you're not going to lose your license. You couldn't *bribe* the Board to take it away from you, not for a million dollars."

The Alternative Street Arises

Geraldine's opinion on the subject depressed Harry, but after he met with Don Bates he felt more hopeful.

The Medical Board had set up a local headquarters for the investigation. This was an unusual step, and showed that they took his persecution quite seriously. Harry felt a strong intuition that the Board's eagerness to destroy him would, at the end, overcome the unwanted help of his loyal supporters.

The Board's local office was located on River St., not a mile from the Galleria. Harry decided that he would walk to his doom. On the day of the hearing, it was a beautiful Santa Cruz morning. The air was a crisp sixty, the sky clear, and the flower gardens and Victorian houses were more beautiful than ever. It was a wonderful day to die.

He crossed Mission at Pacific, walked half a block, and paused by a stairway that climbed the chalky cliff to the Santa Cruz Zen center. He felt an urge to go up there and make a formal act of thanksgiving. But he didn't have time. Instead, he slipped his medical license out of his wallet, ripped the damn succubus to shreds, and dropped the pieces in what would be for him a forever-hallowed trashcan.

He walked on until the row of shops petered out and he reached a semi-industrial area. He passed a construction site, and saw a man about his own age operating a backhoe. He should have become a backhoe operator. You could feel proud of work like that; it wasn't a hopelessly compromised profession like being a doctor.

Further on, he saw a billboard that glorified the virtues of a particular brand of vodka. Advertising. Now that might have been an option too. Advertisers could lie honestly.

But there was no going back, and anyway it didn't matter. His lying days were almost over.

This thought quickened his spirits, and his walk turned into a saunter. However, when he neared the corner of Pacific and Riverside, he spotted a small gang of people holding placards and banners, and came to an abrupt halt.

The Board's office was still a half-mile off. If the line of protestors reached this far, there must be hundreds or thousands of them. Sudden panic surged to his throat like esophageal reflux.

But he shouldn't jump to conclusions. Ashley knew he meant to walk to the hearing. She must have arranged for a little group to escort him on the final stretch. It was thoughtful of her. A dozen supporters couldn't hurt.

Reassured by this likely explanation, he began walking again. However, when he reached the intersection, he discovered that his first panicked impression had been correct: These few people formed only the tail of a line of protesters extending all the way down Riverside to the Medical Board office.

The sidewalks were packed with supporters. Police cars at the intersections turned away automobile traffic, and a rope along the curb kept people out of the street. There were cameramen everywhere, and up above a CNN helicopter followed him as he walked distractedly down the center of the street.

Who were all these people? Harry didn't recognize more than one in ten. The call must have gone out by phone tree and supplement-industry mailing list and email and chatroom and instant message. The whole damn alternative medicine world had come out to support him.

In the middle of the first block, he saw Leanne Beckam, his patient with the head explosions, holding a sign that read "Let Harry Heal!" As he passed, she swung the sign in support.

At the next intersection, he came to Mrs. Bates, poised and proud on a teak and gray leather chair she'd set up beside a CNN van. Her sign read "Trustbust the Medical Monopoly."

Ten yards further along the same block, Harry saw the mother of Sandy Owen, his patient who'd died of cancer. She held aloft a placard that read, "In memory of Sandy Owen: God bless Harry Boullard," and that brought tears to his eyes.

He wiped the tears away and kept on walking and waving until he recognized a woman of about sixty, holding a sign that read, "Herbs for Harry" in familiar, exquisite calligraphy. It was Sarah, the herb gardener from the Home of the Spirit commune.

"Geraldine called me," Sarah said, when he came over and took her hands. She still had the same kindly drawl. "You can imagine how surprised I was to find that young Harry, my herb garden assistant, is now a big time holistic doctor, and he needs my help."

"I'm incredibly touched that you came," Harry said.

"You'll win, I know it," Sarah said. "I've spoken with the plant spirits, and they've told me so."

The factual tone in which this statement was delivered knocked Harry out of his heart for an instant, but sentiment soon flooded back, and he kissed Sarah on the cheek before walking on.

At the next block, he spied his former office manager, Carol Cohen, standing with a dozen of his Wichita patients, holding a large red banner that read, "Drugs kill, Herbs Heal." When he came up, she pinched him on the cheek and said, "Give 'em hell, Harry!"

Charlie Graydon had brought a table with its own beach umbrella, and sat beside a large boom box that emitted silence. A sign beside the boom box read, "Homeopathic Healing Sounds." Apparently, consumers were supposed to turn down the volume until they couldn't hear anything, in order to receive soothing inaudible subsonic vibrations. When Harry passed by, Graydon said, "I've stopped worrying about it."

A block away from the Medical Board, Harry came to Emily, and beside her, Melanie, Ashley and Chelsea.

"Hey dad," Emily said. "I brought students." A group of twenty or so shiny, healthy looking young people, some of them slightly orange from drinking too much carrot juice, waved at him, and one very orange young man pumped his fist.

"Thanks, Em," he said.

"Quite a crowd, isn't it?" Ashley said.

"Unbelievable. I can't believe you got out so many people for me."

"The universe is on your side, Harry." This was Chelsea Crow. "You have nothing to fear."

Melanie kissed him, and so did Emily.

Toward the middle of the last block, Harry passed Royce Largo with a gaggle of glitzy people he supposed must be celebrities, but by now his eyes were too misty to recognize them.

And now he'd reached the building itself, a two-story teal blue clapboard affair in the best of strip-mall styles. A small police cordon held back the crowd. Harry showed his ID to the police captain, and he was allowed through.

With the crowd cheering behind him, Harry climbed a rickety exterior staircase to the second floor. There were three doors. The first two were unmarked, and he walked past them. The third door wore a brass nameplate that read "Medical Board of California, Medical Quality Division." Harry put his hand on the knob, hesitated, then turned around to lean on the railing and face the crowd. Cameras pointed up at him, and the crowd began chanting.

"Holistic Har-ry, Holistic Har-ry, Holistic Har-ry."

When the unison chant of a thousand voices changed to "Let Har-ry Heal!" he felt overcome and tears poured down his cheeks.

But he had a meeting to go to and a license to lose. He turned, wiped his eyes with his arm, and opened the door.

Vance Holding Speaks

It was a remarkably dull room for an inquisition: a few seats for waiting visitors, a water cooler, a framed State of California document with the logo of the Medical Board on the wall, and a counter for the receptionist.

Only, there was no receptionist. Two men sat behind the receptionist's desk. The first was Don Bates. The other was Vance Holding, far less pugilistic than when Harry had last seen him. He looked sick.

How odd, Harry thought. I meet my ancient enemy in final combat, and the first emotion I feel toward him is pity.

"The Board's in there," Bates said, pointing to a door. "Shall we go talk to them?"

"Before you go in," Holding said, "I'd like you to do me a favor and speak to me alone."

Bates stood up. "My client absolutely declines. This is a blatant attempt to separate him from counsel."

Holding shrugged. "It's a personal request. I'm aware I have no legal standing."

"What is it you want, Vance?" Harry asked.

Don Bates stood up and put out his palms out toward Harry. "Don't talk to him. It's a ploy. Their case is weak, and they mean to entrap you."

