

WHAT SHOULD I DO WITH MY LIFE?




Po Bronson



R A N D O M H O U S E

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For Michele and Luke

What
Should
I Do
with
My Life?

Introduction: Obvious Questions Don't Have Obvious Answers

FROM YOUR FEARS COME MISCONCEPTIONS

We are all writing the story of our life. We want to know what it's "about," what are its themes and which theme is on the rise. We demand of it something deeper, or richer, or more substantive. We want to know where we're headed—not to spoil our own ending by ruining the surprise, but we want to ensure that when the ending comes, it won't be shallow. We will have done something. We will not have squandered our time here.

This book is about that urge, that need.

I began this project because I hit that point in my life. The television show I'd been writing for was canceled. The magazines I wrote for had thinned their pages. My longtime book editor had quit to pursue theater and film. I was out of work, and though I could have hustled up more, I wasn't sure I should. I felt like the kinds of stories I'd been telling no longer worked. They no longer mapped the depth and drama of human life as I experienced it.

I found I was intrigued by people who had unearthed their true calling, or at least those who were willing to try. Those who fought with the seduction of money, intensity, and novelty, but overcame their allure. Those who broke away from the chorus to learn the sound of their own voice. Nothing seemed more brave to me than facing up to one's own identity, and filtering out the chatter that tells us to be someone we're not.

What might we learn from those who had confronted this question?

I decided on the simplest approach possible: I would express my curiosity to whoever would listen, trust this would provoke some leads, and travel the country tracking down the people whose stories spoke to me. I had no idea that sticking to this simple method would soon take me to so many places I'd never been, and far deeper into people's lives than I'd ever gone as a writer.

I hit on an incredible wellspring of honest sentiment. Complete strangers opened their lives and their homes to me, confessing feelings and events they hadn't revealed to their closest friends. This was at a time when we were losing our respect for corporate leaders, we no longer believed new technology would make our lives better, and the attack on our freedom made life precious and weighty. People were reassessing what mattered to them and what they believed in.

I heard some nine hundred stories, spent countless hours corresponding and on the phone, and came to know about seventy people closely. I spent time with them all in person, which was absolutely necessary. (About fifty are included in the book.) The word "interview" doesn't describe the emotional exchange that usually occurred. None were friends when I started, but most were by the time I was done. These were microwave friendships, forged with fast blasts of revelation and bonding, like those formed quickly in a freshman dorm, remembered for years. I let them cry in my arms. I slept on their couches. I sat in their musty attics, looking through old photo albums. We went running together. We traded secrets. I met their parents and held their children. I went to one's wedding. I became symbolically associated with their turning points. Many people described how much it helped them to have me listen; they talked their way into a greater understanding of what had transpired and why.

I was no expert. I had no credentials as a counselor or academic. I approached these people as merely "one of them." The events of my life had shredded any theories I used to have about how to address the question "What should I do with my life?" I had been humbled into

admitting I knew nothing, and as I hit the road I was continuously humbled again by what some of these people had endured and the wisdom they seemed to radiate. I learned from them through inspiration and imitation. I also learned from the multiplicity of stories—by comparing how people talked and what language they invoked, certain patterns emerged, and I could place a story in the context of the larger picture.

The flip side to caring for them was an occasional intrusion. When people were in midtransition and confused, they routinely asked for my counseling. This was always an uneasy role; usually, I handled this by telling other people's stories—"Here's what this person found, in a similar situation. . . ." In a few instances, I was not so passive when I sensed that my passivity—my listening mode—was being taken inappropriately as endorsement. I didn't want to be an accomplice to a wrong turn. So I tried to guide them by reminding them of their own stated resolutions. I didn't handle all these situations perfectly; I reveal these moments in the text to show my own fallibility.

People asked a great many questions that helped steer my research. Many of these questions were of the smart-aleck variety, merely intellectual/devil's advocate babble, but it was much more difficult and challenging to address those asked from the heart, by people stuck in the middle of it and honestly confused. Questions such as:

- Is it supposed to feel like destiny? If not, is (experience-derived) self-created "meaning" legitimate?
- Should I accept my lot, make peace with my ambition, and stop stressing out?
- Why do I feel guilty for thinking about this?
- Should I make money first, to fund my dream?
- How do I tell the difference between a curiosity and a passion?
- How do I weigh making myself a better person against external achievements?
- When do I need to change my situation, and when is it *me* that needs to change?

- What should I tell my parents, who worry about me?
- If I have a child, will my frustration over my work go away?
- What will it feel like when I get there? (How will I know I'm there?)

These were screamingly obvious questions, but it seemed they were almost so obvious that we hadn't publicly collected how we've learned to answer them—as if the answers should be obvious too, which they're not. Too often we're reticent about these issues. Talking about them can seem so fruitless, meanwhile inflaming anxiety and diverting us from the other things we have more control over, and can do. Yes, but it can also strengthen our resolve and shield us from distractions. I found that the biggest obstacle to answering the question this book poses is that people don't give themselves permission to take it seriously. At the risk of being fruitless, let this book be a safe place for a discussion.

This book does not research the history of its question. I don't quote experts, though I interviewed some, and I don't quote literature unless it was quoted to me by someone I wrote about. I didn't spend time in the library to write this book. Those sources of wisdom felt too abstract compared to the hard-earned record of those who actually took action, changed their life, and enjoyed or suffered the consequences.

The people in this book are ordinary people. By that I mean they did not have available to them resources or character traits that gave them an uncommon advantage in pursuing their dream. Some have succeeded, many have not. Only one, in my mind, is saintly. Only two had what accountants call "financial independence." Only two were so smart that they'd succeed at anything they chose, though having more choices made answering the question that much harder. None were gypsies by nature, such free spirits that they didn't need or crave a place to call their own, though some eventually found their solace in learning to live that way. Only two asked me for my sign. Only two

asked me not to use their real names. Otherwise, they were people who faced up to it, armed with only their weaknesses, equipped with only their fears. I chose stories that I hoped would encourage reflection and offer solace, not ones that merely entertained.

Spending time with them affected me subtly. Afterward, I was always spent, and needed to recharge on the familiar patterns of my family, the writers' Grotto, and my soccer teams. I became hyperaware of what mattered to me and what was merely that week's noise intruding on my life. It stripped away some of the ways I had colored my past, and often I was visited by old friends in my dreams. I became more honest in person, less contrived in my writing. They helped me find my own story. They wanted to know how I'd come to be a writer, and how I'd recently become a husband (for the second time) and a father (for the first time). I'd never written about my own journey, never thought it was a story worth telling, but hearing their stories helped me tell my own in a way that it finally did have some oomph. To some it was inspiration, and to others it was kinship. *Okay, he gets it.*

My biggest surprise was how being a new dad folded into the book, and how I face this question now that I have a family. Writing hadn't come easily to me, and I've had to be very protective of my love for it. I was once so afraid that being a parent was incompatible with being a writer. The travel, the intense concentration. For years this fear had stopped me from mixing the two. Somehow, in a year in which our son, Luke, was born, and my wife, Michele, a molecular immunologist, was putting a drug through the FDA's approval process, I found the time and the room in my heart for this enormous project. I took my family with me whenever I could, which was most of the time. In his first year Luke went on seventeen trips of up to ten days in length, including weeks in London and Hong Kong, which he loved because it was hot. Now it seems like a miracle.

It's a far different book from what I originally envisioned. It reflects what I found, not what I predicted. I didn't write a single person's story until I had gotten to know two-thirds of them, and even then their

meaning was just beginning to show itself. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the way I've arranged these stories. Since my method conveys how I'm implicitly suggesting we think about this question—and since figuring out how to do this didn't come easily—an explanation is probably necessary.

This book doesn't follow a conventional outline. Every week I sketched out another scenario for grouping these people's lives. Most people had fair claim to several groups. Too many never fit any. It was always clear that the benefits of categorization were outweighed by the harm in chopping their lives down to an anecdote.

I couldn't shake the urge to tame this question by shackling it with some orderly form. But the human soul resists taxonomy. What heals one person might harm another. Ultimately, I bowed down in respect. I recognized that my urge to classify was an attempt to make this journey easy or quick, and to strive for simplification demonstrated a hubris on my part, and a lack of appreciation for the blind winding road we must take. And once I'd done that, I finally found the right arrangement, a flow from story to story.

I learned that people have all sorts of psychological stumbling blocks that keep them from finding themselves. Some of these are badly tangled misconceptions, some are deeply rooted fears. The two are related—like any prejudice, misconceptions get fabricated and sustained by fears. So this book is not organized by industry or personality type, and it's not a travelogue. It uses people's stories to demonstrate these misconceptions and fears, and shows how people are confronting them or have gotten past them. They're not meant to be read out of order, though there's no harm in that. They're meant to build on each other. Ideas and terminology brought up in earlier stories are invoked in subsequent ones, and the result is meant to resemble a rolling conversation, but one in which the ideas are continually reined in by dogged reality.

What are some of those fears and misconceptions? Just a tiny sample, to clarify what I mean:

The misconception that this question only matters to overeducated Americans

- suffering from ennui, when in fact almost anybody can find the question important to them.
- The fear that our passions will put us in the poorhouse.
- The fear of irreversibility, limiting future options.
- The fear of not being on a path with a known destination.
- The fear that what we need for ourselves might tear us away from our spouse, partner, or friends.

The misconception that our life doesn't begin until we find an answer, when in fact our

- failed attempts often establish why we will find our future "answer" so meaningful, that is, in contrast to our past.

What I found is that, if you take care of these obstacles, you create an environment where the truth is invited into your life. When people heard this book's title, the most common question I'd get asked was, "So is your book about life, or about careers?" And I'd laugh, and warn them not to get trapped by semantics, and answer, "It's about people who've dared to be honest with themselves."

Destiny vs.
Self-Created
Meaning

1 An Ordinary Guy

EVEN THE DESTINED STRUGGLE

Wouldn't it be so much easier if you got a letter in the mail when you were seventeen, signed by someone who had a direct pipeline to Ultimate Meaning, telling you exactly who you are and what your true destiny is? Then you could carry this letter around in your pocket, and when you got confused or distracted and suddenly melted down, you'd reach for your wallet and grab the letter and read it again and go, "Oh, *right*."

Well, a friend of mine has such a letter. He's thirty-two years old and rents a bedroom from a nice lady in Phoenix near the base of Camelback Mountain. He's gray at the temples, wears Hawaiian shirts, and drives a dusty Oldsmobile that suffers from bad alignment. The car's tape player is broken, which is fine by me because I can't stand the soft rock he listens to. He loves America because friends here treat him like an ordinary person. He says being here has made him much more open-minded. He grew up in a refugee camp in southern India. When he got the letter he had just enrolled in a special school there, with the vague notion of eventually becoming a professor of Tibetan literature, though he admits he wasn't much of a student. But what else was there to do in life? No way was he going to be a farmer. Being a businessman meant having to sell, and he didn't study hard enough to ever become a doctor. He couldn't imagine sitting out his life in a government office job, filing forms. His name was Choeaor Dondup, but everyone called him Ali, after the boxer, because he was big. His hair hung to his shoulders. He spent most of his time figuring out how to get into his girlfriend's pants. He played soccer. He was

scared of the dark. Then one day at school he received this letter, signed by the Dalai Lama.

Ali was a big believer in the Dalai Lama.



The letter said he wasn't Choeaor Dondup after all. Instead, he was the reincarnation of a warrior who, along with his five brothers, had ruled a poor and remote region of eastern Tibet six lifetimes ago. The brothers had descended from one of Genghis Khan's grandsons. Ali's Previous One turned his back on the family's violent rule and became a monk. Over his lifetime he founded thirteen monasteries and became the great spiritual leader of this region, the Tehor. Ali's real name was Za Rinpoche, which is Tibetan for "The Dharma King."

Imagine! You're not a dumb, lost, inexperienced seventeen-year-old! We actually have a spot picked out for you! And not just any spot!

WANTED: Great Spiritual Leader. No experience necessary.

Nevertheless, the letter was a bit of a shock. They wanted him to attend the Drepung monastery in northern India. All Ali could think about was, "Am I going to have to cut my hair?" "Am I going to have to

become a monk? *Give up sex?*" You think it would be easy if your destiny were offered on a silver platter. But Ali went around for a few days openly expressing his angst and annoying his friends by debating whether this was the right thing to do. The social pressure was so great that eventually he shut up, gave in, and went off to the monastery, keeping his doubts to himself. It took four years for the doubts to evaporate. But it's never been easy. He spent the next twelve years memorizing two-thousand-year-old ancient texts, the whole time craving the kind of understanding that comes from experience. Back in Tehor, when people are dying they hold his photograph inches from their face and stare at him, wanting him to be the last thing they ever see before they cross over into unembodied consciousness. That's how much faith they have in Rinpoche—more than he has in himself, I suspect.

I found Rinpoche like this: When my son was born, my mom cleaned out her basement and brought up my well-preserved souvenirs from my childhood, soccer trophies and warmup jackets and my high school yearbooks. In one of those yearbooks was a nice note from an upperclasswoman, Jodi, fondly remembering those long conversations we used to have during studio art classes. "What conversations?" I wanted to remember. So I tracked her down, and during another long conversation she mentioned she'd been hanging out with Rinpoche. I was curious, though not for any particular reason. Just curious. Curiosity is a raw and genuine sign from deep inside our tangled psyches, and we'd do well to follow the direction it points us in. So to Jodi I said, "I gotta meet that guy," and booked tickets to Phoenix.

What would it be like to have this certainty about your place in the world? To have it in writing from the Dalai Lama himself! Of course, my desire to understand this wasn't my only motivation. I was excited to meet a holy man. Perhaps his spiritual presence might rub off on me, and he might offer me guidance. Instead I found a friend, who, though sacred, was still utterly human and real. He was skilled at minimizing his anguish over everyday struggles, but he still faced them routinely and fought his urges like any of us. Possessing that letter had not

relieved him of having to figure out where he really belonged and make some hard choices. In his mind, this question was not settled.

He and I were riding around Phoenix a little while ago, looking for some authentic Mexican food. I was joshing him about this reincarnation thing.

“Come on, you really believe it?”

“Yes.”

“So, *all* of you, or just, like, your *soul*?”

He said the biggest misconception in the West, and in young Tibetans, was that mind is physical.

I said, “How do you know young Tibetans? You said you’ve never even been to Tibet.” (China wouldn’t let him into his country.)

“Like, you know, I’ve met many who are also in exile.”

“In Phoenix?”

He said that they were mostly in New York.

“What does that even mean, ‘mind is not physical’? That’s so cryptic.”

He tried to unpack his statement for me. Sanskrit describes five layers of self, or mind:

Physical,

feeling,

perception,

intention,

and consciousness.

His consciousness had been reincarnated, but his perceptions and feelings and body had not. That said, the inner layer, by itself, is no more valid or important than the outer. Self is the combination of the five.

“So on the inside you’ve got it figured out, but the rest of you is dragging along.”

Rinpoche laughed, and it’s when he laughs that he seems so wise. He learned his English in Atlanta from undergrads at Emory University, and he picked up their vocal idiosyncrasies, tossing “kind of,” “like,” and “you know what I mean” into every sentence. He speaks English like a teenager, but laughs like a man six lifetimes old—such a deep, merry, pure chuckle.

I asked him if Buddhists believe we all get a specific destiny.

“We don’t think there’s a specific place in your life to go. Everybody’s destiny is to become an enlightened being and reach the everlasting state of mind.”

“That’s pretty easy for you to say. Your destiny arrived in the mail. What if you had to go out and get a job?”

He laughed again. “Yes, that I could not imagine.”

Rinpoche has always had to be pushed to take the next step. In 1998, the Dalai Lama chose him to lead a tour of monks across the United States. Rinpoche didn’t want to go. He’d heard the tour required long bus rides, thirteen hours at a time. He relented when the abbot leaned on him. Rinpoche says he was a narrow-minded snob

back then. Maybe a monastery sounds like a terrific place to become a deep person, but the truth was, he was sheltered and had a big ego. He didn't hang out with ordinary monks, only monks of high status. He had no respect for other religions, and assumed anyone who wasn't a Buddhist couldn't be a nice person. He was lonely and too serious. But traveling in America did wonders for his personality. After a year, he went back to the Drepung Monastery, and everyone said, "Wow, you've changed a lot." He hung out with monks regardless of their status. He laughed all the time. He felt more grounded. His elders were so impressed they asked him to stay and teach. For once he had the balls to say, "That is not in my nature," and stick by it. He wanted to return to America, where not everyone treats him like a divine being. He wanted to understand the Western mind, how people in the West think. Exposing himself to this crazy world was making him into a better person, and that was the right path to be on.

If it were me, no matter how cool or great it would be to have a spiritual calling, and to be given this early in life, I'd still have that American notion of needing to discover things myself. I'd need independence—I'd feel controlled. I might now and then be testy about having my calling put upon me rather than arriving at it by myself. We have mixed feelings about the seductive notion of destiny. There's a persistent tension between wanting our life's purpose to be revealed to us by some higher power and wanting to scrap and fight for it against all odds—to earn it without help. We think about destiny sort of like how we feel about inheritance—we covet its fruit but it's sweeter if we earned it ourselves. And so I wasn't surprised when Rinpoche called to give me his new address and phone number.

"What happened?"

"I am not with Bodhiheart anymore." Bodhiheart was the foundation he cofounded with his sponsor—the woman in whose house he had lived until now.

"Did you get in a fight?"

“Uh, not really. Kind of. I myself am not a citizen, you know? So as my sponsor, I relied on her for legal things like this.”

“Like creating the foundation.”

“That is right. So I have my own foundation now.” He let out a hearty laugh, his punch line coming a little quick before I could understand.

“What happened between you?”

“I felt she tried to keep people from me, control my schedule, these things, you know? Like she wanted to be the access to me. Like last time you were here? She was upset with that.”

“But you’re my friend!”

He sighed. “That is right. You understand.”

“You don’t want anyone to control you.”

“That is right.”

“So have you ever lived alone before?” He’d spent most of his life in a monastery with four thousand monks.

“No, never.”

“Can you cook?”

“Simple things.”

“Going out for burritos a lot, I bet.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“How big is your apartment?”

“Not too small.”

“You’re not still scared of the dark, are you?”

Rinpoche laughed.

“I’m glad you’re learning to look out for yourself,” I said.

“Yes. At this I am getting better.”

Once he’d said to me, “I wish I could be ordinary sometimes.” He was getting his chance.

At one of Rinpoche’s “teachings” at a hospice, he described how fears hold us back from our own advancement. “Fear is like a wound within our emotions,” he said. You heal a fear much like you heal a cut on your hand. If you ignore a cut on your hand, it will get infected. But it will heal itself if you pay attention to it and give it time. Same with a fear. First, recognize its existence—what kind of fear is it? Is it fear of poverty, of loneliness, of rejection? Then use common sense. Don’t let the fear get infected. Often we burn 70 percent of our emotional energy on what we fear might happen (90 percent of which won’t happen). By devoting our energy to our other emotions, we will heal naturally.

This didn’t sink in for me right away. In the moment, my mind tagged it as “deep,” and filed it away to be revisited later. Which I did. When my way of organizing this book was finally coming into focus—as stories portraying people working through their fears and misconceptions—that method rang a bell. I dug up my notes on Rinpoche’s teaching and found the similarity. I felt like I’d wasted time getting there the hard way. “Look, it took me nine months to figure this out by myself, when all along Rinpoche was trying to show me this is how to do it.” But, then again, I felt like I understood it better because I’d done it the hard way.

Which was how he’d lived, too. His purpose was given to him, but he’d had to go find it anyway.

2 Hunted by Her Cause

DO THINGS HAPPEN FOR A REASON?

One of the first local people who contacted me was Janelle London, who heard about my project from friends. When I was slow to get my act together, then those friends also contacted me. “You’ve gotta talk to Janelle.” They held her out to me as a valiant example of the reformed soul. She’d been an intellectual property lawyer who’d lost her kidneys but found her cause and was about to take a job as an organ donation activist. There was a *lesson* in her story, they promised, something on the order of *Things happen for a reason*. But was that really the lesson it offered?

If possible, I like to meet people for the first time on a big day in their life. I offered to show up for Janelle’s first day at her new office, but she suggested a café instead. She’s bone skinny, and preppy. Her family’s in Austin, and she owns a rental house there; she talks about that city longingly, but hasn’t tried to move there—a pattern I’d see again. She said if there was a fault in her character, it was that she’d always thought her calling would fall into her lap. Until the loss of her kidneys defined her, she had a self-described “boring life” without any intense passion. After college at Stanford, she’d been a research assistant for Senator Lloyd Bentsen’s staff in D.C., where she assumed she’d find a cause. She thought something was wrong with her. How can I be in D.C. and *not* find a cause? Same with law school at Boalt—surely one of those Big Legal Issues she studied would light her fire. But none did.

Her friends’ version of her heroic journey goes something like this: Bored by work, she’d gone to Barcelona for a month with friends. She

was getting a ton of rest, sleeping twelve hours a night or more. She was still fatigued, but figured it was the heat. It was hard keeping up with friends. She'd walk a block and need to sit down on the curb for a spell, chastising herself: "I shouldn't have had that extra croissant." Her muscles cramped, particularly her fingers, which clenched up involuntarily. She ignored it. Seven of her ten fingers had swollen into itchy fat sausages, and she blamed the new dish detergent she'd been scrubbing the plates with.



"Po, I don't know what I was thinking, but I kept pushing it out of my mind."

Finally, her hands were so damn itchy she walked into the ER, and the night nurses trotted her out for a laugh. "This American princess thinks itchy fingers is something to come to the hospital for!" Then they tested her and discovered her kidneys had shut down. Complete renal failure. Janelle was plucked from the shredded narrative of her old life and tossed down into this new one, unable to make sense of it. Oh shit! How is this happening to me?

So, as this version goes, she was whisked back to the United States for dialysis treatments, and was put at the bottom of the long waiting list for a kidney transplant. But she was a changed person. It

was impossible to tolerate her job anymore. “I was sitting in this office, surrounded by corporate greed, doing nothing to improve this shortage.” At that time, 77,589 people were awaiting an organ transplant. The previous year, 5,600 people had died while waiting for a match. It was the kick in the butt she always needed. On New Year’s Eve, vowing not to be in this position another year, she gave notice. She didn’t know how she’d get by, but the rental house provided enough income to cover her deductible on the dialysis treatments. She volunteered for several fund-raisers, praying in some way it would magically turn into full-time work. And as soon as she got involved—as soon as she devoted her life to this cause—her luck changed. A kidney was found that matched, and she underwent transplant surgery at Stanford. To top it off, she’s been offered a well-paying position as the executive director of the Northern California chapter of the National Kidney Foundation.

I asked her why she went to Barcelona. “Were you on sabbatical, trying to find yourself? Or vacation?”

“I was there for the Olympics.”

“The Olympics? In *Barcelona*? That was back in 1992.”

She said that was correct, and I realized there was something funny about her story. Where were the missing years?

“Your kidneys failed back in ninety-two?”

“Yes.”

“And you quit your job this past New Year’s?”

“No, at the millennium, 1999.”

“So you haven’t worked in over two years? My god, how’d you get by?”

"I hung in there, waiting for the right job to shake loose."

"Let me go back. 1992 to 1999—*seven* years. You spent *seven* years in this law job before you decided to quit and volunteer? That doesn't sound like you found your cause when your kidneys failed."

"Actually, for a long time I pretended everything was normal. I would sneak off for dialysis, but I wouldn't talk about it with coworkers. And I actually got a transplant that first year, which my body later rejected. But when I walked out of the hospital after the surgery, I thought I was done with this bad phase and never wanted to talk about it again. I never went back and said 'thank you' to the nurses. I wanted to put it behind me."

"Sounds like you actually pushed your cause away."

"I guess so. Yes."

A moment later, she admitted that her *mom* had lost a kidney when Janelle was a teen. And Janelle had pushed that out of her mind too. It sounded like Janelle's destiny had been stalking her like a lion her whole life. She blew her first two chances to be transformed, so it came back.

I said, "Well, thank God you finally figured this out and took the job."

"Well, that's another thing. See, I turned that job down."

"You're not working?"

"No."

"Why? Janelle!" I wasn't challenging her, I was trying to understand.

"I don't think it's quite right for me."

I was dumbfounded. "You gave me a big speech about how important it is we work to increase awareness about organ donation!

This job sounds like your best chance to do that! What am I missing? I don't get it!"

"The job requires me to do a lot of fund-raising and budgeting."

"So?"

"My ideal job would let me be a little more involved in policy. And I'd like to have more weekly interaction with patients."

Was she pushing her destiny away yet again? I couldn't believe it. Most people crave this kind of clarity.

Janelle insisted she should hold out for her dream job. I thought this was her excuse to hide. I'd only known her for an hour, and so it wasn't my part to protest. In that moment, there was a scuffle for control of my tongue, the male instinct to fix the problem wrestling against the female instinct to listen. I fought off the urge to meddle and kept my thoughts to myself. But I still needed to comprehend. Why was she pushing away the very opportunity she'd waited all these years for?

"Janelle, help me make sure I understand your point of view. Why not take this job and work toward your dream job? I mean, are you qualified for your dream job? You're a patent lawyer."

She said, "After all I've been through, I don't want to settle."

"It doesn't sound to me like running one of the biggest foundations is *settling*."

"Have other people you've talked to settled? Or did they hold out?"

"Every single person wracks their brain over that question. Sure. But I don't think that's the question you're really dealing with."

I was crossing the line, and I backed off. She seemed unswerving in her intent, even if I couldn't take her conviction at face value: *dream job or die*. We hugged good-bye, and I left feeling discomfited. That night I

watched a promotional videotape of a bicycle trip down the East Coast in which Janelle participated. It was staged to raise awareness of organ donation, and in various cities they held forums. I watched Janelle at the podium, speaking to the audience, and she seemed so fulfilled.

I wanted to write her a letter:

Janelle, you are not an unemployed member of the café society. You are in fact a diehard organ donation activist. You have always been this, and just didn't know it.

Of course, I didn't write anything but a nice thank-you letter, promising to stay in touch.

Later, I thought even my take on Janelle stank of—let's call it Hypergalactic Theism—attributing too much karmic intelligence to the universe. Janelle wasn't put on this earth to persuade more people to donate their organs. Janelle lived in a shell until kidney failure opened her heart to how confusing and scary the waiting list is for transplant patients. I wished she'd made that terrain her life's work, but it wasn't "cosmic destiny" she was pushing away. She was pushing away memories of her trauma. My younger brother is a transplant nurse, and he's told me what patients go through. They commonly try to forget the time spent on the waiting list. If Janelle took the job, every one of those patients would trigger memories, and she'd never get that pain behind her. Janelle was unconsciously balking at that choice's doorstep.

I'd recently talked with a personal coach, one of the most respected in the emerging coaching field. She warned me that many people use the dream-job-or-nothing goal as a way of ensuring their dreams are never challenged by reality—by hoping for too much, they can preserve their dream as a perfect fantasy. I wondered if that described Janelle. I tried to forget about her and move on, but whenever she crept back

into my thoughts, I was unsettled. It would be a few months before I heard how it worked out.

3 Lacking an Off Switch

A TEST OF BEING TRUE TO ONESELF

Jessica Grossman was twenty-eight. We arranged to meet the first time at a Starbucks, which became awkward quickly, because she needed to pause often while she wiped tears from her eyes. Twice she sobbed and curled up into a ball in her chair. I'm sure it looked like I was breaking up with her—the kind of tenderness between us, yet the necessary professional distance, would be easily misread. I was exceedingly grateful for her emotion, for her openness, because I was really just a stranger. I found her when scouting for doctors who had left medicine. She'd been an ob-gyn at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital in Philadelphia until four months ago. She didn't know much about my book, didn't know much about me, but here she was, pouring her heart out. One of my secret fears for this book was that my interviews would be unemotional and detached—that I'd find people related to the question “What should I do with my life?” in only a cerebral way. But with Jessica and so many others, it was clear this was an incredibly *personal* question, around which swirled a whirlpool of emotions.

Jessica had a glamorous aura and dressed chic in a navy sweater, checkered slacks, boots with a swooping high heel, and plenty of well-considered accessories. Her hair fell in long strawberry blond curls. She was pretty and distinctive. People looked twice. Her black mascara and cornflower eyeshadow smeared when she wiped away her tears. In the last few months she'd fantasized about going into fashion, and had brainstormed about it with a friend who was a designer for Gap. “But my parents would kill me,” she said. For money,

she was working as a consultant to a surgical robotics company in San Mateo. The work was more interesting than she expected, but she thought of it only as a placemaker to buy time. She felt like a total failure.

“Every moment of my life, from when I was a little girl, all I’d ever wanted to do, and all I’d ever prepared for, was to practice medicine,” she said, welling up with tears again. “Can you understand this? I’d been working sixteen-hour days for years. I had no personal life. I never could go to a gym. I never got my nails done. Never went on a date. So when I left, I didn’t leave my *job*. I left my *life*. I left everything. I left my *soul*.”

She kept asking if I’d interviewed women who had to leave their child—that’s how deeply she felt about it. I *had* done so, and I was uncomfortable letting Jessica equate the two, but she didn’t toss it out as a loose metaphor, and as an ob-gyn she’d seen a lot of women lose their babies in labor. She’d held more dying newborns than she cared to remember. She’d brought a few back to life.

Growing up, Jessica’s dad was a famous cardiologist at Harvard’s Brigham Hospital. He never pressured her to become a physician (she swears). But he was such a fabulous role model, because he had a palpable *passion* for his work. Passion is infectious—so few people have it for their work that when you do glimpse it, it makes an indelible impression. As a little girl, whenever it snowed and the schools were closed, Jessica’s father would bring her to the hospital and let her hang out in a break room in the basement, among the clicking steam pipes. There was a chalkboard with colored chalk to play with, and she’d eat her pack lunch and never be bored. By junior high, her father’s pupils would sometimes hang out with her to chitchat, and she saw their reverence for her dad. By high school, she was allowed to follow him on rounds, blending in with his entourage of students. He had a miraculous ability to tune this entourage out when with a patient. He would sit on the edge of his patient’s bed, hold their hand, look them in the eye, and be 100 percent there. Jessica prayed for snow.

After four years of med school at Thomas Jefferson, Jessica believed her choice of obstetrics and gynecology was the right one. She liked working alongside strong women and having women doctors as role models. From her experience one summer in a lab in which she performed a lot of operations on animals, she knew she had a surgeon's mentality ("let's just get in there and cut the thing out"), as opposed to a medicine mentality, which tries to figure out what could be causing the problem before doing anything one might regret. She liked blood and guts. She knew the hours would be bad, because babies arrive on their own schedule, and she didn't think that would be a problem. She knew ob-gyns get sued a lot, but that didn't seem like a reason not to follow her heart. Jessica felt like she belonged on the labor and delivery ward. It was an exciting environment, punctuated by intense joy and relief. Every day she felt a surge of adrenaline.

Within a year, Jessica's resolve and conviction wore down under the 130-hour workweeks, which was to be expected for any doctor going through his or her internship. Misery and exhaustion were part of the deal. The work was what she expected. What she didn't anticipate was what she gradually learned about herself over the next two years.

"I don't have an 'off' switch," Jessica said. "It turns out that doctors not only have to be very good at giving of themselves to their patients—they have to be even better at drawing the line, and protecting themselves. I don't have that ability. The others did. My dad did. I don't have it, and I couldn't learn it."

For instance, Jessica commonly cried with and for her patients. She also gave her patients her home phone number, even though the hospital had a rule against that. She couldn't help herself. Jessica regularly took the shifts that nobody else wanted to work, and on major holidays, the other interns knew they could hit her up to take their shifts because she couldn't say no. Whatever her work asked, she gave, far too unselfishly.

The promise was that this incredible sacrifice would end when her

internship ended, but that belief was dealt a blow when she watched a doctor she admired tell her daughter (by phone) to feed herself dinner and put herself to sleep. This belief was dealt another blow when another doctor said she had been sued for three million dollars. Then a nurse was kicked in the belly by the mother during a particularly difficult delivery, when the baby's shoulder was stuck behind the pubic bone, and they had to climb on top of this mother and fold her up like a pretzel. The baby came out dead, but Jessica resuscitated the baby, and all was fine until the nurse told Jessica she'd been kicked. Blood trickled down the inside of the nurse's leg. She was four months pregnant. She didn't lose her baby, but she easily could have, and it scared the hell out of Jessica, who walked into the stairwell and burst into tears.

One day last September, Jessica almost peed on herself after many hours during which she wouldn't even let herself go to the bathroom. "Is this what it's come to?" she thought. It was time for a vacation. So she went to London for a few days, and she went to Harrods and bought nice gifts for the other five interns. Jessica loved these girls; they were her peers and the only regular people in her life. They'd been through a lot together. When she came home, she wrapped the gifts in nice paper and put them in the call room for the other girls . . .

Jessica couldn't finish the story.

"What happened?" I asked.

She sucked it up for a moment. "Nobody ever said 'thank you.' Not one of them."

"That's terrible!"

"They were so busy. Most of them forgot it a second after opening it."

New Year's Eve was her last day. She was working because, of course, nobody else wanted to. She knew it was her last day, and so

she was kind of happy. Her father called—he wasn't handling her departure very well. He told her he loved her and whatever she needed was fine . . . "But what about not doing the obstetrics and just doing gynecology?" he suggested. She didn't need him to solve her problems. She needed him to understand.

"Dad, I'm leaving *tomorrow*."

The next morning she walked out of the hospital for the last time. She felt like a plucked chicken.

"Some people can do it," she said. "I can't. I failed at it."

She either had to learn to draw boundaries, or she had to find work that didn't ask too much from her. She was shooting for the latter because the former seemed unacceptable.

"I don't want to be a person who cares *only so much*, who has to communicate to people, 'Okay, you've used up your five minutes of love.' No. That's not the kind of person I want to be."

Jessica was brand-new to wondering who she was and how she fit in. It was on her mind but she wasn't desperate yet. She was resolute that she'd figure it out. "I'm going to miss thinking I had a destiny. I'm going to miss that certainty."

"You don't think you'll ever find that again?"

"I *had* it, Po. I thought I'd already found it. And I was wrong."

"But maybe you'll find it again?"

She sighed and asked rhetorically, "But it won't ever be the same, will it?"

We took a moment for her to feel the loss of that notion.

I told her I could relate. I was leaning on destiny less and less these

days.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“I’m not exactly sure. I started this book somewhat blindly. At first, I gravitated to people who seemed to have a destiny. I assumed they had that elusive feeling of ‘rightness’ we all crave. But if they do, the destiny component is a very small part of that feeling. Even these people I held up as ‘destined’ had to fight against their supposed destiny, or willfully ignored it.” I told Jessica about Janelle London and Za Rinpoche. “Slowly, as I hear more stories of people who’ve struggled through crises and redefined themselves, I’m recognizing the power of what’s discovered the hard way.”

I promised to pay attention to this issue in the coming months. How did people come to their convictions about where they belonged? Were they born with them? Did they have epiphanies? Were they deduced, rationally, through careful analysis? Did they rise from the ashes after deeply felt experiences, tragedies and losses? And of those many ways, which endured the test of time?

Jessica asked, “So you’ve talked to people who thought they had a certain destiny and discovered they belonged somewhere else?”

“Some.”

“How do they manage not to feel like that first part of their life was anything but a complete waste of time? If the genuine part of their life came later, what of this early part? Because so far, my entire life has been the first part.”

“Well, they learn from it. As long as they are able to transform it into a lesson which they can now apply—”

“But what if there is no lesson? What if it all feels like a waste?”

“You learned something. *You don’t want to be the kind of person*

who gives only so much. That sounds like valuable self-knowledge that you had to fight extremely hard for.”

“I guess it is, but I don’t know what to do with it.”

“Well, it’s the first step.”

“Towards what, though?”

“Well, if the purpose of life is to be as great a doctor as your father, then you might have stalled. But if the purpose of life is to be true to yourself, when you walked out of that hospital, you passed your first big test.”

This was possibly just a trick of words, but for a moment it helped her find the value of those years.

4 Dropping the Watermelon

THE FEAR OF BEING IMPRACTICAL

Marcela Widrig's blueprint for her life always included best-case scenarios and backup plans. She was a realist. Her passion might have been cultural studies, but she didn't pretend—the jobs were in business, and the entry-level jobs were in sales. So she earned a business degree, but studied languages too, becoming fluent in Spanish, Italian, and French. When it came time for her MBA, she attended Bocconi University in Milan. She honed herself for international sales, and when she graduated she was hired by a big modern manufacturer as their sales director for southern Europe. She loved it. She was based in Barcelona and traveled everywhere. Lisbon! Johannesburg! Prague! She had no pulse for modems, but she was interacting with these cultures, learning each country's style of negotiation, whether they talk business first and then drink, or drink first and then talk business. The pace of business was serene. It allowed her time to really know her clients. Talk always veered to politics or family. She told her friends this was her dream job, what she'd always wanted. She stayed in Barcelona for five years. Then she got a promotion. She was doing so well the company wanted her to cover Asia and Brazil as well. Great! More cultures to learn, more intriguing people to meet.

The catch was, the company needed her to be based in the United States. So Marcela chose San Francisco, which had always struck her as European in its ways. Ha ha.

The culture shock was far worse than when she'd moved to Italy.

Most of her frustration was attributable to the Inevitable Cocktail Party Question: “What do you *do*?” She’d been away long enough to forget about this disgusting American custom. She found it degrading and reductive and mercenary. In Europe, nobody asked that question, but here they blasted it at her constantly. It became her “fingernails on the chalkboard.” She felt compartmentalized and judged according to how she answered. Sure, she had a cool job, but if she described it poorly, she was pigeonholed. Even if they were impressed, that tainted it, as if she’d learned these languages and studied abroad so she could impress peers at networking events. It drove her crazy.

I think that Marcela was so frustrated by the Inevitable Cocktail Party Question because it confronted her with her choices. She didn’t like being challenged because she’d been burying her dissatisfaction, until it drove her to make changes. When I started this book, I thought the Question was a scourge on our society, a contagious mental virus transmitted via verbal exchanges. But I’m starting to see that the Question serves a valuable role. The Question is how we hold ourselves accountable to the opportunity we’re given. We live in a rich country, so rich that we’re blessed with the ultimate privilege: to be true to our individual nature. Our economy is so vast that we don’t have to grind it out forever at jobs we hate. For the most part, we get to choose. And so a status system has evolved that values being unique and true even more than it values being financially successful.

I’ll never forget a potluck dinner I attended during the New Economy’s heyday. A guy was standing in the kitchen doorway, and my wife gave him the Question. His ego crumpled. Dripping with self-disgust, he barely got out the words, “Oh, I’m just another venture capitalist.” Well, my wife was excited to meet a venture capitalist. At the time, “venture capitalist” was about the highest status tag you could aspire to. It was a superexclusive title—there were only a few hundred VCs in the whole country. He should have been proud, and his loathing was so unexpected I had to ask him why. From his point of view, he was indistinguishable from his VC peers. He hadn’t really found his niche.

In other words, if you don't like the Question, maybe it's partly because you don't like your answer.

Well, Marcela was able to get away from the question on her travels. But the Internet economy was quickly changing how business was transacted around the world. Its ethos was *speed*. Forget local color and custom. Get the deal done in a day, fly to another city, do another deal. Or, forget even showing up in person for a meeting—e-mail makes it so easy! All the human contact was gone. The global economy was blurring the world into an impersonalized monoculture.

It wasn't interesting anymore.

Marcela didn't recognize this right away. What she noticed was constant fatigue during the day and insomnia at night. Then frequent migraines. Back in Barcelona she'd occasionally gone to this yoga studio, and mixed in with the classes was some Israeli guru's notions about how the body stores unhappiness or fear and manifests it as physical pain. She'd always found that interesting. Marcela knew she was not in sync.

One day she buzzed into Hong Kong and grabbed an express lunch with a client, and then he was shuttling her back to the airport, the whole while droning on about how she should give him exclusive distributorship of the province, yakking too fast, nothing but price, best price, me, me, fast, too fast. He let her off at the curb and she boarded another plane and took her window seat and stared out the porthole at the tarmac and realized what was wrong. "That's it. I cannot sell one more modem," she vowed. But do *what*? She knew what she wanted: She missed human contact. She wanted to touch people. She thought of that Israeli guru, Grinberg. He had an institute in Switzerland. Wouldn't it be great to study with him? Marcela was too practical, too businesslike, to do anything rash. It was a nice fantasy, but awfully hokey. She kept her job.

Meanwhile she let the fantasy mature into a hobby. She earned a

massage certificate taking classes on weekends. Six months went by before she let friends know what she was up to. Everyone in San Francisco was jumping on the Internet bandwagon and she longed to venture in the other direction, to get physical rather than virtual. Consistent with her character, she planned it out meticulously. On her vacations, she studied at the institute in Switzerland. The classes cost more than an Ivy League graduate degree and required a ton of studying, which helped Marcela feel like she wasn't doing something frivolous, or dropping out for an easy life. She always came back jazzed. She kept promising herself that when she socked away another thousand dollars, she'd quit her job. But she was afraid. She'd always provided for herself. Financial stability was her baseline. Could she really make a living doing bodywork? So she'd save another thousand, and another; she was like a hamster in a wheel. It might never have happened if the guiding hand of fate hadn't intervened. The day after she got back from one of her Switzerland trips, she was laid off. Her company went under. She was thirty-two.

This was her chance to at least *try*. She printed up business cards. She photocopied flyers and tacked them to bulletin boards. She set up a table at the Whole Foods market. She gave away ten-minute freebies, but the customers could tell something wasn't right. Marcela was so scared her stomach hurt, and they could sense it. None of those freebies were turning into paying clients.

She had prepared exactly for this circumstance. This is going to sound like a game of semantics, but the Grinberg method teaches people to *embrace* their fears rather than *avoid* them. American culture coaxes people into states of denial by always saying, "look on the bright side," or "don't feel sad." When we put on the happy face, we swallow our fears. This becomes an energy whorl trapped in our bodies, continually pushed down. How the combination of massage and philosophy works to fix that, I'm not really sure. It made perfect sense to me when Marcela explained it, but I haven't been able to put it back into words without making it sound like I live on an ashram channeling the spirit of honeybees. In fact, I'm embarrassed even to be

telling you this story right now, and I'm afraid you're going to put the book down before it gets too precious. But I'll risk it: Embracing your fears means letting yourself be sad when you're sad, and so the massage is not supposed to make the customer feel better, it's supposed to make the customer feel sad/pain/fear. Does that make sense? I think it's like sad music, which can be wonderful to listen to, and bring about a nice zone of melancholy in which you stop pushing yourself to be perfect.

Let me try again. Carrying this negative energy around is like carrying a twenty-pound watermelon—you can't give a good hug when you've got a watermelon in your arms. It blocks your connections to others. So Marcela needed to let go of her watermelon.

Marcela acknowledged this pain in her gut and this terrible dread that possessed her, and she said back to it, "Oh no, you're not going to stop me." She wasn't going to grant her fears that kind of power over her. She refused to live in fear of the unknown. When she went back to the Whole Foods some weeks later, the clients started rolling in. The watermelon was gone. It took about a year to drop the business suit persona and truly embrace her new profession.

So here's what I wanted to know: Does a solo career in bodywork put you on a downward slide to loosey-goosey-land? That'd be my fear. In fact, I might as well admit that's why I'm telling this story: to confront my own watermelon. My last three books were set in the world of *business*, and suddenly I'm writing about bodyworkers and high lamas? What's my dad going to think? Will *The Wall Street Journal* ever talk to me again? Well, I think we have to cop to that fear, and recognize that finding our calling might get a little internal, but that doesn't mean we're going to wig out.

As for Marcela, her practical side was fully intact. She was drawing up business plans and raising capital for a big studio. She saved a lot of her money, and she kept backup plans in case this didn't work out.

"Do you ever feel isolated?" I asked. "Working alone? I mean, you

used to travel the world.”

“I get a far more powerful and genuine connection to people now. That’s what I *always* wanted—to connect with unusual and interesting people.”

“I guess what I really meant was, you kind of dropped out of the traditional status framework. Most people need the context of a company and an industry and a title and a salary level and regular performance reviews to provide a measure of self-worth. How does one forgo that, and dare to go alone? I’m sure every hour you have clients that really appreciate what you do for them. But on the macro scale, where do you get your sense of importance?”

“I used to need that. I was proud of being the top salesperson and I got satisfaction from succeeding. But when I could see that need was actually hurting me, leading me toward depression, it was no longer so important to be successful in that highly visible and external way.”

I asked Marcela if the Inevitable Cocktail Party Question still bothers her today.

“Maybe it’s only recently stopped causing me stress.”

“What do you tell people when they ask now?”

“I’ve been doing bodywork for a year and a half now, and only recently have I been able to say that. ‘I do bodywork.’”

“Sounds like you’re comfortable with that answer.”

“I love what I do, and I think it comes across. Now it seems as though I could be nowhere else than right where I am.”

“Do you ever work on dot-commers, like people who used to be *you*?”

“A lot, actually. They really appreciate that I can speak their language

and relate to their stress.”

“So you tell them you used to sell modems?”

“Sometimes. They can’t believe it. *You? Really?* I think they’re beginning to realize how their lives might change.”

As for the laid-off dot-commers who wanted to talk about where they were, I decided to hold off for six months and let their stories mature. To those who, chin up, proclaimed how much they were going to learn about themselves when they were traveling through Asia, I said, “Write me from Phnom Penh when you really have learned something.” To those who were going back to school, I said, “Let me know how you’re feeling when you’re facing the decision of what to do *after* school.” To those who were enthusiastic about their new gig as stay-at-home dad, I said, “By all means, let’s talk, but let’s talk in a year, when the novelty’s worn off and you can better describe how you see the world differently.” With every conversation, I had to correct a misimpression—I wasn’t seduced by tales of their experience. I wanted the legacy of that experience. How did it change you? How are you a different person today from what you would have otherwise been, were it not for this experience? It’s easy to babble about the white beaches in Indonesia, or how everything else is rendered meaningless compared with your child’s first smile at six weeks. It was rare to find someone who could tell me what had happened to their watermelon.

5 The Dharma Adviser

ITS PLACE AMONG THE GREAT PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTIONS

If you were one of the 22,000 students at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge last year, and if you were one of the 1,100 students with grades good enough to be in the Honors College, a couple times a year you would walk over to the second floor of the French House, where you would sit down for your scheduled appointment with your academic adviser, a tranquil young man named Mike Blandino. You're supposed to tell Mike what you want to do when you grow up, and he's supposed to translate this into a list of classes you should take, which will prepare you for the life you have chosen. Mike is the guy you see long before you start seeing career counselors. Many people have asked you what you want to do when you graduate, but Mike is probably the first to do so officially. Your conversation will be summarized on a form, which will be slipped into your permanent file.

At first glance you might be encouraged. Mike can't be that many years older than you, so he can probably relate. You might tease out of him that he had attended LSU as well, and once sat in the chair you're sitting in. So he can *definitely* relate. All this angst and confusion you're feeling? He's felt it. Your gnawing sense that the premise of this conversation is ludicrous, because you don't have the faintest clue what to do when you graduate? He's *felt* it. And now he's come back home to help. He's gone through it, he's coped with those feelings, he's figured out his life, and now he's here to help *you*.

Right?

What you wouldn't know, and what you'd probably never get out of him, is that Mike Blandino has never had a real job himself (other than this one). One would think that a prerequisite for being a career counselor would be having had a career, or at least aspiring to one. But apparently not. Mike found this job in the newspaper after his application to be a janitor was turned down. While at LSU he took music, religion, and math. His grades were excellent but he never thought twice about a career; he assumed getting by would always work itself out. Those conversations were too pedestrian for him. He was absorbed with the great questions of metaphysics—"Why do we exist?" and "What is the point of the universe?" and "What's important?" After graduating he wandered the earth pretending to be a philosopher, following Phish on its tour through Amsterdam and Paris, popping fun drugs, reading Burroughs, and racking up debt from phone sex calls. So he came home, sorely needing a place to live and a way to eat. He held off pedestrian reality another year by ending up as the temple keeper at the Dharma Center in New Orleans, which is not in any grand temple, but in a little blue house three doors off Desai Boulevard, near City Park. There he was taught that from the beginning of time everything has always been perfect and only needs to be appreciated. One night on ecstasy, he bumped into his old friend's ex-girlfriend, and he had a new appreciation for her. They fell in love and let nature take its course and so, of course, she got pregnant. Five months later, with her belly big as a volleyball, it dawned on her for the first time:



“Mike, one of us has to get a job. And I’m pregnant.”

A job!

Pedestrian reality had finally caught up to him.

Mike figured no problem. “I’ve got a B.A., right?” What he didn’t know about getting a job could fill a phone book. He applied for jobs that were listed, went in for interviews, and was turned down by all. Old Navy, a pharmaceutical company sales force, a fly-by-night day-trader boiler room . . . in other words, every \$20K-a-year starter position. Couldn’t even get hired as a security guard. Or as a janitor. He was always too smart, or too educated, or too aloof, or too naïve.

And now he’s dispensing career advice.

Believe me, he sees the irony in this.

This job—the gig as academic adviser—was not offered to him first, mind you. The woman who was supposed to take it had a family medical emergency. So the school turned to Mike, who at least had good grades, and literally *two hours* after he was hired, the State of Louisiana announced a statewide hiring freeze due to budget concerns.

He got in here by such miraculous happenstance, with such a grossly unqualified background, that both he and I can't help but wonder if it is some sort of sick cosmic justice, like being sent back in time to a previous life to work it out again. Having completely ignored it when he had his chance, his penance now is to help kids like himself pay attention and figure it out.

The sad thing is, Mike is so timid, and so scared of losing this job he feels so lucky to have—so afraid to bend the rules at all—that he doesn't reach out to help these honors students. He follows the structure of the Official Ludicrous Conversation. He avoids tampering or influencing them in any way. He doesn't tell them his own story. He doesn't push the students to be true to their dreams, or to remember that the world is perfect, or to be pragmatic and not be a drifter like him, or to read *Notes from the Underground*, or anything that he might feel in the moment.

If you want to build your résumé, he won't call you on it. If you're premed only to please Daddy, he won't help you see this. And if you can't tell Mike Blandino what you want to do when you graduate, you are shit out of luck. Don't expect help from him. Check Undeclared. Next.

I like Mike—he was sweet and unguarded—but it seemed irresponsible when he told me he didn't give students any impromptu advice.

"Why not?" I demanded. "You've got an interesting story and perspective. Don't you want to bring that to bear?"

"I don't want to influence their choice."

"Jesus, Mike—you don't think they come in here *hoping* someone will influence them? Don't you remember what it was like? Didn't you want help?"

He giggled nervously, part embarrassment, part squirm.

I went on, “Mike, you have a chance to help eleven hundred students a year. You could have an *enormous* impact. You could do so much good. I can’t believe you’re wasting your chance!”

I stopped myself, suddenly thinking that maybe he was feeding me the party line—was he afraid he’d get busted if his boss read in my book that he was teaching the honors undergrads that the world was already perfect? But I grilled him at length, and we role-played several typical examples, and I was certain he was being honest—he really didn’t depart from the script with the students. And again, when I dwelled on it, it astounded me. I couldn’t let it go. Was there something in his own story I wasn’t seeing that could explain this? We’d been corresponding for two months, and I’d come all this way because I thought he *would* have an interesting perspective to offer students. It shocked me to find that he had none. In fact, he was quite shy and nonverbal in person, while he had been verbose in correspondence, even though he hadn’t always connected the dots.

“How old are you, Mike?”

“Twenty-five. Well, almost. I will be.”

“You’re twenty-four.”

“Yes.”

“And you like this job?”

“Very much.”

“Why do you do it?”

“It pays pretty good. Nice office. Nobody bothers me.”

God, that seemed so shallow! I tried to get him to admit there was more. “And how old is your daughter, Julia?”

"Nine months.

"Does it feel good to provide for her and your wife? Does that fulfill you?"

"Yeah. At first it was such a relief, and now . . ." He brightened up, thinking about it, but didn't finish his sentence.

"You feel proud, right?"

"In Buddhism, pride is . . . a vice."

"I know. But that's what you *feel*, right? I mean, I can see it on your face when you talk about them."

"Yeah."

Mike was from Houma, a Cajun city in the swamps south of New Orleans. His dad sold commercial insurance and his mom was an accounts receivable clerk. They're Catholics and frequently tell Mike he is going to Hell. But Catholicism doesn't work for him. He used to pass out at church as a kid, because the kneeling would cut off his circulation. In those unconscious moments he would have intense visions and dreams.

"Mike, when you were nineteen and sat in the chair I'm sitting in, what were you told? By your counselor?"

"I was told that I was on a Quest." He giggled nervously again. "I really had my delusions of grandeur back then."

I thought he was still under plenty of delusions, but I found it significant that he thought of his Quest as a failure. Suddenly it clicked. "Mike, are you afraid of giving these students visions of grandeur? Are you afraid to inspire them to the same Quest you went on, because you think it will amount to nothing but phone sex debt and having to get a job to feed your family?"

He paused and considered this, seemingly for the first time. "Maybe I am," he said meekly. "This school is dominated by students who want to go into business and engineering. They want to make money. Who am I to tell them there's more to think about?"

"You can't be telling these kids that all they should shoot for is something that pays pretty good and has a nice office where nobody bothers them."

"I don't say that."

"Your silence says it loud and clear."

He'd never thought of that. "You think I give that impression?"

"You're giving it to me."

He seemed troubled by his quandary. "What do you think I should say to them?" he asked.

"I can't put words in your mouth. Tell them what you think."

"I don't want to intrude."

I thought about it and chose my words carefully. "Mike, if a student comes in here, and she's headstrong about going into business so she can make money, I don't think you or I have a right to question that. You're absolutely right. We shouldn't intrude. But what about the students who don't show up for their appointments, or who never even call for an appointment? They're probably the ones who most need your help."

"You think I should call them?"

"Why not?"

"What would I say?"

“Encourage them to come in and talk.”

“What if they think it’s stupid?”

I let it rip for a moment. I was mad. It seemed like Mike was using every justification to neglect these kids. This wasn’t intentional, just misguided. “Tell them that thinking about what they should do with their life isn’t pedestrian. Tell them that if they ignore it, reality will bite them in the ass like it did you. Tell them it’s modern philosophy for people who have to feed their wife and kids. Tell them it’s okay not to have an answer, but it’s not okay to stop looking for one.”

I was being pretty harsh, but Mike didn’t seem to be bruised by my challenge. In fact, he responded to it.

We went way past our allotted “appointment” on his schedule. When he started to consider actually coaching a few students through their choices, he was kind of terrified and suddenly asked me all sorts of questions about notions he had. At one point, he pulled a book from a drawer. I won’t tell you the title because I don’t want anyone to buy it. It was a book he’d picked up at the Dharma Center, prescribing a strict Zen formula which involved breaking the day into fifteen-minute chunks and trying, in each fifteen-minute chunk, to do only one thing and avoid distraction. This was the path to happiness it offered. Mike asked me what I thought of the book and the philosophy.

“I think it’s complete bunk,” I said. “I think you should throw that away.”

He was amazed. “Really? Why?”

“Two reasons. First, it encourages people who aren’t happy to stay put and suffer their fate in fifteen-minute increments. If you’re not happy, you shouldn’t stay put, you should find where you belong. Second, when you’re passionate about what you do, time disappears. That’s one of the consistent things people I’ve met have been telling me. Time disappears. You don’t watch the clock.”

"But do you think we all get a passion?" he asked.

"I don't know. It's a good question, but I'm not sure how to answer it yet. So far, all I can say is, don't expect it to be easy to find your passions. I haven't heard many stories where it was easy."

"I always thought there was something off about this book," he said, slipping it back in the drawer.

"Mike, have you given up your Quest?"

"Not completely."

"It may seem confusing right now, but you've already come a long way. Do you realize that? I mean, I want to make fun of you, but I also admire you. With your background, to get this far, to have changed this much from what your parents wanted you to be—don't stop."

"Sometimes I feel guilty that I'm doing this just to live, just to get by."

"Let it be more then. I think you have a big opportunity right here, right now, to make a difference. I know that goes against what your religion is telling you, but try it." It seemed so obvious. Purpose and fulfillment were right there for him, if he got off his Gandhi kick. He was like a blindfolded kid swinging wildly for the piñata, repeatedly missing what was right in front of his face.

When I walked out of the French House, I noticed all the purple and gold balloons and the parents walking around with students slightly overdressed, like everyone had been to a nice lunch. I read some of the signs on lampposts, and I realized, *Oh*, it's the day before graduation! Tomorrow, some five thousand students would dress in their gowns and walk through a ceremony to mark the beginning of the rest of their lives. They were young and exuberant and brimming with potential. Were they prepared to hang on to that feeling, when pedestrian reality would try to box them in? Were they ready? Partly because of my own experience, I wanted to stop each of them and

whisper, "It might very quickly get overwhelming, but hang in there."

WORKING WITH WHAT'S ALREADY THERE

To a certain extent, asking if we all get a passion is like asking if we all have a story to tell.

I thought I lived at a time in which nothing much would happen. The past seemed so dramatic. The wild course of history seemed to have tamed and leveled off in time for me to miss out on the action. My generation would enjoy a mild-mannered era, with little hubbub to record. Then the space shuttle blew up. Friends of mine made millions in a few years on Wall Street. The Berlin Wall was torn down and the Cold War ended. Crack destroyed many urban neighborhoods. South Africa ended apartheid. Friends went to fight in the Persian Gulf. An earthquake interrupted the World Series. Riots raged on the streets of L.A. The disabled were given protection from discrimination. Friends died of cancer and respiratory failure and suicide. Friends made tens of millions in a few years in Silicon Valley as the Internet changed how we communicate. Animals were cloned. Peers were killed in the World Trade Center attacks. History was being made faster than we could make sense of it.

In the same way, I never thought I had a story. Other people's lives were interesting, and I admired them for overcoming difficult prejudices and beating long odds. By comparison, my life was bland and fairly privileged. My parents loved me and told me so all the time, I attended good schools and earned mostly high grades. Near the end of college, I began to secretly fantasize I could someday be a writer, but even then I knew there was a bigger problem than the difficulty of

getting published or learning to write well: I didn't have anything to say. I had no real material. Nothing had happened to me!

I thought of my life as a series of ordinary trials and errors, a slideshow without patterns or pitfalls, peaks or surprises. I believed that this slideshow had little lasting impact, and I was still a fairly blank slate at thirty. In retrospect, I hadn't accepted my life for what it was; meaningful events and turning points were there all along, churning down in my psyche, waiting for me to recognize them.

In accepting my past—in not asking it to be more dramatic than it was—in not asking it to compare with other people's stories—I could finally wake up to how it had shaped me, and embrace where it was steering me.

Let's take my experience with work, which is of central relevance to this book. From seventh grade through college, my slideshow of summer jobs tallies into this script:

Busboy

Cafeteria assistant manager

Line cook

Cement factory janitor

Sports medicine intern

Hydraulic bus lift assembly line technician

Kitchen manager at fraternity house

Aerobics instructor

Student Union bookkeeper

After college the slideshow continued with snapshots from the following:

Litigation consultant

Greeting card designer

Bond salesman

Political newsletter editor

High school teacher

Book publishing jack-of-all-trades

At that point, my writing suddenly took off after years of frustration, and I've made a living as a writer ever since. The funny thing is, I look at that list and I barely see any clues I might end up a writer. As far as I was concerned, I'd done nothing but haul my ass off to work every day, slowly gravitating toward work that was less objectionable. Some jobs were worse than others, but nothing worth writing home about. I'd never taken time off to travel and have any adventures. And I'd received my worst grades in English classes, taking only the minimum two quarters in college. My teachers had told me I couldn't write and my ideas were unintelligible. My best grades were always in math. I was actually an indifferent math whiz, scoring near perfect on every math aptitude test I was asked to take, and I had competed in the Washington State Math Championships held each winter at Central Washington University. But I didn't care about math and couldn't see its importance. If I'd seen a counselor, I would have been steered toward engineering, but I was never sent to one. Because my grades were good, nobody thought I

needed advice or steering.

So how'd I do it? Well, I eventually learned to work with the material at hand. I'll tell one story for now. Everyone has a "My job was sooooo bad . . ." story. Here's mine.

It was my first job out of college. I slipped into a navy wool suit and rode the bus downtown every morning, saluted the chipper security guard, rode up to the twenty-second floor, strolled past the window offices, and eventually took my seat in the back row in a gray windowless room of twelve young professionals my age. My employer was a litigation consulting firm—supposedly a blend of the best of law and the best of management consulting. I'd fought for an interview, and fought harder to get hired. It was the perfect setup job for law school or business school. That wasn't my plan (I don't think I had a plan), but it suggests the high reputation this firm had.

The image was not the reality.

Our client was a large utility, which was suing the State of California for reimbursement of the \$5 billion it spent building two nuclear reactors in San Luis Obispo. The reactors were budgeted at a billion each, and our client blamed inflation for most of the \$3 billion overage. So our firm created enormous spreadsheets, each hundreds of pages long, detailing every expense over ten years, factoring out inflation. That wasn't my job, though. Oh no. That would have been the job I would get to do in two years if I was good at my job.

My job was to use a ten-key manual calculator and add up columns of numbers on the spreadsheets to make sure the computer hadn't made a rounding error. If the computer was correct, we put a little red check mark on the bottom of the column. Then, with that same column, we'd do it again. Every column needed to be checked twice. That, and only that, was all I ever got to do. Ten or eleven hours a day, six days a week. I was being paid \$12 an hour and being billed out at \$75 an hour to our client (which was in turn passing the cost on to the lawsuit). All twelve of us in that windowless room were doing this. I was in the

back row, staring at the backs of heads, entertained only by the occasional ghost of a bra strap or a bare Achilles. The crazy thing was, at least ten of my associates were competitive about being the fastest spreadsheet checker. They'd been brainwashed to believe rounding errors were as dangerous as the Ebola virus, and our spreadsheets had to be clean! It might occur to you that we were printing money for the firm by racking up billable hours like monkeys hidden behind a door, but it didn't occur to us.

I'd had grueling and mind-numbing jobs before (janitor, assembly line), but we always acknowledged we were mere shit shovelers. Here, everyone pretended what we were doing was somehow important, somehow relevant. The pretending was the worst part. We couldn't play music at our desks, not even listen to headphones. When we went to lunch, we had to wear our suit jackets. The firm was obsessed with its image. The firm had a rule that we couldn't pass through its lobby not wearing our jackets, and we couldn't be seen outside the office with our jackets off.

I wanted out by the second day, but I had \$42,000 in student loans to pay off versus less than a month's worth of savings. Besides, I *couldn't* quit. Years of competitive sports and my natural stubbornness made me hold quitting in such low regard that it was simply unacceptable. I prided myself on being able to gut things out. I was raised never to give up until the final whistle blows. Never dropped a class. Played through injuries. Never quit a job. I didn't know how. I was sure nobody would hire a quitter.

After a couple weeks I began crying into my pillow at night. My girlfriend would hold me and offer solace. I fantasized about someday getting Saturdays off. I felt like my soul was withering away. Every dollar I spent was extending my prison time that much longer. So I ate rice and cabbage at night. Cornflakes with powdered milk for breakfast. I doctored my bus transfers to use them for the ride home. On my family's birthdays, I'd save the dollar a greeting card cost and draw my own on a scrap of paper.

One day I went swimming at the YMCA. The entrance to the pool was through the showers, and at the entrance to the showers there was a scale to weigh yourself. So I stepped on the base and set the weights at 157 pounds, because 157 pounds is what I'd weighed ever since high school. The lever arm fell hard. Hmm . . . I must have lost some weight. So I slid the one-pound weight to the left, tap, tap, tap, waiting for that lever arm to rise. Then I moved the fifty-pound weight one notch over, and resumed tapping, tapping . . . tapping. The lever arm finally lifted up to balance.

132 pounds.

I wasn't metaphorically withering away, I was literally withering away. For several months I'd avoided spending five dollars on lunch by raiding the coffee room. Along with coffee and tea, the firm offered Carnation Sugar Free Instant Cocoa mix, in single serving packets. I would dump four or five packets in a Styrofoam cup, add enough water to stir the powder into a pudding, and spoon down the calories. I'd get invited to lunch, and all I could think about was that five dollars I'd never see again. "Oh, I brought mine today," I'd say, and beg out. Five dollars today, five dollars tomorrow, that's \$125 a month (six-day workweek), that's \$2,400 a year I could save by skipping lunch. The crazy thing is, until I discovered I was vanishing, I was secretly proud of my ingenious technique for saving money. I'd walk around with my cup of cocoa and nobody was the wiser. I thought I'd found a secret loophole in the code of ordinary human behavior. I was always looking for loopholes—things that people did unconsciously, out of custom, that were unnecessary.

I got a performance review and mentioned to my reviewer that I wasn't happy. He said that was normal. In two years I could go to business school and put it behind me. I didn't tell him that at the rate I was losing body mass, in two years I'd weigh seven pounds.

I daydreamed about every escapist fantasy imaginable. One of those daydreams was that I'd magically grow rich designing greeting cards. So my girlfriend and I began to secretly design and draw an

imaginary line of absurdist cartoon greeting cards—to have something to hope for! I had nowhere else for my hope to go, so it poured into this crazy, stupid, small-time pipe dream. That would have been it for me—I didn't want to dare risk destroying this fantasy by subjecting it to reality—but my girlfriend was more practical than I was, and she started to think it was stupid we'd done these drawings and were going to let them sit idle. She went to greeting card stores and asked some questions, introduced herself to some sales reps, attended a gift conference—how hard could it be?—and suddenly our fantasy, this vessel of hope, had a little more room to grow. A month later we'd raised ten thousand dollars, five hundred at a time, and I was running a greeting card company out of the back of that windowless room at the litigation consulting firm.

I'd come in early as ever, take my seat in the back row, lay out my spreadsheets as if I were working, and start to make phone calls to my sales reps around the country. All day long I'd talk to stores, talk to the printer, order boxes and paper, et cetera. I used the firm's computers and copiers to do the accounting and print invoices. We had forty-eight card designs and were on sale in about two hundred stores in twenty states. The whole room knew what I was doing, but three of them had invested \$500 each in the company—they needed hope too—and the others were so flabbergasted at my complete and utter disregard for propriety that they didn't know what to say. At lunch I'd walk around to the greeting card stores downtown to make sure our cards were displayed. At the end of the day, I'd scratch a couple red check marks at the bottom of the spreadsheet columns and turn in my work.

It was a new type of small company incubation—I called it *parasite entrepreneurship*. When I'd gained the weight back, and my confidence was brimming, and I'd gone through a full order cycle with the cards, I quit the firm to do the cards full-time. Funny thing was, the greeting cards didn't last long—like a parasite and its host, there was something essential in the symbiosis between my fondness for greeting cards and my hatred of spreadsheets. Once I was out on my own, I really didn't have the dynamism anymore. It wasn't nearly as

much fun to run a greeting card company as it was to run a greeting card company out of the back of a suffocating law/consulting firm, leeching off their infrastructure. After six months, the card company died for lack of effort. That was okay; I thought it was my dream but once I gave myself to it, it clearly wasn't.

Partly because of the shame of losing people's money, albeit small, and partly because of the embarrassing misery I'd gone through in that windowless room, I took that year and packed it down into the frozen iceberg of all things forgotten. If you met me in the years after, and asked me what I did or what I'd done, I wouldn't have mentioned either. I looked only forward, not backward. Six years later, in an oral storytelling workshop, I remembered it. Was it a great story? Not really. But that was the first time I ever told a story as it really happened—the first time I didn't use the truth as merely a foundation on which to build what I thought stories should sound like.

We all have passions if we choose to see them. But we have to look backward even more than forward, and we have to chase away our preconceptions of what we think our passion is supposed to be, or not supposed to be. This next story is a weird example of that.

7 Have You Looked Under the Bed?

NATURAL ENTHUSIASM

Noah Goldfader didn't think he was ever going to find it. He told me that since college he's had ten jobs in eight years, spread over six cities in four states on two coasts. But when I broke it down with him, employer by employer, I tallied no less than *sixteen* jobs in those eight years. He never stayed anywhere long enough to move up the ladder—everything was entry-level. Two-thirds of these jobs were in marketing and promotion. He'd given away Frappuccinos and Cuervo Gold tequila, put up placards during WNBA games and three-on-three NBA Hoop It Up tournaments, and created never-used ad campaigns for Levi's blue jeans. The highlights of his travels were pounding Coronas with Rod Stewart's band and standing on the same court with Kevin Garnett. He's thirty now. Currently unemployed. His older brother tells him to stop fucking around, thinks he's a slacker.

But Noah's no slacker. You can't fault him for not trying. My definition of a slacker is someone who thinks all jobs suck and isn't going to lift a finger. Noah would happily work sixteen-hour days if he only knew what it was he should be doing. He was all-too-desperate to find his song in life, and was panicked that there wasn't one out there for him. He didn't expect it to be easy. But he sure wanted an answer.

The night I went to meet Noah, he was living in old army housing in the Presidio in San Francisco, sharing an apartment with three roommates. We cracked a beer and sat in his tidy living room. He was thrilled I actually showed up. I think he might have vacuumed before I arrived—the air smelled of a tired electric motor. He was super-

introverted, twisted up by his thoughts, but not a dungeon-dweller or a Web-geek—more goofy, maybe a little mentally lopsided; intuitive one moment, blind the next. He was a sports nut. His father was a football star for Brandeis University, then a minor league catcher in the Milwaukee Braves organization. His mom was a nurse for twenty years.

“I believe everyone has a unique gift to give the world,” he agonized. “I sure as hell don’t want to be one of those people who dies with the music still inside them. I wish I could find what the hell I was put on this earth to do.”

He looked at me like maybe I’d pull the answer out of thin air. Long silence. I didn’t know what to tell him. I wasn’t exactly sure why I came here, why his story piqued my interest.

He went on. “Have you ever seen or heard Dick Vitale, the college basketball commentator? He loves what he does. You could lock him in a gym for sixteen hours a day and he’d never look at his watch. Why can’t we all have a passion like that?”

I glanced over at a coffee table book on Ben Hogan. Noah grabbed the book and leafed through it. “This book makes the hairs on my arm stand up. Hogan was the ultimate. Forget Tiger. Nobody understood Hogan. Like nobody gets me. I wouldn’t even know where to start when talking about Hogan. That guy had a singular fixation. I wish I had that.”

Noah desperately wanted my opinion. I shot at the low-hanging fruit. “What does your brother do?”

“He’s in finance down in SoCal.”

“Does he love it?”

“He doesn’t expect to. He’s stable, has his act together, and owns his house. That’s what he says matters.”

“You know, some people struggle with this question, and some people just *don’t*. Look for help from people who relate. Not your brother.”

“I don’t know. I’m starting to see his point. How many years should I spend hunting for this answer, and when should I give up and get on with my life?”

“What would ‘giving up’ mean?”

“It’d mean admitting there is no answer for me. Not everybody gets a passion. What do you think? What have you found? Do you think everybody gets a passion?”

“No way.” Suggesting otherwise would be irresponsible. However, there was a catch—a significant catch. I was going to regret telling him this. I was almost certainly condemning him to more years of frustration. “Some people are born into their passions. Some never get them and don’t care. But I think if you’re *really struggling* to find it—and I think you have, I mean, you’ve gone all over the country to find it—it’s almost certainly for a reason. I think the depth of your struggling is the sign there’s something there. Something in you that’s trying to get out. People who don’t have passions don’t struggle.” I didn’t know what I believed when I started my research, but I’d heard enough stories that this was coming clear. Young people often said, “I feel an urge, a vacuum. But I’m not called to anything in particular.” But those who had succeeded in finding a calling remembered that feeling as the beginning of the process. “The call was muffled and vague at first. That blank urge *is* the call.”



Noah nodded slowly with deep appreciation. “Wow. Yeah, my struggling *is* the sign.”

“So keep looking.”

“If I had something to show for these eight years, I might feel better about myself.”

That was another interesting question. Are the years before you find your passion a waste? I hear that a lot. *My real life won't begin until I find my place.* That's bogus, and I told Noah so. “Sounds like in eight years you've learned a lot about promotion and marketing. Maybe those are tools you're going to need when you finally figure out what you're here for. So what if it's been Frappuccinos, Cuervo Gold, and Levi's? You're learning promotion. Maybe someday you'll need to promote what you really believe in.”

Noah was listening raptly, so I launched into the story of my younger brother. He's really good with people. Always has been. For this reason he was always a natural salesperson. But he never had a passion, and he had become convinced he was not a passionate person. Our family always told him not to worry, and that when he made more money he'd feel good about what he was doing. But he did worry, and one day he gave up sales, went back to school, studied medicine, and became a nurse.

"Does he like it?" Noah asked with some urgency, his face starting to light up.

"He *loves* it. He can't wait to go to work. He talks about his patients all the time. I'm telling you this story because he took this gift with people—a gift that he'd honed in those years in sales—and he brought it to nursing. And it makes him a *great* nurse. It's the same gift, the same talent—but rather than selling insurance, or selling game meat, or selling Pennzoil, he's using it to *help people*."

Noah's face radiated enlightenment like I'd said the most insightful thing he had ever heard.

"That's what I want to do!" he blurted.

"You want to become a nurse?" I was confused.

"No, no—I want to *help people* . . ."

"Good . . ." I wasn't following, and I certainly didn't see this coming.

"I want to help people . . . *play better golf*."

Play better golf! "You do?"

"Yeah. That's what I like more than anything. I love it."

In the back of my mind, I recognized this was kind of humorous, but

in the moment it felt very serious. “Wait a minute! If you love golf, why haven’t you been doing that? Why have you been traveling the country, going broke, and giving yourself a hard time these eight years, when all along your passion was *golf*?”

“I never thought of it as a way to help people before. But it is. I mean, I really feel like I’m helping people when I’m giving lessons.”

Probably every time in his life he brought up golf as a career, someone shot him down. He confirmed this. He mentioned his love of golf to his rabbi, and she didn’t know what to make of it. Then he spent \$100 an hour on two sessions with Patti Wilson, *the* guru of Silicon Valley career counselors, who is famous for helping entrepreneurs discover their dreams. Noah had high hopes and put a lot of stock in her advice. She asked him, “If you could do anything, what would you do?” He told her he wanted to make people better golfers. She dismissed this quickly, as if giving lessons on the driving range were beneath someone with a college degree. The sessions were a bust.

“You should have stuck up for yourself.”

“I’m not good enough to be a club pro, anyway.”

“Golf’s a ten-billion-dollar industry, Noah. Surely there’s a lot of jobs that don’t require a scratch handicap.” Noah responded like nobody had ever acted interested before.

“Can I show you something?”

“Sure.” I was trying to be supportive.

He went into his bedroom, reached under his bed and pulled out two handcrafted gizmos—a swing trainer and a newfangled putter grip. Noah turned out to be an inventor. I couldn’t believe it. This guy had been looking for his passion for eight years, and the whole time it was under his bed!

He said, "With a new grip like this, I can help a lot of golfers at once. It's helping people on a larger scale."

"Noah, why aren't you working at Ping or Wilson or Nike?"

He said the entry-level jobs for the manufacturers are in sales. "Would that feel good, hawking clubs to retail outlets? I don't know. I don't think I'd like it."

Ahhh, the Entry Level Problem. All entry-level jobs suck the big one. How do you get past that? "Noah, imagine for a moment you've become one of Ping's mad scientist inventors. Would that make you happy?"

"Yeah, that'd be awesome!"

"Well, twice a year you'd have to go to a Ping sales conference, at which you'd present your inventions to the Ping sales reps. These reps will be the voice of your putter grip to the stores and the pros. Your invention will live or die based on how they perceive it. Maybe you're going to be an inventor, but don't you think you'll be a more successful inventor if you've walked in a rep's shoes? If Ping called you tomorrow and hired you as an inventor, you'd probably fail miserably, because you don't know shit about distribution, or materials science, or manufacturing. If you're serious about nurturing your invention, you'll put in the years to learn the skills to protect your gift. So when the day comes, you'll be *ready*."

"Whoa, I never thought of it like that."

"People have this stupid fantasy that if you're the *creator*, or the *inventor*, or the *artist*, you hand over your creation to businessmen and cash the royalty checks. That's a fantasy. It's irresponsible to their gift. If you have a gift, you should take care of it."

"Did you do that?"

“Absolutely. During my late twenties I was attending writing school at night. I believed that someday I would write something worthwhile. So for five years, during the day, I put in my time at a small publishing house. I learned everything I could about the industry. I prepared the financials and paid the bills. I typeset books. I shipped orders. I designed jackets. I wrote press releases. I made publicity calls. You name it, I did it. I knew publishing wasn’t my calling, and the pay sucked, but I was determined to have the skills to protect the books I would someday write.”

“And did it make a difference?”

“When my first book came out, I did at least a half-dozen unusual things that helped my publisher get the book an audience. It made a huge difference.”

“Wow.”

Noah was honored that I would equate his love of golf with my love of writing. (Of course I would!) He wrote me frequently afterward, remarking how much of a relief it was to tell his story and not have someone like his brother say he was wasting his time. That’s all he had ever needed. A month after we met, he jumped into entry-level golf sales, becoming a merchandise manager at a Sportmart. He also reinvented his grip prototype and sent it off to the USGA, and demonstrated it at a couple of golf expos. He was on his way. Two months later he discovered the secret of the golf swing, which had eluded him his whole life. He taught it to me at a driving range. Sometimes I feel good about my little role in his life, and other times it freaks me out that I would have said something that loosened the knot in his mind, allowing him to feel his desires without guilt. I didn’t say anything controversial, but that I said anything at all *was* controversial. I was on the hook.

“I want to help people . . . *play better golf.*”

8 The Brain Candy Generation

STIMULATION/INTENSITY VS. SIGNIFICANCE/FULFILLMENT

So, what if your destiny doesn't stalk you like a lion? What if it's not hiding under the bed or on its way by mail? Can you *think* your way to the answer?

Lori Gottlieb took that route. She decided there was nothing more important than answering this once and for all. She considered her years as a junior production executive in Hollywood a big mistake. She grew up in L.A., used her college alumni network to score summer internships, and those internships led to job offers, which she took because what else was there to do? She became successful but felt like a fraud. Unplugging herself from that realm was so painful and embarrassing, she never wanted to have to go through that again. Her biggest fear was that she would make another mistake and waste more of her precious life. She wanted to get this right. So she gave herself three years to sort it out.

Lori attacked the question like nobody ever had. She dug out her diaries from her childhood. She rejected the model of her father, who ground it out as a stockbroker. Fifty years with the same firm; his motto was "work is a four-letter word." She gave herself permission to dream. She investigated every dream. Astronaut. Corporate spy. Ballet dancer. Scientist. She took classes through UCLA Extension in photography and figure drawing. She interviewed others who had left Hollywood. She broke every job down by skill set and laid that over a grid of her innate talents. She filled out every exercise in the *What Color Is Your Parachute?* books. She distilled every job down to its

essence, to its inherent brain candy. Bottom line, her answer had to keep her brain firing at high gear. She was Phi Beta Kappa at Yale, and couldn't let her brain gather moss. She realized what her mind really loved was *solving puzzles*. Well, okay, who solves puzzles for a living? Doctors! A patient presents symptoms, and the doctor has to figure out what's wrong. Day and night, doctors are solving puzzles! So Lori did her homework. She called up brain surgeons and oncologists and invited herself to observe them on their rounds. She enrolled in premed classes at Pepperdine.

Organic chemistry was a wet dream! Endorphins flooded her bloodstream. She felt more alert, more alive, than she ever had in her years of Hollywood story meetings. This was it! This was what she'd always been looking for! Her med-school application was so persuasive that every school wanted her. And why not? Finally a student who was in it because she loved it, not just because she wanted the status, or her parents pushed, or she didn't know what else to do. Lori chose Stanford's program, which throws students right into the clinic, face-time with patients, real-life problems to be solved.

Lori was so convinced, she was interviewed by a national magazine about her journey. The article became an inspiration to lost souls everywhere. (Later, I met people who'd clipped and saved the article.) The woman who loved solving puzzles had solved the biggest puzzle of all: where she belonged.

Can you see where this is headed?

Lori dropped out of Stanford Medical School after only *two and a half months*.

Lori's a tiny, anxious woman. Of course, I'd be anxious too if I had to account for this goof. She wore her dark chocolate hair in a tight bun and hid behind dark chocolate sunglasses. She lived near campus in a painfully generic dank duplex, what she called her "refugee camp." She was ashamed to let me in. Most days she didn't shower until the afternoon. It'd been a year and a half since she dropped out, though

she frequently reminded me that, technically, she was “on leave,” and could go back. In other words, *technically*, she wasn’t lying when she still told people she was a Stanford medical student. Her ego was a little bruised, and affiliating herself with Stanford helped when she got hit with the Inevitable Cocktail Party Question.