"Our case is quite strong," Holding said. "But public opinion is stronger. In the last ten minutes, the Board has gotten phone calls from the governor and six state congressmen. Apparently, Harry's solitary walk down the street is playing over and over on television. This is the most political Medical Board I've ever seen."

"They're all political," Don Bates said. "It's just that in California the politics is on our side. It will happen everywhere, sooner or later. California's just ahead of the game. Alternative medicine is winning. You've lost, Dr. Holding."

Holding shrugged again. "You might be right. But it's something completely different I want to talk about with Harry."

"Absolutely not," Bates said. "He's not doing it."

But something about Holding's expression caught Harry's attention. "I'm going to hear him out," Harry said.

"If you do that, I quit."

"You can quit if you want," Harry said. "But if you're only bluffing, please go into that room and tell the Board I'll be ready for them in a few minutes."

Don Bates walked toward the inner door in stages, pausing every few steps to make a gesture of entreaty. Harry didn't give way. When the lawyer reached the door and opened it, Harry caught a glimpse of Shoushan, along with other faces he didn't recognize. Then the door closed and he and Holding were alone.

"Would you mind coming around back here?" Holding asked. "I feel a bit out of breath. I have fairly bad emphysema, and it's acting up now."

Harry took Bates' vacated chair. "So what can I do for you, Vance?"

Holding put his hands behind his head and leaned back in his chair. "Remember when I came to your office disguised as a paraplegic? You really threw me off. You defended conventional medicine. I couldn't believe it."

"You overplayed your part," Harry said. "I'm naturally argumentative."

"I noticed. And that was a great shot you got off against me on Markley's talk-show, too. Remember? I brought up the Flat-Earth society to show that sincerity doesn't equal truth. Your comeback was classic. I'll never forget it. 'Yes,' you said. 'A person can be perfectly sincere, and yet have no idea what he's talking about. Now *Dr. Holding*, I believe that you are perfectly sincere ...'"

Holding broke off into a laugh that became a coughing fit, ghastly vacuous gasps with no force behind them, like dry heaves.

Harry filled a cup of water at the cooler and handed it to Holding, who sipped at it until his spasms stopped.

"It was marvelous," Holding said, when he could talk again. "I hated you for it, of course. 'Now *Dr. Holding*, I believe that you are perfectly sincere.'" He laughed and coughed again.

"You were right, though," Harry said. "Sincerity obviously doesn't guarantee truth. And what you said about double-blind studies stuck with me. At the time, I thought it was ridiculous. I *knew* that alternative medicine works.

I'd seen it work with my own eyes. But you got me thinking, and I eventually understood the point. You may not believe this, but these days I'm rather more on your side than against it."

Helding broke into another coughing fit, throughout which he nodded agreement. When he could speak, he said, "I recently discovered that."

"You did? How?"

"A friend of yours, name of Geraldine Steinberg. She called this morning and told me all about it. She's treating my sister, you know."

Geraldine had called Helding and told him that? Why? Some complicated manipulation? "What exactly did she tell you?"

"Pretty much what you just said. That you've come to recognize that alternative medicine is a complete fraud. No, I guess, to be more precise, you'll allow that it has a dozen or so treatments that work. So it's only *almost* a complete fraud. She said that the only reason you're still in it is that you can't figure a way to get out without hurting your daughter's feelings, and everybody else's feelings, all those patients and colleagues of yours." He waved vaguely toward the street, where the demonstrators were now shouting something that sounded like, "Garfinkel Morganatic Marriage."

"It's all true," Harry said.

"I also learned that you're the real author of the EightFoldWayDiet. Now that's a riot! When I first looked at the website, I thought it was a satire. I wondered which one of my fellow quackbuster had put it up to mock alternative medicine diets. It took a while to sink in that it was meant to be passed off as real. And I'll be damned if it didn't succeed. The public loves it."

"Pretty sad, isn't it?" Harry said.

"That's what I first thought. But then something weird happened. Very weird. I don't know what to do about it."

Helding stood up and walked laboriously to the reception counter. He drummed his fingers on it and didn't say anything.

"What's so weird, Vance?"

Helding had his back to Harry. "My sister's on the EightFoldWayDiet. Geraldine Steinberg put her on it in July. She's been on it for almost five months, and she's a new person."

Harry's mind reeled. "Surely it's just the power of suggestion."

"Surely, yes, but she's restored." Helding turned to face Harry. He almost looked like he was crying. "She's getting out and doing things again. She's smiling. I haven't seen her like this for years."

"It's Geraldine, not the diet."

"Maybe so. Maybe so. But does it matter? My sister's better, whether it's your totally ridiculous diet or your totally cynical friend. I don't know how to deal with it."

This was too much. Harry had hemmed himself with scruples, tied himself with responsibilities, locked himself into a position, but this was the last straw.

"I don't know how to deal with it either," Harry said, "but I don't have to. Give the Board my compliments. I resign my medical license no matter how they rule. Now if you'll excuse me ..."

Harry rose, whether to walk into the room of the Medical Board or out to the crowd he wasn't sure, but before he could move either way, Helding took his arm. "You're not going to denounce it, are you? The EightFoldWayDiet? I don't want you to do that. I want my sister to keep on believing."

This was too much. Way too much.

He was sick of lying, but he couldn't tell the truth. He couldn't pretend to believe, but he didn't have any right to sabotage the belief of anyone else. He was utterly and completely trapped. He could neither act nor refrain from acting. He had no options. It was a Zen koan in real life.

And then, in a blinding flash of light, he saw the solution: He wasn't trapped at all. He could satisfy both sides at once. Nothing was easier. The nature of belief *made it so*.

The 0% Solution

When Harry laid out his proposal before the Medical Board, they accepted immediately, having been ready to settle for far less. It took only fifteen minutes to work out a general outline of the plan. After they arranged a meeting the following week to flesh out further details, Harry stood up and reached over the table to shake hands with the Board's president. He shook hands with the rest of the Board members and investigators too, and with Don Bates. Then he turned to Holding.

The Board didn't understand the plan behind Harry's plan, but it didn't concern them anyway. It did concern Holding. The look he gave Harry as they shook hands was so knowing, so ironic and so full of double meanings that it reminded Harry of Geraldine.

Harry said farewell, walked out of the inner sanctum into the reception room, and paused there to prepare his thoughts. He would have to choose his words carefully in order to hide his real intentions while at the same time speaking the truth. He murmured a few practice sentences, tried on a couple of voice tones, then briskly crossed to the outside door and opened it.

The vast crowd burst into wild clapping and cheers. There were even more people than before. He'd never addressed an audience this large, but, strangely, he didn't feel at all disassociated.

The police lines parted to allow the media through, and reporters raced up the steps. Microphones and video cameras were soon flailing so close to his face Harry feared losing an eye.

A familiar voice in his ear said, "This one goes to a PA system." It was Royce, handing him a microphone.

Harry tapped on the grill. The sound echoed into the street and the throng quieted.

How many people would be listening to him on radio, watching him on television?

"The Medical Board of the State of California," Harry began, "has become far more enlightened than anyone of us would have guessed. And you know why? Because of you! Because of all of you. You showed them that they can no longer persecute alternative medicine with impunity. The tide has turned. They must take alternative medicine seriously. It's time has come at last. What you believe, what you advocate, what you teach, it will now at last be heard."