“But are you even thinking of going back?” I asked.

“No. That life’s not for me.” She seemed dead certain.

“So what happened? What went wrong?”

“Well, I forgot that I was going to have to deal with sick people. Sick and *old*. Most patients are over sixty, with arthritis and diabetes. I didn’t want to spend my days like that.”

What? “How could you have forgotten that? I mean, when you’re sick, you go see the doctor. Doctors attend sick people.”

“Of course I knew that but I didn’t think about what kind of environment it would create. I’m sensitive to my environment, and I don’t want to hang around sick people all day.”

We talked some more and she seemed to think it was that simple. Dropped a variable in the equation. Left an ingredient out of the recipe. But if it were that simple, she could plug that factor back into her formula, redo her grids and matrices, and spit out another answer. She’d be earning her Ph.D. in chemistry (which she loved), on her way to being a scientist. Scientists hang out with other scientists and mice. No sick people.

Instead, Lori had bogged down in a nowhere zone. She briefly jumped aboard a dot-com, because they seemed to be having so much fun. She did a little of this and a little of that to get by. Her ambition still went unquenched, and she’s too competitive by nature to be happy for long as an eclectic free radical, where she couldn’t measure herself against others.

So what happened?

I've thought about her a lot. We stayed in touch, and over time her story has suggested a meaning for me.

Organic chemistry is predictable; if you know the rules, you can anticipate the results with great accuracy. And while organic chemistry is the basis of all life, it's a huge mistake to think humans are as predictable as the equations in a classroom. Solving the puzzle of our ill health requires trial and error, some hope, some faith, and some guesswork. The same goes for figuring out your place in life. It's not a puzzle that can be figured out on paper. You have to try something, see if it works, and learn from it.

Lori was always saying she understood my book and its topic, and really related to it. But she always got the title wrong, no matter how many times I corrected her. Even in e-mails months later, she kept calling it my "What Do I Want to Be When I Grow Up?" book. I think that's a notably different question. It lacks the "Should," which hints at a moral or aspirational imperative, and it overemphasizes "Want," as in *I want I want I want*. . . . Our wants are fleeting. They are also indulgent. Every philosophy draws a hard line between what you want and what you need. When Lori defined her relevant question as *What Do I Want?*, she went hunting for brain candy when she should have highlighted experiences she related to emotionally, and deeply.

Lori wanted her work to be "a twenty-four-hour-a-day high." Friends scolded her for being naïve, spoiled, and idealistic. "If I ever agree with that, I will cease to be alive, metaphorically." At first I took her side. I actually underlined her "twenty-four-hour high" quote three times in my notebook and threw some exclamation marks in the margins for good measure. When I started this book, I too thought what would make us happy was Exciting!/Challenging!/Brainwork! In one of my novels, I had written, "What young people wanted more than anything else . . . was a place to go during the day where their brain wasn't wasted."

But my research wasn't backing this up. Those who've found their place weren't reporting twenty-four-hour highs. They're not jazzed *all* the time. They still complain about annoying adminstrivia randomly puncturing their concentration.

Brain candy! A lot of jobs can give you the quick rush—ER physician, currency trader, start-up junkie, concert promoter, grill cook—anything with a lot of risk or a furious amount of activity. But before you can label it your calling, it has to take on personal significance and be woven into the story of your life.

The conclusion that brain candy is not enough is probably the most threatening to our generation's belief system. In this belief system, the world is a battle between the Boring and the Stimulating. We channel-surf through jobs and relationships, pushing the button at the first hint of slowing down. Like Lori, we've rejected the compromises of our parents' generation, who sought safety and security. Anyone who comes along and murmurs that "*stimulation is not everything*" is quickly tuned out, because we don't want to hear it anymore.

But there's a difference between something that stimulates you for a year and something you can be passionate about for ten years. What is the difference? Well, that's what this whole book was to explore. But it's safe to say what the difference is *not*. One thing is *not* ten times more stimulating than the other. And I'm afraid my generation has used stimulation as a synthetic substitute for other types of gratification that can be ultimately more rewarding and enduring. I struggled with this myself, but not until I began this project and listened to hundreds of others did the pattern make itself shockingly clear.

Lori was one of many who, when I described this project, remarked, "What a cool job you have—I wish I could do that." Not that they could be a writer, but that they could have a window into the lives of others. That they could know what everyone else's work was like. That they would have the perspective from which to make an informed choice.

They approach this choice as if it were a box of assorted

chocolates. Some chocolates give a clue as to what's inside, clearly showing the outlines of walnut slivers or peanuts. Some merely hint—their orbbed profile suggests a maraschino cherry within. And the chooser's prior experience may or may not be helpful—they avoid anything that resembles that coconut pineapple custard they bit into four years ago. Frustrated by their inability to see inside the dark chocolate coatings, they hang out around the box, watch other people's faces as they bite into their choices—"What'd you get? Is it good? Is there another one in the box just like it?"—and then, when nobody else is around, they nibble. They sneak a bite into the bottom, knock a chip off, look inside, put it back. Not until they finally choose, and sink their bicuspid into the gooey center, do they discover "Oh, shit, I got the one with the sick people inside!"

So if they could do what I'm doing, it would be like X-raying the chocolates. They'd know what's on the inside, and then choosing would be easy.

I knew this project was some people's fantasy, and when I began it, I calculated I would gain some readers who wanted to X-ray the chocolates. But I think I need to blow the whistle on that fantasy, even at the risk of your putting this book down. I am not trying to X-ray the chocolates. I AM NOT GOING TO X-RAY THE CHOCOLATES. The best I can do is raise our awareness of the process by which some people have struggled with the choice and figured out their life, without ever having the benefit of X-ray vision. My purpose is to tune our ears to the nuances, and recognize shades of ourselves in the stories, so we can be more aware on our own journey.

This book is *not* about what it's like to *do* certain jobs. There's a touch of that, inevitably, but I discovered such information isn't helpful. It doesn't drive decisions. People who had been through a lot reported that they changed their life, or got clarity, when they became conscious of what kind of person a certain job/industry/lifestyle was turning them into. So the relevant question is not *what* you will do, but *who* you will become. What belief system will you adopt, and what will take on

heightened importance in your life? This personalizes the stakes and makes it a lot harder to lie to oneself and ignore the points of conflict.

So if people who've found their place *don't* talk about how exciting and challenging and stimulating their work is, then what *do* they talk about? Their language invoked a different troika: meaningful/significant/fulfilling. And they rarely ever talk about their work without interweaving some of their personal history, explaining how the two are related. It takes a while to learn who we are, and for our latent talents to emerge. Certainly we're better off and will contribute more in a situation that fits us, but in the meantime, we can challenge ourselves in various environments, and use them to find out who we are.

9 A Toxic Environment

THE NEED TO IMPRESS PEOPLE ON THEIR TERMS

The night I came home from seeing Tim Bratcher, I told my wife, “He worked himself into a really intense dark mood. I’m not sure it was good for him to talk to me.”

“I’m sure you were supportive.”

“I tried. He kept saying, ‘Please don’t be disappointed in me.’ Having me there was holding a mirror up to the ways he’s neglected his potential. Maybe this was the wrong day to meet.”

Tim had finished the three-day California bar exam that afternoon, then met me at his apartment shortly afterward. He was convinced he’d failed the exam—that some unhappy, bottled-up piece of his soul had sabotaged his test-taking to keep him from being a lawyer in California.

Tim’s towering. He stands six-seven. He was a skinny freak in high school, and wore black fingernail polish and Goth clothes and long hair to exaggerate his outsiderness. But now, in his early thirties, he’s filled out and handsome and clean cut—courtesy of two years stationed in Panama with the U.S. Army. He’s incredibly polite and conscientious. It took me a while to get him to stop calling me “sir.” When ladies meet him, they ask if he’s somebody famous, or maybe a politician. His accent is pure Kentucky. He never forgets that his parents were barely high school grads. Dad grew up in a place called Hoodoo Holler, which just about suggests it all: outhouses, bare feet, scant pavement.

“What the heck is a hick like me doing in Silicon Valley, huh?” he said when we met.

I told him Silicon Valley was full of people from all over the world. I didn't know anyone here from Kentucky, but I knew a few from Tennessee. He heard me, but he was convinced he was an outcast, the subject of an invisible prejudice against his funny accent and non-ivy League credentials. That was the first sign of many to indicate Tim had a huge chip on his shoulder, rooted in something unclear. Many times during the next several hours, Tim's politeness cracked as he was reliving events of his past, and he'd well up in hot anger at those who'd disrespected him. Then he'd double back in guilt, feeling despicably self-indulgent for brooding—“It's nobody's damn fault but my own!”—and his hot anger would be redirected at himself.



His apartment was depressing. Maybe I have bad associations with these multilevel bachelor-pad complexes: low ceilings, pale manila spackled walls, old carpet, track lights. Where divorced men go to

disappear. I sat by the sliding glass pane doors, clinging to my view of the fountain. Tim sat in the dark, chewing Skoal.

"I'm full of shit," he said.

"It's normal to feel that way, Tim."

"How ungrateful am I!"

"Don't hate yourself for needing to be happy."

"Po, I honestly believe in my heart that I'm capable of great things. But the life's draining out of me. Hell, it's being sucked out of me. If I don't do something *soon*—but I'm such a shit. Why haven't I done something? I should have done something long ago."

Tim was never going to open up to his own gifts until he was able to turn off his need to prove his worth by other people's yardstick. If someone is happy and content playing the status game, fine. But Tim was torturing himself with it. He had failed three times in his life, and the first two times he rebounded with a vengeance, showing everyone they were wrong.

He'd been a screwup in his first try at college, Western Kentucky University, and caused so much trouble he was asked to leave after 1. his sophomore year. The military instilled in him a moral compass, and he came back to the University of Louisville to finish with seven semesters of perfect 4.0 grades.

However, his stellar transcript had been blemished when the Student Affairs Office attached a letter of reprimand to his permanent file. Acting alone, Tim had torn down the posters at a rally protesting the military buildup in the Persian Gulf. Student Affairs charged him with violating the protesters' rights to protest. They held the hearing without him present—he was called for active duty at Fort Knox. He cried unfair, no due process, but was not

allowed to defend himself. Right then he vowed to become a lawyer. He showed me the letter of reprimand, dated November 12, 1991. It still makes him livid. His perfect transcript—ruined! He stayed at Louisville for law school and graduated fifth in his class. He was hired by Stites & Harbison, which recruits from only Harvard and Yale. In Louisville, dropping that name will most definitely impress Louisville's genteel old landed families. At Stites & Harbison, Tim was named the heir apparent to T. Kennedy Helm III. He was even invited to the Warner's Christmas party. Look at me, Dad! From Hoodoo Holler to the Warner's Christmas party in only two generations! He was a ladies' man. He drove a Toyota Avalon, which is a pretty fancy car in Louisville. He felt invincible. So invincible that he took a risk—

He came to Silicon Valley and got his butt kicked. He was hired by Cooley Godward, one of the Valley's more prestigious firms. Law firm salary is based on years worked, and Cooley Godward deducted two years off his résumé—the small town discount. Tim never got over this dis. He was lonely, he made no friends, and his work sucked. He didn't last a year. Three months ago he was asked to leave. Now he was interviewing with research labs to be their general counsel. I was already convinced he should leave the Valley, but he couldn't—he had to prove Cooley wrong.

“Why was your work suddenly so poor?” I asked.

“I don't know!”

“Maybe it was because you were here for the wrong reasons.”

“Like what?”

“You tell me. Why *did* you come here?”

“When I got here, I thought I'd *arrived*. I remember driving up

Interstate 280, cruising along, taking in the view of those beautiful mountains and sweeping vistas. Filter's song came on, 'Take a Picture.' So in my mind's eye I did. I was on top of the world. *'Hey Dad, what do you think of your son now?'*"

"Sounds like you came to impress people back home."

"I know! Dammit, I know! But I can't turn it off! I don't know why I'm doing it! I'm in a walking slumber."

I told him about a young venture capitalist I recently interviewed. He quit and tried to choose a more meaningful path. He went about it like an MBA, scoring his choices against five metrics he'd decided were important. He could never pull the trigger. Then he read C. S. Lewis's article on the fallacy of the inner circle—people think they're important by belonging to an inner circle. One night he had a dream that his girlfriend was walking down the sidewalk arm in arm with an old B-school friend of his. He realized his inner circle was a dinner he'd had one night with other young B-school grads shortly after they got out of school. That night, he'd been The Stud. It had been two years, but in his mind he was still jockeying for status in that circle. Everything was filtered through their eyes.

"Was he ever able to defuse that urge?" Tim asked, intrigued.

"No. He went back to the venture capital world, humbled."

"Damn! I don't want that to happen to me! I don't want to be some grain of sand catching a slow ride in the desert on the devil's breath."

"Who's at the table in your inner circle, Tim? Your dad?"

"My dad wants me to be happy. He's proud of me no matter what."

"T. Kennedy Helm the Third?"

"And always will be. He took me under his wing. I owe him to do

well.”

“The adjudicator of your Student Affairs hearing?”

“All those people! And Cooley Godward too! But what good is it if I can’t let them go?”

“What’s keeping you here in Silicon Valley, this place you admit you hate? A desire to prove Cooley wrong?”

“I’m ashamed to admit it.”

“Why don’t you let the economy get even for you, huh? In six months, some of those guys you have issues with probably won’t even be there. Break the cycle and get on with your life. If you don’t like it here, *leave*.”

“I’ve thought of that. But do *what*? I shouldn’t be a lawyer. I’m not cut out for this profession.”

He fantasized about big changes. Running a hardware store back in Louisville. Going to Hollywood and starting over as a production assistant. The usual embarrassing escapist daydreams that get you through bad days. None of those was going to happen. Besides, he became a lawyer for a decent reason—he knew what it was like to have his rights violated.

“Tim, why did you become a corporate lawyer when your heart was clearly in civil rights law? Why did you abandon that?”

“I don’t know. I was stupid. I got sucked in. It felt *good* to be wanted and to be praised.”

“Nothing wrong with that for a while. Rebuild your confidence. Find out you’re as smart as anybody. But then you’ve got to return to those character-shaping experiences that *matter*. That anger you still carry over that reprimand—that’s *fuel*.”

“You think I should be a civil rights lawyer?”

“Don’t look to me for answers.”

“I respect your opinion and would like to hear it.”

“I’m afraid to tell you. I don’t want you to try to prove yourself to me. I don’t want to be at your inner table.”

“I shared my life in hopes you’d have some perspective. That’s why I’ve done this, opened up the Bratchelor Pad, opened up my heart—so you would tell me what you think.”

He made it clear he would feel cheated, and maybe even used, if I didn’t share my honest assessment.

“Friend to friend, then,” I insisted. “I’m not an expert, and I’ve screwed up my own life a few times.”

“I’d like to hear it.”

“All right. I think if you’re stuck on impressing people, at least impress people you like and admire, rather than people you hate. Which means get out of here. You can’t sort out the real you in this environment. Maybe that’s because you got off on the wrong foot, but the way you talk about it—you despise everything about it. Get out of here. Take the first step. Then, maybe what you need will be easier to sort out.”

“Damn, when you say it like that it sounds so easy and so obvious. So what does it say about me, if I lack the nerve to do such a simple thing?”

“What *does* it say?”

“That I’m full of shit. I can’t believe you’re even listening to me. I can’t believe I’m wasting your time.”

“I actually find your despair kind of gripping.”

“You want to know how lame I am? I won’t even go see a headhunter or a career counselor, because I’m afraid she’ll look at my résumé and —” He stalled.

“And what? Think you’re no good? Not worth her time?”

“Yeah. What a joke am I, huh? Here I am, talking about my dreams, when I don’t even have the guts to risk the rejection of a headhunter.”

Most of his life had been spent avoiding rejection and then getting vengeance for the times he suffered rejection. He couldn’t seem to take rejection as an indication that there wasn’t a good fit there, time to move on. I wondered if this pattern held in his love life.

We talked a lot more that night. I liked Tim a great deal. He was so honest with me. I never got a good read on his first screwup, when he was asked to leave Western Kentucky. The university had censored an acerbic comic strip he’d been drawing for a school paper, and in reaction he’d stopped taking art or English classes. Did it start there? I was afraid to cause more confusion by digging too deep. He’d also had a near-death experience in Panama, when he contracted an unknown tropical disease that put him in a coma for a week. When he came to, the attending nurse was crying. They’d thought he was dead, and suddenly—still in his sleep—he screamed for his mother. A dead man screaming “Mother! Mother! Mother!” Tim couldn’t say if or how that experience changed him.

A month later, he called to say he had accepted a position with a Very Big Law Firm in Atlanta. They were not dingy any years off his résumé. He felt at home during the recruiting visit, with the soothing sound of southern accents in his ears. And his ease had shown; they were enchanted with Tim. Nevertheless, he felt like a bit of a coward for taking the job, and asked me not to be disappointed in him. He was still afraid he was sleeping on his potential. I told him only to worry when he forgets about his potential. He was leaving in a week and

looking forward to the long drive from Vegas through Moab to Denver.

In Atlanta, Tim was instantly happy again. If there was any big-city unfriendliness in Atlanta, Tim's smile melted it. He had an easy time meeting women. He went to concerts and had a social life, at least on weekends. The security of the partner track was way too seductive to resist. He worked on the thirty-fourth floor of the SunTrust building and traded up from his Avalon to a Sequoia, dropping some serious bucks on a custom stereo. He was still trying to impress people, clocking thirteen-hour days, but the people he was impressing were ones he liked and respected. His boss was funny and even-keeled. He still described a "weight around his soul," but he didn't seem to hate himself anymore. The allure of those other lives he once fantasized about had subsided. We wrote each other often, and his letters were always thoughtful and eloquent. I promised to come see him sometime, but I never did, afraid I might stir him up again.

Atlanta wasn't his salvation—only a better place to sort out the next steps. Sure enough, after three months, he started to find Atlanta's faults. His edginess came back and then retreated, like the bite of the seasons. His inherent doubt and misery settled down to a tolerable level. He started teaching continuing-education seminars, which he loved, and was loved by the lawyers in his class. For the first time, he could see a feasible path to happiness, perhaps an adjunct position at a law school, then a faculty position.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF OFFERING FALSE ENCOURAGEMENT

I never pushed Tim to live up to his huge potential. When he begged me for my honest opinion, I gave him the part I had strong feelings about, but after that I condoned his compromises. I just wanted him to be happy—even as I believed his compromises were a root of his misery. Was I too easy on Tim?

Not everyone can adopt Janelle's motto, *Dream job or die*. I wanted to be encouraging, but I was afraid of offering false encouragement. Since my book about Silicon Valley, *The Nudist on the Late Shift*, was published, I had struggled with my culpability in the migration of young people here: 400,000 people had moved to Silicon Valley in the previous four years, most of them young, and most here to chase the dream. During 1999 and 2000, I couldn't go to a party without some stranger recognizing me and saying he'd moved here because of what I had written. I'd saved hundreds of e-mails that echoed this: words I'd written had motivated them to reroute their life, and—in the words of one, though meant as a joke—"it is all *your* fault." Most of these people were now out of a job. I cared how they felt.

I didn't feel I had done something wrong per se, but I acknowledged my role. I had made the Valley enticing. I didn't want to hide behind the journalists' defense, that I was just documenting what was going on in those heady times. What writer doesn't dream his or her work will affect how and where people live? If I wanted that kind of relationship with readers, I had to accept the responsibility. As I got deeper into the

research for this new book, the stories had an effect on me. Integrity became more important. And my responsibility for my earlier work became more apparent. Eventually I was compelled to write a letter of apology in *The New York Times Magazine*, which was unheard of. Most journalists were confused by this act.

“You never did anything unethical! Why are you apologizing?”

“Simply because I led them astray.”

“People have only themselves to blame.”

“This isn’t about blame. It’s acknowledging my books aren’t read in a vacuum.”

So now I faced a similar question on this book. I was writing about people who had changed their lives. Some people were still at the cliff’s edge. They would look to me for encouragement. The code of journalism mandated that I play no part, but that seemed unrealistic. I’d already shown up to interview them, which was a form of endorsement by itself. Setting up a tape recorder says “you’re interesting” loud and clear. My point of view comes across in every line of questioning and every raised eyebrow or tired yawn. It’s not that subtle. And some of these people really needed help. So I abandoned that pretense and tried to be myself. This was life. I vowed not to mythologize. It was important that I respect the difficulty of this journey, the insurmountability of our obstacles to change. At times I wanted to shake people and set them free of their traps. I didn’t want to be like Mike Blandino, missing my chance to affect their lives. But no! It’s not that easy! Think of Lori Gottlieb, whose leap to freedom was one big wrong turn! Think of Janelle London, turning her back on her destiny, not once but three times!

Then I heard from Janelle London.

Less than a month after we met, her dream came true, incredibly, perfectly. She found the job opening on the Internet, running the patient

partnership program for DaVita, the country's second-largest dialysis provider, which has forty thousand patients in five hundred centers across the United States. Not only would Janelle be supervising the program for those patients, but she would spend 30 percent of her time in D.C. lobbying and shaping policy. *Exactly* what she wanted. She was ecstatic. She was anxious to get started and keep me posted on how it turned out.

I apologized profusely for having doubted her motive in refusing to settle. She didn't seem to remember that I'd been discouraging. In her mind, I'd been supportive, and she thought of me as an ally. That surprised me.

Janelle's story could be told any number of ways. The cool way to tell it, as I once wanted to, was to make the point that destiny will track you down until you finally wake up to it. Wouldn't it be nice to think that our destinies are out there, looking for us, *hunting us*? But it's a better story—a more convincing story—to make the point that your experiences are your chance to define meaning. When Janelle went through seven years of dialysis, she learned firsthand about a need that was so glaring she felt it was worth devoting her life to. If she'd taken the first job, she would have let destiny steer her. By waiting for the second one, she inserted an act of will and courage. She's responsible for where she's landed, not the heavens, and her story's airtight.

I realize now, I was tense coming away from my interactions with Tim Bratcher and Janelle London and Noah Goldfader because I was in over my head. My interactions with them all had begun fairly early in this project, and while I'd been starting to triangulate my way to a few theories, I hadn't learned anything yet. In the next months, I got to know people who had worked through the very fears that froze Tim and Noah (and Janelle for those seven years). They reflected on that process, and I hung on every word, even if they had their own flaws and weaknesses.

This next story is one of those people. I tell Ana Miyares's story in direct response to the guilt that routinely haunted Tim Bratcher—that he wasn't entitled to his unhappiness—and made him hate to hear himself talk about it—a feeling that always triggered his cannon shot, *"Howungrateful am I!?"*

In Another
Class

11 The Umbrella of Freedom

ANYONE CAN FIND THIS IMPORTANT

Of all the psychological stumbling blocks that keep people from finding themselves, the most common problem is that people feel guilty for simply taking the question seriously.

I'd come to Miami chasing this intellectual thread. So many people I interviewed around the country felt guilty for obsessing about what kind of work they should do. It felt self-indulgent. They would say things like, "Poor people, they don't get to choose. And they're still happy. New immigrants, they're ecstatic to have any job at all. You don't see any of them stressing out about who they are. They want to do well." There was something terribly perverse with this mental logic: We should live like poor people? Why? Poor people sure don't want to live like poor people—shouldn't we take their word for it? Besides, I wasn't even sure this oft-repeated assertion was true. Immigrants go through an enormous challenge to their identity, and the biggest blow to their esteem is in getting knocked down several rungs on the career ladder. Yes, most simply want to do well—anything that makes them money is fine with them—but not all. Some care. Deeply.

So I thought Miami was the right place to explore these questions. A study had come out that said Cubans are the most successful first-generation immigrants ever in the United States.

I met Ana Miyares at a luncheon put on by Florida International University's School of Entrepreneurship, which was held to honor two inductees into their hall of fame. This seemed a good place to meet

Cuban Americans who had rebuilt their lives after having them stripped away by Castro, or by immigrating, or by having to learn English. I chatted with a lot of attendees, hoping to find a lead. Ana was short and stocky. She looked like a nun. She told me she was recently teaching a résumé-writing class for new immigrants.



“I asked them to stand up and tell me what work they did in Cuba,” she recounted. “So they stand. ‘I was an electrical engineer.’ ‘I was a broadcast journalist.’ They go on like this until I interrupt. I told them, ‘No. You *are* an engineer. You *are* a journalist. You are still that person. You do not lose that identity when you get here.’”

I wanted to hear more of her perspective, so I told her about my book. Could we spend some time together, and would she tell me about her life?

“Yes, I would very much like to talk with you,” she rasped. “But you have to know: I am not a dollar bill.”

“What does that mean, ‘I am not a dollar bill’?”

“Everyone loves a dollar bill,” she said. “Not everyone loves Ana.”

Ana's story is tainted with a dark cloud of sadness. On the second day, the cloud opened up and poured everywhere. In less than an hour the streets were flooded, cars were stalling everywhere, the city was shut down. Ana kept coaxing her little VW bug on, talking slowly in her raspy voice. The sadness was over a foot deep everywhere. We sought refuge in Little Havana. She had this place where she had done some of her best and most important organizing. A nondescript two-story community center off SW First Avenue. She was a hero to many here. I saw the sign, CARE PLUS. I started to get out of the car.

"No, we cannot go in," she said. "I'm showing it to you."

"It's a building, Ana."

"Well, there it is."

"Why can't we go in?"

"I can't talk about that."

"You won't, or you can't?"

"It is too hard for me."

I looked at her. I wasn't buying it. She was tougher than that. She'd already told me about her divorce, her estrangement from her family, misunderstandings between her and her daughter, and how much money was in her bank account (or not). She restarted the car and circled the block.

She said, "I am persona non grata in there right now."

"I thought you were a hero."

"Yes, that is true."

"I'm not following."

"Perhaps since it is raining we should talk about umbrellas."

"Okay—umbrellas."

Ana was an executive at a bank for a long time, then quit to do social work, with which she has had a love/hate thing going for several years. She's been struggling to find the in-between. Umbrellas can explain her opinion of both professions. A banker wants to give you an umbrella when it's not raining, and then when it starts to rain, gets nervous and wants to take it back. A social worker writes a grant to get the umbrellas, but people don't get the umbrellas because the social worker has to write a grant explaining why some people get umbrellas and others don't.

I tried to interpolate from her cryptic allegory. "So, are you saying that back in that building, there are a whole lot of . . . umbrellas, for lack of a better word, that nobody is getting?"

She answered, "In literature, the wolf is dressed up as a grandmother."

The warmer I got, the more cryptic she became. I knew Ana's first project as a social worker was at a facility in Little Havana—it had to be this one. She established a program called Time Dollars, a sort of volunteering bank in which people deposit (give) an hour of their expertise and then can withdraw an hour of someone else's expertise. House painters and tax preparers and day care providers and grunt laborers participate. It's a remarkably beautiful alternative economy that runs itself and costs nothing. An hour for an hour. On a starting grant of only \$12,000, Ana recruited 3,500 people into the network, who exchanged 12,000 hours of time a month. I let my imagination paint in how this might have gone so awry that Ana couldn't even show her face in the building. Perhaps Care Plus had fallen under the control of a dictatorial executive director? Perhaps that dictator took advantage of people's free labor time to inflate her budget, or to make it balance? Did Ana try to blow the whistle? I didn't know, but these were my suspicions.

I felt Ana's vast loneliness.

"I'm lonely but I'm happy," Ana warned.

On the Lost versus Found Spectrum, Ana should be a Found—she quit to go where her heart told her to go. She's *found* in the sense that she knows herself. But it has brought no peace. The tug-of-war never ends.

To respect Ana's story, you have to understand how Cuban-American culture views social work, and how it views family. Social work is highly distrusted. There is nothing wrong with it, but as a system, it is easily corrupted. It hints of Castro. It is not regarded as a noble calling. Family, on the other hand, is more important than God. Your family is with you at all times. I don't mean that metaphorically—you go to the airport, family goes with you. You go to your soccer game, family goes with you. You go to a barbecue, family goes with you. You go to be inducted into Florida International University's hall of fame, you buy three tables—one for your employees, two for your family.

Ana descended from a line of prominent bankers in Cuba who lost everything to Castro. One morning Ana was a ten-year-old girl in a protected household with servants. Forty-five minutes later she was a ten-year-old adult in a Cuban camp down in Homestead, taking care of her seven-year-old sister. It was years before she saw her parents again, but she carried their hopes to rebuild what the family had lost. As a teenager she began working in the microfiche department of a branch of United Jersey Bank. Filer, teller, branch manager, she slowly worked her way out of the branch and into its headquarters, in Elizabeth, New Jersey. In Cuban culture, there is intense pressure to be successful, to rise up. Ana wanted to be a vice president, like everyone else. She became an auditor. Then a lending officer. By her mid-thirties, she was senior vice president, and in line to one day run the bank. She was the pride of her family. But she wasn't happy.

Behind her eyes, she led a secret life. On Sunday nights, she got tired knowing she had to go to work the next day. Her friends were social workers. Civil servants at Health and Human Services, or therapists at hospitals, welfare case workers. She admired what they did. Ana was always looking to volunteer, and she found ways to do so on weekends. But she could never do it full-time. She was too afraid of her family's disapproval, too afraid to let them down.

One of her friends told her about a grassroots redevelopment program that was looking for a director. Ana longed to go for it, but feared how her family would react. "Please tell them I'm not interested," Ana said to her friend.

"No, I'm sick of listening to you. It's always, you want to, but you can't. If you are not interested, then you go tell them yourself."

So Ana went to tell them she wasn't interested, and walked out having promised them she'd do it for a year. The job paid \$25,000—\$17,000 after taxes.

She went home, and she asked her mother if they could move to a smaller, less expensive apartment.

"Why?" her mother asked.

"Because I want to give myself a chance to see if I can be happy before I die. I have ninety-eight thousand dollars in the bank. Please don't stop me."

Her mother couldn't understand it, but she didn't refuse. The rest of her family wasn't so kind. One day Ana was in the kitchen and she heard her two aunts talking about having her mother committed. Ana couldn't believe it—her mother was old but still lucid. Then Ana realized they weren't talking about her mother—they were talking about *her*. It was Ana they wanted committed.

Another time, her cousin invited her to a party. "You can come, Ana,

but only if you won't tell people what you do."

"Why not?"

"Because I am embarrassed for you. They will think you are crazy."

The only reason she stayed in contact with her family was for her daughter, who needed to spend time with her *tías* and *tíos*. To this day, they continually bug Ana, "When are you going to settle down, get married—you're not getting any younger." Most of Ana's family has since moved across the state, and recently her daughter chose to leave Ana and join them, now that she is about to start her own family.

Ana sums it up this way: "Back in Cuba, they would say of me, 'Ana is a light, but one that projects outside the house, not inside.' That is still true. That is me. Happiness comes at the expense of ones we love."

Social work didn't make her happy, though. From one nonprofit to another, from city contracts to federal agencies, she kept running into the same systemic problems. "Nonprofits require you to sell your soul to the politicians. You have to fight for money against other agencies," she said bitterly. "Then I find there is backstabbing everywhere. And they don't really care about the people. Keeping them poor is their business. As long as they keep them poor, they keep getting more grants or bigger budgets. Then, there are the volunteers. The message implicit in volunteering is, 'You need me, I'm good, I'm better than you, you have nothing to give.'"

Within a few years the \$98,000 was gone. Her life's savings. She didn't want to go back to banking. "So I went to church. And I'm sitting in church, and I asked God, 'Where do I belong? Where do I go? How do I make a living?'"

Shortly after, she met Edgar Kahn, the founder of the Time Dollars movement. Time Dollars seemed to be the answer to her prayers—she could work in the impoverished communities, but teach them to

help each other, rather than to be helped by the government. She told Kahn, "I will not write you a single grant. I will not come to Washington to shake hands. I will not be an employee of Time Dollars, because I do not want to be dependent on you. I will work contract by contract, getting Time Dollars programs started."

Kahn said okay, and Ana has been much more resolved about her place in life ever since. She's incredibly proud of Time Dollars. "All people really need is to be treated with respect. We need someone else to help us see inside ourselves, until you can see how beautiful you are. That's what Time Dollars does. So-called poor communities are rich in assets and resources. Time Dollars helps people in those communities remember in what ways they are rich." She's started programs in Miami, Baltimore, Phoenix, St. Louis, Japan, and England.

That said, Ana is still wary. The theme of her life is the continuous fight for her freedom—Castro, family, husbands, jobs, enemies, all tried to make her into somebody she's not. She seems unable to put her whole trust in Time Dollars. She takes other projects on the side—teaching in a housing project in Homestead, or hurricane relief—simply because she doesn't want to be dependent, like a jilted lover, unable to ever commit again. And she sees money as a danger too. "If you don't need money," she said, "it can't control you." Most of her friends now are new refugees; they're learning to have everything while Ana's learning to have nothing. If they go to dinner, they ask for a doggie bag and put half the plate's food in it before they eat. (They'll eat the rest tomorrow.) They save plastic grocery bags for a million uses. Ana teaches them the importance of opening a checking account and getting a credit card. They're afraid of the credit card but Ana pushes them to use it and build credit. One friend had saved \$2,000 and was going to buy a used car with it. Ana persuaded her to use it as a down payment on a brand-new car. These lessons are reproduced and exchanged in her classrooms and in her work. At these fringes, an economy takes root.

In that classic Joseph Conrad way, Ana's going native. Meaning she's adopting the customs and habits of those she leads. I've continued to stay in touch with her, but it hasn't been easy. I'll leave messages at her home, in Washington with Time Dollars, at the motel she sometimes stays at, on her cell phone, and on her pager—and I usually don't hear back. Sometimes I'll get her if it's between ten and eleven P.M. The rest of the time she's out there somewhere, beyond reach, doing her work, helping the people she considers her real family.

This would be such a happier story if I could say that Ana found her in-between in Time Dollars, and now her life is happy and she's reunited with her family, and she makes a decent, modest living, and she even has a new boyfriend. Plenty of people who do the kind of work that Ana does have that sort of picturesque life. (My older brother, for example—a former bank lending officer, he runs microcredit programs in several countries for Project Hope, a large nonprofit, and lives in the suburbs of Northern Virginia with his family.) But I came to Miami and I found Ana, and I can't hide what I saw. I'm aware that when I mention she's getting by on less than twenty-five grand a year, I kill any chance that someone else will choose to follow the path she's blazed. Ana's story becomes the story of a saint—maybe a curmudgeonly saint, or a flawed saint—but a saint nonetheless, because who but a saint would find her security in getting by on less and less every year? The only thing I can do about how her story turns out is perhaps say it doesn't have to be that way. That's Ana. She's a bit of a slave to her ideals—freedom, independence. Or, I should say, she's a bit of a slave to idealism—any kind of idealism. Her mother sent Ana to America because she believed that there was something in Ana's character that was going to make her a big Communist. Only ten, Ana was already in love with Castro. He was such an idealist! Ana was the kind of person who would want to be a martyr. Today Ana has different ideals—capitalism for all, capitalism will rescue the poor—and she will probably die in her boots, forever devoted to it.

Back to my original query that brought me to Miami: How are we to

handle the *privilege* of being able to author our own life? Should we renounce our privilege, and live like others, finding meaning in family, in God, in providing, and in country? Or should we revel in this privilege, because we live in countries where we are free to choose friends over family, choose from many religions, and choose how we provide?

“Americans take this country for granted,” Ana said, when we were out having dinner with her friends. “Too many neglect the opportunity they are given. This is the land of dreams.”

What is freedom for, if not to live where nobody can tell you who to be, and who not to be? What is freedom for, if not the chance to define for yourself who you are?

FROM WORKING CLASS TO EDUCATED CLASS

Even though she was an immigrant, Ana was from the Cuban upper class, and class is often more enduring than country. Whether it takes one generation or two, immigrants from educated, professional classes usually climb their way back up to their former class in the United States.

So, what about working-class people from hard-scrap beginnings—do they laugh at the notion that it's important to find our "right" place? Is pondering "What should I do with my life?" a luxury only for those whose mortgages are automatically deducted from fat bank accounts on the first of the month, and whose children attend schools that don't balk at the cost of textbooks, and who pay to have their house cleaned? I assumed that was the case when I started the book, but the next few stories are among many that taught me that assumption isn't true, or fair. Ultimately, I found that just about anybody could find this question important to them, regardless of their background.

Stephen Lyons is a big man with white hair and a trim beard, glacier sunglasses and a cowboy hat. Stephen was from a family of blue-collar tradesmen, none of whom had attended college. He trained as an electrician, but dreamed of being an architect, and used a coast guard scholarship to get into college. But the stipend barely covered meals, and his first wife wanted things, so she pushed him to drop out and be an electrician. They had children, and suddenly he needed every penny just to get by. But that marriage didn't last, and for many years after, Stephen wondered what he could have been had he gone to college.

Electrical work paid fine, though, and the Bay Area was growing, so for many years he had regular work wiring the vast suburbs of the East Bay and South Bay. But when the recession of the early 1990s hit, construction halted and there was suddenly no work. He'd recently married Camille, an English as a Second Language teacher who saw in him an untapped intellect. She encouraged him to dream of more, but then she lost her job too, and reality scorched their aspirations. They couldn't make the payments on their little house in Castro Valley, a middle-class city in the East Bay. Within months the bank foreclosed and the sheriff posted an eviction notice on their door. The locks were changed and the house was sold at auction. For a man who builds houses, losing his own was a crippling blow.

They rented a tiny apartment in Marin City, which is a poorer town in Marin County, and began to hunt for work. Nobody needed an electrician. There was no construction going on.

Stephen was desperate. He heard that Dominican College had a cranky HVAC air-conditioning system prone to breaking down. So he showed up, cornered the facilities manager, and offered to maintain the system. He learned that the college had budgeted a half million dollars for repairs (it was a big system, and it's hot in Marin), and was about to contract the job out to a big firm. Stephen pressed. They had nothing to lose by giving him a crack at it for a month. He offered to work for free, for a month, give him a shot.

A month later he was on the payroll, and over the next few years he kept the campus cool. Was this his dream? God, no. But he needed a job. Then he found out that as a college employee, he was entitled to free tuition. It was a chance at the college classes he'd always wanted. Of all the things he learned in college, one of the most important lessons was that other people really weren't any smarter than he was. He earned a business degree attending classes at night and started to read *The Wall Street Journal*, getting a little of that can-do hop back in his step. For his final class, he submitted a business plan for a solar energy company. He was changing, developing an inner focus. When

he walked around campus, other students thought he was a professor. He'd developed that aura. He could work seven days a week and not get tired. He made drawings for a small dream house he would someday build if he ever found the money for the land.

Now he speaks in the phrases of a self-determinist. "I realized I had it in me to be successful. I was tired of struggling—tired of thinking that life was a struggle. So I decided to be successful. Why not? Why not me?"

He kept his day job while becoming a certified installer of solar equipment. He put in a few small jobs by himself. Made payments on the tools he needed. Kept modifying his business plan. The catch is, solar power systems pay for themselves over thirty years. Only a small number of people have thirty grand to outfit their house and the patience to wait thirty years before that investment is in the black. Jumping into the solar energy business doesn't make economic sense. Or, I should say, being in the solar business means counting on a supply of clients who willingly disregard the bottom line. Stephen knew that, and he was in no position to fight those economics.



When the California energy crisis struck, he thought this was his chance. Rolling blackouts left neighborhoods without electricity, and

gasoline prices shot up fifty cents a gallon. Independent service operators were asked to testify before Congress. News of the crisis dominated the front pages. The public was suddenly interested in alternative energy sources.

The numbers tilted a little in his direction. The public hatred for PG&E was so intense that he figured there were homeowners out there who didn't want to be dependent on PG&E for power. Stephen wasn't a risk taker by nature, but he was pretty sure California would reinstate solar rebates and tax credits that would cut the cost of solar systems in half. If he ever wanted to start his company, he had to do it *now*, and hope that a toehold in the market would lead to a boom once the rebates were signed into law. Stephen did some creative visualization, then quit his job and took a gripless open-handed jump into the void.

I spent a day with Stephen and one of his crews on a job site, installing roof mounts and PV cells on a residential house in northern Marin. In addition to installing the equipment, Stephen applied for the permits, secured neighborhood approval, and coordinated inspections by PG&E. Stephen is a perfect example of a guy evolving up the labor food chain, in seven years transforming from a blue-collar guy barely able to survive, slowly learning what he believed in, then putting it together by creating work that he believed in.