That set the crowd into a frenzied roar, and he let them go on roaring for a suitable interval before he quieted their joy with outstretched palms. "Rather than trying to shut me down, as we all expected, they've decided that they want my help instead." (more cheers). "So they've asked me to retire from private practice" (a few boos at that) "and create a State of California Commission on Complementary and Alternative Medicine. SCCCAM, as it will be called, will evaluate the ongoing scientific evidence regarding alternative medicine, and report to the Medical Board. In other words ..." He paused for the requisite number of beats, "... they're giving us a chance to prove that alternative medicine works!"

While the crowd roared its approval, Harry thought: and we will fail.

Of course, there would be a few successful treatments, the occasional glucosamine for arthritis, chiropractic for back pain or St. John's wort for depression, but not many. As a whole, when science dug deep into alternative medicine it would mostly find elaborate placebos.

But it didn't matter. That was the beauty of this solution to the koan. He could tell the truth and it wouldn't hurt anyone.

Medical researchers wouldn't believe anything until it was proven true, but alternative practitioners and their patients would believe everything until it was proved *untrue*. It took years to study treatments, and only minutes to invent new ones. For each fantasy that got knocked down, a hundred new fantasies would arise. Alternative medicine would live forever, supplying the beautiful imaginary treatments that satisfied so many human needs.

He looked in his heart and found no cynicism, only a kind of high, anarchic, love.

And then he saw Melanie at the front of the crowd below, smiling up at him, beautiful in her Da Vinci circle of balance. His love poured out to her. He gave the microphone back to Royce Largo, pushed through the crowd of reporters, and made his way down the stairs toward her.

He'd been such a fool to let mere facts get between them. Love, like alternative medicine, was a matter of irrational faith, of spontaneous trust. Perhaps she did not entirely understand him; perhaps they disagreed about certain things; but of one fact he had no doubt: She was the love of his life.

He raced toward Melanie, his arms spread wide. He'd almost reached her when, off to one side, he saw Geraldine giving him an ironic look, and his certainty wavered.

[extra line]

He still longed for Geraldine. He ached for her. He'd ached for her for thirty years. Could he really set that aside? Didn't a yearning as powerful as that prove its own reality?

Geraldine had said she didn't want a relationship. Maybe so, but couldn't he at least sleep with her a few times? Melanie would never know. He'd tell her he needed time alone to write, and he'd go off to Geraldine's beach cabin. Melanie would believe him. She'd be as easy to fool as any patient.

He could have it all, Melanie *and* Geraldine.

[extra line]

But then Harry's mind cleared. He reached Melanie, and took her into his arms. He didn't have to have it all. He would have Melanie. She was *Melanie*, and that was enough.

Appendix

Why Double-Blind Studies?

Although most people have heard of double-blind studies, few recognize their true significance. It's not that double-blind studies are hard to understand; rather, their consequences are difficult to *accept*. Why? Because double-blind studies tell us that we can't trust our direct personal experience. This isn't easy to swallow. It's nonetheless true.

The insights provided by double-blind studies have been particularly disturbing for alternative medicine. Most alternative medicine methods are grounded in tradition, common sense, anecdote, and testimonial. On the surface, these seem like perfectly good sources of information. However, double-blind studies have shown us otherwise. We now know that a host of "confounding factors" readily create a kind of optical illusion, causing the appearance of efficacy where none in fact exists, deluding tradition and common sense, and creating meaningless anecdotes and testimonials. The double-blind study is thus much more than a requirement for *absolute* proof of efficacy (as is commonly supposed) — it is a necessity for knowing almost *anything* about whether a treatment really works.

What is a Double-Blind Study?

In a randomized double-blind, placebo-controlled trial of a medical treatment, some of the participants are given the treatment, others are given fake treatment (placebo), and neither the researchers nor the participants know which is which until the study ends (they are thus both "blind"). The assignment of participants to treatment or placebo is done randomly, perhaps by flipping a coin (hence, "randomized").

Why Double-Blind Studies?

The experience of the last forty years has shown that, for most types of treatments, only a randomized double-blind, placebo-controlled study can properly answer the question: "Does Treatment A benefit Condition B?"

Common sense says otherwise. It seems obvious that we can tell if a treatment works by simply trying it. Does it help me? Does it help my aunt? If so, it's effective. If not, it doesn't work.

Unfortunately, here common sense is wrong. Medical conditions are an area of life in which direct, apparently obvious observations aren't at all reliable. The insights brought to us by double-blind studies have shown medical researchers that seeing isn't believing. The reason why: a horde of confounding factors.

The Rogue's Gallery: Confounding Factors

Subtle influences called "confounding factors" can create the illusion that ineffective treatments are actually effective. It is because of these confounding factors that so many worthless medical treatments have endured for centuries. Think of the practice of "bleeding," slitting a vein to drain blood. Some of the most intelligent people in our history were sure that bleeding was a necessity, and the medical literature of past centuries is full of testimonials to the marvelous effect of this "medical necessity."

Today, though, it's clear that bleeding is not helpful, and no doubt was responsible for killing a great many people. Why did this ridiculous treatment method survive so long? Because people were sure it worked. In reality, though, the benefits people thought they saw were really just confounding factors, such as:

The Placebo Effect

The Re-interpretation Effect
Observer Bias
Natural Course of the Illness
Regression to the Mean
The Study Effect (also called the Hawthorn Effect)
Statistical Illusions

The Placebo Effect

The *placebo effect* is the process by which the power of suggestion actually causes symptoms to improve. The original research that identified the placebo effect had some serious errors in it,³⁰ but there is little doubt that certain conditions are highly responsive to placebo treatment, such as menopausal hot flashes³¹, symptoms of prostate enlargement,³² and many types of chronic pain.³³ While it's often reported that only 30% of people respond to placebo, this number has no foundation, and, in fact the response rate seen in some of the conditions I just listed reaches as high as 70%.

Thus, if one gives a placebo treatment to a hundred people with musculoskeletal pain, one may get 70 testimonials of benefit. They will be sincere, convincing testimonials too: no one believes it's the placebo effect when it happens to them. The placebo response doesn't *feel* fake, or weak, or superficial, or shallow. It feels real.

Doctors, too, are fooled. Up until recently, orthopedic surgeons believed that "knee scraping" surgery (technically, arthroscopic surgical debridement) or knee arthritis was quite effective, and hundreds of thousands of such surgeries were performed every year. If one asked a surgeon, "how do you know this treatment works?" the surgeon would very likely reply, "Because I can see that it works with my own eyes. I have patients who go into surgery unable to walk, and a month later, they're skipping rope."

After performing this surgery for decades, one surgeon decided to use the double-blind, placebo-controlled methodology to test whether it really worked. The results were shocking: Arthroscopic surgery for knee arthritis did indeed bring about dramatic and long-lasting results; however, so did fake surgery (anesthesia and an incision), and to the same extent.³⁴ Surgeons were shocked and chagrined to find that people given the fake surgery (unbeknownst to them) were so pleased with the results that they said they would happily recommend the treatment to others!