I told him I was worried about how much to encourage people. I didn't want to spawn false hopes.

He gave that some thought, and then scoffed dryly. "It's a shame if people neglect what they can become."

"Do you think other people can do what you've done?"

He gave this even more thought. "If you're going to hold me up as a role model, the important thing to emphasize is, I'm not just some electrician-for-hire who now works for himself. I got divorced, I lost my house, I went through a lot, and that shaped my character. I understand

now it's a matter of character. Getting my degree shaped my character, taught me how to think. If you think starting a business is like winning the Lotto, something that you gamble on and luck into, and *whoopee*, then Lotto odds are about your odds. But if you develop the character—then yeah, the odds are pretty darn good you'll succeed."

On our next break, I asked him how important renewable energy was to him. Was that a big part of his job satisfaction? He said that it was, but probably just as important was that the product of his labor was up on people's roofs, for all to see. In the public eye. "Electricians don't normally get that kind of visibility. Our work is hidden. You only think about it if it's broke. This is different, and it's a kind of pride I didn't anticipate. This is our fourth job, and I love being able to look up and say, *I did that.*"

I tried to ask him about the creative visualization he mentioned.

"You'll have to ask my wife about that," he said. He seemed uncomfortable talking about it. He gave me her phone number. I called her and drove up to San Rafael to meet her.

Stephen's wife, Camille, took over the story. She and Stephen met and befriended a young Chinese man who was training to become an artist. The young man's career choice was devastating and embarrassing to his father, who was a famous banker in Taiwan. They fought and fought, and the young man felt guilty; he couldn't become an artist because he saw his paintings through his dad's eyes. So the young man taught himself inner peace and nonjudgment. Only then could he release his paintings.

"So what about creative visualization?" I asked.

"That's what Stephen calls it because he doesn't know what to call it. They were really friends who felt safe with each other in talking about their dreams."

The right kind of friends.

A month later, Governor Gray Davis increased funding for the rebate program, and another month after that, the tax credits passed into law. The phone started to ring off the hook at Stephen's office. He had more business than he could handle. He hired his brother, and his son, and then his son-in-law, and then every good hardworking kid he could find. But he still wasn't done until he found a quarter-acre of land in Santa Rosa that he thought suited him, took out a mortgage, and broke ground on his dream house.

THE FEAR YOU DON'T BELONG

I met Bart Handford in a diner near his apartment in the Morgan Adams neighborhood of Washington, D.C. He hadn't yet shaved that morning, but he would do so before he went over to the community center where he volunteered. He was thickset and wore a T-shirt that draped over his big shoulders. His brown eyes were sensitive, and his Arkansas accent was slight. He was thirty-nine, and he had been out of a job for six months. Even in his worst-case scenario, he thought he'd have a job by now, doing logistics or scheduling again, though he really wanted a policy position overseeing rural development, which is sort of what he had been doing before he and everyone else in the Clinton-Gore administration were relieved of work.

He stayed away from other Clinton alumni. Nobody was working, and it quickly got depressing to dwell on it. His girlfriend was the communications director for an Illinois senator, so he went out with her friends, most of whom were employed.

In late December, the White House Liaison Office had asked everyone in the administration to submit a letter of resignation, forward-dated to 12:00 noon on Saturday, January 20. Supposedly Washington is great at absorbing the party out of power, but that hadn't happened when I was there. The District of Columbia holds standing-room-only seminars on unemployment in the Canon Caucus Room. *This is how you fill out the Blue Sheet to receive your benefits. . . .*

Nobody's sure how many people are out of a job; the Government

Printing Office puts out a Plum Book, which lists all the Schedule C appointed positions—there's maybe 3,500 in there, according to one of my sources. But there's 22,000 administration alumni—and I know that's a good figure, because I got it from the woman who runs the alumni association, and she got it from someone inside the DNC. That's one of the ways you learn to talk in D.C.—since everyone is in the business of crafting a message, every number and statistic is only as good as the source it comes from. People litter their sentences with footnotes. Except for Bart Handford—maybe because of his background, he's much more plainspoken. Another thing they talk about in D.C. is “point of view.” Many young people are drawn to politics for the weightiness and the sniff of power, and they're just in it for the gamesmanship until the day (or the campaign) when they finally develop their point of view. Most people could tell me exactly which events led to their suddenly getting a point of view—the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas hearings, for instance. Well, Bart Handford's always had a point of view. The Democrats are traditionally the party of the common worker, but most of the staffers have never met one. Bart doesn't have that problem, because a year before he joined the Clintons, he was working the night shift at the ConAgra chicken fingers plant in Batesville, Arkansas, as part of the cleaning crew.



He'd tried college, but didn't last long and didn't really see the point.

He drove a newspaper delivery truck, and then he worked his way up at a florist from delivery boy to store manager, which he felt served him very well because he was dealing with people at the most emotional times of their lives—deaths, weddings, holidays, Valentine's Day. Then he killed a year in the Kimberly-Clark baby wipes plant. But the ConAgra job sent him back to college. At night the plant was over 120 degrees, and he'd stand there cleaning the chicken fryers, drenched with sweat, which ran down into his rubber boots. Every couple hours, he had to take his boots off and dump the sweat out. After a year, he started to see the benefit of getting a degree.

He enrolled at Arkansas State and signed up for classes in political science. One of his strongest memories was of watching the Watergate hearings during the summer of '74, when he was ten years old. He knew it wasn't practical to major in poli sci, but he wasn't planning to go into politics—he just needed a bachelor's degree to qualify him for a desk job and keep him off the assembly lines.

Bart didn't make it through the first semester. One night driving home in his Delta 88, he was crossing a railroad track and was struck by a freight train on the driver's side. Not all the crossings are protected by signal gates, and in the dark the freight train couldn't be seen. Bart woke up three days later in a hospital in Little Rock. His spleen was ruptured, his lung punctured, and his ribs, clavicle, and arms were broken in multiple places. But his head and his legs were okay. He was told that he'd lost so much blood in the ambulance that he had basically died by the time he reached the hospital, but somehow he wasn't dead.

Six weeks later they wheeled him out of the hospital and put him in a bedroom in his parents' house. It took most of a year to rehabilitate. He figured college and all it might lead to were now out of the question. When he could work again, he was hired as a manager at a Little Caesars pizza restaurant. With all the medical bills, he needed a second job, and so he went over to the Clinton campaign headquarters in the old *Arkansas Gazette* building and put his résumé in. When

Clinton won the nomination at the Democratic convention, all the senior operatives moved back to Little Rock. They called Bart in to the second floor. It was complete chaos. There were ten phone lines, and whenever one rang, someone screamed out over the floor. They asked Bart why he wanted a job. He said he'd always voted for the governor, ever since his first campaign. When he was a newspaper delivery driver, Clinton had come into the back room where the boys roll the papers to shake some hands. Bart's hands were black with ink, but Clinton didn't hesitate. Ever since then, he'd always respected the governor.

He got the job answering phones, and soon the floor was filled with volunteers from all over the country.

I asked, "Was it just another job? A second income?"

"In my heart I was hoping it would be something *more*—"

"And was it?"

He said, "More than I had ever imagined. I'd worked very hard before, doing menial work. I never complained that it was grunt work, but I always hoped that one day my labor would contribute to something I believed in, something meaningful. Suddenly I was surrounded by all these other volunteers, most of them five years younger than me, from schools I could never dream of attending, and they were doing nothing but grunt work eighteen hours a day, seven days a week, and doing it gladly, because they all believed in it."

"That was a new feeling?"

"It's like that old story: three guys laying bricks are asked why they're doing it. The first guy says, 'I'm doing it for the wages.' The second guy says, 'I'm doing it to support my family.' The third guy says, 'I'm helping to build a cathedral.' For the first time in my life I was helping to build a cathedral. I felt like I'd found my home, and I'd found my people. On that campaign, I discovered what I really liked to do."

“Had you been looking for your cathedral? Over the years, all those menial jobs, did you just focus on getting paid, or were you jockeying between jobs, trying to find happiness, trying to find something more cathedral-like?”

“It probably sounds silly to you when I list out the jobs I had, but for stretches I hoped I’d find my cathedral. I lost track of that ambition when I started working in the plants, but with all that free time after the accident, I rekindled that hope. Was working at Little Caesars it? No, and I never thought it would be. But I had hope.”

When Clinton won the presidency, Bart was offered a position as head of the Office of Scheduling and Advance for the White House. He was flattered just to be included. They asked him how much he needed to be paid. The White House budget is scrutinized heavily, so they asked him to not pad his figure. He thought about it, and then asked for \$28,000, which would have gone a long way in Arkansas, but resulted in a huge sticker shock when he got to Washington and discovered what an apartment costs to rent, and how much people drop on drinks, and how expensive it is to catch a cab across town. He was stuck with his meager pay. Bart borrowed money from his folks to get by. It didn’t matter. He had his passion.

Everyone has to pay his dues in politics. Scheduling and Advance is thankless work, and Bart was only noticed if something went wrong—someone didn’t get told that their meeting with the president had been changed, et cetera. But those who are paying their dues aren’t miserable, and they have a kind of religious fervor about it. Because the president’s schedule is so intense, the advance team lives on adrenaline, panicking to make sure every public appearance comes off smoothly. Bart flew to Northern Ireland and South Africa on trips with the president, places he never would have seen in his lifetime if his career hadn’t taken this amazing turn. Everybody in politics travels a lot. That’s one of the standard perks. And it’s a type of travel that is more memorable than, say, business travel—even though they work sixteen-hour days when traveling, they do it with a team of compatriots,

and always seem to come back with stories of crazy things that happened late in the night, after the bars had closed.

After two and a half years, Bart couldn't live on \$28,000 anymore, and he was ready to be rewarded for his devotion. It was time to transition away from political skills and develop a policy specialty. He was appointed to the Department of Agriculture as regional coordinator for rural development in the Midwest. The agency ran a program that brought clean water to rural people by lending money for the construction of aqueducts and wells. Bart's job wasn't to run that program—the actual implementation of programs is done by entrenched civil servants. Political appointees set the agenda for the agency. The Republicans in Congress had just slashed the program's budget by 35 percent, so Bart's mission was to generate publicity, and get the word out that this was a program worth not only saving, but funding back to full levels.

Bart had a cause to fight for. He flew down to Mountain View, Arkansas, which wasn't far from his hometown. He found five hundred people living in the Ozarks drinking water that was so cloudy and muddy it was revolting—when they had any water at all. He went down to border shantytowns in Texas, where crop workers were getting water from irrigation ditches contaminated with pesticides. Bart found out that over a million people in America didn't have drinking water in their homes at all. The amazing thing was, the loan program wasn't actually costing the government any money. Even though they were loaning to the poorest counties in America, the default rate was less than one-tenth of 1 percent. Bart came back to Washington and made his case to the representatives from the districts he had visited. He was fighting for their attention against every other issue (which somebody else like him believed in with equal conviction), but by the next year's budget, the program's full funding had been restored. It was a great triumph.

Bart was reinvigorated. He saw where his future might lie. Last year, he earned his college degree by attending night classes at the

University of Maryland. He wasn't upset about being laid off in January—he'd campaigned for Gore on weekends, but he would have had to resign his USDA post anyway and hope for a new appointment. So he was always expecting a hiatus—

“—Just not for this long,” he added.

“And you want to get back into policy?”

“Deeper into it. I'd like to be running a program, not just putting the right spin on it. It's a quantum leap, from political hack to the world of policy and business.”

“There aren't positions to apply for?”

“There are, but I'm going to need an MBA to qualify.”

“So did you apply to grad schools?” Quickly I did the calendar math in my head—he was laid off in January, but knew it was coming . . . applications are due in early winter . . .

He paused. Ahh, *the pause*. There's a point in almost every interaction where the subjects stop presenting themselves as willful architects of their own destiny, and downshift into admitting sometimes they can't seem to control their own hands and feet. There's always this *pause*.

“Po, I didn't send in my applications.”

“Why not?”

“I took the GMAT in September, and then I requested the applications . . .”

“What are you not saying?”

“I'm embarrassed, Po. I had never applied to schools of this caliber before. I had no idea how *complicated* it was. Recommendations,

essays, financials—I didn't know all this had to get done."

"You had nothing but free time."

"I didn't like any of my essays. I would be writing and thinking, 'These people are never going to let a hick like me into their school.' The application process reminded me exactly where I'd come from, and how little I really knew. I've been intimidated. From the moment I came to Washington, I've been surrounded by the smartest people from the best schools, and they seem to know something I don't know, like they've all been taught a secret language. And they *have*—the language of applications. They've all been through it before. To get into Arkansas State, I just waved my high school diploma. I've got to learn the language. I decided to take the year to perfect my applications, and apply next year. I didn't realize it would be so hard to get work in the interim. Now I see I made a mistake."

"Bart, you've been in this community for eight years. You don't feel you belong?"

He said, "I've got to get over my inferiority complex."

"Or use common sense to tune it out. You worked for the White House, for god's sake. That's pretty impressive."

"It is?"

"Yeah."

"The honor of it is easy to forget, in a town like this."

We ate our breakfast and went through too many cups of coffee. I kept thinking about all the poli sci undergrads who never had the resolve to pay their dues in politics, so they went off to Wall Street or law school. I admired Bart for how far he'd come, and it pained me to see him now paralyzed to go the rest of the way.

Bart spent much of the next year working part time for a Maryland abortion rights league and as a volunteer teaching adult education for Academy of Hope. Those essays percolated in his mind. In October, he took an intense Outward Bound course in Mexico, where he confronted some of his preconceptions. Did he really want to learn economic development? Yes. Did he really have to earn an MBA to run a development program? Maybe. Did he have to *run* a program, versus work his way up? No. And with that, his paralysis released. He took a job with the New Israel Fund, which finances economic-development projects in Israel. He traveled to Jerusalem regularly. He found it very satisfying.

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IT'S SUPPOSED TO BE HARD

So do we need our work to be meaningful because we no longer go to church? Could this “meaning gap” be easily solved with a little more scripture and prayer? This was suggested to me by a number of people, and it seemed apparent—most of my friends who consider themselves Jewish or Catholic or Hindu rarely practice the rituals they reminisce so fondly about. The concept of one’s “calling” has been distorted from a religious call to a career imperative. Maybe it needs to be distorted back.

However, it’s not true. At least I didn’t find it to be true. Half the people in this book are devout, and not once did that insulate them from struggling with the question of what to do with their life. Most of them sat down with their rector/pastor/father/guru and asked for guidance. Never did that bring them peace or settle their mind. Many spoke of how helpless their religious adviser seemed. One of those people was Barry Brown, who lived in the county seat down in the boot of southeastern Indiana. It’s a rural and depressed place. The high mark of population in the county was the 1880 census, when they hit fourteen thousand residents. “I’m one of those people who doesn’t really count,” was how Barry first described himself. He has a BA in English from IU-Bloomington, but never built on his education and never thought of work as anything but a way to get by. He sold Kubota tractors, then was a shipping clerk, then found work at the state mental hospital. He’d been in the army. He was an Episcopalian, and that’s where he got his meaning. “What should I do with my life?” was not a question that had ever plagued him. But lately, he’d been rotating in the

security department of the riverboat casinos that were licensed six years ago in hopes of juicing the economy, and it was making him question everything.

Barry rotated between three casinos, the *Belterra*, the *Evensong*, and the *Grand Vic*. Most of the time he stood on his feet doing nothing useful. His job was merely to observe and count. When one of the slot machines paid out a jackpot, Barry did the count, and then the floor attendant counted, to make sure the denominations pouring from the machine jibed with the paperwork. Occasionally he delivered chips to the blackjack tables. The first time he did that, his knees got weak. He was carrying \$60,000. He'd never seen so much money. Barry couldn't understand the fascination of gambling. He tried it once and found it about as much fun as weeding an onion row.

Every evening, buses arrive from Cleveland and Dayton and Indianapolis and Louisville, dumping out hordes of people with hard-earned money to lose. They enter the babel of illusion, deceived by the music and moving lights into feeling like they're doing something interesting. They lose track of time in the permanent indoor twilight, unsure whether it's night or day in the real world. They come to be numbed to their feelings and problems. The corrupting influence of this floating den of iniquity works its magic. Slowly their inhibitions relax. They see their neighbors as marks.

When you understand how the environment of casinos work, you understand how the whole economy works.

Welcome! Welcome to the nonstop spending machine! You won't feel a thing!

I found Barry by the same happenstance that brought me to so many others: an e-mail I sent out to a few friends was forwarded along, eventually reaching people in places where I didn't know a soul.

The night he received my e-mail, Barry had been standing duty. He heard his coworkers laughing. They were watching this little old man

lose his money. Down to his last few chips, the man had started to cry. Tears were falling from his eyes as the last of his chips disappeared into the slot. He was bawling. Barry had seen that happen many times before, but he couldn't believe his coworkers were laughing at the poor man's expense.

"Go back to Dayton, old man," they teased.

"He's not a tourist," Barry intervened. "I've seen him before, at the YMCA and at Goodwill. He can't afford to lose that money."

"Boo hoo."

"When did you get so callous?"

"Shut up, bleeding heart." Now they were laughing at Barry.

Now the tears came to Barry's eyes. Embarrassed, he ran from the pavilion out onto the deck and stood at the rail over the dark Ohio River and cried.

Years worth of tears fell from Barry as big thoughts came to him. What am I doing here? What is this place doing to me? He could see into his future, and in that future he had become as callous as his coworkers, picking on poor old men. He didn't want to be that way. But the babel of illusion would work on him. Every day he'd accept a little more, until one day he'd think it was normal. Barry fought to keep a grip on reality. *This is not* reality, he told himself.

One of Barry's earliest memories came back to him. He couldn't have been more than four. The top of the pew couldn't have been much below his eye level. Reverend Wright's baritone boomed from the pulpit. His barrel chest lifted his Geneva gown. Reverend Wright was an old-time Calvinist, very formal—crisp white shirt, black tie, black shoes, his dark wavy hair combed back. Most sermons are sales pitches, but his weren't. His sermon was inspired by the first question in the old catechism, "Why were we created?" Worshiping God was

not enough, Reverend Wright insisted. You must also offer up to God your skills and your honest labor. You must find your place.

Standing on the deck of the *Belterra*, Barry was struck with guilt. His ancestors had come over here from Scotland and Switzerland with high ideals, and here he was securing the process by which people parted with their hard-earned cash. He had done nothing to live up to the ideals expressed in Wright's sermon.

When he went home that night, Barry was unable to sleep. In the middle of the night he went online and, out of the blue, my random e-mail arrived, solace at a time when his friends felt like strangers. The next day, he was still so ashamed he stayed home from work. We talked by phone. "I don't feel worthy of God's love," he said. "Or anyone else's, for that matter."

"Why?"

"Reverend Wright had it right. Sorting out your vocation is a serious matter. I've ignored it, because it's too hard. Well, of course it's hard! Serious things *are* hard!"

I told him most people have the opposite reaction. They find it really hard, and they feel guilty because they think it's supposed to be a lot easier than it is.

"No! That's the lie of our culture. That everything's supposed to be fun and easy. Even our religions make it fun and easy to be religious. They waffle, they don't make a clear statement. The old-time religions have unraveled. They had it right. It's not supposed to be easy."

"So what are you going to do? Are you going to quit?"

"I don't know. I have an obligation not to eat up my savings. But I've seen what those casinos do to people, and I don't want it to happen to me."

“You feel trapped?”

“Yeah.”

I guessed that he didn’t have too many options in such a depressed county. “Barry, I’m fishing here, but—what have you thought would be *too hard* to do?”

“It’d be too hard to commute to Columbus or Cincinnati. Also, a couple years ago, I was going to study for the Microsoft A+ certification exam, but I stopped.”

“Because it was too hard?”

“I might look into it again.”

A month later, Barry said to me, “I never thought you’d be interested in the story of someone like me.”

I told him I’d been cut short by a publicist in Manhattan, who said the topic of my book wasn’t for the Wal-Mart crowd. It was a common assumption that this concern was phantom angst that only afflicts overeducated happiness chasers who need a cold slap in the face and a dose of “get with it” reality—the professional class’s version of suburban housewife woe-is-me vertigo.

This disturbed Barry. “So they don’t think someone like me cares about my place in the world?”

“I think it’s that your economic situation is so marginal, you don’t have a choice.”

“Maybe I don’t have much choice. But I still care.”

Some of that care had been redirected to his garden. He was planting more than he had in years, even though the humidity in the Ohio River Valley was so bad he had trouble breathing. He kept working at the casinos, simply because he had to. He’d asked his

rector for advice, and the rector had been sympathetic but unhelpful—he told Barry to keep a grip on himself and not lose it, and eventually find something else to do. A few weeks later Barry went to his doctor for the flu. The doc read him like a book, bluntly putting it to him, “You’re depressed.” Barry explained why. “Don’t blame yourself for those casinos,” the doctor advised. He prescribed Celexa, which has helped Barry’s mood but stimulated wild dreams—one night he dreamt he was in the pavilion at *Belterra*, and John Calvin rode through on a horse, followed by the Marx Brothers.

Barry was worried the Celexa would make his situation tolerable, that it would numb him.

I fear it already did. So far, he hasn’t gone back to the Microsoft course. Maybe those dreams of John Calvin were Barry’s conscience trying to burst back into his awareness.

IS MORE RELIGION THE ANSWER?

I flew down to Los Angeles to attend Sunday Mass at Saint Agatha's as the guest of Ashley Merryman. Saint Agatha's services are stirring and vibrant affairs on any weekend, but this was also the day of their annual picnic in a park nearby. Saint Agatha's is located near the USC campus, in what used to be considered a bad neighborhood to be in at night. It's a one-of-a-kind church: Multicultural Catholic Gospel, with a fantastic rock band backing up the choir. The culture of this church is infectious; it was like we were on a different planet: Planet Hug. When I looked into their eyes, everybody seemed to have a world of hurt in their past, yet they were the warmest group I've ever met. I'm not a religious person, but I was stirred, and I sang and clapped and stomped, and when I pictured people in my life I wanted to pray for, my brother, or my stepmom, or an old friend, their image brought tears.

Ashley was the scrawny Irish redhead in a sundress with a big smile and an alto voice. She's thirty-three. Two years ago, she rebuilt her life with Saint Agatha's as the emotional center. Father Ken and the congregation had rescued her and taken her in when she was unemployed, had no car, no phone number, and was losing weight fast—the former conditions had triggered the reemergence of her eating disorder. She joined the choir and started attending a couple times a week. At St. Agatha's, strangers are *always* greeted with a warm hug and the line, "How can I help you?" Ashley had never been treated that way before. Back at the White House, where she used to work—and back in Hollywood, where she worked before the White House—the

premise of every first meeting was, “How can *you* help *me*?”

Ashley let *how-can-I-help-you* reorient her mind. Her heart went out to all the little kids who attended. She began tutoring a few. She knew these kids needed an after-school education center, to keep them off the streets until their parents came home from work, so she approached Father Ken and asked if there was a room that could be used. This is another part of the culture that Father Ken has created—you don’t complain, you don’t tell other people what they should do. If you see a need, that’s your chance to help. Ashley now runs this classroom/tutor center. She decorates the church and sweeps the parking lot as a police helicopter circles overhead. What’s important to her now is getting Keisha to pass third grade or getting Gabriella on family health care.

The catch is—and this is why I’ve placed this story at this spot in the book—Ashley has to make a living. On top of rent for her spartan Culver City apartment, there’s a car payment and then the \$1,500 per month owed to Georgetown Law School. Those student loan payments really have her pinned down. So she’s been working as a contract attorney for a Beverly Hills law firm. “Contract” attorney doesn’t mean she works with contracts, it means she’s paid by the hour and works from ten to six. A sort of attorney temp. It’s a paycheck, not a career. She hates the work and the value system, but that’s not unusual. If she promises a kid she’ll be at the church at 6:30, she can live up to her promise. That’s worth something, isn’t it? I thought her life had balance. Her days were necessary sacrifices for her nights and weekends. Who hasn’t been there? I admired her and I loved her friends. The kids adored her. Her refrigerator is covered with drawings they’ve crayoned for her. Wasn’t this a good life? Wasn’t she serving God? Wasn’t that the message of Father Joe’s sermon today—when helping people, you are serving God? That was Jesus’ dying wish: out of love, do this for him. People who need you *is* your destiny, and this destiny is a free gift from God.

I told Ashley I thought she should be content and proud of herself.

But she wouldn't have it. "I've found my community, but not my calling," she warned. "I'm not even sure God knows what I should do with my life."

"Come on, *this* is exactly what you should be doing with your life. Isn't it?"

"One of my classmates clerked for the Supreme Court. I'm not allowed to make a copy in the main copy room of my firm because I'm a temp."

"But look at what you've got here. Isn't it okay to be working only for the paycheck, if you come home to this?"

"I still feel like there's so much more I'm supposed to be doing. Supposed to have done already. I just don't know what it is. I was blessed. I went to a preeminent law school, the best film school, my parents didn't beat me. I have an incredible sense I should have accomplished something. When people say I'm talented, it makes me feel worse. The blessing has become a curse."



Over the course of her life, Ashley had done right by every piece of advice I might give her. She'd pursued her childhood inspiration. She'd

taken risks. She'd sacrificed, and worked for no pay in order to later get hired. She'd been moved by the events of her day to get involved. She made her contribution to the national dialogue, then returned to her chosen career (or tried to). And after all that, what was she?

An attorney temp who isn't even authorized to make copies.

How could this happen?

Or, maybe I should ask, am I giving bad advice?

Or, if St. Agatha's ~~was~~ the cause to devote her life to, how could she revise her own story so that she didn't feel like she'd failed?

When Ashley was eight years old, she read an article in *American Film Magazine* about her hero, George Lucas. It said he'd gone to USC Film School, so Ashley put the magazine down and told her parents that was where she was going to college. Ten years later she moved into a USC dorm and started film school. She graduated, and spent a few years working her way up in Hollywood as a reader, production assistant, and assistant to a creative executive.

The L.A. riots on the night of April 28, 1992, were a wake-up call. They were not far from her apartment. She was overtaken with this feeling that "something has to change." Not in her life, but in society. She had this Jeffersonian notion that everyone should serve their country for a few years. At that same time, Bill Clinton announced that were he elected, he would create a National Service Corps, later known as AmeriCorps. Ashley thought that was *so cool*. She decided to hit the pause button on her movie-biz career, and she drove her Honda all the way to Little Rock, completely unannounced. She got a room at the Best Western, and asked the desk clerk, "Where's the campaign headquarters?" By chance, there was a Clinton advance team right there in the lobby.

"Are you Clinton people?" she asked. "I want to be one of you."

“Come upstairs then,” they said, and that was the beginning.

When Clinton won, she wasn't rewarded with a job, like Bart Handford. She probably should have come back to Hollywood. Instead, she was swept up in the excitement, and moved to D.C. She became a full-time but unpaid speechwriter for Al Gore. Most of the party hacks had law degrees and never practiced law. Ashley went to Georgetown at night for the respect it might bring her. She paid her dues, and eventually she was given a political appointment as speechwriter for the commissioner of Social Security. She was a Clinton official. Whenever she wanted, she'd call a friend in the White House and go over there for lunch. After sixty or seventy speeches, though, she lost her reverence for it, and according to Jefferson, that was the time to come home.

Was Hollywood ready to take her back? They said so. She took several informational interviews, and it was all, “Oh, we love you, you'll have no trouble getting work.” During the 1990s, Hollywood had a great love affair with the White House. As a Clinton official, it was easy for her to get meetings with creative executives. But as soon as she quit—as soon as she moved back to L.A., and was no longer from the White House—as soon as her callback number began 310, not 202—Hollywood stopped biting. When she actually *needed* something from them (another production assistant job), they scratched their heads. It was the very week that the Monica Lewinsky scandal broke, and everyone wanted to ask her if Bill Clinton had hit on her. There seemed to be no reverence for the commitment she'd made. *Hey, I served the country!* Nobody cared. Ashley was told she was too old for the entry-level positions, and for the positions more appropriate to her age (twenty-nine), she was “unqualified.”

—Unqualified!

—I gave five years to the country, dammit!

—Unqualified!

—I used to eat lunch in the White House!

—Too old!

—I'm twenty-nine!

—Did he hit on you?

—Hasn't anybody read Jefferson!

Now, I know plenty of people who didn't start working in Hollywood until they were thirty, so I'm not sure what can be extrapolated from Ashley's rejection. But *I have* been encouraged to lie about my age in Hollywood. I figure when you start lying about your age, there's no telling what else you might fabricate.

Maybe, if she'd hung in there and kept applying, she'd finally land another P.A. position. But Ashley was a perfectionist. Her psychology was not resilient enough to handle a long period of rejection. She stopped eating almost completely. She made me promise not to mention how much weight she lost in how short a time, because anorexics might read it and find self-destructive "inspiration" in the information. "I got to the point where I couldn't finish a long sentence, because by the end of it I couldn't remember what I was saying," she said, to give me some indication how bad off she was. She didn't have the down payment for an apartment.

A lot of it was, her whole life she had defined herself by what she did. Suddenly that equation created self-hatred. It was killing her. She had to find a new way to define herself.

"Why didn't you go for help?" I asked. "A therapist or a doctor?"

"Because I didn't think I deserved it. Film school, law school, good

family. I should be fine. I wasn't supposed to need help. I thought someone like me asking for help was selfish."

How she'd found Saint Agatha's was, she liked a television drama called *Nothing Sacred*. She read an article that the show's creator had gotten his inspiration from attending Saint Agatha's. She followed her curiosity, came to a service, and met Father Ken. "You're ours now," he told her, and sent her to a doctor.

How she found me was, some scenes for a movie were being shot near Saint Agatha's, and Ashley saw the arrow signs on the lampposts. She drove by the set, looked up the movie, and found that it was based on my second novel. Then she looked me up, and discovered the topic of my current book was the question she asked herself every morning as she drove into work. Again, curiosity. Her instincts were good.

So how *should* she define herself?

Ashley said, "I've given myself permission to have a job that sucks for a while."

"No you haven't. You're still punishing yourself for it."

"I'm trying."

"Look at all the love you have in your life!" Planet Hug was in full gear at the church picnic.

"Isn't it wonderful?" she said, cheering up.

I know Ashley wasn't satisfied with the mix in her life. I'd seen it in many other stories. She could have God in her life, and a choir, and people who needed her, but in her heart she knew that wasn't enough. For some people it may be, but if it's not, there's unfinished business. Ultimately, I hoped that my presence was itself a form of recognition and acknowledgment that might boost her esteem. I didn't spend my

Sunday with her friend who had clerked for the Supreme Court; I spent it with *her*. I couldn't rewrite her story, but I could let her know that I had respect for its latest installment. And maybe, if she got her strength up, she could figure that last piece out.

SWITCH SIDES AFTER AN INJUSTICE

Over the course of my research, I met dozens of people who were morally troubled by their work. They felt they were screwing society, not improving it. No matter how unpalatable their work became, those feelings of shame and loathing were almost never enough, by themselves, to spur them to finally take action and quit. An accumulating social cost only set the stage for the moment of drama, which came when it got personal—when it was not society being screwed, but the individual. Something personal had to be at stake. These next two stories flush this out.

Bryce needed someone to tell his story to, and he found me. He'd been through a hard year and come out the other end a new man; though the worst of it was over he was afraid of backsliding. For three months, I heard from him twice a week. Sometimes his missives had little to do with his story—he'd rant about the Dallas Mavericks, for which he held season tickets, or share an embarrassing anecdote from the previous night's blind date. When I was in Dallas we'd tear into some game meat at Matt's No Place, then cruise around in Bryce's truck on a tour of local toxic cleanup sites, using the cover of night to avoid suspicion. I think he needed me there to legitimize the choice he'd made, and to help him stick by it. When his work situation finally settled down, and he found the peace he'd always wanted, Bryce no longer needed to talk. He didn't regret talking—not at all—he wanted to preserve his privacy. He asked that I not use his real name. I didn't like it but I had no choice. "Bryce" is a pseudonym. He also asked that I not name the big oil company that used to sign his

paycheck, so I'll call them Big & Oily, or maybe just B.O.

Bryce is a throwback to the Burt Reynolds genre of masculinity. Mustache. Swept-back curls. Gleaming teeth. Mischievous eyes. In the movie version of his life, he's handsome enough to play himself. He grew up on a cotton farm in West Texas, back when his dad was paid by the federal government not to grow cotton.

Bryce is a geologist. When he called me, he'd just taken a job as the enforcer of environmental regulations for Collin County, and he was proud of it. His primary task was forcing oil companies to stop gasoline leakage from their underground storage tanks into groundwater wells. He worked in a county office alongside a food inspector, a building permit inspector, a septic system inspector, and a hazardous materials emergency response coordinator. The pay was less than half what he earned at Big & Oily, which clearly bothered him. He was wary of government bureaucracies, the turtle's pace of their work culture. I had a sense that his commitment to this job would last only as long as his need to get revenge. And Big & Oily was doing everything it could to weaken his resolve.

He whipped out his cell phone and played a message his answering machine recorded that afternoon. The call was from an old compatriot at Big & Oily: *"Hey, Bryce, what's going on, man? I'm in town and I've got the company's credit card tonight. Thought we might take you out and get you in trouble."*

"Did you call him back?" I asked.

Silence = yes.

"Are you going out with him?"

"Why do you think you're here with me?"

I could tell that Bryce liked the notion of being a Force for Good, and he loved bringing Big & Oily to its knees at the negotiating table, but he

was adjusting to the loneliness of it. He wasn't part of a tight community, and that made him vulnerable.

"Can I make an observation?" I asked.

"Sure."

"When you talk about that partying you used to do—you still honor it with a frat house relish. The more hammered you got, the more glory to the story."

"That's how everyone talks."

"Not everyone."

"Everyone in Texas."

"Sounds like you miss it."

"Naw."

"Would you go back?"

"Never."

But my concern was well founded. Over the next month, Bryce kept being enticed to return to the warm and cozy embrace of Big & Oily.

I told him to watch out. "They're trying to get you off their back in Collin County."

"Of course they are."

"What if they're lying to you? They lied to you before."

"I'd make them put it in writing."

"I can't believe you'd even consider doing business with them

again.”

“This is probably no good for the pretty picture in your book, huh?”

“No, believe me, I appreciate the realism.” I wasn’t drawn to saints. We can worship saints, but we can’t emulate them. I would rather hear how the weak of will end up doing some good. The hesitant, all-too-human.

“I’m just thinking about it,” he said. “That’s all it is. A man can’t help but think about these things.”

A week later he called to say he was going to give notice with the county unless they increased his salary. All along, he was bugging me to join him for a Mavericks playoff game. I thought it was time I went, and made plans for Game 6 at Reunion Arena. But the Mavericks were eliminated by the Spurs in Game 5. He had even less to root for now. I stayed in San Francisco, and Bryce went off to his high school reunion in West Texas.

When Bryce was at UT Austin in the early 1980s, oil was still gushing at forty dollars a barrel. He got a summer job making a hundred bucks a day as a roustabout on the drill rigs. He was told if he earned a geology degree, the money would get a lot better. They needed geologists to examine drill cuttings to determine if there was oil below. It was fun, it was outdoors, and it was good science. Plus he’d get an equity percentage in any wells that hit. He had visions of kicking back and living off the royalties. But shortly after he graduated, the price of oil crashed, hard, and didn’t bottom out until it hit nine dollars a barrel. The oil exploration industry in Texas was dead. Not kind of dead, like the computer industry, or almost dead, like the dot-com industry. There was no pretending. The laments of software engineers coming out of universities today have nothing on Bryce. In six months he was selling used cars off a lot in Lubbock, wondering, *what happened?*

Cut to: 1989. The *Exxon Valdez* spilled eleven million gallons of

heavy crude into Prince William Sound, Alaska, and in its wake a tiny new industry boomed: Environmental Consulting. Nobody trusted Big Oil to clean up its own mess. In most states, new laws forced oil companies to pay independent consulting firms to monitor their toxic land, and, when determined necessary, to oversee the cleanup. When that law was passed in Texas, Bryce was hailed off the car lot for a phone call. It was his best friend from college.

"You gotta come to Dallas, Bryce. You can get a job in a heartbeat."

"With who?"

"The oil companies are panicked about the bad press. They're throwing money around like you wouldn't believe. They need geologists to clean up their land."

"You're shitting me."

"I'm not. Get back here. *Now*."

It didn't take long for Bryce to decide. *Getting paid big bucks to clean up the environment?* How good does that sound?

Too good to be true, he discovered. The so-called independent firm he joined was nursing from Big & Oily's titty. They called it "the game," and it was played like this: The boys at Big & Oily who controlled the lucrative contracts let it be known they had a weakness for golf and strip clubs. Bryce would reserve a tee time, plunk down the course fees, load the cooler, and make sure his wallet was stuffed with cash in case the day became a long night, which it frequently did. The next day, Bryce would get a call: "We're going to throw you a few more sites, Bryce." These sites numbered in the thousands. Every underground storage tank that leaked a little gasoline or benzene had to be evaluated for whether it was contaminating groundwater aquifers. Bryce would drill a monitoring well and file reports with the local regulatory agencies, recommending that no action needed to be taken. B.O. made it absolutely clear: his job was to keep them out of

trouble. They instituted an incentive plan, where his bonus was inversely proportional to how much they spent on cleanup. The regulatory agencies in each county were undertrained and overwhelmed. They'd haul B.O. in for a meeting to review these sites. B.O. would trot out Bryce as their "independent" consultant. Bryce stalled, distracted, buried facts, argued, protested, and defended. Some of these regulators didn't mind a round of golf now and then.

Bryce became a legend around Big & Oily for his escapades on a night he doesn't even remember, but has been told it involved him spinning donuts in his 300ZX on the eighteenth fairway at Rancho Luna. The Z ended up in a reservoir drainage ditch. There was also something about Bryce in a golf cart with a Dallas Mavericks cheerleader. All Bryce remembered was waking up covered in mud and grass burrs.

"That was the night I became part of the family," he told me.

He used "family" to describe the culture around Big & Oily. Sometimes he used the phrase "country club." Or "fraternity." He always described himself as Golden Boy.

"You knew what you were doing was wrong?"

"I avoided thinking about it."

"Pretty tough to avoid, I'd think."

"The money was intoxicating. Drinking was a big part of it, too. I'm sure I was drinking to forget. Then it was the culture. They were my friends. We got a laugh out of stalling the agencies. We took pride in doing it well. I judged myself by how much money I made."

I recognized it's a lot easier to get sucked in if you grew up on a cotton farm and your last job was selling used cars.

"Did you think of leaving?" I asked.

“All the time. But to do what? My contacts and my friends were in the game.”

“Did you think you’d play the game forever?”

“I hoped not. I left one consulting firm and founded a new one with four friends. We had some hope that we might get bought out, and could quit with a decent lump sum.”

So when did his redemption come?

Did it come when he woke up in a motel room with a skull-cracking hangover, finding himself a divorced man?

It did not.

Did it come when Big & Oily began to squeeze its consultants, and the free-flowing cash began to dry up?

It did not.

Did it come when Collin County filed a multimillion-dollar lawsuit against Big & Oily over twenty-one sites Bryce had stalled on?

It did not.

Did it come when it was discovered that MTBE (a gasoline additive) escaped even newer, government-approved, “leakproof” storage tanks?

It did not.

He could always say of the family, “these are a great group of guys,” and firmly believe it. There is a bond between men, and as long as one never breaks that bond, men will ignore other sins. They had always been good to Bryce. Always paid him on time, always thanked him when he did a good job, always sent a Christmas card, always called when he was sick.

It was in the eleventh year that the family finally revealed its true character. Bryce was cut out of the game by one of his business partners, whom he calls "Person X" because merely invoking his name spins Bryce into fits of anger. They had been buddies for years. One afternoon, Bryce learned that Person X had drained their consulting firm's annual profits. The money had been paid out for suspicious expenses. Bryce drove over to his house that night and confronted him. The next morning, Big & Oily canceled its contracts with Bryce and awarded them to Person X, who had formed a new firm.

"That was a dark day," he said.

Bryce was in shock for a week. He couldn't understand why he was made an outcast—and still doesn't. At forty, he figured he was too old to find another field to work in, but that was the surface problem. That job had been the justification for his whole personality. At work he'd learned to be evasive, to employ white lies and errors of omission, and now he recognized that was how he treated everyone. Over the next ten months, he coached himself to be direct and answer questions plainly. He stopped drinking, which was the easier part for him—he didn't know where to go at night if he wasn't going to drink. So he read constantly, killing time, waiting for he didn't know what. He played pickup basketball at the gym. Lost thirty pounds. As a practical matter he sold his house and managed to get by on a lot less money, but much more disturbing was that his sense of humor was scrambled. He didn't know what was funny. Everything that used to be funny was no longer funny. Those eleven years of moral compromise ran deeper than he'd ever realized.

Big & Oily offered Bryce a small number of other sites, but he couldn't stomach working for them. He started thinking about naval base cleanup, and sat on one committee, but found the cacophony of those bureaucracies intolerable. Then a friend told him about the county oversight position.

For all those who were morally troubled by their work, it surprised

me how few ever considered simply switching sides. What better way to make use of what you've witnessed? But it's a culture shock, as Bryce found out. A chance to get even might sound like the perfect gig, but it required a whole different mindset. For instance, with this county job, what did it lead to? It wasn't what you'd call a dead-end job, but it was an end in itself. It wasn't a path to something else. Every other job Bryce had had was rimmed with possibilities of something else—sometimes the unknown, but it kept hope alive. The finality of the county job was a little suffocating. He could do this, but could he do it *forever*?

His first week, he shocked Big & Oily when he showed up wearing the county badge. He sat down across the table from their new Golden Boy and growled, "Get to know what it feels like to be a kept man. They own you now." He turned to Big & Oily and warned, "I know your every tactic. Those days are over in this county." It felt great, really great, until one of them quipped back, "What are you driving these days, Bryce?" and they laughed.

Money!

It was going to bring him down. In the root of his mind, the boys at Big & Oily were still his inner circle.

Every time they saw Bryce, they asked what he was driving, where he was living, which restaurants he'd been to, which golf courses he'd played at. Every question was a dig. Then he'd go back to his county office and sit at his desk, alone, eating his \$2.99 cellophane-wrapped turkey breast sandwich.

The hardest thing about doing the right thing for yourself is you usually have to do it alone.

Bryce was on the fence when he took off for his high school reunion in West Texas. He ran into his high school sweetheart, Charline. She looked fantastic! She was single again too. He told Charline what he was up to, and because he wanted her to think he had some money,

he added that he'd be leaving the county soon for this much better-paying job with Big & Oily. Her face soured as he described the job, and she said, "That doesn't sound like the Bryce I remember."

That stopped him cold.

When he thought back to high school, he always thought of himself as pupalike, unformed, clueless about real life. But Charline insisted not. "You were a thoughtful guy. You were conscientious. Maybe you didn't know what you wanted to be when you grew up, but you knew your *values*. You weren't a jerk like some others."

They spent much of that weekend together. They weren't trying to recapture the past, but it is likely that we fall in love with people who bring out the part of ourselves we want to see more of. In Bryce's case, he wanted to bring back the character he'd lost. The next week he called to say the county had agreed to give him a raise, and he wasn't going anywhere. He sounded a lot more upbeat. I asked him about the money, and he said, "Ahh, you spend what you earn."

A month later I heard from Bryce. He and Charline were planning their marriage. He went to a barbecue with the other inspectors, and he saw that his county job wasn't a dead end, it could lead to a state job or into research at a federal lab. He'd acclimated. Both his work life and his love life had come full circle, and that had a sweet resonance, a sense of fit, the feeling of no longer being lost, no longer chasing the wind.

THE FEAR THAT OUR CHOICES ARE IRREVERSIBLE

Here's another thought that stops people, one I hinted at in Bryce's story: there are a lot of possibilities that sound exciting—but you're not sure you'd want to do them forever. And because of their quirky nature, they're résumé killers—they slam a lot of doors shut. Sure, it'd be a fun ride, but where do you go from there?

Well, imagine you were a Harvard MBA, then an investment banker with First Boston at the vice president level. At that point, if you had the guts, you could jump to about anywhere white-collar and respectable, or you could stay put and get rich. Instead, imagine you went off and did something crazy like this:

1990–present CATFISH FARMER (Indianola, Mississippi)

Managed 8,000 acres of row crops and 1,500 water acres of catfish (5.5 million head). \$16 million annual sales. Side businesses wholly or partially owned include cotton gin, flying service for pesticide spraying, feed mill, fish processing plant, and adult extended care facility.

That's what Don Linn's résumé looks like, and that's about all I knew of his story when I went to see him. But my curiosity was raging. What would his life be like? Would the foolish originality of this path be worth its stubborn irreversibility? Was it, indeed, a one-way ticket? Could daily life in the third-poorest county in the poorest state in the union

possibly be *interesting* enough to keep his Ivy League mind engaged?

To get to Indianola, you fly to Memphis, drive down past Graceland, and keep going in that direction for half a day. Once you get to Indianola, to find Don Linn's office, take a right at the four-way stop sign and then take a left where the church used to be and it'll be a quarter mile ahead.



Where the church used to be?

How would I know where the church *used to be*? But that's the way you get directions in the mid-South. Don grew up in South Carolina and Tennessee, and then spent the go-go eighties in Dallas, but a southern accent ain't the beginning of how they talk here. You never say it rained. You might say "we got ourselves a little private rain, inch and a tenth," or, "it was a real packing rain," meaning the clay soil glued itself into a crust that the cotton sprouts have a hard time busting through, or, if the rain was heavy, you'd say "we done got thundered on." When the catfish tastes good, it's "on flavor." The foreman is called the straw boss, and if he's off drinking you're told, "he got the Jack attack." And when you go looking for him and run into one of the farmhands, the conversation might transact like this:

“How you been?”

“I been good.”

“Where you been?”

“I been around.”

“So when you figure he be around then?”

“He be here ten minutes or so.”

Eleven thousand people live here. Unemployment is 12 percent, not bad. Cash advance shops outnumber bank branches. A trenchant crack problem plagues the neighborhood on the other side of the railroad tracks. You can't get any men to work during bow hunting season. Conversations focus on hunting, football, and who's screwing who. The local weekly newspaper lists every traffic fine and charge brought by the local police. Most of the jobs listed are for drivers. A truck driver takes home \$8.50 an hour, the women at the catfish processing plant a little less, and the seining crew, which dredges the ponds, earns minimum wage. A straw boss earns anywhere from \$40,000 to \$100,000.

Don gets up at four AM every morning to read. Almost every day, a shipment arrives from [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) with more brain food. Don misses New England's intellectual culture, but he's insistent on one point, which took him a year to wake up to: “It'd be easy to mistake these people's ways for lack of intelligence, but most of them are as smart as you and me. They've never been out in the world. Some are uneducated, but they know their business better than I know mine.”

This part of the state doesn't have a long history. It was swamp and bayou until the levees were constructed along the Mississippi in the 1920s. The hardwood forests of mangrove, pecan, and walnut were cleared to get rid of mosquitoes and stop the spread of malaria. The drained land was so heavy with clay, they named it “gumbo.” It wouldn't

sheep. Only the old high spots could grow corn, so with the rest they farmed rice, but rice is prohibitively expensive. Two decades ago someone dug a five-foot pond in the gumbo and tried raising catfish. This made a certain economic sense. Catfish are nature's most efficient animal in turning feed into protein (twice as efficient as chickens, for instance). Catfish are the hogs of aquaculture—they'll eat anything. Fish pick up their flavor from their environment. Catfish acquire their legendary aroma by scarfing off the bottom, where fish rot. A decade ago, someone started feeding catfish a puffed cereal that had been aerated and thus floated. The filets from young catfish that eat off the water's surface are as flaky and light as any freshwater whitefish. It used to take three days to net a fish, truck it to the plant, get it fileted and frozen. Now it takes thirty minutes. Boom! The catfish industry exploded, and this part of the country finally had the means to sustain itself and a reason to be proud.

That's about when Don arrived. He's six feet even, thick sideswept auburn hair, too-pink skin for these parts, and has let his gut go a little. He hasn't changed much what he wears: pleated khakis, pink polo shirts, deck shoes. Don's here as a businessman. His wife talks a lot about a "sense of place," and if you enjoy being close to nature, rolling the sleeves up, there's psychic income galore. But Don isn't one of those people. He didn't come to Mississippi with the sentiment that farming was particularly noble. Back in Dallas, he didn't own a cabin out in lake country. He carries a rifle in case he encounters a water moccasin, but that's all it's used for. The adrenaline he gets, that charge that makes it all worthwhile, comes entirely from the risks and rewards of running a big complex operation.

His first day on the job, a flock of Canadian geese arrived by truck—that sounds weird, I know, but the geese had been purchased, with the intent that they'd populate the bayou that ran through their land. The geese were thrown into a cabin and had their way with the place. Don had to go in there with pruning shears and clip their wings. Quickly covered in goose shit and blood, Don was wondering what he'd got himself into.

A few nights later, the phone rang at two AM. Don couldn't sleep anyway, it was so hot.

"Get on out to the ponds," the voice said.

Don drove out to the ponds, each of which is about the size of a football field. There was a froth on the water. Something had driven those fish crazy, and a lot of them were turning belly up.

"They can't breathe," Don was told. "They're coming to the surface to get a gulp of air."

Why would fish be breathing air? It didn't make any sense. Slowly he figured it out. There's ten thousand head of fish to every acre—unbelievably thick with fish, and they're burning oxygen to digest their food. During the day, sunlight triggers photosynthesis in the algae, keeping the water oxygenated. On a hot night, with the water evaporating, the oxygen runs out. Don put a paddle wheel on the water to stir air into it, but it was too late. For the next month, Don rode around the ponds at night, monitoring the oxygen levels with a measuring device on a long pole, trying to keep his fish alive by allocating paddle wheels where the situation was desperate.

Don found that other farmers wouldn't return his phone calls. He wondered if he'd done something to insult them. Then he found out that it was insulting to use the phone. They like to chat in person, down at the café or by the side of the road.

I make it sound like his MBA ain't worth a lick here, and I don't mean to. Farming is a famously tough business. It's as risky as biotech and it pays out no better than T-bills. (That's including the aid income from the government, which is more than half of the total income on most farms.) The difference between making 2 percent profit a year and losing your shirt is in maximizing the efficiency of resources. Catfish fingerlings cost five cents per, and by the time a fish is big enough to harvest, with twelve ounces of meat on its bones, Don has spent fifty-five cents on every fish. He sells them for about seventy cents a pound.

You can't harvest the fish when it's too hot, or they won't be on flavor. If the fish get too big while you're waiting for their flavor to clean out, they become too tough.

Grow crops are even more weather-dependent. Corn goes in mid-March, then some early soybeans. Wait for another cold snap, then plant the cotton. It costs \$325 to raise and pick an acre of cotton. Most of that money used to go into pesticides. But now there's worm-resistant seed, which can get by with little pesticide—except the seed is expensive, which means Don's bet is already in the ground. If the sprouts get hailed on or can't get a stand through the crust, he loses his bet. Last summer, it was so hot that Don's plants couldn't pollinate. Back at his office, Don has computer programs generating wall charts that map out every penny spent on every acre. He spends two hours every day watching the commodities exchanges and hedging his risk by buying or selling in the futures market. In the language of an MBA, it's a classic resource optimization problem. In the language of a farmer, it's just life.

Late his first year, Don earned the respect of the other farmers in the valley. Five big farms share ownership in a catfish processing cooperative, Delta Pride. Don got a call at midnight from the co-op's bookkeeper. The bookkeeper had been ordered by two executives to make fictional entries inflating sales. On behalf of the co-op, Don went in the next morning and fired them on the spot. He discovered the co-op was in bad financial shape. None of the farms could afford to lose their investment. Don decided to step in and run it himself for a year. He nursed the business back to strength and won over the locals. He saved a couple hundred jobs.

The next year, Don learned that good people were having to leave Indianola for Jackson, where they could get care for their elderly parents. So Don created an elder-care facility, sort of like day care for parents. It was so successful he now has three centers.

Don's dedication and resourcefulness have paid off. Despite the deteriorating agricultural economy countrywide, Don's business has

grown—at rates even his business school mates would admire. Revenue has tripled and profits have quadrupled.

I rode with Don on his rounds. He's calm and thoughtful. Nothing I asked him caught him off guard or forced him to contemplate something he hasn't already considered on his own. That said, he was hungry to talk with me and to show me the good and bad of his life. He didn't leave anything out.

Most of Don's days are spent shuttling about in his Suburban, making sure everything's getting done. The rule of thumb for farming is, "go wherever you're spending or making the most money at that moment." This morning a seining crew was harvesting the catfish in pond 9. They'd stretched a huge net across the water, dragging each end with a tractor. Two men in chest waders walked along the pond bottom, one foot on the net to keep it from floating to the surface. Don doesn't have to say too much. His presence is a motivator. If his hires don't think they're being monitored, they'll slack off. That's the work culture here, so that's the essential nature of his role, and it's hard for that not to have its erosive effect—he has to be slightly watchful, just about all the time. Don didn't learn this lesson quickly, and it's not in his basic nature. On Wall Street everybody's income was tied to their performance, and that was all the motivation anyone needed. Supervision was nil. So when Don came to Mississippi, he tried to vest his employees with back-end incentives and empower them with autonomy, et cetera, but the traditional culture was too entrenched to overcome.

I asked Don why he left First Boston.

"I started out at Paine Webber," he said. "We were drilled and drilled that if we gave good advice we'd get business. Clients would come to us. And I was so successful doing that in Boston that the firm asked me to run their Dallas office. This was 1987, the height of the fever. Investment banking changed, it became predatory. Six months into it, First Boston made me an offer to move my team over to their firm. They were more prestigious, so I went ahead."

The way investment banking works, every couple years someone invents a new kind of financing deal. If it flies, and everyone makes money, they reproduce this deal on every other company they can sell it to—whether it fits them or not. In the late 1990s, this deal was the IPO. A few dynamic start-ups went public and became huge successes. So banks jumped in and took a couple hundred other start-ups public, even though few were worthy. In the mideighties, the equivalent deal was the LBO, the leveraged buyout. First Boston performed a headline-grabbing multibillion-dollar leveraged buyout for Federated Stores, and earned huge fees in the process. In the following two years, First Boston ordered all of its corporate financiers to sell lookalike deals to their clients. That's the nature of the beast. It's no different from Hollywood cranking out the *Matrix* sequels, or the record industry churning out boy bands.

I know this because at the time, I was an assistant bond salesman at First Boston; I sold the Federated Stores debt and everything else behind it.

“So you understand this then,” Don said.

“I think I was too young to understand it at the time, but since then, in seeing the pattern repeated with IPOs, I slowly realized how the business works.”

“Well, I was old enough to know I didn't want to do business that way, and I told my bosses as much. I told them I'd only generate business I was comfortable with. I became passive-aggressive, dragging my feet, not calling my clients. Then I had one particular client, and I was ordered to push an LBO on him. I knew the numbers wouldn't work—if he did the deal, he'd never be able to pay off the bonds—but we were supposed to be long gone by then. I was embarrassed to put together the proposal. That night, I thought hard about it. I knew I couldn't do it. My father was a high school principal. My role model was a professor of finance at Vanderbilt. They never compromised their ethics.”

“So what’d you do?”

“Well, around this same time, my baby boy was walking but not yet talking. He’d entered that phase when he was developing separation anxiety. Part of that is he’d cry if he was ever picked up by strangers. And you remember how it was—I was gone five or six days a week. I was flying to New York twice a week. All week I’d stare at his picture, and I loved him so much it practically made me cry with joy to think about him. He was becoming a little person. All week long I wanted nothing more than to be able to come home and hold him. Pick him up in my arms and play with him.”

“And he didn’t recognize you?”

“I was a stranger. He’d cry if his mother walked out of the room, but he’d cry if I walked *in* the room. That was when it finally hit me. No more.”

Don’s story fit the same pattern as Bryce’s—unethical business alone wasn’t enough to impel a change. It had to get personal. For Bryce, that point came when his best friend betrayed him. For me, churning billable hours didn’t get me to quit—it was realizing how much weight I’d lost. If you need to summon the will to make a change, don’t debate ethics. Get personal. If you don’t believe in the integrity of your profession, you can debate the ethics of it forever and never do anything. But if you define the personal toll it’s taking, it hits a lot closer to home.

“So did you quit?” I asked. I had memories of bankers who quit or were fired; they were ushered from the building by security guards in minutes.

“Not exactly. I came to an agreement with the firm that after the bonus cycle, I wouldn’t re-up for another round. I had about thirty days to figure out what to do next.”

“You didn’t have savings?”

“Well, I had some, but with a mortgage and two kids . . .” He wasn’t going to let himself hang out for months waiting for a vision.

“So, of all the things you could have done, how in the world did you end up a catfish farmer? Particularly if you didn’t think it was noble, and you weren’t an outdoorsman itching to get back to the land?”

“It wasn’t like I chose catfish farmer off a long list of possibilities. It was the only opportunity that presented itself.”

This farm had been passed down in his wife’s family since the Depression, but her generation had run for the cities and wanted nothing to do with farming. If they couldn’t find somebody to manage the operation, the family would have to sell the land. During this thirty-day period, Don’s father-in-law paid them a visit, described his problem, and Don—who’d never in his wildest dreams considered something like this—volunteered for the job. It wasn’t a well-analyzed decision. He saw an out. And he thought it would be good for his kids to run in trees and fields and sky.

“Weren’t you afraid?”

“I sure was.”

“Of?”

“Of how it would look. Not then, but later. I was aware it would look like a step down to my old business school classmates. Would anyone ever hire me, after I’d done this crazy thing? I didn’t think so. This would be it. The last stop. I expected to be buried in the backyard.” He meant this literally—there was a burial plot behind the house.

“Was that feeling of being able to see the rest of your life, knowing it wouldn’t change much—was that comfortable or uncomfortable?”

“Both.”

Farming may be just a business to Don, but it's had a different effect on him from investment banking, just as the catfish changed when it started feeding from cleaner water. Success here doesn't come at someone else's expense. Don isn't trying to steal another farm's business. He can't outbid them or charge more than the market will bear, and there's no chance for excessive profits. It encourages him to be steady, to take it slow, and to ride out the crises.

I took the chance to bring up the irreversibility question. Was he going to do this forever? Did he even have a choice?

He said, "Those soybeans we watched going in—those are the last soybeans we'll ever plant."

"What are you going to grow instead?"

"Nothing. We're selling the farm."

"Why? You can't make any money?"

"No, we're doing fine. We've had some tough years, but the farm's well capitalized. The family wants their money out." If his wife's older relatives died, the estate tax would be triggered, and the next generation would have to cough up far more cash than they had. "My job's up in September," he added.

This was a bit of a shock. I'd only been there two days, but I could tell I'd have memories of this place forever.

"Why don't you buy it?" I asked.

"Can't afford it."

"How long have you known?"

"Since the end of last season."

"How's it make you feel?"

“Scared of the uncertainty.”

“I bet.”

“I’ll be all right, though.”

“What are you thinking of doing?”

“Well, I would have thought that nobody in the world wants to hire a former banker turned farmer. But, as it turns out, I’ve become a bit of an expert on transgenic foodstuffs. I’ve seen firsthand the good it can do. I put us into a program for experimental farms. The summer nights here were too hot to grow corn until Monsanto invented a strain for the mid-South. Our seeds are engineered to be worm resistant. Some aren’t genetic hybrids—they have one gene scratched out. There’s a new catfish cereal that has fish meal protein mixed in, though we’ve held back on using that yet. I’ve been reading all the research as these and other products came to market. So, it’s a little premature—I haven’t been hired yet—but there’s some biotech start-ups who are interested in the diversity of my background. I’m talking to headhunters and flying out for interviews.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah.”

“Who would have thought taking such a crazy leap would turn out to be the perfect stepping-stone to get in on the next new thing?”

“Not me.”

“What part of the country?”

“Big cities. Bay Area, Boston, Maryland, Research Triangle.”

“Intellectual havens.”

“Yup. And I won’t be swatting mosquitoes in November.”

I was really heartened to know it was going to work out for Don—that this wasn’t irreversible—and we talked about it a lot. As he said, “You close one door behind you, and inevitably another opens up in front.” In these start-ups, they need a business manager who understands what farmers want and why they’re wary of newfangled products. It’s a lot easier to imagine them buying seed from Don, who’s walked in their shoes, than from some bioengineer who’s never set foot on a farm.

In fact, when we get back to the office, Don has a phoner with a headhunter. Don’s done more than read the research—he’s flown to meet with many of the researchers in person, for his own education. He visited a lab in Boston where they were splicing salmon genes into catfish DNA, with the hopes their supercatfish would get the magical ice water gene.

Don told me this upcoming passage felt different from the one he made a decade ago. He’s not trying to play it down, minimize the change it will surely bring. “*Transition*’s not the right word—it’ll require a transformation.” Last October, he went to a continuing education retreat at Harvard, taught by a sociology professor named Shoshana Zuboff. Her course was called “Odyssey,” and it was mostly attended by businesspeople looking for the next thing in life. She had Don write his autobiography, then helped him expand on it, write more and more into it, picking out themes, adding layers. She built her course around the metaphor of an oyster shell; the outside layer, the formative layer, is fragile and vulnerable, but the old layers are hard and strong. Don figures he’s got enough layers on him now to hold out no matter how hard it gets in the next year. He’s looking forward to not merely “changing hats,” but changing heads. Did you ever hear businessmen brag about all the “hats” they wore? As if wearing the hat were enough, rather than the whole uniform, or more—embodying the whole point of view.

At some point, we have to give up the habit of measuring ourselves against our peers. Don did that long ago. But to prepare for this

upcoming passage, he's been tracking down his old friends and reestablishing contact. Ironically, his life compares well. Most of Don's classmates who chose investment banking because it would be a bridge to some other yet-unknown destination never ended up crossing the bridge. They were trained to be bankers, they got good at it, they never left its domain. Most have turned out to be sad guys with gray lives, bankers at accounting firms, brokers at Schwab, earning half what they did a decade ago—the good times couldn't last forever. Don's come to think the strategy of keeping your doors open is mostly an illusion, or a trap.

A month after my visit, I called for Don to find out if his conversations with that headhunter had led to a job yet, and/or if he might be coming to San Francisco to interview.

"Oh, he's not here," Don's secretary said.

"When will he be back?"

"Well, he went out into the country to set a pile of stumps on fire."

"Mmmm. How long you figure that take?"

"Could be right quick, but if those stumps are slow to catch, he could be a while."

"Well you tell him I said hi."

"I sure will."

Don e-mailed me that night. He'd come upon the final words Raymond Carver ever wrote, which spoke to him mightily:

And did you get what

You wanted from this life even so?

I did.

That was classic Don. Ying-yanging between piles of stumps by day,
Carver's verse by night.

Temptations
vs.
Aspirations

IS TURNING DOWN THE MONEY STUPID OR BRAVE?

There's a part of my story I can't make sense of.

I loved selling bonds. I was a sales assistant, meaning I sold on behalf of my two bosses to their clients, mostly banks and savings and loans. I sat right between both of them, clearing their trades, hearing every whisper of every call, missing nothing, and handling everything they didn't have time for. Their clients learned to trust me. My math gift made it easy to find the story in a pattern of numbers, spot anomalies, and exploit them. As a budding writer, I enjoyed translating that story into words, lending it a bit of drama, making the pitch zing. It was clear to all I had a rare talent for the markets, and when I was twenty-four, after I'd been on the mortgage desk for eighteen months, the firm offered me a position as full salesman, with projected first-year commissions of \$300,000. The two guys I worked for earned two to four times this amount, so I knew it was no joke. I could reach their level within a few years. But for some reason, I turned the firm down, and walked away with nothing.

I didn't say no right away. I wasn't good at saying no to anybody's face. So I said that sounded good, can we talk about it later? And I'd go home with my stomach in knots, dreading having to make a decision. The firm kept bringing it up, and I strung them along for a couple months, until they finally realized I wasn't biting.

My ability to understand how I resisted that temptation only gets foggy over time. How could I be so stupid! It wasn't my dream, but so

what? Why not do it a couple years and sock away a nest egg? I honestly don't know. I probably had a handful of reasons at the time, but in retrospect none outweigh the reasons to have a half million dollars in my savings account. I'm too embarrassed to tell you my reasons, for it will clearly reveal I am perhaps the stupidest person of all time. Even though it worked out, and anyone would say I made the right decision, I still second-guess it.

I was drawn to the sales floor from the moment I walked the edge of its trenches. A friend had passed around my résumé, and I was called in for an interview. I didn't know what the job was. It didn't matter—I was already sold. Men and women were running around, hollering at each other, gesturing with their arms, cracking jokes. Their sleeves were rolled up and their ties loosened and they were eating at their desks or throwing phones or barking into the squawk box. They called each other by nicknames—Q, Mayo, Doll, Dan-O, Crash. I didn't know what a bond was, or the difference between a bid and an offer, but coming from that suffocating windowless room at the litigation firm, this looked like a blast. It had an egalitarian ethic; titles meant nothing and management was thin to none. The gig paid about 35K. I should have bargained for more—they probably wanted me to counter—but I would have hung out on that sales floor for less.

I thrived in that environment. It was so loose, so unpoliced, that I felt incredibly free to be myself. After a year, the firm brought in a distinguished elderly Chinese gentleman, Mr. Bob Chang, to cover the pipeline of high net worth investors moving to the states from Hong Kong. The firm warned me to rein in my eccentricity around Mr. Chang, be a little more proper. But in two weeks I had Mr. Chang standing on an imaginary pitching mound in the middle of the sales floor, throwing fastballs of wadded paper down the aisle into my catcher's glove. During peak trading hours. Nobody said a word to me about it. As long as Mr. Chang was happy, I was untouchable.

This was in San Francisco, not New York. So we had to be at the office by five AM. It was punishing to drag myself down there at that wee

hour, when the streets were empty and the sky was dark, but in some way this added to its luster—I wasn't one of the faceless drones who filled the sidewalks at 8:56 every morning, hurrying to clock in my face time. I didn't feel so anonymous, so indistinguishable, so unnoticed by the eye of history.

But after eighteen months, I was itching for a new environment. And I'm not good at not scratching my itches. That environment had taught me what it could.

Example 1: I went in there with a terrible fear of picking up the phone. I was the kind of guy who put off for a week calling the hardware store to see if they carried a certain brand of paint. Calling people for job interviews was way out of my league. But my desk at First Boston had over two hundred direct phone lines to the firm's accounts, all at a push of a button, and on an average day I would have to make (or answer) a couple hundred phone calls, to pitch a trade or quote a price or confirm a settlement. I had to make those calls or I was fired. It pushed me. I got over my fear. Gone forever.

Example 2: I learned an attitude, a cavalieriness around money—how to show no fear and keep my wits when the sums get big. From the first day, I had nearly a billion dollars a day pass through my hands. Does that sound like a lot? It sure did to me. The first time I processed a trade for \$300 million, I could barely stand, I was so afraid I'd somehow screw it up. But anybody who's worked in the debt markets knows that a \$300 million trade in overnight repos is actually meaningless slop. It's a doggie bag, scraps left over from whatever the banks didn't get properly invested that day. The commissions on it are barely enough to buy a shoe shine and a taxi ride home. A billion dollars a day is chump change, if it's only one day at a time. So it's that kind of attitude I learned—that a billion dollars can be mere chump change, nothing to get impressed about. Nobody ever taught me this directly or said it aloud—it was the flavor of the room, and like a catfish I soaked it up. I carry that attitude with me to this day. I'm so easily unimpressed by the dollar signs.

So maybe that's why I didn't stay two more years. Maybe the environment made me immune to its temptations. It vaccinated me. The firm offered me three hundred grand, and I was callous about it. *Three hundred isn't really that much money*, I would say. *It's not enough to retire on. It's enough to get habit forming. And that's a pretty expensive habit.* It was like play money. What would I possibly need that money for?

"Well, money is freedom," my dad said.

"I'm already free," I shot back.

"It's a different kind of freedom that you'll learn to appreciate later in life."

"Then I'll deal with it then."

That makes it sound like my dad was some Paternal Quote Generator, but in fact he'd recently rebuilt his life after putting his company through bankruptcy—he *knew* the feeling of independence one has when making money, and he *knew*, way too intimately, the loss of control one feels under insurmountable debt—he learned it the hard way. But I ignored that, and wrote off his words as typical Mr. Cleaver Dad stuff. I had no idea how to listen.

I couldn't take it seriously. If I was financially independent, I would never have to take work I didn't want to do. But to become financially independent, I had to take work I didn't want to do. Two years would lead to five years, and then I'd be like one of Don Linn's old friends. Why waste years trying to game the system? Why fabricate excuses for why I should stick at a job that wasn't, ultimately, the real me? There had to be a more straightforward way.

Maybe what follows is too neat of an answer, too virtuous to be real. I was obsessed with these identity questions—Who am I? Why am I here?—and I wanted to pursue this quest. But I was surrounded by men and women who showed no interest in that question. They were

trying to score big and cash out. They were a few more good years away from never having to worry about money again. I might have stayed if one of them had put his arm around my shoulder and said, "*This* is my calling. *This* is my natural environment. Let me tell you how I'm making a life out of it." If I needed role models, I'd have to look elsewhere. Oddly, they are all still in the business thirteen years later, all but two at different firms. Some are rich, some aren't, but none left the life behind. They learned that having been at one of the best firms on Wall Street is a currency, it means something, but it only means something on Wall Street. Take that title off Wall Street, and it gets devalued fast. You can't trade it into a position in other industries and make anywhere near the kind of money. Wall Street teaches that money is the only unbiased and objective measure of a person. Trading out of the business is a stupid trade that few make.

Failure's hard, but success is far more dangerous. If you're successful at the wrong thing, the mix of praise and money and opportunity can lock you in forever. It is so, so much harder to leave a good thing.

19 The Crossroads of Temptation

OVERCOMING THE STIGMA THAT THIS ISN'T IMPORTANT

How many times do you really face a choice in life? How many times will you get the benefit of arriving at a crossroads, where you don't have to fight the tug of rolling inertia, and your choice isn't going to hurt someone you love?

Not many.

Make them count. They *will* define you.

When I left First Boston, I joined my girlfriend managing and writing a subscription-only newsletter on San Francisco politics. I was earning about one thousand dollars a month. At night I took my first class in creative writing at San Francisco State, a lonely commuter school of mostly part-time students. I continued to wedge one class a week into my schedule for the next seven years. You might think that I had an obvious topic to write about, bringing to school my incredible front-row perspective on the unique macho culture of global finance. But I went five years before it even occurred to me I could use that setting in fiction.

That wasn't what *serious* fiction writers wrote about, and I wanted to impress my teachers. The writers and books they held up as role models didn't go near the workplace. Minimalism was in vogue. Nobody wanted to read about the jobs we so wanted to escape from. Writing school was a window to leave that dull numbness behind. We were encouraged to find our material in our childhood, and in our

family heritage, and in our travels abroad, and in our rocky love lives. My writing was decent, but it was severely handicapped by lack of material, because I didn't have a rocky love life and I'd never traveled anywhere. I eked out some stories that later made it into anthologies and literary journals, but the going was slow. I didn't know it was slow at the time. I thought that was the deal. Years passed.

I'd reached the upper-level MFA workshops, and I had a story due in two days. I had nothing to turn in. I didn't have anything to write about because I'd spent my entire adult life hauling my ass off to one job after another. With deadline looming, I stubbornly decided I would write about that—about hauling my ass off to work at four AM. Something magical happened. I wrote a story in about twelve hours. I didn't need sleep. And it wasn't a straightforward confessional memoir story; it incorporated for the first time the wilder writing styles I loved—magical realism, absurdism, satire. These were forms that until then I'd never been able to control. But I found my voice in a topic I finally had something to say about. When I submitted it to the workshop, I was dead certain everybody would hate it and find it inappropriate. It was everything serious writing wasn't supposed to be—funny, bloated with overwritten sentences, and set entirely on the bond sales floor. These deficiencies were pointed out to me in class, but in the hallways later, classmates admitted they liked it anyway. It was different in a good way, they said.

The next few months presented me with the biggest crossroads of my writing career. This is the pattern of my life, both professional and personal: every time I am about to follow my heart, I am offered enormous temptation. At this point, I'd been a graduate student for five years and dreamed of nothing but getting a collection of my short stories published. I'd been talking frequently to my friend's agent, and she agreed to represent me when I had enough stories together. I sent her this new story I was so proud of . . . and she never got back to me. No matter, because one of my earlier stories that had been published in a literary journal made it into the hands of an editor at a new imprint, Harper SF. He took me out for lunch at Zuni Café and intimated he

wanted to publish my stories as soon as he got his imprint's budget authorized by the parent conglomerate. With great excitement I presented this new story on top of my others . . . and two weeks later he told me he loved them all except this new one. I was confused about how to handle it. Publishers had been rejecting my stories for eight years; finally one was interested, but not in the writing I was most jazzed by.

"I'm still waiting on my budget," he said. "Hang in there. It won't be much money but we'll get it done soon."

"I'd still like to include this story," I said.

"We'll talk about it," he said, meaning *not likely*.

A couple nights later, I ran into that agent at a party. I cornered her and asked what she thought of that new story I sent her.

"I didn't get it," she said.

"You didn't receive it?"

"No, I received it, and I read it, but I didn't *get* it. I didn't understand it. I wasn't engaged."

"Really? I was so excited about it. I was thinking of making it into a novel."

Seeing I was on the verge of making a big mistake, she tried to set me right. "It was one of the least interesting stories you've sent me."

I did want to make it into a novel. I'd scratched the surface with that story and I thought I could do a lot with the premise. My plan was to work on the novel while the short stories were getting published. But nobody else liked that plan. I sent the story to two other notable writers whose advice and encouragement thus far had been invaluable to me. I hung on their every word. They saw merits in the story but didn't think I

should go in that direction.

I think back and am so grateful the promised contract for the short stories never arrived. He never resolved his budget fight and a different editor took over the imprint. I'd resisted the temptation of a \$300,000 salary, but I don't think I was strong enough to resist having those stories I'd slaved over for five years get published. The minor ensuing praise would have locked me into that track forever. My writing would have gone in a different direction (but a well-traveled one).

Everybody I respected told me to drop the novel, but I couldn't. All I had to go on was my memory of those magical twelve hours in which writing was no longer so painful, no longer so exhausting, no longer insubstantial. Would it happen again the next time I sat down to write? There was only one way to find out.

So I found a new agent, and with his encouragement I set to work on the novel. I anticipated the writing would take a couple years.

I was done in four months.

That magical thing kept happening.

My agent sent the novel to the one editor he believed would like it. He read it that night and bought it the next day. Then the Brits bought it, and the Germans, and the Japanese, and the Koreans, the Russians, the Italians, the Greeks, the Danes, Dutch, Spaniards, Portuguese, and Chinese.

The success I've enjoyed since then has never resolved this underlying shame I carry that I've been writing books about topics that serious writers don't touch. I have never quite gotten over that stigma. Most of my fan mail begins, "Dear Po, I never thought I'd want to read a book set in the business world, but I was at the bookstore and read a few pages and the next thing you know, I'm writing you."

But that's the material life dealt me, and I was never going to be

successful until I accepted it and worked with it.

Let me bring this full circle. I've found that a lot of people have the same stigma about the "What should I do with my life?" question as I had writing a novel about bond salesmen. They fear it's not a *serious* question, because it's mostly about the job, not the heart, not character, not love, not issues that matter.

But it is about those things. That's what I hope these stories reveal. "What should I do with my life?" is the modern, secular version of the great timeless questions about our identity, such as "Who am I?" and "Where do I belong?" We ask it in this new way simply because constant disruption in our society *forces* us to—every time we graduate, or get downsized, or move to a new city, we're confronted with *this version* of the question. It's a little more pragmatic than its philosophical and religious antecedents, reflecting the bottom-line reality that we can search for our identity only so long without making ends meet. Asking the question aspires to end the conflict between who you are and what you do. Answering the question is the way to protect yourself from being latched into someone you're not.

GETTING RICH CHANGES YOU

Couldn't I have published those short stories, and *then* published the novel? Couldn't I have spent two more years at First Boston, then gone to writing school?

Why not get rich, then do your dream?

When I started this book, I assumed I'd find numerous examples of that path. Surely, among all the young millionaires who left Wall Street or Silicon Valley, I'd find some who used their money to bankroll a successful run at the dream they always harbored.

But I didn't find any.

I found tons of rich guys who were now giving a lot away to charity, or who were traveling the world on a big yacht. I found plenty who only discovered their purpose *after* they made some money. Plenty who always wanted to own an island, and now they do, or who always wanted to own a plane, and now they do. But that's not what I'm talking about.

I'm talking about the garden-variety fantasy—put your dream in a lockbox, go out and make Fuck You money, then come back to the lockbox and pick up where you left off.

I met plenty who tried, but none who succeeded.

I found Wall Streeters who went off to the finest art schools, but never made a splash.

I found dot-commers who went down to Hollywood to write movies, but never met with success.

I'm sure they're out there, but compared with how prevalent the fantasy is, examples of the strategy succeeding should be easier to find. Shouldn't they? Particularly for someone like me, since I know thousands of people who got rich in those industries.

What about Mark Cuban, who made \$3 billion in the Internet, then bought the Dallas Mavericks? Well, he doesn't count. He didn't put his dream in a lockbox. He loved sports, so he built a sports radio site to listen to his beloved Chicago Cubs games, and the next thing he knew he had \$3 billion. He followed his passion, he didn't lock it away.

I've seen lots of people get rich. It takes twice as long as anyone plans for. It's more work than anyone expects. It requires more sacrifices, more changes—you don't come away from that the same person who went in. And you end up so emotionally invested in that world—and psychologically adapted to that world—that you don't *really* want to ditch it, take the money and run. In the battle to succeed, you develop a respect for its difficulty. You adopt values. And even though you might have plenty of money to pump into, say, a nightclub, you can't get pride out of owning a money-loser.

I met some rich guys who bought nightclubs. But they sold them. I know lots more guys who *invested* in nightclubs. It's just a cool thing in their portfolio.

Let me describe the kind of person I was much more likely to meet. I met people like this in droves. I didn't go looking for them—they came to me. They were twenty-eight, or thirty-five, or forty-six, or fifty-two, and they'd gotten accustomed to making “very good” bank. Filthy rich? No. But did they have enough to quit and change their life? Sure. They wanted to. Ten times a day they'd fantasize about doing it. But they

couldn't. Couldn't seem to cut off that pipeline of cash. They'd come to me because they'd heard I walked away from money. They want to know how I did that. They want the golden key to unlock their golden handcuffs. No matter how much they earned, it was never quite enough to free them. Similar to the way ethical objections rarely triggered a change by themselves, having enough money to change rarely triggered the change by itself. It had to get personal. Something else had to pull the trigger.

Going in, everyone thinks they'll be strong enough to resist the golden handcuffs and the glowing praise.

I'll do this for a few years. . . .

Wait! Wait! What about those Microsoft millionaires?

Again, I found plenty who found something worthwhile to do *after* they made their money. But when they were twenty-four, and starting at Microsoft, they didn't say to themselves, "I really want to own a stonemason company and build marquee fireplaces with rare Italian rock. But that's going to cost a lot of money, so I'd better work here for ten years." I met another who always wanted to import exotic fabrics from southern India; she put some money into that dream, and probably could have afforded to lose money on it for years, but she didn't respect it unless it existed on its own merits. She didn't want a hobby.

Toy stores, organic farms, same thing.

Okay, it happens. I know it does.

Dream. Lockbox. Fuck You money. Lockbox. Dream.

That cold, calculated formula.

Rarer than I ever imagined.

I'm not advocating giving up your day jobs to chase pipe dreams. But don't put your dreams in lockboxes, and don't invest years of your life in a day job for the wad you expect to have at the end. Believe in that myth at your own peril. This next story is a fair example of how it really happens, most of the time. Joe Olchefske didn't lock his dream away, but he compromised it until it was almost forgotten. He made some money, but never as much as he might have thought he would. Eventually, he began to ache for meaning, haunted by the ghosts of what he could have been. He found his way back slowly. Getting there required both fortuitous circumstance and healing from an enormous loss.

MOTIVATION FROM THE HEAD VS. THE HEART

The ceilings are low in Joe Olchefske's office. Sound tiles alternate with opaque fluorescent panels. The industrial-grade pebbled carpet hides a few stains. The big wood desk is standard issue, available in any supply catalog. Someone is collecting egg cartons in his lobby. When he cracks the venetian blinds, the view captures the base of the Space Needle and the wavy rainbow roof of the Experience Music Project. His office is in an old school at the base of Queen Anne Hill. The place reeks of plodding bureaucracy. The computers on desks are eyesores. Paper memos go out every morning announcing who's reserved the old classrooms as meeting rooms.