In general, surgery lags behind other branches of conventional medicine in the extent to which it incorporates modern standards of evidence. However, there are many commonly used drugs that lack meaningful support as well. Cough syrup is a good example. In recent years, it has become clear that cough syrup containing either codeine or the "cough suppressant" dextromethorphan doesn't actually suppress coughs, despite decades (in the case of dextromethorphan) or centuries (in the case of codeine) of apparently effective use.³⁵

Comparison to placebo treatment is thus essential; without such comparison, any random treatment is likely to appear effective. Few proponents of alternative medicine have grasped this basic though counterintuitive fact. It is quite common for an alternative medicine product or technique to be advocated based solely on research in which people with a problem are given a treatment, and lo and behold, they improve. But in the absence of a blinding and a placebo group, such studies are meaningless. Any nonsense treatment should be able to produce apparent improvement in a fair number of people.

Consider these examples:

In a study of 321 people with low back pain, chiropractic manipulation was quite helpful, but no more helpful than giving patients an essentially useless educational booklet on low back pain.³⁶

In a randomized, controlled trial of 67 people with hip pain, acupuncture produced significant benefits, but no greater benefits than placing needles in random locations.³⁷

In a double-blind, placebo-controlled study of 30 people with carpal tunnel syndrome, use of a static magnet produced dramatic and enduring benefits, but so did use of fake magnets.³⁸

And in a randomized, controlled trial of 177 people with neck pain, fake laser acupuncture proved to be *more* effective than massage.³⁹

Note that these studies do not actually disprove the tested therapies. The study sizes might have simply been too small to detect a modest benefit. What they do show, however, is that comparison to placebo treatment is essential: without such comparison, any random form of treatment, no matter how worthless in itself, is *likely* to appear to be effective.

Beyond the Placebo Effect

At least the placebo effect involves a real benefit. Many other illusions can create the impression of benefit although no benefit has occurred at all. These are often loosely referred to using the plural term "placebo effects."

Even when a fake treatment doesn't actually improve symptoms, people may *re-interpret* their symptoms and experience them as less severe. For example, if someone gives you a drug and says it will make you cough less frequently, you will likely experience yourself as coughing less frequently, even if your actual rate of coughing doesn't change. In other words, you will re-interpret your symptoms to perceive them as less severe.

Observer bias is a similar phenomenon, but it affects doctors (and researchers) rather than patients. If doctors believe that they are giving a patient an effective drug, and they interview that patient, they will observe improvements, even if there are no improvements. For a classic example of this consider the results of a study that tested the effectiveness of a new treatment regimen for multiple sclerosis by comparing it against placebo treatment.⁴⁰ This was a double-blind study, and therefore the physicians whose job it was to evaluate the results were kept in the dark about which study participants were receiving real and which were receiving fake treatment (they were "blinded"). However, the experimenters introduced an interesting wrinkle: they allowed a few physicians to know for certain which patients were receiving treatment (they were "unblinded").

The results were a bit appalling. The unblinded physicians were much more likely to "observe" that the treatment worked compared to the impartial blinded physicians. In other words, the unblinded physicians hallucinated a benefit because they expected to see one!

I call these results appalling because of what they say about so-called "professional experience." Suppose a physician has tried two drugs for a certain condition and found by experience that drug A is more effective than drug B. Does this mean that drug A is *actually* more effective than drug B? Not at all. If the doctor has any reason to expect drug A to produce better results (e.g., memorably positive experiences with a few patients, recommendation from a respected colleague, impressive salesmanship on the part of a pharmaceutical company), the doctor is very likely to experience drug A as more effective than drug B, regardless of the actual comparative efficacy as tested in double-blind trials. The effect is so strong that doctors are likely to discount the results of studies that don't agree with what they "know" to be true.

Many diseases will get better on their own, as part of their *natural course*. Any treatment given at the beginning of such an illness will seem to work, and a doctor using such a treatment will experience what is called the *illusion of agency*, the sense of having helped even though the outcome would have been the same regardless. A good example is neck or back pain: most episodes of these conditions go away with time, regardless of treatment, and so any treatment at all will seem to be effective.

Regression to the mean is a statistical cousin of natural course, but applies to chronic conditions. For example, consider high blood pressure. Blood pressure levels wax and wane throughout the day and from week to week. Suppose that a person's average blood pressure is 140/90, but occasionally it gets as high as 160/105 and sometimes it's as low as 120/70. If people like this are tested and found at the moment to have high blood pressure, they may be seen as needing treatment. However, if they happen to be more near their average blood pressure, or lower than their average, they won't be seen as needing treatment. In other words, when patients have a fluctuating condition, doctors (and researchers) tend to enroll them in treatment at the moment of an unhealthy extreme. By the laws of statistics, after any sufficient interval, a fluctuating variable is more likely to be measured near its mean than at its extremes. Therefore, regardless of what treatment (if any) is used, blood pressure will appear to improve with time.

The *study effect* (also called Hawthorne effect) refers to the fact that people enrolled in a study tend to take better care of themselves, and may improve for this reason, rather than any specifics of the treatment under study. This is a surprisingly powerful influence. If one enrolls someone in a trial of a new drug for reducing cholesterol, and then give them a placebo, their cholesterol levels are likely to fall significantly. Why? Presumably, they begin to eat better, exercise more, etc. Again, double-blinding and a placebo group are necessary because otherwise this confounding factor can cause the illusion of specific benefit where none exists.

Finally, *illusions* caused by the nature of *statistics* are very common. There are many kinds of these, and so they deserve a section of their own.

Statistical Illusions

Suppose you've invented a truly lousy treatment that fails almost all the time, but helps one in a hundred people. If you give such a nearly worthless treatment to 100,000 people, you'll get a thousand testimonials, and the treatment will sound great.

Suppose you give someone a treatment said to enhance mental function, and then you use twenty different methods of testing mental function. By the law of averages, improvements will be seen on *some* of these measurements, even if the treatment doesn't actually do anything. If you're a supplement manufacturer, you can selectively report the positive results to support the sales of your product, even though in fact the results are merely due to the way statistics work, and not any mind-stimulating effect of the product. (In order to validly test the mind-enhancing power of a supplement, researchers must restrict themselves to at most a couple of ways of testing benefit).

Suppose you give 1000 people a treatment to see if it prevents heart disease, and you don't find any benefit. This frustrates you, so you begin to study the data closely. Lo and behold, you discover that there is less lung cancer

among people receiving the treatment. Have you made a new discovery? Possibly, but probably not. Again by the law of averages, if you allow yourself to *dredge the data* you are guaranteed to find improvements in some condition or other, simply by statistical accident.

Perhaps the trickiest statistical illusion of all relates to what are called observational studies. This is such an important topic, that again it deserves a new heading.

Observational Studies

In observational studies, researchers don't actually give people any treatment. Instead, they simply *observe* a vast number of people. For example, in the Nurse's Health Study, almost 100,000 nurses have been extensively surveyed for many years, in an attempt to find connections between various lifestyle habits and illnesses. Researchers have found, for example, that nurses who consume more fruits and vegetables have less cancer. Such a finding is often taken to indicate that fruits and vegetables prevent cancer, but this is not a reliable inference. Here's why:

All we know from such a study is that high intake of fruits and vegetables is *associated* with less cancer, not that it *causes* less cancer. People who eat more fruits and vegetables may have other healthy habits as well, even ones we don't know anything about, and they could be the cause of the benefit, not the fruits and vegetables.

This may sound like a purely academic issue, but it's not. Researchers looking at observational studies noticed that menopausal women who take hormone replacement therapy (HRT) have as much as 50% less heart disease than women who do not use HRT. This finding, along with a number of thoroughly logical arguments tending to show that estrogen should prevent heart disease (see footnote 23), led doctors to recommend that all menopausal women take estrogen. Even as late as 2001, many doctors continued to say that taking estrogen was the single most important way an older woman could protect her heart.

However, this was a terrible mistake. Observational studies don't show cause and effect, and it was possible that women who happened to use HRT were healthier in other ways and that it was those unknown other factors that led to lower heart disease rates, and not the HRT. Doctors pooh-poohed this objection (showing that even doctors often fail to understand the need for double-blind studies) and said that it was perfectly obvious HRT helped. However, when a double-blind, placebo-controlled study was done to verify what everyone "knew" was true, it turned out that that HRT actually *causes* heart disease, rather than prevents it.⁴¹ HRT also increases risk of breast cancer, and, possibly, of Alzheimer's disease as well. In other words, placing trust in observational studies led to the deaths of many, many women. This is not an academic issue.

In hindsight, it appears that women who happened to use HRT were healthier not because of the HRT, but because they tended to be in a higher socioeconomic class, have better access to healthcare and also take care of themselves. However, it is also possible that the real cause of the spurious association between HRT use and reduced heart disease rates is some other factor that we have not even identified. People's characteristics are not independent variables; they are linked in numerous complex ways. For this reason, observational studies can't prove cause and effect, and they can easily lead to conclusions that are exactly backwards.

This is a lesson that the news media seems unable to understand. It constantly reports the results of observational studies as proof of cause and effect. For example, it has been observed that people who consume a moderate amount of alcohol have less heart disease than those who consume either no alcohol or too much alcohol. But, contrary to what you may have heard, this doesn't mean that alcohol prevents heart disease! It is likely that people who are moderate in their alcohol consumption are different in a variety of ways from people who are either teetotalers or abusers, and it may be those differences, and not the alcohol per se, that causes the benefit. Maybe, for example, they are moderate in general, and that makes them healthier. The fact is, we don't know.

Similarly, it has been observed that people who consume a diet high in antioxidants have less cancer and heart disease. However, once more this does NOT mean that antioxidants prevent heart disease and cancer. In fact, when the antioxidants vitamin E and beta-carotene were studied in gigantic double-blind studies as possible cancer- or heart-disease-preventive treatments, vitamin E didn't work (except, possibly, for prostate cancer) and beta-carotene actually made things worse! (One can pick holes in these studies, and proponents of antioxidants frequently do, but the fact is that we still lack direct double-blind evidence to indicate that antioxidants truly provide *any* of the benefits claimed for them. The only evidence that does exist is directly analogous to that which falsely "proved" that HRT prevents heart disease!)

Double-Blind Studies, and Nothing but Double-Blind Studies

All of the information I've just presented has accumulated over the last several decades. After coming to a great many false conclusions based on other forms of research, medical researchers have finally come to realize that without doing double-blind studies on a treatment it's generally impossible to know whether it works. It doesn't matter if the treatment has a long history of traditional use -- in medicine, tradition is often dead wrong. It doesn't matter if doctors or patients think it works -- doctors and patients are almost sure to observe benefits even if the treatment used is

fake. And it doesn't matter if observational trials show that people who do X have less of Y. Guesses made on the basis of this kind of bad evidence may be worse than useless: they may actually cause harm rather than benefit.

To make matters even more difficult, double-blind studies are not all created alike. There are a number of pitfalls in designing, performing and reporting such studies, and for this reason some double-blind studies deserve more credence than others. Double-blind studies from certain countries, such as China and Russia, always must be taken with a grain of salt because historical evidence suggests a pattern of systematic bias in those countries.⁴² Studies that enroll few people, or last for only a short time, generally prove little. And unless more than one independent laboratories have found corroborating results, there's always the chance of bias or outright fraud. Thus, a treatment can only be considered proven effective when there have been several double-blind studies enrolling 200 or more people, performed by separate researchers, conducted according to the highest standards (as measured by a study rating scale called the "Jadad scale"), carried out at respected institutions and published in peer-reviewed journals. Weaker evidence provides, at best, a hint of effectiveness, likely to be disproved when better studies are done.

While a number of herbs and supplements have reached, or nearly reached the level of solid proof, most alternative therapies have not.⁴³ Again, this isn't an idealistic, ivory-tower standard useful only for academia: it's a minimum necessity. Treatments that have not been evaluated in double-blind studies are very likely to be so much hot air. Except in the rare cases when a treatment is overwhelmingly and almost instantly effective (a so-called "high effect-size" treatment), there is simply no other way to know whether it works at all besides going through the trouble and expense of double-blind trials.

Evidence-Based Medicine

The double-blind study has begun to cause a revolution even in conventional medicine. Many old beliefs have been tossed out when double-blind studies were finally done. It's been discovered, for example, that (as noted earlier) over-the-counter cough syrups don't work, that immediate antibiotic treatment for ear infections is probably not necessary or even helpful in most cases⁴⁴ (the same goes for sinus infections), and that cartilage scraping for knee arthritis is no better than placebo (but, as noted above, placebo is very effective!). Many other widely used conventional treatments, such as spinal fusion for back pain and most physical therapy modalities for any sort of pain have essentially no supporting evidence, even if they haven't yet been *proven* ineffective. Regarding back fusion surgery, at least, this is a big problem; as Royce Largo points out, unproven surgery borders on the criminal.

The understanding that medicine must be grounded in double-blind studies is called the "evidence-based medicine" movement. According to evidence-based medicine, if a treatment has not been properly studied, it should not be advocated as an effective treatment.

This is true whether the treatment is an Indonesian herb or a well-accepted medical technique. However, conventional medicine, at least, has a certain reticence about offering unproven treatments, and a historical trend of rising evidence standards. Alternative medicine has taken the opposite approach: offering a profusion of treatments without the slightest concern about meaningful scientific support.

Double-blind studies on alternative medicine are at last coming in. Unfortunately, the results aren't all that great. Alternative medicine contains a few modestly effective individual treatments, but its grand schemes of healing most likely possess no more truth than other pre-scientific approaches to understanding the physical universe. In Harry's words, the body is a biochemical machine, alas, not a spiritual entity composed of subtle energies, and one can't get very far without a microscope.

ENDNOTES

¹ A best seller by Louise Hay (*You Can Heal Your Life*, Hay House, 1984) popularized the notion that body symptoms represent emotional disturbances in the manner of a pun: e.g., a person with asthma who cannot take in air has emotional difficulty taking in life. This poetic concept actually goes back to Freud, and entirely lacks any meaningful supportive evidence. Susan Sontag dissects the possible harm of this approach in her book, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and its Metaphors* (Picador USA, 1989).

² Harry is deliberately mixing up systems. The triple burner meridian is a term from Chinese medicine, while the Pingala Nadi and Agnya chakra are discussed in Hindu texts. The term “Herxheimer-like reaction” derives originally from symptoms seen during the conventional medical treatment of syphilis, but it has been misappropriated by alternative medicine proponents to indicate symptoms that supposedly arise during various alternative medicine treatments, such as Candida treatment and mercury filling removal.