This is his habitat, and he feels lucky to be here. On the first floor, down at the end of a hallway, his photograph is the last in line of the many men who have run this place. In his picture, which doesn't do him justice, he's a prematurely balding guy with a kind of jowly, bookwormy aura. The last kid to be picked for the baseball team. Caught here in his blazer and tie, he could be an accountant, or a numbers cruncher of some sort, which he was for twelve years. In his picture, he looks forty going on sixty. But in person he lights up and radiates an unexpected warmth. He's fit and moves with grace. The more time I spent with him, the younger and younger he seemed. For the record, he's forty-two.

Joe would be the first to say that what I saw in the picture is the man he used to be, and what I saw in person is the man he's only recently become. He used to be cerebral, careful not to let his passions

interfere with his decisions. Now he sees that passions are the great organizing force of the world. As a leader, he's found that to move a mass of people, you absolutely must connect with their emotions. Only a small slice of the world can be persuaded by passionless arguments. It is Joe's job to move the people, because he was recently named superintendent of the Seattle schools.

In Seattle he is nicknamed the Accidental Superintendent, because he has no teaching experience and no government experience, and his appointment was not recommended by the search committee that scoured the country for qualified candidates. He did not spend his fortune on a campaign. He does not have a fortune. He did not have a campaign. A few years ago, he was another modest public finance investment banker who was trying not to forget that there was more to life. One night he rocked his newborn daughter, India, to sleep and tucked his tired wife, Judy, into their bed. At nine P.M. he went downstairs to their apartment tower's gym to clock a few miles on the treadmill, and in those unlikely surroundings, he bumped into the rest of his life.

When Joe was a sophomore at the University of Chicago, he thought he wasn't interested in anything, which meant he'd probably end up at law school by default, trying to maintain respectability. He went to a career counselor who gave him some good, simple advice: "Go out into the world, and watch what you naturally pay attention to. This will reveal your interests." That summer he went home to St. Paul, and he found he was really interested in the news stories about the progress of the first-term mayor, George Latimer. At the time, St. Paul's identity was still defined by an aristocratic class that descended from the railroad robber barons who made the city so glamorous in the early 1900s. The town was dying, and everyone but the aristocrats felt it. George Latimer was an unconventional politician, a short fat Lebanese man who spoke with a lisp and wanted to shake things up. He won over the populace and attracted a lot of new, young, dynamic people into government.

That's all it was to Joe. Interest. Reading. Not a big deal, no epiphany, nothing like a Call. But Joe changed his target from law school to Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. There he met Judy Bunnell, who became his wife. When they graduated in 1984, almost their entire class took high-paying jobs on Wall Street. They were abandoning their interest in government, but they didn't quite realize it at the time. They told themselves that it was for a few years, and that it was okay because they took jobs in *public* finance, which meant floating bonds for municipalities. They wouldn't work *in* government, but they'd work *with* government. And in that little semantic cheat, which seemed such a minor compromise at the time, most would never look back, would never return to the thing they really loved.



Joe and his wife interviewed on Wall Street, but they didn't think their relationship could survive the intense Manhattan work and party schedule. They took the jobs they were offered on the condition that after training, they'd move out to their branch offices in the Twin Cities. It was an exciting time. Joe's firm, Piper Jaffray, was growing so fast that in two years he made vice president. He was only twenty-eight. Joe was called into his boss's office and told, "We want you to open a Seattle office."

"I'm not sure Judy will leave her job," he said.

"That's the other thing. You two are competing against each other here. She's winning business from you, and you from her."

"So that's what this is about."

"Not at all. We want you to hire her and take her with you."

Seattle was not yet the modern Seattle of Kurt Cobain, Starbucks, Amazon, and a titanic Bill Gates. It was a frontier, ready to be shaped. The next five years were the most enjoyable of Joe's life. The office grew to nine bankers. Joe was a savvy manager. Investment bankers have big egos; they want each other's turf. Joe would tape a question of the week to his door and make it mandatory everyone participate: *Name the top three funniest movies of all time. Or, If stranded on a desert island, what three things would you bring?* He'd get twenty-seven different answers, resulting in greater familiarity and respect among colleagues. In another game, Joe made them chart on a spectrum how liberal or conservative they thought everyone else in the office was. Then they'd find out how they were viewed by others. It was often shocking. They became more sensitive to the image they projected. Then Joe had everyone write down what they imagined everyone else would be doing in five years. Again, it helped them see they were on different paths and didn't need to fight.

Joe was having such a good time that he never thought much about his interest in local politics. It was enough that he had the Port of Seattle as a client, and the port director's problems were his problems, her headaches his headaches. When she went on maternity leave, he stepped in and prevented the Port from being taken advantage of by other bankers. He thought of himself as a midwife, helping his municipal clients through the difficult labor of serving the public. He was involved, but he was always able to walk away. But by the midnineties, he had a nascent, inchoate feeling that he was treading water. He'd accomplished what he set out to accomplish.

What was next?

“Ultimately, I started to feel that I didn’t want to be a high-priced midwife. I wanted to be a mother. It was never *my* deal. It was my client’s deal. They were taking the risk. They were building hospitals and bridges and freeways, not me. I envied them for that.”

Joe wanted to be in the productive stages of his life. He felt like he’d been consuming for thirty-five years. Consuming education, consuming training, consuming know-how, learning how deals work, learning how to manage, improving himself, but for what? When was he going to take what he had consumed and produce something of his own, take the risk, contribute to the world?

Joe lived in the Pike Place Market. One night he came home and got in the elevator. On the second floor, the door opened, and in walked an older man with movie-star looks and a charismatic presence. The man paused, looked Joe in the eye, and then thrust out his hand.

“John Stanford,” he said, like that meant something.

Joe took his hand, thinking, *And who the hell is John Stanford?*

They chatted briefly on the way up to the fourth floor. Joe got enough to figure out that Stanford had recently been hired away from the Atlanta schools to run the Seattle system, whose previous superintendent had just been fired. Stanford was brand-new in town, had moved into the building, and didn’t know anyone. His job didn’t start for another month.

Joe continued to bump into Stanford at the gym late at night. The two had an affinity from the beginning. They often talked until two in the morning. Stanford was a retired army major general, and talked to Joe a lot about leadership. One night, as the two were sweating it out on side-by-side stairclimbers, Stanford said that all but one of his staff positions would be filled by staff from the previous administration. But

that one position was the CFO. Would he come help him turn this district around?

It was a complete surprise, but in a heartbeat, Joe said, "Sure."

"Even though your daughter had just been born?" I asked Joe.

"I know. That would usually not be a time to take a risk. But I didn't overthink it. It popped out, surprised even me. I hadn't been angling for a position. But as soon as he offered it, I knew I wanted it."

"Had you ever done a bond deal for the school district? Did you know much about them?"

"I would occasionally meet with other local bankers, and we'd swap horror stories. Seattle Schools was the worst client anyone could have. It would take five elections to pass one levy. The schools were in such bad shape that the public didn't want to throw good money after bad. The public didn't trust the district with a penny. There'd been a huge flight to the private schools. Every parent in Seattle was aware how bad it was."

"And that didn't stop you?"

"It was John. John made the impossible seem possible. He was really a great man."

The first month, Joe and John drove over to a community hearing in the Magnolia district, where members of the public got a chance to speak their minds. They didn't know if anyone would show up. It was in a tiny elementary school cafeteria. When they walked in, the room was packed with 250 people. All three local TV stations had cameras set up, as did CNN and *NewsHour*. Joe and John listened for two and a half hours.

Stanford captured that pent-up hope and channeled it to break the bureaucracy's stranglehold on the district. He implemented a market-

based school system, where the dollars were attached to each pupil, not to each school, and the students were free to choose their public school. As students moved around, the dollars went with them. There was so much resistance from within, but there was such a yearning in the heart of the public and on the school board to get serious about change.

The catch was, six weeks into the job, Joe discovered that the previous superintendent had pushed costs into the future, and the district was eighteen months from bankruptcy. Joe had to cut \$35 million from the \$350 million budget, even as Stanford was promising money for his new initiatives. The CFO and the superintendent became Mr. Inside/Mr. Outside, the Prophet of Doom and the Prophet of Hope. At this point, Joe's public image was that of a bloodless green eyeshade, and some of it was deserved. Joe's notion of civil service was that he, as a private-sector financier, brought his smarts and his can-do to help the public sector out. But when he put on those airs, he would insult people to the point that they would never work with him. His private-sector pedigree was meaningless to the entrenched civil workers in permanent government.

"If you act like the private sector is better, you're dead," Joe said.

Stanford stuck by him, and the two men grew close. Stanford was twenty years older. Joe's own father, a foreman at a natural gas plant, had died when Joe was twenty-three. Stanford was one of the only men Joe has ever seen as a role model. On March 30, 1998, Stanford went to the doctor for some tests, and by the next day he knew he would soon die. He had AML. Leukemia. Joe went to the Barnes & Noble in the U-Village and looked up AML in a physician's handbook. Acute myelogenous leukemia is a particularly painful type of leukemia, and less than 10 percent survive. They both felt the only chance Stanford had to survive was to not accept his death and fight, so Joe went over to the hospital all the time, and they talked about what they would accomplish together when Stanford came back to work. His first round of chemo failed. Though nobody thought it would really help,

Stanford underwent a bone marrow transplant to create a public perception that he was really fighting for his life. The whole city rooted for him.

When Stanford died in November, it was one of the great community crises in the city's history. The city memorialized him for two weeks straight. The memorial service was held at Hec Edmundson Pavilion, which was packed with ten thousand grieving people. This two-hour service was carried commercial free, during prime time, on the local television channels, and it was one of the highest-rated nights of television ever. Joe Olchefkse was the emcee of the service, and as the entire city's eyes were upon him, they did not want to hear the bloodless green eyeshade who had balanced the budget. They needed Joe to echo the sadness in their hearts. I've watched a videotape, and what I see reminds me of that moment in *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* when the Grinch hears the singing in *Who-ville* and suddenly grows a heart. Joe Olchefske cracked open, and fading into his past were the balance sheets that made order out of the unruly chaos of public service. Rising up was an understanding that the world is ruled by our hearts, that his own actions would be ruled by his own heart.

"I always believed that I would never realize the limits of my own bandwidth," Joe told me. "I didn't realize how different that is when your heart is heavy. It humbled me. That whole next year humbled me. It taxed me so much emotionally and physically until I couldn't give any more. Everywhere I went, everywhere I spoke, people needed more from me. I hit the limits of my capabilities every day. For the first time in my life, I had to admit I was powerless, but I still had to move on."

The memorial at Hec Ed was followed by a burial at Arlington National Cemetery, because Stanford was a major general. Joe had never been more moved. The uniforms. The horse-drawn casket. The head of the U.S. Army, kneeling in the mud, folding up the American flag to put in the casket. The twenty-one-gun salute. Cannons firing into the air. The army prepares for death, and so it's a really big deal to

them if you're someone's successor. They treated Joe with great respect and sat him next to Colin Powell.

But Joe's position as successor was not at all certain when he got back to Seattle. Not in the minds of the school board, and not in Joe's. A board meeting was scheduled for a month later, and he did not talk to the board during that time.

Every other crossroads in Joe's life had been a career choice. This time, it was entirely an emotional choice. Only one question mattered: How do I best deal with my grief? For ten months, every conversation with Stanford had been about the time when he'd come back to work. That was to be the payoff for the agony of watching him suffer. For the first few weeks, Joe was certain that he could not heal in the superintendent's office. He had to get past it, move on. Maybe it was time to go back to banking. He'd given his three years of service. Go back to private life. Grieve in private.

As an Irish Catholic, he'd been raised with eternal, guiding principles that floated above his everyday life. When important decisions had to be made, the question was not *What are your principles?* but *Which principles are you prepared to act on?* *Act* was the operative word. He needed not to withdraw, but to act. The best way to deal with his grief was to carry Stanford's agenda forward. Keep enacting the change Stanford started. He told the school board he was ready to ascend to the superintendency, but they were not ready for it. He even had Lasik surgery to get rid of his glasses, but they weren't impressed. Joe had never been a teacher. He did not represent the racial diversity of the district. He was a numbers nut. He was going to fire some principals and piss teachers off. A banker should not be running the schools. They wanted Stanford back. Stanford was a saint. Joe was only human. They debated for three months, until they finally gave Joe the nod.

I found Joe's transformation inspiring. That he was not a saint, that he was merely human, is what led me to him. At one point, he

wondered aloud, “Where is my generation? Why is my generation not with me?” It’s not easy to answer, but I think there’s something in whether one’s motivation comes from the mind or the heart. The latter is willing to put up with a lot of crap and discord the former will avoid. The intellectually motivated person might read Joe’s story while secretly thinking, *That would be a cool job, but how much crap does he have to put up with?* I considered writing about the bureaucrap he has to fight—I was going to take a few crapometer measurements throughout Joe’s day—but why indulge that question? The right question is not *What’s the Crap Factor?* The right question is, *How can I find something that moves my heart, so that the inevitable crap storm is bearable?*

Lately, I’ve found myself talking about what I call the Brilliant Masses. The Brilliant Masses are composed of nothing less than the many great people of our generation, the bright, the talented, the intelligent, the resourceful, and the creative—far too many of whom are operating at quarter-speed, unsure of their place in the world, contributing far too little to the productive engine of modern civilization, still feeling like observers, all feeling like they haven’t come close to living up to their potential. The Brilliant Masses are mostly intellectually motivated, so if they cross over and get involved, their commitment is conditioned on being respected, and conditioned on a minimum of unnecessary idiocy, and conditioned on winning/succeeding. They *like* being cerebral. In their tribes, it’s cool.

Being guided by the heart is almost *never* something an intellectually motivated person chooses to do. It’s something that happens to them—usually something painful. Joe chose to assist John Stanford when Joe was still intellectually inspired, but he didn’t *commit* to the district until John—and John’s death—had changed him.

So where is his generation?

Waiting for the pain that opens up its heart.

22 After a Brief Period of Experimentation

DOES LOCATION MATTER?

I start a lot of books but don't finish them, and I don't watch a ton of movies, because I don't want to water down or drown out the few that really mean a lot to me.

One of those few was a movie that came out in 1985, the year before I graduated from college—*St. Elmo's Fire*. It was an ensemble piece about seven friends and the unexpected turns their lives took in the first year after they graduated from Georgetown. Watching it, I thought, Hey, that's me up there. Along with *The Breakfast Club*, which showcased many of the same actors, it launched the Brat Pack—they were going to be *my generation's* actors. Rob Lowe played a drunk who tries and fails at about a half dozen jobs before finally going off to New York to chase his dream, playing the saxophone. Andrew McCarthy played a frustrated hack reporter who wanted to write about the meaning of life for a change—something deep. Something real.

The screenplay had been penned by Carl Kurlander, with lots of help from the director, Joel Schumacher. Carl was twenty-four at the time, and the movie was based on a short story he had written during his senior year at Duke. Carl wasn't enrolled in creative writing classes when he wrote the story—he'd been taking premed classes because all of his mom's husbands had been gastroenterologists, and he was probably looking for her approval. He was rescued from that fate when his short story fell into the hands of an English professor, and the next thing Carl knew, he had won an internship to come out to Hollywood for a year. During the filming of the movie, he went out for sushi with Andie

MacDowell, and then drove her up to Mulholland Drive in his Volkswagen Rabbit, where he parked in the dirt and showed her the view of Los Angeles at night. Carl was already sensing that Hollywood was going to betray his artistic integrity. Drunk on sake, he promised Andie that when the shooting wrapped he was moving home to Pittsburgh, where he had grown up, to write short stories about their generation, stories from the heart, something deep, something real.

Carl didn't live up to his promise.

I know this not because I am a student of the movie, but because Carl Kurlander was one of the first people who contacted me out of the blue when I spread the word I was writing this book. I didn't recognize his name and had never heard of him, but he was happy to explain it because my topic fascinated him. It had been seventeen years since he'd made that promise to Andie. Partly he was writing me out of concern that Hollywood would do to me what it did to him. He was living above Sunset Plaza in a house designed by the architect Robert Byrd, with David Schwimmer as one neighbor and Richard Simmons as the other. He drove a Land Rover with the vanity plate CKLANDER. C. K. Lander was the pen name he used for that first short story—he had created it to protect his identity and integrity. The pen name was to be a kind of temple, used only for *real* writing. What was once a temple had become a vanity plate!—what had he done? “I'd become an unlikeable narrator in my own story,” he told me with self-disgust. “I've become Holden Caulfield's older brother, the phony, who wrote one good short story and went to Hollywood and never wrote anything else worth a damn.” Carl had written a lucrative sitcom for teens, *Saved by the Bell*. He sometimes wasn't proud of this. By most people's measure, he was a success—he was well off, and he was well known in his industry. But by his own measure, Carl had turned his back on his purpose in life.

Carl reiterated to me that it was always his fantasy to move back to Pittsburgh and regain the writing voice he'd lost along the way. I treated him kindly and promised if he ever did it, I would come see him

—but I sort of blew him off, because I thought, Fat chance. Carl got the hint, and after a while our correspondence fell off. Seven months later, he copied me in on a mass e-mailing, giving his new coordinates. The area code and the address were in Pittsburgh. The guy had finally done it! And I had to go see him. I waited three months, until some of the novelty had worn off. I was dying to know what had pushed him to finally take the improbable leap. I was also wondering if he really needed to be in a different city to find his voice—why couldn't he write his stories from Beverly Hills?

I should make clear that Carl wouldn't tell his story the way I'm telling it. He can't seem to keep endless movie references out of his sentences—as if his own real life is too muddled to make sense of without allusions to popular culture. (“It's like that scene in , or, “It's the same arc that was done in .”) That's part of the bad habit he needed to shake. He also can't seem to avoid talking about a woman he long ago had an irrational crush on. She's intersected his life a few times since, but in a circumstantial way only, not in a meaningful way, and I'm not going to mention her again. Carl's been married a long time, and he has a two-year-old daughter.



Sometimes I just wanted to hug him and say, *This is your story, Carl, not the sequel to some movie, and not some girl's.*

There is a building on the campus of the University of Pittsburgh that is so tall it can be seen from almost anywhere in the city. It is called the Cathedral of Learning, and at 535 feet, it is the second-tallest educational structure in the world. It was built in 1937, contains forty floors of offices and classrooms, and is truly a *cathedral*—the ground-floor chamber vaults up in classic Gothic architecture, with a labyrinth of chapels and belfries separated by equilateral arches. If you grow up in Pittsburgh, this building becomes an indelible symbol of all things academic and pure.

Carl had come here to teach for the year. His office and his classes were in this building, and he rarely left it during the day. “To me, this building is as glamorous as a studio lot,” he said. “I wanted to bathe in something altruistic and clean, and I think it’s having the desired effect. For years I told people in Hollywood I wanted to come back here, and they always said, ‘Being in a different place isn’t going to make you any happier.’ But it *has*. I’m happy. I like the feel of the city. When it rains here, I’m even happier. Maybe it’ll wear off, but I’m reveling in the genuineness of what I feel here, and the power of my memories.”

He was realizing his real journey had just started. Would he really be able to regain his voice? What would he do when the year was out? If he moved back to Hollywood, would he ever write movies about the meaning of life? Carl was panicked and obsessed with these concerns. He looks like a blond, curly-haired version of *Seinfeld*’s George Costanza, and he talks like Woody Allen, rambling, repeating himself, zigzagging with his doubts. That’s his natural vocal style, and he wants to see himself writing in that voice again. Movies don’t get to ramble anymore. But his students love his digressions, and every hour he spends on his feet in front of his class is like an hour of voice workshop, *this is your voice* . . . He loves his creative writing class in particular, and like so many rookie teachers who aren’t yet burned out, he has an incredible gift of raw energy for the students. He’s fresh meat. They call him by his first name, and they all laugh at his jokes, and when he asked what they did over the Thanksgiving weekend, they let out with some incredibly honest and idiosyncratic stories. Real life!

Carl's loving it. Pitt is no Harvard; many of his students are the first generation in their family to go to college, which means Carl feels needed—these are students for whom he can make a difference.

That's the bright side. Undergrads. But the Cathedral of Learning has twenty floors of graduate students and professors who belong to the canon of Academia, one of the only cultures with a higher bullshit quotient than Hollywood. It turns out that since Carl went to college, academia has come up with something called the Freytag Triangle, by which all short fiction can be diagrammed and piece by piece leached of all mystery. It's very important that the Freytag Triangle be drawn on the chalkboard a few times during every class. It resembles a regular old three-sided triangle in many ways, but apparently it requires a Ph.D. to tell the difference.

One night Carl had to deliver a colloquium for the graduate students in the film studies program. On the way over, he kept wondering aloud, "What's a colloquium? How does it differ from a lecture?" To make fun of academicians' manner of over-titling, he'd billed his speech as "An Anecdotal Analysis Inside a Post-Classical, Increasingly Globalized Hollywood, 1982–2001." Nobody got the joke. He tried to conform to their conventions, following an outline and draining his analysis of any personal stories, but eventually he couldn't help it and busted out the old scrapbook for some show 'n' tell. Carl would tell a funny story, and the graduate students would nod knowingly with recognition that Carl had clearly never been to graduate school.

His speech was interesting, though. Carl's thesis was that he was able to make *St. Elmo's Fire* because he arrived in Hollywood during a brief period of experimentation. Studio executives had put out some expensive bombs, and it would be two years before the studios would figure out how to quadruple their revenue by exploiting soundtracks, video, foreign markets, and product tie-ins. Hollywood's studio system today is not broken; it books more revenue than ever, and that's the standard it measures everything by. Box office. It doesn't need writers to experiment.

“How’d I do?” Carl asked, as we were walking out. It was a load off his shoulders to have it done. Somewhere during the hour, he and I both figured out that the difference between a colloquium and a lecture is that you deliver a lecture to just students, but in a colloquium other professors show up and sit in judgment.

When we reached the car, I asked, “Aren’t you afraid you’re going to swap Hollywood’s voice for Academia’s voice? The Three-Act Structure replaced by the Freytag Triangle? Trying to impress lesbian erotic poets rather than studio executives?”

He paused, and took his response in a different direction. “See, how can you do that? Somehow you cannot idolize a place like this. How come I can’t? You’ve been here one day, and you can see into the shadows better than I do after three months.”

“I just don’t want you to lose track of why you came here.”

“God, I wish I had your sincerity. Really. You’re like Gary Cooper.”

“Don’t idolize *me* now.”

Another pause. “How do I do it?” he asked.

“Not lose track?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t live for their approval. Don’t live for anyone’s approval.”

“Everyone wants approval.”

“That’s just argumentative.”

“They do!”

“Sure they do. But you can take a break from it. Not forever, but a while.”

I told him about a recent year, in which I was trying to heal after my divorce. Remorse and guilt had nearly paralyzed me. I realized one of my problems was my parents were viewing my divorce through the lens of their own. Both thought I should handle mine the way they had handled theirs. So for a year, I insisted my parents not express any judgment—approval or disapproval. About *anything*. I wanted them to know me, not to fix me. It was exceedingly difficult to get the habit of, but I found I wanted to share with them a lot more. I shared out of desire, not responsibility. Because one of my books came out during this same year, I didn't read any of its reviews. This had nothing to do with hostility toward reviewers, and nothing to do with that book. I needed a year where I could listen to my own inner voices and rediscover who I was.

Carl found this experiment inconceivable. But he understood the concept. He said back in Hollywood he would sit by the phone, waiting for it to ring with business. If it rang a lot, it meant he was wanted and needed. If it didn't ring, he would start to feel like nobody loved him anymore.

Carl said, "The phone doesn't ring much here. But that doesn't scare me anymore."

Carl and I were uniquely uncensored with each other. His story didn't reveal itself to me like a mystery, one clue at a time. Because of his rambling style, the whole story jumped out from our first minutes together. Time was flattened; events that occurred twenty-one years ago were as immediate as his hunger for lunch today. Long sentences would connect his parent-child relationship with director Joel Schumacher to his mother's multiple absent husbands to the rarity of long-lasting marriages in Hollywood to the way he's raising his daughter today. Since I'd had a bit of a broken childhood too, he viewed me as his alter ego, and said so often. He was eager to read the stories I'd written of my childhood. "Where are the novels in which carpools appear?" he lamented. "Why is nobody writing about this stuff?" (Of course, plenty of writers *are* writing about that stuff, and so

his rant feels like a call to himself—*Why have I not been writing about that stuff?*)

We went out for some Chinese cuisine with his daughter and his wife, Natalie, who had indulged Carl's need to return to Pittsburgh with grace, but she let it be known that one year here was more than enough for her.

"Somehow, forty thousand dollars in Pittsburgh feels like four hundred thousand dollars does in Beverly Hills," Carl said, after he paid for our dinner with a twenty-dollar bill.

"Not to me it doesn't," Natalie offered. "I miss cable."

"We just have to adjust our expectations," Carl suggested.

"I know. It's good for us."

It was like he'd dragged his family camping.

Later, Carl and I went out into the neighborhood. It was quiet and dark and peaceful. The rain had stopped. A few houses had already strung Christmas lights along their windows. The feeling was timeless. It could have been any November night in the last thirty years. We were high schoolers out looking to score beer. We were grade schoolers out past our bedtime. We were parents looking for our kids. His rental house overlooked the elementary school playground where he used to get beat up by schoolyard bullies. Not far away was the apartment over a garage that he moved into with his mom and little brother after she got divorced (the first time).

"She would send me out to the bar around the corner at night to buy her a pack of smokes," he said.

We went around the corner, and there was the bar, now a storefront.

"You were?"

"Twelve . . . You?"

"Twelve."

"See! You understand."

"Tell me anyway."

"It was another time of experimentation. The institution of the nuclear family was breaking down just as the working-class economy in Pittsburgh was breaking down. People thought, 'Hey, let's get divorced.' They had no idea about the consequences, they were just trying something different. In Pittsburgh, we were like the *first*. It was scandalous, for a prominent doctor to get divorced. *Nobody* lived in an apartment."

And a few blocks later stood the house where they moved a couple years later.

"When I was fifteen, I walked home from school one day and there was a moving van in the driveway."

"You were moving again?"

"No. My *mom* told us she was running away to New York to be an actress."

"Out of the blue?"

"Yes."

"Without you?"

"She enrolled my little brother and me in Shady Side Academy, a prestigious boarding school outside of town, real old-world conservative, the place where the Heinzes and the Carnegies all sent their kids." He got distracted for a moment talking about the school. They have a three-million-dollar ice hockey rink, but no stage theater,

which tells you where their priorities were.

I'd heard about Shady Side Academy on my way in from the airport, and learned it didn't board on weekends. I asked Carl where they went on Fridays through Mondays.

"Mom had signed me up to be the baby-sitter for the kids of a wealthy Arab man in town. He looked out for us. And in the summers, he took us to Chautauqua, a couple hours away, where he owned the St. Elmo's Hotel. I worked as a bellhop. I developed the most abnormal-sized crush on a waitress. That was the basis for the short story I wrote at Duke that won me the internship in Hollywood." Again he started to ramble about his years at Duke, his Marxist phase, going to Washington to protest . . . but I kept cutting him off, because I thought this stuff about his mother running away was too important, and it explained a lot of why he could never leave Hollywood, which placated him with its artificial affection. So we went back to his office over his garage, and he dug out his boxes of photos and mementos from his years in Hollywood. Carl had spent years of his life idolizing that waitress, and it was obvious to me that this self-generated illusion came from a deep longing created by the absence of his mother.

In Hollywood, that void was filled by Joel Schumacher, who became both the mother-figure and father-figure Carl needed. "We can't be a minute late!" Joel would order him, hustling him out the door. Then in the car, Joel would offer inspiration: "Nobody writes as good as you, Carl." While writing *St. Elmo's Fire*, Carl was living in the laundry room of the Anarchists' Collective. The pledge he made to Andie MacDowell was not the only one of its kind—many times he told Joel that as soon as he'd made \$50,000, he was moving back to Pittsburgh. He told everyone who asked, and many who didn't, that he wasn't going to stay in Hollywood. When the filming of *St. Elmo's Fire* wrapped, Carl's agent brought him a project that some studio wanted him to write. It was about a man who thinks he knows what babies are thinking. Carl had no interest. He was going to write the stories of his generation!

"Tell them I'm going back to Pittsburgh," he instructed his agent.

"Well, this is how we say *no* in Hollywood," the agent explained. "We ask for *too much money*. You get the same result, but you don't insult anyone about the integrity of their project." Hollywood has developed elaborate customs by which nobody ever quite has to say *no* or *yes*. Nobody wants to offend someone who might end up winning an Oscar or running a studio. The unfortunate result is people have a terrible time being direct. When new writers arrive in Hollywood, they get the impression their career is about to really take off, because it seems that *everyone loves me!* This partly explains why box office results have become the measure of success—all other forms of praise have lost their currency. Praise is cheap and plentiful.

So Carl's agent asked for too much money, and the studio said okay, and paid him. Carl was on the hook for writing a movie about a man who could read babies' minds.

"How much was too much money?" I asked.

"A hundred thousand. That ~~was~~ a lot of money back then."

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Carl. No young writer could say no to that."

"You could."

"No way! Are you kidding? At twenty-four?"

"But you turned down a *lot* more than that."

"To be a salesman! Not to *write!*"

Hearing this from me seemed to alleviate some of his guilt.

Carl began writing the talking baby movie. He soon learned that getting hired to write a movie is still a huge leap away from that movie

getting made. It was suggested that he might improve his movie's chances if he did his "research" by hanging out with the babies of important studio executives. So C. K. Lander, great writer of his generation, became a baby-sitter again, schmoozing eight-month-olds and newborns, hoping they might put in a good word with Daddy or Mommy. All this did was humiliate Carl and destroy his self-respect; the project was shelved.

But there were other producers who wanted to hire Carl, other people eager to tell him how much they loved his work. Pittsburgh wasn't going anywhere. Hollywood creates insecurity at a slightly higher rate than it fills the void with money and love. For every movie shot, there are fifty in development that don't get made, and for every two new television shows there are seventy writer-teams getting paid to write pilots that will never make it. It's not just *possible* to make a decent living in Hollywood without ever having a movie in a theater or a TV show on the air—it's commonplace. Writers are cut off from the feedback of the audience; they rarely get exposed to what real people think of their work. Well-paid writers like Carl end up starving for recognition and have to live off the crumbs of flattery from executives, who tell them repeatedly that what gets their movie made is having stars attached to the project. So the writers are asked to rewrite their scripts with a certain famous actor in mind.

"I got really good at imitating the voices of the stars," Carl explained. "We chase success. We write in the style of last year's Oscar winner. I could write in everybody's voice but my own."

As Carl described all this, I started to understand why he had to move away from Hollywood to regain his voice. My curiosity swung to wondering how he'd ever managed to leave.

"How'd you do it, Carl?"

"I'm not sure," he said. "It still amazes me."

"What do you think was the first trigger?"

“Yahoo!”

“Yahoo!?”

“I was writing a script about Silicon Valley, *The Great Gatsby* reset in Sunnyvale, and I was allowed into Yahoo! for a couple days to research the project.”

He arrived expecting to see an incredible ostentatious display of wealth. At the time, a full three-quarters of the employees were millionaires. “But they were still working in cubicles. Even the founders! And they were so nice!” One moment that stood out: an assistant had to get lunch for David Filo and Jerry Yang. She grabbed two premade turkey sandwiches from the cafeteria and threw them on the table in the conference room. Carl couldn’t believe she hadn’t asked them what they wanted, or let them customize their orders. When Carl was her age, he had to get lunch one day for Joel Schumacher and another executive. Joel ordered gazpacho with no croutons, no sour cream, and chopped egg on the side. The other executive ordered a hamburger with grilled onions on the side. But the burger came by accident with the onions *on* the burger. The executive refused to eat it, and chewed Carl out for not checking the order to make sure it was accurate before presenting it.

“My few days at Yahoo! really put Hollywood’s absurd values in perspective,” Carl said. “I’d assumed wealth ruined *everybody*, but it wasn’t everybody. They were all millionaires, and still had their values.”

That script died a slow death like all his others, but he became hypersensitive to his life in Beverly Hills. “That’s when I realized what I’d become. Like the vanity license plate—I suddenly wanted it off my car.”

He reached into a file drawer and pulled out the culprit, CK LANDER. He said, “I used to think this was so cool. Now it embarrasses me.”

Around the time Carl first contacted me, the Writer’s Guild appeared

determined to strike. It was narrowly avoided, but in the approaching months, every writer in Hollywood was facing the possibility of not working for a while. Carl pined for Pittsburgh. As he does every year, Carl filled out the card from his old high school that requested donations. He put down his credit card number beside a donation amount and mailed it off. Right after that, he lost his credit card. So he e-mailed Shady Side to provide his new credit card number, and after a woman there dug out his card and learned he worked in Hollywood, he wrote that he always had this fantasy he would come back there and teach. She e-mailed back that one of their English teachers was going on sabbatical—they needed a teacher for the year. She also knew the head of the department at Pitt, who invited Carl to visit and meet with some of the faculty.

“When we sold the house and moved here, I thought that was it, fade out, end of story. Man overcomes temptation, moves home, roll credits. I thought we would get here, and it would all click, and the rest would be easy. I never thought through what I’d do once I finally got here. But now I’m really aware that moving was only the first step. I’m kind of embarrassed. It took me seventeen years to take the *first step*.”

“Are you going to stay?”

“I have no idea. What do you think?”

“About what?”

“About what’s going to happen to me.”

“Have you been writing?”

“I just started something.”

“A story or a script?”

“Uh, it’s a memoir.”

“Great! Good for you.”

“But it’s not *my* memoir.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you know Louie Anderson?”

“The comedian? The host of *Family Feud*?”

“Yeah, but he also wrote that book, *Dear Dad*. The publisher wants the prequel, all the rich stuff about his childhood. A lot of amazing stuff happened to him.”

“So what the hell does this have to do with you?”

“He’s a close friend, and he asked me to write the book for him.”

I suddenly understood, and I was simultaneously deeply disappointed and frustrated and sorry for Carl. “You’re writing Louie Anderson’s memoirs,” I repeated in a hushed, astonished tone.

“It won’t take me more than a few months,” he said. “Right?”

“That’s pretty optimistic. Usually you get sucked into the editing cycle and it consumes twice the time you anticipated.”

“I was afraid of that.”

“Carl, why do it at all? Why give even three months to someone else’s story when you sold your house and moved across the country to write your own story? Any other writer, I’d say sure, take the work, it’s a paycheck. But you don’t need the money. You only have a year here. It’s not why you came.”

His wife had joined us, and I got the feeling she had made the same obvious point several times.

"I couldn't turn him down," Carl said. "He needed me."

"Tell him you can't do it," I insisted. "What kind of friend asks you to write *his* book when everyone knows you need to write *your* book? If you were an alcoholic, I'd call him an enabler."

Carl admitted he'd grown scared about whether he could really write his own story, and he thought this might be a good bridge—it would be a book, not another script, and it would be about early family material, which Carl also wanted to mine in his own story. Carl kept insisting he could write the book quickly.

I said, "I don't know what to tell you, Carl. Since I write books, I find it kind of insulting that you believe you can just dash one off for a friend, not recognizing the amount of work that will be involved."

This was a hard moment, because until that time, I was implicitly giving Carl my approval. I'd flown across the country, and we were fast becoming friends, and I could see this meant a *lot* to him. None of his friends in Hollywood had come to see him, and few probably would. Suddenly I was the Voice of Disapproval. In the moment, I just wanted to brush it away and be friends again, but in the back of my mind I was trying to remember, "This is the guy who wrote *St. Elmo's Fire*! This is the guy who inspired me! Look out for him! Help him regain his courage!"

But how? I didn't want to insult him. I told him the stories of others who had put their nose right up to their destiny, only to get sidetracked by last-minute temptation, or in Carl's lexicon, the Third Act Complication. We are our own worst enemies. I grew weary quickly, and I had to call it a night. I could have taken his extra bedroom, but I went to a hotel, where I proceeded to stare at the ceiling for about three hours. Why was I so worked up about this? Why did it matter? I don't know. The stories of others had been brainwashing me, surely. I had been surrounding myself with acts of courage. Was I pushing Carl when really I needed to do something for myself? Had I betrayed my own artistic integrity? I lay there, working through the choices I'd made

the last nine years. I'd resisted a lot of offers, but not always. I still had a long way to go. I woke up in my clothes late the next morning, wondering whether I should walk over to the Cathedral of Learning for another day. My sadness was gone. Carl had mentioned several times he would have lots of time for me today, because his students would be filling out teacher evaluations and grading him. I suddenly thought, it's his Day of Judgment! And I knew what his students thought of him would matter a little too much to Carl. I called him at home, let it ring a few times, and then wavered and hung up.

A moment later my phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Po."

"I just called you."

"I know. I star-sixty-nined you."

"I just wanted to say—" What was I trying to say? "—It means so much to me how you've let me into your life, Carl. Into your classes, into your marriage, into your past, into your house. I wasn't sure if I should even say this, because I don't want you to care what I think. But I think your story will mean something to people. You have a good story. Your story—I think it's important."

"I always thought it was meaningful."

"It is, Carl, whether you write it or I. And . . ."

"And?"

Now I was rambling. "And I want you to know that what those students think of you doesn't matter, Carl. You're a good teacher, I've seen it. You keep doing what you're doing, it'll be all right."

"Oh, I don't care what those kids think."

“You don’t?”

“Naw.”

“Oh. Well, good.”

I promised to come back to Pittsburgh with my wife and son that summer. Carl promised not to spend much time on Louie Anderson’s book. And in this way, our future was again bound tight in our hopes for it. It wasn’t wise to make these promises—they would be hard to live up to—but we seemed unable not to swear to them.

COMPROMISES LEAD TO BOREDOM

John Benson decided he could compromise no longer. John had spent his life torn between engineering and film, between science and art. The tug of war was always there. He worked the last decade at Industrial Light + Magic creating special effects for films. A friend of mine who works in a different division at ILM (but who does not know John) heard he was leaving the company.

“Apparently,” my friend said, “he’s quitting and moving to Portland to start an electric car company.”

“By *himself*?”

“I guess so.”

“How does one guy start a car company?”

“Sounds crazy.”

“Why not Detroit?”

“Yeah, you’d think that was where the car industry is.”

“How old is he?”

“Never met him.”

“Is he rich?”

“Not a chance.”

John had recently turned thirty-seven. He wore a bright orange Hawaiian shirt, shorts, and sandals. He has a trim beard and is handsome and level-headed, though maybe his wife, Sally, wouldn't agree with me. When I pulled up to his adobe house in North Berkeley, the FOR SALE sign had been crossed out with a strip that announced SOLD. The movers were coming in a few hours. Tomorrow morning, John would stuff his two children in the Volvo wagon and drive up I-5 to Portland so he could start a car company. The family was making a huge sacrifice. He had no financial backers. They were moving to Portland because houses are a couple hundred thousand dollars cheaper there, and John would use the difference as start-up capital. He pulled his kids out of their schools. Let go of their nanny, who'd been with them since their older boy was born. His wife said good-bye to her friends. The house in southwest Portland they'd bought had a stand-alone garage in the backyard, and from those humble beginnings he would begin his venture.



“How do you feel today?” I asked.

“Like I'm really letting down my wife. She doesn't say so but I still feel

terrible about it. Rather than supporting the family, I'm being a drain on it. It's really hard on her."

"Is she going to have to get a new job?"

"No, her company's going to let her telecommute from Portland. Which is isolating. She won't have an office to go to. We created a really tight community here. It took five years for those bonds to develop. I'm yanking her out of that."

I wanted to ask him how one man was going to start a car company by himself on a little capital, but he made it clear: "That's the easy part. If you have a passion, then making your dream come true is so easy compared to the hard part."

"What's the hard part?"

"Leaving. Leaving friends, associates, neighbors, schoolteachers. Leaving people we love."

Was it worth it? Was it right? I asked him to explain. We sat down with some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and were about to go over the last half of his life when I noticed the surfboard hanging from the kitchen ceiling. I couldn't resist asking. He'd designed a new triple fin to improve turning control.

"Won't need that in Portland," I said.

"Don't remind me."

He'd also invented some inflatable surfboards. He was a compulsive tinkerer.

"Well, I'm not starting this car company because I want to tinker with electric engines," he said. "I would never put my family through it for just that."