³ Conventional medicine up through the 1930s focused heavily on diet as well, making complex recommendations that from the perspective of the present day seem quite silly. For a detailed and historically accurate presentation of 19th century conventional medicine’s enthusiasm for dietary prescriptions see the Aubrey/Maturin stories by Patrick O’Brian. In the series, the ship’s doctor, Stephen Maturin, frequently makes diagnoses and prescribes treatments that, while nonsensical in retrospect, are holistic in intent, and remind one of current alternative medicine practice.

⁴ See the Appendix for more information on the placebo effect and related effects.

⁵ The Worsley School is a uniquely non-traditional form of acupuncture that calls itself Traditional Acupuncture.

⁶ Ashley has slightly misunderstood the Blood-Type diet. Lectins are substances found in food. According to the theory espoused in *Eat Right 4 Your Type*, people with certain blood types have negative reactions to certain lectins. So, it would be the body that relaxed, not the lectins. (That is, assuming the theory has any truth to it whatsoever, which I would not recommend assuming.)

⁷ See the Appendix for an explanation of these expressions.

⁸ Harry might have been somewhat less proud of these accomplishment if he knew that placebo pills generally reduce hot flashes by about 50% and PMS symptoms by almost as much. Furthermore, fake laser acupuncture (with the laser turned off) has been found in one study to be even *more* effective than massage for neck pain.

If placebo produces satisfactory effects in 50% of people, and two hundred people are treated, there will be 100 testimonials. Since those patients who don’t do well often just don’t come back for a second treatment, a medical practitioner can easily experience nearly a 100% rate of benefit with a treatment that is no better than placebo pills.

See:

- Diegoli MSC, da Fonseca AM, Diegoli CA, et al. A double-blind trial of four medications to treat severe premenstrual syndrome. *Int J Gynaecol Obstet*. 1998;62:63–67.
- Irnich D, Behrens N, Molzen H, et al. Randomised trial of acupuncture compared with conventional massage and “sham” laser acupuncture for treatment of chronic neck pain. *BMJ*. 2001;322:1–6.
- MacLennan A, Lester S, Moore V. Oral estrogen replacement therapy versus placebo for hot flushes: a systematic review. *Climacteric*. 2001;4:58–74

⁹ Many systems of medicine, including modern medicine, draw information from the pulse. Most traditional medical systems, but not modern medicine, also make extensive use of examination of the tongue. Traditional Chinese Medicine has refined these two examinations to a remarkable degree.

According to TCM, there are three pulses on each wrist, corresponding to three positions on the radial artery, and each one is examined under light, moderate, and heavy pressure. Each of these six pulses can be “hurried,” “languid,” “floating, etc., and the process of pulse examination can take a great deal of prolonged attention. Supposedly, taking the pulse in this manner can reveal a great deal of information about the various systems of the body.

However, it is well known in acupuncture that if two different acupuncturists take one patient’s pulse, they come up with different results. This is attributed to an “interaction of Qi,” but is also the hallmark of an unreliable form of observation.

The Chinese medical examination of the tongue pays attention to the color and condition of the tongue body and its coat. There has never been, to my knowledge, any investigation to see whether there is more than a random statistical association between any medical condition and the state of the tongue.

¹⁰ Coffee enemas are said to cleanse the liver, and, along with juice fasting, are used in many alternative cancer cure programs.

¹¹ Irnich D, Behrens N, Molzen H, et al. Randomised trial of acupuncture compared with conventional massage and sham laser acupuncture for treatment of chronic neck pain. *BMJ*. 2001;322:1–6.

¹² In a previous book, *Health Food Junkies* (Broadway Books, 2000), I defined “Orthorexia nervosa” as obsession with healthy food. See www.orthorexia.com for more information.

¹³ There is a persistent naturopathic idea that certain foods alter the acid-base balance of the body, and that this plays a major role in health. This idea, while plausible in 1850, stopped making sense at least a century ago.

The body constantly monitors blood acidity, and adjusts it by modifying the rate of breathing. This is possible because carbon dioxide is acidic, and the faster one breathes, the less carbon dioxide in the blood. Small changes in breathing rate automatically compensate for the relatively slight changes in pH caused by consumption of foods. Even if one were to scarf down tablespoons of baking soda, a substance far more alkaline than any food, breathing rate would automatically adjust to maintain blood acid/base balance, and no change in pH would occur.

¹⁴ The Dietary Supplement and Health Education Act of 1994 is an interesting bit of legislation that actively mandates lying. According to its rules, supplement manufacturers are not allowed to place any “disease based” claims on supplement labels. A disease-based claim is one that refers to a medical condition. Thus, although glucosamine has been studied and generally found effective as a treatment for arthritis, a bottle of glucosamine cannot legally state “for the treatment of arthritis” on its label. Instead, manufacturers are required to use “structure-function” claims, which eschew mentioning a disease and instead refer in a positive way to some aspect of the body’s structure or function. For glucosamine, this leads to statements such as “supports healthy joint function.” This legally acceptable statement gives the false impression that glucosamine has been shown to help *prevent* arthritis; it has not.

Similarly, St. John’s wort (used for depression) is said to “support healthy mood.” It does not have any such general effect. It treats major depression of mild-to-moderate severity, a far more limited action. A supplement company complying with the rules of the FDA is therefore violating the false advertising rules of the FTC.

¹⁵ Harry is using the term “placebo effect” loosely. The placebo effect itself involves a true benefit caused by an inactive treatment. In addition, there are many other effects that can give a false impression of benefit. These are often informally referred to in the plural as “placebo effects.” See the Appendix for more information.

¹⁶ In macrobiotics it is believed that one must make sure not to drink too much water. This is one of many areas in which macrobiotics contradicts the principles of naturopathy. Another major contradiction involves cooked vs. raw vegetables. Naturopathy tends to believe that vegetables are better eaten raw, because they have more “life force” and more “enzymes.” In macrobiotics, however, as well as in much of the rest of Asian medicine, raw vegetables are said to cause diseases such as cancer and arthritis. It is the existence of head-on collisions like these that make it difficult to believe that alternative medicine possesses a special dietary wisdom; more likely, it merely sports a plethora of semi-religious dietary beliefs.

¹⁷ See *You Are All Sanpaku* (Citadel Press, 1980) and *Your Face Never Lies* (Avery Publishing Group, 1983)

¹⁸ Ginkgo for Alzheimer’s disease is perhaps the best established of all alternative medicine treatments, supported by numerous double-blind studies, including a large US trial published in 1997.

¹⁹ The term “allopathic” was coined by Samuel Hahnemann, the inventor of homeopathy, as an insulting description of all forms of medicine other than his own. He intended the term to criticize not only the conventional medicine of his day but also herbal medicine.

Homeopathy uses substances that, when taken to excess, cause effects that are similar to (“homeo” to) the symptoms of the disease; allopathy uses substances that when taken to excess do not cause effects that are similar to the symptoms of the disease. Unless you believe in the tenets of homeopathy (e.g., that substances which cause symptoms similar to those of a disease are helpful for treating that disease), this is a rather irrelevant issue. However, the name stuck, and today even conventional medicine has, to some extent, accepted the term for itself. Herbalists, though, have generally forgotten that they too were once vilified as allopaths by Hahnemann.