The way he described it was, if you try to go any farther in life, you

keep hitting the same old issues. And you have to resolve that issue before you can grow any more. His issue was that he'd always compromised his passions—not a lot, but a shade of compromise. As a consequence, he'd always lost inspiration. He couldn't sustain his interest. And he knew why. He'd applied his passions where they would be practical and useful, rather than letting them run. As a result, he was blocked—creatively, personally, emotionally.

For example, in high school, rather than turning in a term paper, he'd turn in a term movie on eight-millimeter film. Not for film class; for every class. He studied physics and chemistry at the University of Colorado, and, of course, lost interest. He dropped out, took a year off to travel, remembered his passion, and went back to school at NYU to get a degree in film. Loved it. So did he then make films? Nope. Didn't have the courage. So he got into the *business* of film, using his science to break into special effects.

Back then, special effects were created by what is called “motion control”—shooting one frame at a time from a camera mounted on a robotic vehicle. The robot was programmed to move an intricate, precise distance between frames. John's specialty became building these robotic vehicles. Doing so ignited the tinkerer in him. It was his second great passion. That his vehicles were used by the film business was the practical part of it. Ten years ago, he won an Emmy for Titles and Graphics Design for *Pee Wee's Playhouse*. ILM recruited him, and he moved to California.

He pitched himself to ILM as a designer of electric cars. He put that on his résumé. Told everyone. But over the last ten years the special effects industry has started to call itself the “visual effects” industry, and motion control photography has been replaced by computer graphics. This trend accelerated in the last five years, and John spent almost all of his time in front of a large graphics monitor creating effects with a keyboard and mouse. John had nothing to complain about; he was well paid, worked long but sustainable hours, bought the home in North Berkeley, raised children, surfed, and had a wonderful life. But he

couldn't lie to himself—this was the practical compromise. He knew he would eventually go crazy if he kept working at something that didn't inspire him.

He wondered if this was getting across. "I don't really get off on how the effect looks in the finished film. The effects have gotten bigger and more amazing every year, and being on the cutting edge sustained me briefly. But ultimately I feel hollow achieving the effects by mere computer. It's not visceral enough, not tactile enough, too flat. Does that make sense to you at all?"

It sure did. I explained how I walked away from math and computer science for the same reason. And how I regretted never being exposed to mechanical engineering, physical tinkering. I asked him if this concept we were talking about—this need for the tactile—had a name among engineers.

"I don't know," he said.

"Then what should we name it?"

"It's not just an engineering thing."

"Absolutely not." I told him how I used to paint with watercolors, but gave it up because I felt I was painting with my fingers, delicately holding a little brush—it was elbow down and unsatisfying. I moved to oil pastels that required me to throw the paper on the ground, get on my knees, lean over it, and feverishly rub the pigment into the paper, heating it with friction until it softened, working up a sweat. When my whole body's involved, the paintings seemed to come from a different place. Even as I said this, I was thinking, *Why haven't I painted anything in five years?*

"What about writing?" he asked. "That seems finger-down. You must spend a ton of time in front of a computer."

"I do. I write in a dimly lit claustrophobic closet. But the days I'm not

writing, I get to come out and meet nice people like you. That keeps me balanced.”

We didn’t name it. As a placemaker, with a better name to come later, we suggested *tactile jones*. (There was a poster on his wall of an Indiana Jones movie he had worked on.) It’s the same quality that makes so many office workers suffocate in cubicles and fluorescent light. Got that tactile jones.

Two years ago, craving to tinker with electric vehicles, John bought a kit to convert an old Porsche 914 into a battery-powered car. He put the 914 on blocks in the parking lot at ILM and built it during a few months of lunch hours. Then he used the car for his commute, and whenever he had a chance he improved on the system. He researched battery materials and drivetrain design and electrical systems. The 914 became his development test vehicle. He found he could get away with an incredibly small engine—you are not going to believe this—only 16 horsepower! Don’t ask me to explain how a 16-horsepower engine can make a Porsche push 85 mph on the freeway and accelerate zero to 35 in less time than a regular 914. Also, don’t ask me why he can do this and never have to take the car out of second gear.

I didn’t take his word for it. We’d been sitting for some time and we both had a bad tactile jones.

“You want to go for a ride?” he offered.

The Porsche was parked on the street, plugged in by a standard lawn-tool power cord. John’s son Quinn climbed in my lap and we took off, seemingly without having to even start the car (of course not, it’s electric, but it’s hard to get used to). It’s also hard to get used to going fast when the only sound coming from the car is the tires on the road and the wind whistling through the cracks.

I was impressed but I still didn’t see how he was going to start a car company by himself. He picked up the story.

“Ever since I was a kid, I thought the age of thirty-six was going to be an incredible year. Thirty-six had this significance to me.”

“Why?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe it was tied to the millennium. Maybe it was fantasies about *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Maybe I knew that in 2001 I’d be thirty-six. But, you know, for some people it’s thirty, or forty—they have these milestones in their life and expect to have accomplished something by then. Thirty-six was my milestone year.”

So when he turned thirty-six, he asked himself if his passion for electric cars should remain only a hobby. Toyota and Honda’s new hybrid vehicles were coming on the market. California had passed laws forcing manufacturers to sell alternative vehicles. Now seemed the time to consider a career change.

He attended the Electric Vehicle Symposium in Montreal, hoping he might be offered a job. But people looked at his résumé, saw he had a degree in *film*, and laughed him off as a kook. John half-expected this. Nobody standing in a booth wants to give out jobs. They’re there hoping to drum up business. So he changed tactics and introduced himself: “I’m developing a new electric vehicle, and I’m wondering what you’ve got that could help me.” The booth staff saw dollar signs. If they got their component in his car, and he started to move units . . . you bet they wanted to help. Suddenly everybody wanted to meet him. Research engineers shared their knowledge. Kit manufacturers offered him financing deals if he used their kit.

Awesome tactic. Don’t look for a job to break in. Look like a player.

“It was liberating,” John said. “That first day, I was pretending to be a qualified engineer, when I’m really not. I was compromising my dreams again. I didn’t want a job anyway. What did I really want to do? I wanted to design my own car and market it. What better time than now, when people are suddenly interested in these vehicles? When I decided to

do that, it clicked.”

“So are you going to be building a whole car?” I asked, still wondering about how to pull it off as a one-man show.

“No. Phase one is the electric drivetrain I’ve created. I’ll be working with kit manufacturers to market my drivetrain to individual buyers of some luxury British sports cars, like the Lotus and Caterham.”

“So if I bought a Lotus, and I wanted to make it electric—”

“—you’d ship it to me, on the back of a truck, and I’d do the work and ship it back to you a month later.”

“Well, that doesn’t sound too hard.”

“I only have to trick a handful of cars a year.”

Phase two of his venture will be completely customizing Porsche auto bodies with a hybrid engine he’s now working on—not a gasoline/electric hybrid, like those on the market now, but a natural gas/electric hybrid.

“I know starting a car company sounds crazy,” John said. “But the technology is already out there. The parts are there. It’s doable. It’s not overly ambitious. Someone has to step up and put the pieces together.”

When we got back from our drive, the moving van had pulled up to the curb. The movers were sitting around, smoking.

“I gotta go,” John said.

We shook hands, and I wished him luck.

We are our own worst enemy.

I tell these stories because they’re realistic. They reveal us struggling

against our external obstacles only to find that, once those obstacles are cleared, we still have our old urges to fight. John overcame the impossibility of inventing an electric car design. He overcame not having capital to fund his business. He overcame a family hesitant to change with him. When he got to Portland, there was nothing to stop him but himself. And that's what happened. His urge to tinker got the better of him and distracted him from his dream.

The house in Portland had a mazelike floor plan. Being superhandy, John figured he could fix it. Take down the walls here, add a floor there. His father-in-law was a contractor, and his brother-in-law was an architect. The demolition began, and soon the ambition to “do it right or not at all” added bathroom remodels and a kitchen remodel to the list of projects, not to mention updating the electrical, sewer, and plumbing systems. A \$100,000 job became a \$300,000 job. The profit on their house in California poured right into the Portland house. It consumed all their funds. The money's not gone—it's in the house. It's a fantastic house. But there was no money left for building electric vehicles in the garage. Without any savings, John had to get a job. He was drawn back into the film/animation business, running the computer graphics department for Will Vinton Studios. It was creatively stimulating, but as he plainly admitted later, “The family, at the present moment, has completely failed with all the objectives of moving, with the exception of being closer to the grandparents. But I still dream.” This was hardest of all on his wife, Sally. Berkeley was her “stomping grounds,” and where her best friends were. She'd grown up in Portland; whatever indescribable, indefinable thing that made her want to move away from Portland in the first place was still there.

It hurt to learn this. It had no bearing on me, but I had grown to care for John. His story could be taken any number of ways. Several years ago, I wrote many stories of guys who built technology companies in their garages. Those Herculean stories lacked a crucial element, which is why they always seemed so artificial—the real challenge is to overcome one's own weaknesses. For me, John's story underscored a theme that had been gestating in many stories—when it comes

down to it, and all the reasons you can't accomplish your dreams have fallen away, the final stumbling block is within.

Could one argue that John didn't really want to build electric cars, which is why he'd never done it all along? Could one argue that Carl Kurlander really wanted to write in other people's voices? I'll take their word for it that their dreams are genuine. Some guys are all talk and no action, but those two men took major steps, uprooting their families.

It's a common dilemma, though. Do our actions represent our true desires, no matter how our mind or heart flip-flops? We're often confused by the evidence. We want X, but once we reach for it, our desire evaporates like a mirage. Did I want Y all along? Which piece of evidence is real, and which is a fabrication? This next story dives right into that mess.

24 The Chemical Engineer Who Lacked a Chemical

WHAT'S REAL?

When I told Julia Meriwether that I'd like to come to San Antonio, preferably on a day when her feelings would be on the surface, she suggested I hang out the weekend of her wedding to Patrick Harrigan. I knew that weekend wouldn't allow us much chance to talk in private, so we talked by phone until then. We discussed some things she hadn't really talked about with anyone, not her dad, not her best friends, not even Patrick, and so I had to be a little careful, not wanting to get her on a who-am-I? jag before the big day. But her mind was dwelling on that question already, and she appreciated having someone to talk to about it. She was going to be starting her life over, in a way. Patrick was a protocol officer in the air force, and he was being restationed to Robins Air Force Base in Georgia. They were moving after the honeymoon.

So when I showed up for the weekend's festivities, I was in the unusual position of having spent less time with her than anyone else in attendance, but knowing more of her real story than some of her oldest friends.

Her oldest friends were the nine other geeks from the honors science classes at MacArthur High School, class of 1985. Four women and five men. Though graduate schools and careers had dispersed them over the country, they were still a tight group, stayed in touch regularly, and used each other's weddings as an excuse to see each other. I found them remarkably refreshing. Not one was a computer geek; they had gone into hard sciences, from genetic

engineering to astrophysics. They were the type who laugh too easily, and too hard, at the slightest bit of physical humor. They were also the kind of people who might walk up at a wedding reception and say, without provocation, "I was thinking more about how on the moon there can be places which get constant sunlight within a few kilometers of places in constant darkness near absolute zero. . . ."

Julia had been the only one in the group to leave scientific research. She earned her BS in chemical engineering, then joined Du Pont's prestigious Field Program. She studied superconductivity for two years and synthetic plastics for another two. Du Pont bent over backward to make her happy, but Julia grew depressed, sank into a scary black mood, and finally quit. Engineering wasn't for her. She came back to San Antonio, and to avoid becoming a waitress, she started substitute teaching sixth-grade science. She was offered a permanent job, took it, and spent seven happy years at Alamo Heights Junior High.

None of her family or friends thought there was much more to it than that—almost everyone in Julia's large family was a late bloomer. Her parents encouraged their children to travel. One of her sisters had taken a year off school to pack salmon in Alaska. Her older sister followed her father into family medicine, but not until she was in her thirties. Her five siblings had waited until their thirties to get married and have children. So Julia's story fit the pattern. *Of course* Julia would toy around in engineering before finding happiness as a teacher right here in San Antonio. *Of course* she wouldn't get married until she was thirty-three. All the Meriwethers were like that.

San Antonio is the seventh-largest city in the United States, but it is not a highly competitive urban metropolis with a wealthy upper class whose sons and daughters go off to the Ivy League expecting to run the world in ten years. The wealthy in San Antonio wouldn't be wealthy in many other cities. Nothing is made here that's sold elsewhere, except for Pace salsa. But nothing like airplanes, computers, medicine, or movies. Its local industries are tourism and military

bases. A third of the population seems to be military retirees who have fond memories of green hills and sunshine from when they were stationed here. They reenter the workforce in their mid-forties and depress the overall wages because they're willing to work for little, since they already receive a full-pay military pension. You can't earn a lot here unless you're a developer, and even that line doesn't generate a fat margin. Modest houses in the best neighborhoods of Alamo Heights and Terrell Hills sell for as low as \$140,000. All of this means that San Antonio is a little bit sleepy, and its best and brightest don't think outside of Texas. They graduate from public high schools and enroll at UT, Rice, A&M, Baylor, et cetera. By the time they're thirty, on average they're less likely to be riddled with angst over whether they've lived up to their potential. But by the time they were thirty-three, as Julia and her friends were, they'd discovered they're as smart as anyone else out there, and they were feeling a latent urge to aim higher, and to expect more from themselves.



So on Friday night, as her friends caught up with each other, it seemed everybody was facing a decision about whether to make some personal sacrifices in order to fulfill these growing ambitions. The astrophysicist had to decide by Monday whether to leave his tenured position at the University of Oklahoma, where he ran the national weather forecast system, for a private-sector job in Colorado

that would allow him to study advanced space travel, which was always his dream. "Meteorology is interesting, but space travel is cool," he said. Two other guys chipped in with their opinion. One had designed the space shuttle's global positioning satellite system at NASA. (He invited me to come see him at NASA Goddard when I was in D.C., and I took him up on that two months later.) The other worked for Jet Propulsion Laboratory, and he'd driven up from Houston, having spent the last twenty-four hours fixing the computer systems on the international space station *Alpha's* fifty-eight-foot robot arm. I had no doubt that on Monday the meteorologist would be headed to Colorado.

They wondered aloud why they hadn't been raised to aspire to more. They knew they were smart—they'd been National Merit Scholars. But only one had even applied to a college outside Texas. I blamed it on rampant Texas boasting. Texans are raised to believe everything in Texas is bigger and better than its equivalent outside the state. Harvard is the Rice of the north. Austin's music scene is better than Nashville's. Dallas's gay community is better than San Francisco's. San Antonio's Sea World is the best Sea World. The Silicon Hills is a better place to do business than Silicon Valley. Bigger and better. That's all you ever hear in Texas, and though it's always expressed slightly in jest, I can imagine if I were eighteen I'd think it was taboo to be curious about the rest of the world.

The wedding was at a local Presbyterian church. I went looking for a toilet and ended up accidentally in Julia's dressing room, where I shouldn't have been. She wasn't a bit nervous. Julia looks a lot like her mother, who is from Hong Kong and part Asian. Julia also has lots of freckles. She wore a traditional white gown, snug on top, billowing at the legs, decked with little white flower petals of satin, and a long veil flipped back behind her pinned dark hair.

Patrick's uncle is a pastor and performed the service; his father was best man. The reception was at Julia's parents' house in Alamo Heights. It was a sweet and unembarrassing wedding by Texas standards. Julia was completely herself, holding court, laughing, happy

and in love, untouched by the usual stress over whether the event would come off, whether family would get along, and whether someone's ex-husband would get drunk and end up in the pool. The band didn't have to stoop to playing "YMCA" and "Celebrate" to get people dancing. The caterers didn't run out of sushi before everyone had their turn at the buffet. None of this is really relevant to Julia's story, but I describe it to make clear that her confusion about the rest of her life didn't bleed over into her love life. In that she felt secure.

Julia's doubts about who she was were triggered last Thanksgiving, when her medical insurer notified her they would no longer cover her antidepressant, and she had to switch over to one they would. This required her to taper off her old antidepressant, and for the first time in a long time her blood system was free of meds. Julia always believed that her real self was her medicated self; the antidepressants simply made her feel normal. She never noticed any side effects. She told herself, *I just have a medical condition.*

Sure enough, in those two weeks after Thanksgiving, before the new meds kicked in, Julia felt that old urge to tear her life apart, to make a change. She wanted to quit teaching. She became recalcitrant and snippy and withdrawn. But she told herself, "This depression is not because my brain lacks a chemical. I have good reason to be unhappy." The principal of her school was an asshole; four of the nine science teachers had resigned because of run-ins with this principal. Julia had had run-ins too, but the medication had suppressed her desire to fight back. The medication had a scary side effect after all—it turned off the instinct to protect herself. Riding a surge of willpower to reclaim herself, and afraid that the new drugs would restore her complacency, she quit her teaching position midsemester, with no notice, leaving the school in the lurch; her students had to finish the term with substitutes. She told her friends that she'd burned out on teaching and wanted to take it easy before the wedding; few knew she'd ever been on medication, let alone that she'd recently gone off it.

Julia started to seriously question the accepted version of her adult

life. Were these past seven years of steady happiness real? She was certain the last year and a half had been a fraud, ever since this principal took over her school. But what about the five years before that? She couldn't trust her feelings so she wrote down the facts. The facts were:

- She never *wanted* to become a teacher.
- Even after her first year as a substitute, she didn't apply for a teaching post—the district recruited her.
- She took the job because the school was only a mile from her parents' house, where she was living. It was convenient and offered summers off.
- At the time, she *wanted* to go to a Native American reservation in South Dakota and help out anyway she could, even if it was to drive a school bus.

It really bugged her that she hadn't gone to that reservation seven years ago. Whatever happened to that idealistic streak? Her engineering classes were mostly in environmental courses. Her minor had been Latin American politics. When interviewing for jobs her senior year, she always asked her potential future employer if their company did business with the Pinochet regime in Chile, and if they didn't know the answer or said yes, she refused to consider an offer from them. What had happened to *that* Julia? Had she grown into a realist, as most people do as they get older, or had the drugs turned her idealism off? She simply didn't know.

Thankfully she wasn't on the right drugs while she was at Du Pont, or she might still be trapped there. Boy, those days were awful. Julia blamed them for triggering her first real severe depression.

It hadn't started out bad. Du Pont's Field Program groomed engineers to become managers. Every year, 120 chem E's are chosen from thousands of applicants. They congregate for an annual management camp, are given lots of special training, and have their

own yearbook with everyone's photo inside. The program allowed Julia to rotate every couple years through Du Pont's diverse divisions until she found one worth choosing as her permanent specialty. It's a remarkably enlightened program, because it doesn't force its engineers to choose before they're ready to.

After her first two years in superconductivity research, Julia considered quitting. Du Pont convinced her to try something else. She warned them she wouldn't work on weapons or environmental poisons, so they suggested a plastics and rubber division in Beaumont, Texas, which would be close to home.

Beaumont turned out to be a hellhole. She was fine for three months, high off that first hit of newness, and then her Quarter System Alarm Clock went off. The only thing that smells worse than a fish processing plant is a paper pulp mill. And the only thing that smells worse than a paper mill is burning plastic. Julia was surrounded by all three in Beaumont. If the wind blew from the south, the rotting fish got her. If it came from the north, the paper mill stink soaked into her clothes. If the wind was still, she worked in a cloud of burning plastic.

The plant was a maze the size of several shopping malls. Outdoor walkways on three levels ran between the buildings. Julia got lost repeatedly. She rode a bicycle around the plant and whenever something broke, she went to interview the line workers to learn why it might have broken.

After nine months Julia was assigned to a team creating the roofing material for the Alamodome. To manufacture this stuff required a great deal of chlorine gas, and Julia was made responsible for the process hazard review on the chlorine gas. She thought this was irresponsible. She didn't have enough experience to do it. She was freaked out that she might gas the town and kill hundreds. She felt as if she were impersonating an engineer, and lacked confidence in her abilities. She recognized she was unhappy, but the only thing she could control was her job, so she assumed she had to leave engineering. She started to break out in tears at work. A friend of hers would poke her head into

the hallway, glance left and right, and when the coast was clear rush Julia out to her car and send her home.

Julia went on medication, but it wasn't making any difference. She started to have daydreams of committing suicide. On her drives home she'd have the urge to plough her car into a cement freeway pylon. *If I turn right now.* . . Instead she finally turned herself in. This wasn't right. She resigned and went home to San Antonio to live with her parents.

The crazy thing was, when she left Du Pont her department threw her a going-away party, and everyone was really happy for her. "I envy you," they said. "I wish I could just quit." "Congratulations." It was the first time Julia realized they weren't happy either, and were only doing it to make their mortgages.

So now, seven years later, Julia doesn't know if what made her so unhappy was engineering, Beaumont, or her condition. There's plenty of evidence to blame her condition, and plenty of evidence to blame Beaumont, but almost no evidence to blame engineering.

"I wonder if I threw the baby out with the bathwater," she said.

Only recently she remembered that when she left Beaumont and sought medical help in San Antonio, she was given different medication. So maybe Beaumont wasn't really as bad as she remembered—maybe she was on the wrong medication. Julia Meriwether is the chemical engineer who left engineering because her brain lacked the right chemical.

"I always loved engineering," she said. "You've met my friends. I was one of them."

She's also learned, from a seminar at UT, that feeling like an unqualified imposter at work is common. So common that it has a name: Imposter syndrome. It's particularly common among women thrust into lots of responsibility in a male-dominated work culture, where the men make it taboo to ask questions because they don't

want to appear uninformed or unintelligent. In other words, Julia learned that feeling like an imposter *wasn't* a sign that she didn't belong there. It was a sign that she had to ask more questions.

Most of all, she feels in retrospect that she *fled* engineering, more out of fear than out of wisdom.

"Did I leave it behind because I was so afraid of my depression?" she asked.

So Julia is left with these shards of memories and impressions, while trying, like her friends, not to sell her potential short. She knows that her happiness or unhappiness isn't dependent on her job. But her job is the one thing she can change.

Looming on her horizon is the fact that she wants to have kids, but she's not supposed to be pregnant on these meds. What will she do? She doesn't know. Will she be happy when her baby is born, or will she be depressed?

At her wedding, I got only a brief moment alone with her. I asked her what she was thinking of doing when she and Patrick moved to Georgia. Was she going to have kids right away? Was she going back to work? She'd decided she needed to figure this out, even if it meant backtracking seven years. She was applying for engineering jobs on the base. She'd sent in her résumé for a position overseeing an electroplating operation and managing hazardous waste byproducts. She might like it, or she might hate it, but she needed to find out for her own peace of mind. I thought this was brave.

"I need to know what's real," she said.

We kissed and hugged good-bye. I felt like I had to ask her why I was privy to her story. Why had she told me what she hadn't told her oldest friends?

"Because you're the only one who really asked," she said.

Considering all she felt had happened, she was surprised those who loved her most hadn't pried into her moods or made her justify her decision to abandon engineering. They'd always given her carte-blanche support—"whatever you need is fine, no matter whatever it is you need"—but consequently left her in a vacuum to figure this out by herself. Time and again, she was told by her family, "Let me know when you make a decision." Now she wishes they'd intervened, and made her explain why she left engineering wholesale.

I heard this echoed more than I ever expected by the people I met while writing this book. The stereotype is that domineering parents push their kids to succeed, killing their children's love for whatever they're studying. But the opposite was far more common—young people who were given too much leeway by parents afraid of being overbearing, when their children really needed help in identifying what was important to them. It's difficult terrain, no doubt. If Julia had come to me, in the middle of her Beaumont depression, I would have been willing to butt in, but I would have given her bad advice. I would have told her to quit and find something else entirely. I would have suspected she went into engineering only because all her best friends did it.

I'm not sure there are right answers, which means we have to let it be okay that we make what appear, in hindsight, to have been mistakes. We shouldn't beat ourselves up about it. As I told Carl Kurlander, very few people get it right without missteps. It's normal to have gotten off track for long periods.

It took a few months, but Julia found work at Robins Air Force Base as an industrial engineer.

Destination
vs.
Journey?

THREE LESSONS FROM ONE WHO'S STAYED PUT

The aerospace engineer who invited me to NASA Goddard was Russell Carpenter, and he was an amazing oddity in today's times. I decided to spend the day with him several months later not only to goof around in the flight dynamics center, but because Russell had confessed an astonishing fact that I needed to understand. When he told it to me, I didn't realize right away how extraordinary it was, but as I heard hundreds and hundreds of people's stories, it stood out.

Get this: Russell Carpenter, thirty-five, has had only one employer his entire adult life.

Having a single employer was commonplace in our parents' generation, even as the social contract was torn up in the 1970s. So we don't think of it as a weird thing. But consider it for a moment—how many thirty-five-year-olds do you know who've had only one employer? It's rare. I could count the ones I know personally on a single hand—they went to work for Microsoft during college, and have had yet-to-vest stock options chaining them to the company whenever temptation lurked. But Russell is a GS-14, stuck to government pay scales—the money is *okay*, but never the reason to stay. He's watched fellow engineers peel away to join dot-coms and the human genome project, but the glitz and moola have never rocked his conviction that NASA is his place. Lately, private space exploration has garnered the buzz, but Russell's had no trouble staying put. So without money to keep him, and without sizzle to keep him, why has he stayed?

What might we learn from a guy who has never compromised—from a guy whose work doesn't shoot for the moon, but shoots way past the moon?

Russell works in a NASA division called Spacecraft GNC: Guidance, Navigation, and Control. Or, in NASA slang—

“Where am I?”

“Where do I want to go?”

and “How will I get there?”

—which is a nice metaphor for the purposeful manner in which Russell has boldly navigated life. He did not drift aimlessly in space, was not tugged off track by the gravitational pull of other worlds.

“Where am I?” *I'm a kid in junior high, watching Cosmos and Carl Sagan, thinking it's the coolest thing I've ever seen.*

“Where do I want to go?” *I want to go work for NASA on space exploration.*

“How will I get there?” *Well, I'm not astronaut material, so I'll be an engineer.*

UT Austin has a program with NASA that's similar to ROTC. NASA pays your tuition if you work your summers and two years after school. Russell took advantage of this, and when he was done they offered to send him back to UT for his Ph.D. Until 1998, he was at Johnson Space Center working on the space shuttle. At that point he moved to Goddard, outside the beltway of Washington, D.C., in order to work on satellites. The space shuttle was an incredible team environment, and he got to work directly with the astronauts, but the cutting edge in GNC has moved to satellites. NASA builds a shuttle every five years or so, while Goddard builds a couple satellites every couple years. In order to implement the newest rage in guidance systems, Russell jumped to

satellites.

This newest rage is not like the rages that swept through the high-tech sector the last few years. Engineers don't hype it, and it's still several years away from implementation. The halls and offices at NASA are quiet. They're content with slowly pushing toward a solution. Which I took as Extractable Lesson #1: Time Frame. In most companies, goals and objectives are set quarterly. These goals are highly measurable, and tied to compensation, but they're awfully short-term. Is it any wonder people jump from job to job in such a culture? Can anything really great be accomplished in ninety days? Russell watched so many Internet engineers compromise their science in order to patch something together for a quarterly milestone. "I never thought what they were doing was cool. It was so clear they were creating problems for themselves down the road. We would never do it that way." The opposite of the corporate culture is the government culture, which slugs away at problems that seem intractable. People have a natural tendency not to work on problems where they can't make a difference. As a result, bureaucracies form and become bogged down with fatigue. At NASA, Russell has found an intermediate time frame, where he can accomplish the high-minded objectives GNC is charged with, but not today, and not tomorrow, and not ninety days from now.

The objective NASA was charged with was to measure some things in space that would require a telescope aperture a mile wide. Well, you might be able to build a mile-wide mirror, but you couldn't get it into space. The Hubble telescope was the biggest telescope NASA could build and get into orbit. So someone thought of creating a flying network of semiautonomous drone satellites, like a swarm of flies, that would fly up to a mile apart, each taking readings. This created a huge challenge for GNC, because now each drone satellite needs its own guidance system, and it's infinitely more complicated because they have to know where the other drones are too. Not just to fly in formation, but to take accurate measurements. Global positioning is easy if you're on Earth, but it's a lot trickier when Earth is two years

away. What are your zero coordinates? Where's the center?

This is the problem Russell works on. He was test-driving some software he'd written. He'd hypnotized two computers into thinking they were up in space, and he instructed them to measure the thickness of Iceland's ice cap with laser altimeters. Depending on their fictional positions in space, their readings would vary, and Russell had a way to combine them accurately. Don't ask me.

"But basically, the end product of what we do is black boxes," Russell explained. "We build a small piece of computer hardware and software that gets riveted onto the satellite."

He escorted me into the enormous bays where a satellite was being built. One of these black boxes was being installed onto the frame that very minute. Then we went into his computer lab, where he assembles and tests the black boxes. This is unlike any computer lab I'd seen. Their black boxes must work under incredible heat, radiation, cold, g-forces, electric pulse, and vibration. They had everything but the Samsonite gorilla to beat up their components. They had a kiln to cook the chips in, a radiation oven of some sort, a centrifugal whirly spinner, a superfreezer, a vacuum to re-create zero gravity, a blowtorch to toast hard drives like marshmallows. Every black box that emerges from this testing can take a beating. Aerospace engineers are obsessed with redundancy and backup systems. They know that metals give, that gears slip, that motors overheat, and they plan for this in their designs. Not everything has to go right for it to work.

This obsession shows up in every aspect of their lives. Later, Russell gave me driving instructions to his condo about six different ways. There was the left-left-right variety, but also the miles and minutes per-mutations, in case I preferred to measure distance either way, and the signpost/monument version, and then, in case I missed any of these turns, he had various contingency directions to either get back on track or take a different route, when that was locally optimal. This is how NASA engineers are trained to think. Which I took as Extractable Lesson #2: Russell hasn't let minor setbacks get in his

way. His backup plans do not lead to different destinations, such as “If I don’t get into business school, I’ll be a schoolteacher.” His backup plans lead to the same destination, and if you have to arrive late by the back road, that’s fine. Not everything has to go right. His hopes are not pinned to a single turning point.

You want to put a mile-wide mirror into orbit?

It *is* possible.

Russell made it clear he was no genius. He introduced me to a genius inventor he works with, but Russell’s your ordinary aerospace Ph.D. His method is his secret, but it’s no secret.

I drove to his house because I wanted to attend that night’s Bowie Baysox game with him. The Baysox are a AA minor league baseball team, and their stadium is in the woods behind Russell’s condo. Russell goes often. The tickets are cheap, every seat is close to the field, and the beers are good. They draw about nine thousand fans a game. It was a great summer night, and the Baysox won in the bottom of the ninth when a little-used catcher hit a grand slam. The game had looked as if it were over ten minutes earlier, with the Baysox down three runs with two outs. I suggested we skip out and not get stuck in the parking lot, but Russell wanted to watch to the end. Which I took as Extractable Lesson #3: Russell leads a balanced life. He does not let himself get burned out. He is not in a rush. He takes advantage of his after-hours. He had bought a town house in Alexandria, Virginia, with his girlfriend, and was going to move in as soon as it was completed. If he reads something stupid in the newspaper, he has the time to write a letter to the editor. NASA sponsors a variety of clubs and gives each club a trailer on the back grounds. Russell was a member of the flying club, and with about fourteen other guys bought a Cessna 172, which they kept at a small private airport ten minutes down the road. Most of the other guys have families and a little less time, so Russell has use of the plane whenever he wants. On weekends, Russell often flies up to Teterborough or down to the Outer Banks, in North Carolina. He has a

good life. But he's very humble about it. He wasn't selling me on anything. He didn't take me to the Baysox to show me how great his life was—he wanted to see the game.

“Do you realize that having had only one employer makes you pretty uncommon?” I asked.

“I never really thought about it,” he said. “I guess you're right. It's not a point of pride with me. I always wanted to work on cool things. But not what the media thinks is cool—what I think is cool. If something else really cool came along, and it meant leaving NASA, I wouldn't have trouble doing it.”

“But you're not a cool chaser, Russell. I've met a million cool chasers. Cool is usually a thing of the moment. The way you think, it's different. It is.”

“I suppose you're right.”

I told him I had to get back to Washington.

“Do you want to go out the front way or back way?”

“I think I'll go out the way I came in.”

“The back way is quicker.”

“Okay.”

“Now if you miss it . . .”

Let's jump from someone who's had only one employer to the opposite phenomenon, far more common—some people who've had a *lot*. By “a lot” I mean more than a few, and spread across many industries. Some readers might think, “Oh, that's *me*. I change a lot.” So here are three stories of professional women who might, at first, seem very alike. They're all very educated, similar in age, and highly functional. They've changed careers many times.

What I found though, is that “People Who Change a Lot” is not really a definitive category. Each of these women had different attitudes toward this change. Their underlying psychologies were revealed when risks didn’t pay off, and they suffered layoffs, and failures, and the deaths of friends. They battled to understand their individual nature, and each came to terms with this change in a different way.

Heidi Olson has the job she was always meant to do, and she feels one of the reasons she’s alive today is to do this job—yet she also entirely expects she will get bored in a year or two and move on, destiny be damned.

Many people who change a lot have never had a consuming passion, but that doesn’t describe Leela de Souza. Before she started rotating through superstatus résumé builders, Leela had an incredible passion that consumed a dozen years of her life, and the former is related to the latter.

Diane Kort tried to embrace change, too, until she sensed her urge to change came from her tumultuous childhood. Rather than accept this as who she is, she’s challenging herself to look for ways to improve her situation rather than chuck it.

CHANGE, FOR SOME, KEEPS THEM ALIVE

Heidi Olson's job, currently, is to rebuild the Cantor Fitzgerald brokerage firm after it lost seven hundred employees in the World Trade Center attacks. I spent some time with her on the twenty-ninth floor of a Park Avenue building, where she had leased temporary headquarters until a new one is built in Shrewsbury, New Jersey. I watched seventy-two traders bark orders and bicker over which one of them had just bought a certain stock. Heidi said it is not a sad place to work, that now and then a wave of grief clobbers someone and they need a hug. There is also a steady sense of fulfillment, to be here, and to be around so much emotion. A window-washer was on a scaffold outside, cleaning the glass. As he was lowering himself, his scaffold rubbed against the glass, a weird scratching sound and vibration from an unexpected place, and Heidi flinched, hard, looking over her shoulder as her heart raced.

Until this chance, she thought of her career as a cliché. Every newsworthy trend, she'd been a part of. She's what I would have called a Boom Wrangler. The Summer of Leveraged Buyouts. Art in the eighties. The tech gold rush and the IPO rage. She was there. Now she's part of the most newsworthy event of this young century, and her past is no longer a cliché. It was, she now sees, training for *this* moment, this incredible and unforeseeable crisis. The ultimate rebuild.

"It seems this was my destiny, to be available when the call came. I'm the perfect person for this. Everything else I've done prepared me for this job."

The thing about Heidi, though, is that she's never been looking for a destiny. She's never asked the universe to send her one. She was content to chase the heat and excitement of whatever her generation found hot and exciting. She fully expected that every half-decade or so, she would grow bored and need to find something new to challenge her. Being a Boom Wrangler's fine with her.

So Heidi's retelling of her story, in light of the tragedy, only goes so far. She's not suddenly a "destiny" person. She fully expects that the intense phase of this job will be over in a year, and it will mature into a fairly normal blah-job, which she will eventually leave. She does not believe that the emotional enormity of what's going on here will change her basic pattern. This surprised me. I thought, maybe an event like this can be so intense with pain and significance that it becomes a thing one would never leave. It would be too important to one's psyche to simply flip for, say, a flashier challenge that had no psychological import. Coming to work was never a more conscious decision than in the days after September 11, 2001. Just getting in that elevator and sitting down at one's desk was deeply meaningful. It symbolized moving on with life, or showing strength, or it was a humiliation (if it was the last place one wanted to be) that ignited the will to make some changes.

Heidi did not just ride the elevator and sit down at her desk. For the firm that was most devastated by the attacks, she had to find a new building, and make sure the elevators were working, and bring in new desks for the traders to sit at. And phone lines, and computers, and market data . . . they needed grief counseling, and funeral planning, and increased security . . . an endless list. Three hundred employees of Cantor Fitzgerald did not die in the attacks, and an amazing 289 of them decided that the best way to deal with their grief was to come back to work for the firm. For Heidi, wouldn't this add up to something that would last forever? Wouldn't those who came back to work be so bonded together as the Cantor "family" that walking away would no longer be possible?

Heidi says no.

I find Heidi's story fascinating. It's rare to find a Boom Wrangler whose philosophy has been truly challenged. Boom Wranglers usually avoid the kinds of emotional crises that other people in the book have gone through. With change as their mantra, they always have an out. It's hard to find one who's had a reason to think, "Maybe I should stay put." Heidi has, but won't. I'll fill in the details.

Heidi is about five-five, blond hair in a bob, rimless eyeglasses, efficient, no-nonsense, no reason for nonsense anymore, lets it out fast. Her husband is an architect who travels a lot; her son is eight and her daughter, who is adopted from Ecuador, is two. Her cell phone is never turned off, because Howard might need her. Howard is Howard Lutnick, founder of Cantor Fitzgerald; the two went to Haverford College with a friend of mine, which is how I met her. During Wall Street's go-go years, she was at Yale getting her master's degree in public and private management. She's walked that line between nonprofits and for-profits her whole career. When leveraged buyouts dominated the headlines, she worked at J. P. Morgan, but that was too far astray from the line she liked, so she then joined up with Tom Krens, the dynamic and controversial director of the Guggenheim Foundation, then newly hired.

It was a cool time. During the 1980s, all this Wall Street new money needed somewhere to go, and a good amount of it went toward art. But the old-money syndicates that surrounded the traditional-minded museums shut the new money out. The few museums that were open to the new money, like the Guggenheim, created a different kind of art culture, less stodgy, more entrepreneurial. Art emerged as a serious professional job for the first time. Heidi Olson worked for Krens for five years, doing a lot of everything—driving donors around, meeting with artists, writing grants, talking to the press, and running the membership department. It was a start-up atmosphere. Krens had dozens of ideas and was always coming up with more. They renovated and expanded the Guggenheim, opened the Guggenheim Soho, and began plans for

what became MASS MoCA, a museum of contemporary art in Massachusetts. While most museums refused to tinker with their traditions, Krens embraced change. He instilled in Heidi (if she didn't have it already) the belief that change keeps any institution, and any individual, full of life. Heidi became his director of budget and planning, floated a bond issue for the Guggenheim's plans, and then took Krens's words to heart. Even though Bilbao was in the works, it wasn't enough to keep Heidi there. It would be more of the same.

"There was no reason to keep doing it," she said.

For the next two years, she was the director of finance for Orbis, a flying eye hospital. They had a DC 8 (and later a DC 10) outfitted with high-tech microscopes and modern ophthalmology technology. They flew around the third world teaching local doctors how to treat and prevent blindness.

Then she came to Cantor Fitzgerald, and in the past few years she's run various projects—always at the forefront of how the firm was changing. She was the CFO for technology, building up the company's technology business, then built eSpeed, a division that was spun off and taken public. But running eSpeed, even with its growth rate, was too pedestrian. She didn't want to be a bean counter. So she did business development, acquiring new firms for Cantor, and she became the person who got newly acquired companies plugged in to the rest of the company.

The reason Heidi Olson is not dead is because she was laid off last April. With the market's downturn, the deal flow dried up and the company consolidated. There was no rapid growth for her to manage. Heidi understood the reasons for being laid off, but it wasn't handled well.

"I had issues with it, but the people I had issues with are now all dead."

Heidi went through some soul-searching last summer. What was she

looking for? There had never been a job description that fit her. “I do best in organizations in flux,” she realized. “If they’re undergoing rapid change, need to be reinvented or fixed, a cleanup or a new build, I’ll do great. I’m not right for a regular job.” With that criterion in mind, Heidi looked at jobs in many industries, but didn’t find anything quite for her.

On September 13, Howard Lutnick called and gave her this enormous job. He needed someone capable of building a company, fast—but also someone who knew him, could deal with his personality, and knew Cantor. Someone he trusted. Heidi was the only person on earth left who fit that description.

“There had to be someone for Howard to call,” she said. “It was the ultimate challenge. I suppose I’m fatalistic about it.”

Her new title was chief administrative officer, equities group. It’s five or six jobs at any other firm. Volunteers reached out to help continually. The traders here were amazingly patient. They’re a breed of people who want everything fixed *now*. But not one has yelled at her. For a while, every morning men would cry in the elevator. To show your emotion is now to show you’re human. It’s a good thing.