²⁰ Prior to the Women’s Health Initiative study, physicians were in the habit of prescribing hormone replacement therapy to almost all menopausal women. They were quite sure that HRT prevented heart disease; one spokesperson of a major medical foundation had stated as fact that HRT was the single best treatment any doctor could give a post-menopausal woman.

As early as the late ‘80s, however, an organization called the National Women’s Health Network had begun arguing that there was insufficient evidence to justify the widespread use of hormone replacement therapy. They pointed out that *higher-than-average* standards of evidence should be required before manufacturers could promote the use of a potentially dangerous drug in healthy people, and demanded double-blind placebo-controlled trials. However,

it took a long time to convince anyone of the need for such studies. It simply seemed obvious that hormone replacement therapy should be good for menopausal women.

The (in retrospect, incorrect) theory that HRT prevents heart disease was based on five pillars:

(1) Observational studies had reliably shown that women who took hormone replacement therapy had much less heart disease than women who didn't take hormone replacement therapy. However, in observational studies, people aren't given treatments. They are just observed. Women who took hormone replacement therapy were also in a higher socioeconomic class, on average, than women who didn't; they also went to the doctor more often. Both of these factors are independently associated with less heart disease. In retrospect, it appears that it was these factors, or others like them, that created an *illusion* that hormone replacement therapy prevents heart disease.

(2) Prior to menopause, women have far lower rates of heart disease than their male cohorts; from the moment of menopause onward the rates of the two sexes converge. Since estrogen and progesterone levels fall precipitously in menopause, it seems logical that taking estrogen and progesterone should help prevent heart disease. (It *was* logical, but it wasn't true)

(2) Estrogen reduces cholesterol levels. Since we know that high cholesterol accelerates heart disease, this finding served as a "surrogate marker" to confirm estrogen's value. In retrospect, estrogen's effect on cholesterol appears strikingly modest, but researchers tended to gloss over that fact.

(3) Estrogen also possesses antioxidant properties, and in the early and mid '90s, antioxidants were thought to protect the heart. It wasn't until a few years later that study results came back in which antioxidants failed to prove helpful.

(4) Finally, estrogen has favorable effects on the artery wall, effects that, according to theory, should help prevent heart attacks. As it happens, antioxidants also relax the artery wall. Apparently, this simply isn't an important enough effect to make a difference.

Putting all this weak evidence together, physicians came to strongly endorse hormone replacement therapy for post-menopausal women. They did so despite existing evidence that estrogen caused blood clots, and growing evidence that it caused breast cancer. The benefits, most everyone assumed, outweighed the risks.

The pharmaceutical industry loved this conclusion because it justified the sale of a profitable drug to millions of healthy women. Physicians loved it as well, for they were pleased to have a health-promoting treatment to give their patients. And women were supposed to love it too, because through the use of estrogen they would stay healthy – and feminine – forever.

Unfortunately, everyone was wrong. Hormone replacement therapy appears to increase risk of heart disease, breast cancer, and, possibly, Alzheimer's disease; there is no meaningful evidence that it prolongs youthful appearance. Universal hormone replacement therapy was a BIG mistake.

²¹ The Cave Man Diet, also known as the Paleolithic Diet, attempts to reproduce the diet of pre-agricultural humans, such as meat (cooked or raw), dark greens, tubers, nuts, seeds and berries.

²² For a survey of scientific studies on astrology, see Carlson S. *Astrology. Experientia*. 1988;44: 290-7.

²³ In his book *The Blank Slate* (Viking, 2002, Page 220-222), Steven Pinker discusses what he calls mental modules, or core intuitions. These are aspects of brain function that we are born with, and operate outside of the process of painstaking learning. The ability to learn language, a sense of what can be called intuitive physics (built in knowledge of how objects fall), a spatial sense, a sense of fairness, etc.

I would postulate that the expectation of benefit through delayed gratification is another one of these core intuitions. There are many circumstances in which a primitive human, or an animal, might do better with the ability to delay gratification. (Don't try to spear that mammoth yet: wait till the rest of the guys have caught up.) Such delay would require a specific mental mechanism, in order to defer the urgent demands of basic drives. A module that represented the view "if I give up or defer something I want, I'll benefit" could provide the necessary impetus.

Like all core intuitions, however, this one can lead to problems when it is misapplied. People have a strong intuitive sensation that if they give up food they like, it will do them good. That doesn't make it true.

²⁴ Many observational studies have found that individuals who consume more saturated fat have a higher rate of heart disease than those who consume less saturated fat. fatty foods. As with hormone replacement therapy, however these findings do not by themselves indicate that saturated fat increases heart disease risk. The apparent connection between the two numbers could easily be a statistical fluke, just as the apparent contribution of hormone replacement therapy to heart health proved in retrospect to have been a statistical fluke.

Furthermore, while the supporting observational evidence for an estrogen-heart disease connection is quite consistent, the observational case regarding saturated fat is not. In France, for example, high consumption of saturated fats is *not* associated with excess risk of heart disease. This is called the "French Paradox," and proponents of the saturated fat theory typically invoke red wine, olive oil consumption and lifestyle differences to explain it away. However, there's another, simpler explanation: that there never was a paradox at all. If one does not decide in advance

that saturated fat causes heart disease, one can take the French findings simply as evidence to discredit the saturated fat theory. As it happens, observational studies performed in several other countries have also failed to find a straightforward saturated fat/ heart disease connection. If observational evidence deserves to be looked at with suspicion, inconsistent observational evidence is entirely untrustworthy.

Furthermore, the changes in surrogate markers brought about by saturated fat are at best confusing. Reduction of saturated fat intake does reduce total cholesterol, and taken by itself, this does seem to support the saturated fat hypothesis. However, medicine no longer relies merely on measurements of total cholesterol level; Rather, it looks at an overall lipid profile that includes, in addition, LDL (“bad”) cholesterol, HDL (“good”) cholesterol and triglycerides. Reducing saturated fat intake improves levels of total and LDL cholesterol, but it worsens levels of HDL cholesterol and triglycerides. The net effect is, so far as we know, neutral.

Some might say that it’s obvious fat causes heart disease: fat clogs up the arteries like it clogs up the drain. But that idea was discarded decades ago; the connection between fat intake and hardening of the arteries, if there really is one, is definitely far more subtle.

Thus, reducing saturated fat might prevent heart disease, have no effect on heart disease, or even increase it.

²⁵ Although this description may sound fanciful, Harry has recorded the standard procedure quite accurately.

²⁶ Many vegetarians believe that no matter how much a pan is scrubbed, if it once held meat, nothing cooked in it is truly vegetarian. I propose that in fact this feeling is due to what Steven Pinker calls the sense of contamination (*How the Mind Works*, WW. Norton, NY, 1997, Page 379-386). The classic example of contamination involves putting a plastic cockroach in a glass of water and asking someone to drink it. No amount of knowledge about the sterility of the cockroach imitation can easily eradicate the sense of disgust aroused in most people even by thinking about drinking the water. Furthermore, if one takes a drop of water from that glass and moves it to another, clean glass of water, the new water still feels slightly repulsive. According to Pinker, this sense originates in a kind of hardwired understanding of the nature of infection: even a very small amount of bacteria can be dangerous, because bacteria reproduce. Thus, if even a small amount of an unclean object like a cockroach or feces comes in contact with water, the water may be dangerous to drink.

Pinker goes on to speculate that the human generalizes this concept of contamination to all sorts of taboos -- the sense of the “unclean” seen in most religions. The vegetarian revulsion to meat-contaminated cooking utensils may be one of the clearest example of this psychological force.

²⁷ There is an acupuncture point above the upper lip and beneath the nose that is traditionally used to restore consciousness. It does seem to work, perhaps because it’s quite painful to have a needle stuck there.

²⁸ The Candida theory first appeared in the early ‘80s and by the ‘90s had become settled naturopathic wisdom.

Like all good alternative medicine theories, the Candida approach mandates a fairly difficult diet. Everything containing or made with or related to the Kingdom of Fungi is banned: yeasted breads, cheese, alcoholic beverages and tomato paste. Mushrooms too, because mushrooms and Candida are both yeast, and therefore people who are hypersensitive to one will, obviously, be hypersensitive to the other. (E.g., housecats and blue whales are both mammals, and so people who are allergic to cats are also allergic to blue whales.)

The Candida diet also bans sugar, because it “feeds yeast.” This is true in a fermenting bottle of wine, but in the body, where sugar levels are strictly regulated, the connection is, at the very least, not self-evident. White flour is also banned, because the body rapidly converts it into sugar. Fruit goes on the bad list too; it is interesting that naturopathic physicians accept this, because it reverses centuries of naturopathic belief that fruit is the ideal food.

Another oddity about the Candida approach is that it encourages use of sometimes dangerous pharmaceutical medications to kill yeast, along with a host of natural yeast-killing products: caprylic acid, probiotics, grapefruit seed extract, oregano oil, Oregon Grape, olive leaf, and lapacho.

It’s a complex, expensive, evidence-free, simplistic theory. No wonder it’s so popular.

²⁹ Chelation therapy is a high-profit alternative medicine technique that involves the substance EDTA injected intravenously. It was derived from the discovery that people with heart disease have calcium deposits in their arteries. Early on, it seemed plausible that calcium might be the cause, therefore, of heart disease. EDTA is a substance that can “chelate” or bind with metals in the body, and help remove them. It is often used to remove excess lead from the body. Chelation therapists use it to remove calcium from the arteries. This is a very lucrative practice, because the physician can have a nurse do the work, and collect a hefty fee for each treatment.

However, it is now fairly clear that calcium deposits are a side effect of hardening of the arteries, not the cause; there is no evidence that chelation therapy offers any benefits beyond a strong placebo effect. For more information, see:

- Anderson TJ, Hubacek J, Wyse DG, et al. Effect of chelation therapy on endothelial function in patients with coronary artery disease: PATCH substudy. *J Am Coll Cardiol*. 2003;41:420-425

- Ernst E. Chelation therapy for coronary heart disease: An overview of all clinical investigations. *Am Heart J*. 2000;140:4-5.
- Knudtson ML, Wyse DG, Galbraith PD, et al. Chelation therapy for ischemic heart disease: a randomized controlled trial. *JAMA*. 2002;287:481-486.

³⁰ Hrobjartsson A, Gotzsche PC. Is the placebo powerless? An analysis of clinical trials comparing placebo with no treatment. *N Engl J Med*. 2001;344:1594-1602

³¹ MacLennan A, Lester S, Moore V. Oral estrogen replacement therapy versus placebo for hot flushes: a systematic review. *Climacteric*. 2001;4:58-74.

³² Nickel JC. Placebo therapy of benign prostatic hyperplasia: a 25-month study. Canadian PROSPECT Study Group. *Br J Urol*. 1998;81:383-387.

³³ Solomon S. A review of mechanisms of response to pain therapy: why voodoo works. *Headache*. 2002;42:656-62

³⁴ Moseley JB, O'Malley K, Petersen NJ, et al. A controlled trial of arthroscopic surgery for osteoarthritis of the knee. *N Engl J Med*. 2002;347:81-8.

³⁵ See: Taylor JA, Novack AH, Almquist JR, et al. Efficacy of cough suppressants in children. *J Pediatr*. 1993;122:799-802; Croughan-Minihane MS, Petitti DB, Rodnick JE. Clinical trial examining effectiveness of three cough syrups. *J Am Board Fam Pract*. 1993;6:109-115. Schroeder K, Fahey T. Over-the-counter medications for acute cough in children and adults in ambulatory settings. *Cochrane Database Syst Rev*. 2001;CD001831; and, most impressively, Paul IM, Yoder KE, Crowell KR et al. Effect of dextromethorphan, diphenhydramine, and placebo on nocturnal cough and sleep quality for coughing children and their parents. *Pediatrics*. 2004;114:e85-90.

³⁶ Cherkin DC, Deyo RA, Battie M, et al. A comparison of physical therapy, chiropractic manipulation, and provision of an educational booklet for the treatment of patients with low back pain. *N Engl J Med*. 1998;339:1021-1029.

³⁷ Fink M, Karst M, Wippermann B, et al. Non-specific effects of traditional Chinese acupuncture in osteoarthritis of the hip: a randomized controlled trial. *Complement Ther Med*. 2001;9:82-88.

³⁸ Carter R, Hall T, Aspy CB, et al. Effectiveness of magnet therapy for treatment of wrist pain attributed to carpal tunnel syndrome. *J Fam Pract*. 2002;51:38-40. However, identical benefits were seen among those given fake magnets.

³⁹ Irnich D, Behrens N, Molzen H, et al. Randomised trial of acupuncture compared with conventional massage and sham laser acupuncture for treatment of chronic neck pain. *BMJ*. 2001;322:1-6.

⁴⁰ Noseworthy J H, Ebers G C, Vandervoort M K, et al. The impact of blinding on the results of a randomized, placebo-controlled multiple sclerosis clinical trial. *Neurology*. 2001;57:S31-5.

⁴¹ Manson JE, Hsia J, Johnson KC, et al. Women's Health Initiative Investigators. Estrogen plus progestin and the risk of coronary heart disease. *N Engl J Med*. 2003;349:523-34.

⁴² Vickers A, Goyal N, Harland R, et al. Do certain countries produce only positive results? A systematic review of controlled trials. *Control Clin Trials*. 1998;19:159-166

⁴³ To be fair, for some types of treatment, such as chiropractic, acupuncture, physical therapy and surgery, it isn't possible to design a true double-blind study: the practitioner will inevitably know whether real or a fake treatment has been applied. In such cases, most researchers settle for a "single-blind" design, in which the study participants (and the people who evaluate the participants to see if they've responded to therapy) are kept in the dark, but not the practitioners of the therapy. The problem with such single-blind studies, though, is that the practitioners may convey enthusiasm when they are providing a real treatment and lack of enthusiasm when they apply a fake one. The former might act as a better placebo than the latter, and thereby produce the results that really have nothing to do with the treatment itself. To get around this, Kerry Kainer D.O. has suggested using actors trained to provide fake treatment with confidence and enthusiasm, but, so far as I know, this has not yet been tried.

⁴⁴ Pappas DE, Owen Hendley J. Otitis media. A scholarly review of the evidence. *Minerva Pediatr*. 2003;55:407-14.