I asked her how she dealt with the fact that she would have been dead if she wasn’t laid off.

“There but for the grace of God go I,” she said, tossing her hands to the sky.

Had it affected how she thought of her life?

“No,” she said. “It is unprocessable. It’s too absurd. To lose one or two friends—that’s all our generation has ever had to deal with before. We are not prepared to watch our coworkers die in a combat zone. We lost more than two out of every three. The coping goes on in a different part of my mind. Every day I open the newspaper, and I know dead people.” *The New York Times* had been running obituaries for two months. “Every day I know at least one person who died and

another person as an acquaintance of friends. How absurd is that?"

And had it changed what mattered to her?

"I don't care if my son wants to wear a shirt with a hole in it anymore. If I'm late, it doesn't cause me any stress anymore. I'll get there when I get there. There's no anxiety in the little things. My family matters more to me, but ironically, I worked four days a week for eight years to spend more time with my kids. Now I'm needed here at least sixty hours a week."

I was amazed that being so needed didn't translate into a long-term vision for Heidi. But it simply didn't. She didn't need her life to be a complete circle, or to run along a consistent theme. She didn't need it all to add up.

"After college, I worked for a year at an insurance company. I decided to go to Oxford for a year, because, well, it was Oxford. I told the other women at work, and one said, 'I wish I could just up and go to Oxford.' So I asked, 'Why don't you?' She said, 'I would, but I bought a couch.' I always remembered that moment, and I never wanted to be that woman. I never wanted to be trapped by my belongings, my past, my commitments."

I would, but I bought a couch.

Many people share Heidi's horror at the idea of being trapped by an earlier decision, of being frozen inside a younger self. Is this horrific because we need change to keep us alive, or is it horrific because we'd never get to let our real self out? In other words, should we get used to the journey having no target, or are we headed toward some destination?

This is where "Those Who Change a Lot" start to differentiate. I found that a lot of people assumed they were genuine Boom Wranglers, until they realized something else was going on (as we'll see in these next stories).

BE YOUR OWN AUDIENCE

The first time we met, Leela de Souza was working in high-tech public relations for one of the most prestigious firms, Burson-Marsteller, and her big client was Sun Microsystems. She'd learned the skill of crafting stories, and when it came to her own life, each turning point was a great story-package unto itself. It all made complete sense—until she tried to explain why she was in PR and suddenly the clarity was gone. When I brought up her future, her pitch was muddled and strained, despite her best efforts.

Her father was a doctor from a family of many doctors in India. Her mother was a flautist with the Chicago Symphony. Leela was bright, but she excelled only in classes that required her to memorize, like math and spelling. Her father paid her \$100 for every *A* on her report card, which perhaps undermined any inherent joy in learning for learning's sake. She rarely read and never wrote, didn't have critical thinking skills. Leela was also tall, slender, and a graceful athlete. Ballet. Volleyball. Basketball.

Leela had photographic memories of two turning points in her life. *It was 1983. My cast had been removed, my broken ankle healed but tender. During my time off, I'd decided to stop being a generalist and become "The Ace of One Thing." I remember those words, that phrase. My mother found out where the Hubbard Street studios were and took me to watch, hoping it would inspire me with my ankle rehab. I watched, and I was absolutely transformed. This was athletic*

dance, perfect for me. I thought, "This is it." I had a deep sense of passion at a very young age. Complete clarity. I was fifteen.

Leela won a scholarship with Hubbard Street, studying under Mark Morris that summer. She danced seven hours a day, six days a week. She soon turned professional and traveled internationally four months of every year. When two dancers retired, she was promoted to leading roles. She had fame and acclaim. She was also a runway model, earning \$1,500 a day, which made up for her meager dancer's pay. But dance has nothing to do with money; she never once thought about money. It was also not the most intellectual crowd. Leela realized she'd left her intellect behind, in a raw and untrained form.



So, in her early twenties, with several good years left on her legs, she took the SAT and applied to college. She did well on the test by memorizing math and vocabulary. *It was 1989. I had been accepted to many universities. I couldn't decide which to attend. I walked down to the mailbox carrying two yes/no letters, both checked "yes." One is to Princeton, one to Chicago. I stood over the mailbox. Princeton is a great education, but one where I could still cheat my potential by*

taking classes that relied on memorization. Chicago is renowned for its classical method—100 percent critical thinking, writing papers every week on Antigone. At Chicago, I'll have to face my intellect. I remember the moment perfectly. I mailed the one to Chicago.

She had something to prove to herself, so she never skipped or transferred out of a class because it was too hard or she didn't like it. By the time she graduated she'd perfected her mind like she'd once honed ballet poses. She knew how to ask questions and how to think. The education cost \$100,000, every penny of it her own, paid for with runway work. She could have accepted help from her father, who offered, but Leela wanted ownership of her education, wanted it to be something she gave herself, not a gift from others. She'd gone to college not for what it could lead to, not for what it could get her, not to trigger a long chain of events leading to prestige and security, but simply to have *an adept mind*.

But now what? What to do with this mind?

Over the next seven years, Leela made seemingly smart decisions, but never got any closer to making a choice. She was exposed to the highest echelons of society, and all of it interested her, yet nothing grabbed her, nothing made her think, "This is *it*."

Her training included a year in Spain, Stanford Business School, McKinsey Consulting, a White House fellowship, and now high-tech PR. Each of these exposed her to more choices, but I can't help feeling like they add up to an endless tour ride through Foreignland, Businessland, Policyland, and Technologyland. She never jumped off the tour bus and rolled up her shirtsleeves and got down in the dirt. She never got *involved*. She had cases. She had clients. She met with diplomats. She gave *advice*, but did not put herself in a position to take action. She's long thought it would make sense for her to take her business skills back to the arts, but she fears that arts administration will be boring. So she stays on the bus, and soon she's not the young prodigy anymore.

I have this term I use now and then: “Phi Beta Slacker.” If a traditional slacker hops between temping, waitressing, working at record stores, telemarketing, and more temping, Phi Beta Slackers hop between esteemed grad schools, fat corporate gigs, and prestigious fellowships, looking like they have their act together but really having no more clue where they’re headed than anyone else. And while slackers are not lazy by nature—they actually *want* to work, just not at the wrong thing or for the wrong reason—Phi Beta Slackers have a great gift for the world, if they can figure out what it is, or defuse whatever is holding them back.

Here’re some of the obstacles that hold Phi Beta Slackers back. First, they use money as a measuring stick. They jump among high-priced jobs, believing the elevated salary is a proxy for respect. Second, they have a strong need to belong to the smartest crowd. Third, they continuously find something to prove. They keep finding new challenges, new crowds to win over. Eventually there’s nothing left to prove, and they have to face the question, “Okay, I’ve proven I’m smart. Now, who am I? What am I going to *do* with my smarts?”

Leela had overcome the first of these distractions.

“The high point of my life, the thing that brought me fame and acclaim, the thing I was by far the best at, paid less than thirty thousand dollars. But I walk a runway, which requires no skill, and I’m paid fifteen hundred dollars for a few hours’ work. Then I spend only *two years* studying business, and suddenly the marketplace says I’m qualified to earn \$120,000 a year. Four times as much! Without a drop of business experience! Was I really that different a person? It’s absolutely wrong to think money is an objective measure of a person. *Absolutely wrong.* What the market values is arbitrary. Dance was my passion. Business school and runway work were whims. The market says my whims were far more valuable than my passion. But the truth is, what I was striving for in dance, you couldn’t put a price tag on.”

But Leela still needed to be the Ace. The *best*. She lived by that

standard. Having once neglected her intellect, she needed to prove to herself that she belonged with the smartest crowds.

Leela racked up seven years of experience, yet she was as completely uncertain of what to do with her life as the day she graduated from the University of Chicago.

Leela didn't admit all this to me right away. Over sandwiches in her office, she put her best spin on these seven years. After the White House, she started in PR because she ran into a friend who worked at Burston-Marsteller, and her friend spoke passionately about the work she was doing for clients. Leela made the mistake of assuming that PR work must be inherently passion-inducing, when passion is really a complex organic chemistry between an individual and her job that isn't replicable or mass-producible. Leela tried to assure me she was passionate about PR, but she gave up quickly and admitted it had regressed into a mere day job after the initial three-month adrenaline high. She figured she'd stick at it a couple more years.

I figured otherwise, because tech was crashing.

Shortly after meeting Leela, I gave a speech at the University Club in San Francisco, and I mentioned her. I said she was cursed with infinite abilities and choices. Two women in the audience laughed, because Leela was their friend, and they approached me afterward.

"Leela's *always* saying she doesn't know what to do with her life. She's never been able to figure it out, and it's constantly on her mind."

I wasn't surprised when, two months later, Leela accepted a buyout and joined the unemployed. Even then she didn't quite come clean and drop the PR instinct to cast it in the best light. She promised that she would write me at the end of the summer and explain what she'd figured out. I didn't ask her to make this promise. I didn't think she had a chance of figuring it out in three months. But she made the promise out of some need to look like she was the master of her destiny.

In late September, after I left several messages wondering how she was doing, an e-mail finally arrived.

I must admit I have been feeling unusually empty in the attempt to send you a written update. I've been staring at what feels like a blank canvas depicting my unconventional journey with no words to make sense of my current crossroads. Ironical that others find my journey "extraordinary," yet right now I'm at a loss for how to put it all together. I wish there was a stronger lexical thread between the paragraphs of my life. Or at least one more visible to me now as I search for that dream job. I dream of work that would put it all together and allow me to wake up every morning totally jazzed about what I'm doing. Ugh . . . how I wish it would fall into my lap. Perhaps I could then write you an update that would fit neatly into your storyline, which I'm assuming believed that this unconventional road is, in fact, the high road.

We met for lunch a few days later. She'd been feverishly conducting informational interviews with people of all careers (more exposure!). The night before, she'd had dinner with a liver surgeon who talked about the adrenaline high he got from the intensity of surgery. He'd recently moved to biotech, and he was having trouble getting high in that world. Leela related to this—what could get her as high as standing before a packed opera house? She was desperate to hear some of the stories from people in my book. This was kind of odd; it was like people who eat their food so fast they never taste it.

"Why do you think I wanted a neat story line?" I asked.

"Well, if you're going to write it, it has to hang together, doesn't it? It can't just be a crazy scrabble."

"I think I'll find some themes in your crazy scrabble."

She wanted to know what themes those might be. She wasn't trying to control how I wrote about her—she wanted my perspective. She wanted everyone's perspective.

I said, "Several times you've said things that make me think you're mistaking intensity for passion. It's a common mistake. Intensity is external; passion invokes something inside you. It's a call-and-response with your soul. It's not just adrenaline."

She asked me if my work was more a series of highs and lows, or a steadiness. I told her that people who say they want highs and lows really haven't experienced many lows. They really want highs and highs. The interesting thing was, the lows really seem to help people get there. When they recover from their crises, they're more grateful and appreciate life's preciousness. They know themselves better. They're able to rule out a lot of choices that they couldn't before.

"Maybe I shouldn't look for highs," she admitted. "Ever since I left Chicago, I've been looking to replace that feeling of being on stage. Maybe I've been looking for the wrong thing."

"You're not alone in that, Leela," I said. "Maybe you're the best example of it, but not alone."

I told her that I thought of her e-mail as a huge breakthrough. She'd given up the need to come across looking brilliant. That's not easy, and once it's done, it's very liberating.

Of all the people's stories I told Leela, the one that moved her most was that of Deni Leonard. I won't ruin his story by telling too much of it here (I include it later in the book), but Deni trained himself in many disciplines for twenty years before putting it all to use as an entrepreneurial banker bringing jobs to Native American reservations. Leela wanted to follow that pattern; to take all these skills and contribute in a significant way. But contribute to what? On that, nothing I said helped her one bit.

For the next few months, Leela kept up her rapid pace of informational interviews. Teachers might call her a "cognitive," one who has to research everything before knowing what's right. But was she? These interviews intensified her anxiety, because nothing popped and

she was worried she'd never find it. This anxiety became a thing she finally paid attention to.

"I finally stopped looking around externally," she said, commenting on her new calm. "I was looking everywhere but inside myself. It really scared me to go there. So much of what I've done has been for recognition or achievement, not really from within. I haven't found it yet, but my anxiety is gone, and maybe that's an indication I'm looking in the right direction."

She spent more time with a family in East Palo Alto that she mentored. She produced a benefit for a nonprofit that celebrated Bay Area artists. To make money, she took on piecemeal consulting jobs. She stopped asking, "What to do *next*?" and started asking, "To what can I devote my life?" Mostly, she stopped expecting herself to uncover her passion by applying herself really hard to the search. "I found out it's not something one can force," she said. It's one of the few things in life where being smarter doesn't give you any advantage in finding your answer. "I'm going to give it plenty of time to find me," she said.

Okay, so what's the difference between Leela and Heidi? Here are two incredibly intelligent women who've both done a series of very interesting things, one of whom is completely comfortable with the serial nature of life, while the other is increasingly uncomfortable and finds it confusing. Boom Wranglers would tell Leela that she needs to be more like Heidi, adopt her philosophy. Should she?

Two years ago, I would have said yes.

But now I don't think you can turn a Leela into a Heidi. In each of her jobs, Heidi was heavily involved. She functionally ran much of the organization, though she was never the figurehead. In the moment, she was committed. And the commitment lasted an average of four years. Leela's jobs were tentative and noncommittal, on that tour bus. Her tenures (postdancing) averaged fewer than two years. She was always in search mode.

For whatever reason, some people crave a place to carve out as their own. I've come to think that craving shouldn't be belittled, and it can't be philosophized away. There's something going on there that needs to work itself out. While you might admire how easily Boom Wranglers seem to navigate these seas which you find so turbulent, you need to let Boom Wranglers be Boom Wranglers.

28 The Change Junkie Kicks Her Habit

DECIPHERING THE URGE TO CHANGE

Diane Kort went to a cocktail party/networking event, and some woman (whom I'd never heard of) stood up and told people about my book, how I was looking for stories. Diane e-mailed me, I was intrigued, and we began talking. She was thirty-four, bright and earnest, but a little impatient. She lived and worked in Palo Alto. She was a whisper of a woman, dressed in avant-garde black, in stark contrast to her long blond hair and pale skin. I think she hoped for more from me—or at least I sensed some slight disappointment. Answers weren't coming fast enough, I guess. Diane had one to three years of experience in all the obvious choices:

Consulting

Banking

Teaching English Composition at a University

Medical School

Trademark Law

Despite this frequent movement, she found that none of these paths was really that different. She jumped into one after another with the

hope that this would be it—get completely excited and turned on—only to find she'd grown bored in less than a year. They *always* started out great, and they *always* fell off a cliff. When we met, Diane was growing tired of intellectual property law and looking for something else. She admitted she was completely at a loss. She feared her inability to commit to a career, and the frequent unhappiness her jobs caused her, was making her unattractive to men. She'd been beating herself up over this her whole adult life, and she was starting to think there wasn't an answer for her, she'd always get restless.

At some point, when you've tried enough careers and none seems to fit, rather than look for yet another career, you start to think the problem is inside you. Diane was at that fork, and she was hammering herself on two fronts: Maybe I need a new career. Maybe the problem is me.

The point where it got really interesting was when she talked herself right out of what seemed like an ideal career and geography move. She'd told me she wanted to be nearer to the ocean, ideally in San Diego. She'd also told me the trademark law she was doing would be all right if it didn't require so many hours, or maybe wasn't in such a big firm. She'd *also* told me that she wished she'd given more of her time to environmental causes, rather than donating money. Based on that, her ideal career would be a job in San Diego doing trademark law, part-time, with some pro bono legal work for a habitat-protection nonprofit on the side.

Then, in a moment eerily reminiscent of my conversation with Janelle London, the kidney-transplant activist, Diane told me that she'd recently been offered a part-time position by a female attorney in San Diego, who had a solo practice doing intellectual property. This lawyer also knew people at the National Wildlife Fund, which was based in San Diego, who said that if Diane signed on, they had plenty of pro bono work for her. But Diane had turned down this perfectly ideal life.

Was she having trouble stepping off the beaten path? Although

she'd made many changes, she'd always landed in something prestigious and socially acceptable, like the gargantuan law firm that employed her now.

However, it wasn't that simple. First, Diane didn't have the family pedigree of someone who clings to prestigious confines. She wasn't pushed to succeed. In fact, her family would have cheered if she'd moved to San Diego to help the NWF. She's from Hawaii, the most laid-back state in the country. Her brother is a former hypnotherapist turned life coach. Her grandmother started a school for troubled kids, and adopted twelve children. Her mother started a program to prevent child abuse. They're a family of do-gooders—they were voted Family of the Year by a Hawaiian magazine. Traditional status isn't even on Diane's radar screen. Though she's worked in prestigious firms, she never worked hard or put in face time or otherwise tried to impress anyone.

"So why'd you say *no*?" I asked frequently. Not only had Diane turned that lawyer down, she didn't seem agonized over it.

"I'd still be a trademark attorney. Which is getting kind of boring."

"Maybe it wouldn't be boring if it was for the NWF, rather than some start-up trying to patent its computer code."

"Probably. But you know why I think I said no? It would be a gradual, incremental change, when what I really need is a big change. I'm afraid making little changes will only buy a little time."

She was now thinking of becoming a marine mammal field biologist.

She said, "I think I'm addicted to learning new things."

Diane had recently swung from thinking her need to stay in motion was a problem to thinking it was the solution. Maybe that's what she needed. Constant reinvention. Why not? Why does there have to be an ultimate destination? What's wrong with being permanently restless?

I'd met many people who were change artists. They'd given up the notion that any of their passions could stay lit for long. "Life is a great opportunity to try out *all* the things I'm interested in," one wrote. Their only constant was wanderlust. "It took me awhile to realize that I was born to wonder what to do with my life," wrote another. "And in the wondering, experience constant metamorphosis."

I knew this feeling, and when I was twenty-seven and working at my sixth job in five years, I too convinced myself that I was a change artist. The world was too interesting to bother limiting myself by making an arbitrary choice. But then I grew out of it. Even though book publishing wasn't my thing, it never bored me, and I'm still involved in book distribution. I started writing full-time in 1994, and seven years later I feel like I'm just getting started. Certainly, changing careers is a modern form of wandering. It's how we expose ourselves to more of the world without ditching our responsibilities or draining our savings. We have to wander for some years to figure ourselves out. But also recognize that going to school from an early age until we're twenty-two wired us with a quarter system attention span. Every three months, four months, we expect a two-week break and then a whole new curriculum to learn. Every three months, the alarm goes off: *Hey, it's time for something new*. It takes years for that alarm to shut up, to adjust to the pace of adult life.

I'm not saying that change artists haven't found their true passion yet, or that they have to turn their alarm clock off. Wanderlust is an ideal solution for some people—but how was Diane to know if it was the right solution for her? True Change Artists are able to have many powerfully intense passions. Change on the horizon is not an excuse to avoid getting emotionally involved in the present. This is very different from the Bay Area woman who wrote, "I just can't seem to develop a passion for anything I have done." Or the guy in New England who confessed, "Sometimes I think I'm one of those people who will find a reason to be dissatisfied under any circumstances. I have managed to tear through several careers and even more short-lived relationships in the search for something I can't name or identify." A woman in

Nebraska hoped I'd recognize the distinction between "explorers" and "runners"—"I imagine you'll find there are many people attempting to escape their own selves in the guise of challenging the unknown." I didn't think Diane was a Change Artist. I don't think she really thought so either. She was trying that theory on for a while. I think she was in a struggle to explain her life, and her opponent was some internal devil's advocate/Socratic neocortex that grabbed irrelevant theories from other people's lives and misapplied them to her own.

Her heart told her that there was a destination. In a moment of quiet, she asked me what it feels like.

"What it feels like to find your thing?"

"Yes." She was almost ashamed to ask.

"You stop getting bored."

"So there's people you've met who feel that way?"

"Many."

"How long do they go without getting bored?"

"Years and years. Not forever, but a long time."

"What else do they say?"

I rattled off a few things. "Well, there's a lot of misconceptions. They're not always happy, and not always content, and not always jazzed. It's not a high. It still feels like work, it's hard, but Mondays never come too soon. It seems like their purpose—for now. They don't daydream about living some other life. Their like or dislike for their job doesn't hinge on what happened that day, or even that *month*. They're not always comparing their life to some other imagined life in their head. Maybe that's the most consistent thing they report—the mind chatter stops on its own, without having to be ordered to stop, or

requiring meditation to stop.”

She paused for a long moment. I think I described exactly what she was craving, a sort of mental quiet. *Could somebody please turn this voice in my head off?*

“Does that speak to you?” I said.

“Yes.”

“Maybe you’re not really a change artist at heart.”

The good thing was, Diane couldn’t change quickly. Becoming a marine mammal field biologist after being a trademark attorney isn’t easy, and the daunting challenge of that escape was slowing Diane down. She didn’t know where to start. In the lull, she began to recognize how she’d created this fantasy about marine biologists, and how she’d only looked at the good side of their lives. She couldn’t get the fantasy out of her head, but in the meantime she became hyperaware of this fantasy-creation part of her mind. She started to see its handiwork everywhere. She entered into a torturous phase where she couldn’t tell earnest thoughts from fantasy thoughts, friend from foe, real me from fantasy me. She was prone to counterintuitive reasoning and hair-trigger second-guessing. She had to work through a rat’s nest of theories slowly, one by one, before she regained her confidence in her instincts.

Among the theories that she held briefly, then discarded:

- “Am I avoiding the thing I love so that I can’t fail at it?”
“Is my mother instinct keeping me from falling in love with a career? Am I
- subconsciously taking jobs that I don’t love, so that I can easily leave when I have children?” (She didn’t even have a boyfriend.)
- “Am I obsessing about my career because it’s the only thing I can control, since I can’t control my dating life?”

I listened as she worked through them. Eventually she came around to a story of herself that wasn't so convoluted. In fact, it was remarkably straightforward. Her dad left when Diane was five. It was violent, not good. Her mom was now on her fourth marriage, and though she was blissfully married to her soul mate, it wasn't always that way, and Diane had moved around a lot when she was a kid. Furthermore, she'd boomeranged from one financial extreme to another. With her birth father they lived on food stamps. With one of her stepfathers, they lived in a mansion on the beach, and had every luxury they could desire. Diane summed it up this way: "I got used to lots of change. Change was normal. And when change wasn't under way, I'd feel stagnant. I'll never feel secure standing still. I'm uncomfortable without chaos. I'm always looking out for what's next."

In other words, there are Change Artists, and then there are Change Junkies. That made perfect sense, and for a while she embraced it. *This is who I am. This is why I am me. This explains why I need to move around. Accept it and embrace it.* But she couldn't quite accept it. To accept it meant she'd never feel at peace, and she couldn't give up that hope.

One day we were walking back from lunch on California Avenue, and I told her I didn't think she had to accept it. I wouldn't have said this, and what followed, if it wasn't what I thought she wanted.

"But it's me," she said. "It's who I am."

"Well, there was a time when I thought I should never get married again and never would have kids. This wasn't sad. In fact it was empowering to embrace it. I thought I was choosing to live in reality rather than romantic make-believe. My parents had been divorced, all of their friends were divorced, and I was divorced, and that was kind of how my universe tilted. Sort of like how your universe tilts toward

change. That was me. It was part of my identity. I was proud to recognize it rather than lie to myself.”

“So how did you get over that?” She knew my son had just been born a few weeks earlier.

“Well, I had a girlfriend who I loved dearly, but I was afraid to take the next step with her, afraid I’d end up hurting her like I had everyone else. One day, I realized I was giving my childhood too much power over me. Maybe my childhood had turned me into a person highly likely to get divorced. But there was a real me before that happened. Why give those scars so much control over the rest of my life? Why let them delude me? A healthy and good person had been inside me all along, and I had to strip off the layers and let that person out.”

“And that did it?”

“I finally got pointed in the right direction. Every time those old instincts cried out, I was able to pause and fight back. ‘No, don’t listen, that’s not me talking.’ I’m protective, and once I’d labeled these voices as *not me*, I was able to chase them away.”

“Did it take long?”

“No. Maybe in only six months after this realization, I was ready to get married again and finally be a parent.”

I’d told this story to a couple dozen people in the previous year, and I could tell when it resonated versus when it came across like a bunch of analytic gibberish. Diane heard me.

She decided to stop looking for new things until she figured out if she could overcome this itch to tear her life up. She recognized that if she had gone to San Diego, she would have been running from exactly what she needed to confront. Ditto for marine biology.

For the next few months and beyond, she devoted herself to learning

to be happy and sit still and chase away those voices. She believed she'd never really given any of her jobs a fair chance. She'd always run at the first hint of boredom. Maybe she was getting bored because she didn't bother to truly engage in the work. She challenged herself to be truly involved in what she was doing now, and to look for ways to improve her work situation rather than chuck it. She wasn't giving up on figuring out what to do with her life, but she needed to learn these skills first.

Know Thyself

IS GETTING TO KNOW MYSELF IMPRACTICAL?

This chapter is about two tiny moments when opposing courses butted against each other, the hard-headed versus the soft-hearted.

The first of these moments occurred when I was spending the day with Jonathan Greenblatt, and he received a phone call from an old business school classmate—let's call her Fluffy—just to chat.

Jonathan is thirty-two, from Trumbull, Connecticut, a real working-class town. Between them, his parents had a single semester of college. Jonathan's mother was a secretary. Jonathan's father is a traveling furniture salesman. He's extraordinarily hardworking, and he instilled this ethic in his son.

At Tufts, Jonathan was an editor of the school newspaper. During his senior year he interned at the Anti-Defamation League, investigating hate crimes. Postgraduation, he had little idea what to do, so he went looking for a mentor and had lunch with a lawyer in Boston. They argued about politics—the lawyer was a Perot supporter, and Jonathan found himself arguing for Clinton. Hearing this kernel of ardor, the lawyer shrewdly told Jonathan to go work for Clinton. A few phone calls and one brief meeting later, Jonathan was working for Michael Whouley, who became the national field director for the Clinton '92 campaign. After the campaign, Jonathan received a political appointment to the staff of the secretary of commerce, Ron Brown. Health care, NAFTA, the Internet—Jonathan wrote white papers for some major policy issues. On April 3, 1996, Ron Brown's

plane went down in the Balkans. Jonathan lost fourteen friends. He did not react to this by taking time off to grieve and heal. It was a major wake-up call. He thought about all the other things he wanted to do before he died, like go to grad school.



The plan he mapped out (and stuck to) was to get his MBA from Kellogg and then work for an Internet company. Internet companies were proud of flaunting how unimportant degrees were, but Jonathan Greenblatt from Trumbull, Connecticut, whose parents worked hard to send him to college, knew that a *degree* is something you can bank for the rest of your life. As if he were not pragmatic enough, business school taught Jonathan how to make a rational decision. Which *factors* must I take into account? Then you run the different choices through these criteria, scoring them on each, and the optimal choice will bubble up. Jonathan developed criteria for Internet companies to interview with. They had to be in a huge market, have good management, have excellent venture capitalists behind them, be pre-IPO, and have a competitive advantage in the market. Passion was not a criterion. Being able to ride a skateboard down the hallways was not a criterion. The optimal Internet company that bubbled up through Jonathan's matrix was Homestore.com, based in Thousand Oaks, California, an hour northwest of Los Angeles. That's where he went to

work, in the fall of 1999, and that's where I went to meet him almost two years later. Jonathan had chosen wisely: since he arrived, almost every Internet company had failed, but Homestore.com was one of only four biggies that were profitable. It was a serious company, not a lifestyle. He'd been smart. He kept his eye on the curve. He never breathed his own exhaust. His dad was proud.

But a lot of his friends from Washington were now unemployed, with no idea what to do. That also described a lot of his business school classmates who signed on with the wrong Internet company. Jonathan didn't have any sympathy for them.

Such as with Fluffy's phone call. He listened to her politely, told her what he was up to. His face suggested annoyance, though. When he hung up, he was outraged: "What the fuck was that!? What the fuck was that!?"

"What?"

"Oh, she was going on about how she was *great, really great*." He imitated her voice with disdain. "*I'm great. I'm really finding myself. I took off the last ten months, I'm reading a lot, I'm getting to know myself.*" He shifted back to his own hard voice. "It blows my mind she's not working. You don't go to business school so that two years later you can take ten months off! I can't imagine what my mom or dad would say if I told them I was *finding myself*. You know what my dad would say? He'd say, 'You want to find yourself? Go look in the mirror. Now get back to work.'"

I'd heard from a lot of Fluffies in the world, and I tried to defend her. "Maybe she was at business school for the wrong reasons. Maybe she needs something else."

"Give me a break!" he argued. "It seems so self-indulgent. So *incredibly* self-indulgent."

We fought over this for a while. In the heat of the moment I didn't fight

well, partly because I could tell I would never change his mind, and partly because I had just heard his life story, and in the mood of the moment I was swayed by his eye-on-the-curve approach. Like Jonathan, I didn't appreciate people who use the mantra "I'm getting to know myself" as an excuse to sit by the pool all summer.

When I left him, I was still wondering, *Is it self-indulgent?* Or is it necessary, for some people? Can "getting to know yourself" really help you figure out what to do with your life?

Second of these moments, where the hard-headed was confronted by the soft-hearted:

A month or so later, I got into a debate along these lines with San Francisco city supervisor Gavin Newsom. We were both on a Commonwealth Club panel. The Club was attempting an outreach to a younger crowd, and by the size of the standing-room-only audience, the recruitment seemed a success.

In addition to being a supervisor (and often predicted to be the next mayor of our city), Gavin is a successful young entrepreneur, with something like eight different small businesses, many of which are spinoff brandings of Plumpjack Wines and Plumpjack Restaurant. He entered into these industries blindly, as a novice. He had taken huge risks, failed in several, lost some people's money, but not let that get to him—he kept trying, learning, and eventually succeeded. He offered the motto, "There is no such thing as failure." He recounted how Winston Churchill failed high school, and Henry Ford failed at five different business ventures, and Michael Jordan was cut by his high school basketball team, and Thomas Edison had discovered his method of conducting electricity after seven hundred other failed methods. Gavin's advice to the audience—many of whom had been employed by dot-coms that failed—was *to seek out that at which you might fail*. And just keep going. Take more risk. Plow ahead.

I started to interrupt him.

There was some good wisdom in his message—we need to show initiative, and we need to have faith in ourselves—but the tone of it was too rah-rah for my ears, too Tony Robbins. I wasn't even sure where I was headed with my retort, but I waded in. I knew there were people in the audience who could spring back from failure and rejection, and yet there were some people who couldn't. I knew there was a lot more confusion and sapped motivation in the audience that needed to be acknowledged. A halftime cheer from the pumped-up team captain wasn't what they needed. I used to champion the very philosophy Gavin was now pushing, and I had seen thousands of people fail, and hundreds had written me. Many were present for this panel.

One of the sociological experiments of the dot-com era was whether ordinary risk-averse people could act like natural-born risk takers when exposed to a culture where risk taking was commonplace. On the way up, they did. But when all these ventures *failed*, the natural-borns handled it very differently from the converted. The natural-borns like Gavin bounced back, but the converted lost faith, and shut down. They withdrew. They felt a need to find themselves, like Fluffy.

Where I'm headed with this is, not all people are the same. Heidis are not Leelas. The question of what you should do must take into account that complex chemistry.

In the dot-com heyday, failure was frictionless. Start-ups collapsed during this time, but the successes took the limelight, and then hired all the warm bodies. Failing had no consequence. But when the whole thing crashed, real-world friction and gravity caught up. People found defeat painful and confusing. Lawsuits were filed. Bankruptcy court got its grip on scant assets. Best friends parted as sworn enemies. The have-nots bitterly resented the haves. Apartment rents went unpaid, and the unfortunate were evicted. Men who no longer had big bank accounts were ditched by their girlfriends.

To deny the blow of failure dangerously risks not learning from it.

I mentioned earlier that my father had put his company through

bankruptcy. He had grown up in the insurance industry, but in the late seventies he got the entrepreneurial bug, borrowed from a bank at 20 percent interest, and purchased a thirty-employee light-industrial company that refurbished telephones. He ran it well and loved it, but after a few years the Justice Department succeeded in breaking apart AT&T. AT&T, in turn, broke all of its subcontractor contracts. My dad no longer had a contract with his biggest customer, and his company plunged into bankruptcy, a long and arduous process that almost took our house and car. Could he have jumped back on the entrepreneurial horse again? Sure. But should he? He didn't like the feeling of total loss of control. He didn't like the temper that rose up in him. He didn't like not being able to sleep at night. He hated the feeling that he couldn't provide for his sons. He recognized that his psychological makeup was not a good fit for failing. It's easy to be a magnanimous guy if the coin lands on heads. But to play a game of chance means you have to be capable of handling tails. Going to court that summer was such a terrible experience. He saved himself by using his afternoons to do something his heart told him to do. He took a Coast Guard training course and earned his skipper's license. At the end of the summer, he skippered a 96-foot-long, 1929-built wooden passenger vessel all the way up to Alaska. It was his salvation. He eventually decided, I think rightly, to go back to selling commercial insurance. He'd always been a great insurance broker, and he even learned in this time of crisis that he probably wasn't cut out for managing more than small teams of people. In any big firm, if you're good at doing the work you get promoted and don't do the work anymore. My dad liked being the one who did the work. He told his firm that was where he fit. He had the awareness to recognize where he was most productive. And now, in his retirement to horse ranching, he's found in himself a sweetness and thoughtfulness that he never expected.

The Boom Wrangler makes her way through life by sniffing out the next big opportunity. The Boom Wrangler doesn't really care what it is that's booming, because the adrenaline comes from the rapid pace of change itself—having to rewrite org charts and business plans,

appease personalities, raise money, and compete against equally nimble rivals. The Boom Wrangler enjoys the spotlight. Financial reward is often involved, but it's not as essential as the excitement. Intensity is her passion. She works hard and plays hard. The Boom Wrangler learns from each ride, but the kinds of things she learns are modern carpentry—how to write a press release, pitch a venture capitalist, run a meeting, negotiate a lease. When a boom tails off, and she is faced with the question, “Well, now what?,” the operating principle that drives her decision is *Where's the next boom? What will be exciting?*

If you're one of these adrenaline seekers who's convinced all you need from life is a series of oversized challenges, good for you. But you should probably put this book down right here. Because where I'm going to take this conversation might make you very uncomfortable.

HOW THE PAST COLORS PERCEPTION

When the New Economy imploded, it took more than six months for the stubborn deniers to admit their hoped-for quick rebound was nowhere in sight. The techies were starting to acknowledge the solution to their problem was not to retreat from rocky start-ups to sturdy Ciscos, or to climb up the food chain from founding companies to funding them, or to hop from dot-coms to telecoms. No sector was immune. It was not all going to be fine. Friends of mine had to can their friends, and then they were canned too.

If they were lucky enough to score a new job, it was no longer dressed up in this hubbub about changing the world, or taking down evil Microsoft, or whupping the Fortune 500. It was a paycheck. Employed or not, rich or poor, winner or loser—how they defined themselves and what gave their life meaning was going to have to change.

They weren't well equipped for this turn inward. Accustomed to being able to conquer challenges quickly, they discovered that making this change was a lot harder than they had anticipated. I have a lot of stories to share, but none portrays this drama better than George Milano's. The Internet boom was in his past, but the way it had taught him to think was harder to shake.

George is thirty-eight, with curly Mediterranean black hair, purposeful in his mannerisms, polite. He's having one meaningful conversation a day, and in his determination to fulfill that goal, he was

willing to risk his pride and image by admitting to me his concerns. He's been reading Francis Fukuyama's *Trust* and Robert D. Putnam's *Bowling Alone*. He was concerned about community, which he feared had been lost in the last three decades, or maybe in the last three years, a time during which he'd also lost his one romantic love and his closest friend and a good deal of money. It had humbled him. He didn't know where to turn.

George shares a two-bedroom rented apartment on the tiptop of Potrero Hill. It's spotlessly clean and uncluttered by the usual knickknacks one accumulates. From the couch tucked into the bay window of the living room, he looks down on the South of Market industrial neighborhood that was home to so many dot-coms, with the skyline of old money downtown rising up behind it. He can see right into the baseball park's center field, and he can tell if Bay Bridge traffic is backed up. The view pans from Antioch in the north to Fremont in the south. Fantastic perspective, and it was perspective George needed when he settled into this couch after leaving start-ups forever. For two weeks straight he hung out in his pajamas reading Stephen Ambrose's *Citizen Soldiers* and watching the ten-segment World War II documentary *The World at War*. It was the only thing he could relate to. Battle.

I'm not sure the war analogy is deserved, but it was customary for dot-commers to borrow the heavy-handed language of timeless dramas to describe how intensely they felt about their business machinations. "The last year was hell," George said, as if he might roll up his leg and show me a napalm burn. "I saw an ugliness in human character that destroyed my faith in my common man." It was a raging bonfire of greed, a sick and disgusting chase to get rich and get out. All propriety had been tossed aside as his employees sensed this was their last chance to score big before the inevitable crash. The start-up George founded, Statement, was tearing itself apart faster than it could build itself up. George hired an office manager; after six weeks she demanded a promotion, and wanted it effective *that day*. The week some very interested venture capitalists came in for a demonstration,

his vice president of engineering effectively cut bait and ran to a competing start-up, taking ten members of his engineering staff with him. The VCs backed out of the deal. George hired a new engineering VP, but he was no better. Several times he blackmailed George and kept the code hostage. He refused to finish the programming for a major milestone unless he was given some of George's equity. It seemed like every high-level employee was gunning to bump George off and take the CEO spot. George was so frustrated that he decided to sell the company.

The bonfire didn't burn out; it only intensified. George found a buyer, a company called Digital Insight. They put an offer on the table. The offer was dependent on the engineering staff staying on board for two-and-a-half years. One of these key engineers was a young Russian immigrant, Vlad. He was set to make \$800,000 in the sale. You would think a Russian immigrant would think \$800,000 was a lot of money and be grateful. God bless America. But that wasn't enough for him. He threatened to badmouth the software in due diligence if he didn't receive a bigger cut.

"But you're going to make \$800,000!" George argued. "Aren't you happy with that? Isn't that enough?"

Vlad blew him off. He said, "For only eight hundred grand, I can't get motivated."

"Can't get motivated!"

"On the free market I'd earn \$150 an hour. That's \$22,000 a month. In two and a half years, \$660,000. So \$800,000 doesn't impress me. You have to do better."

The one gratifying thing about building Statement was George's relationship with his close friend, Jason. They'd known each other since working at a previous start-up. They'd gone to Mardi Gras together. Jason was in his early twenties, and he was going to make \$2 million in the sale. He wanted more. He wanted some of George's

shares. In the final month of closing, George lost a third of his shares in order to get the deal done. But Digital Insight's shares were dropping in value too, and the lost time was costing everyone. In the months between initial offer and closing, the purchase price dropped by half. On the last day, after the paperwork was signed, Jason told George, "I never want to see your face again."

George's father had founded a home medical supply business in Pittsburgh with roughly one hundred employees—big enough to be stable, but small enough that George's father knew everybody by name, knew their kids, loaned them money, took care of his people. His father was a patriarch at that company and in the city. When he went out on the town, his father would run into customers he had helped, people he had given medical supplies on credit. When his customers died, George's father always attended their funerals. George started cleaning shelves in the warehouse at the age of nine for twenty-five cents an hour. He drove delivery trucks in high school, and made sales at doctors' offices nights and summers until he graduated from Stanford. His father wanted George to take over, but George didn't want the benefits of nepotism. He wanted to make a name for himself. He had entrepreneurism in his blood. Statement was George's third company; though neither of the others were big successes, it didn't matter. Start-ups allowed a kind of open-book collectivism, a chance to work with your friends and share a passion. His first two start-ups had that feeling. But at Statement, all that had been good turned bad.

Nevertheless, George had walked away from the sale with nine million dollars. He knew he deserved no sympathy. He never had to work again. After two weeks on the couch, it was time to buck up and get on with his life. But do what? Start another company? He couldn't stomach it. Besides, that's all he had ever done. It was time to do something different.

So he thought, "Well, I should do some good in the world. I know how to get things done and to motivate people. Maybe I can apply what I've

learned.”

For a couple years, George had mentored his housecleaner’s son and occasionally gone to his high school as his “parent or guardian” when his mother couldn’t. George had always been aghast at the poor quality of the boy’s education but never lifted a finger to change it. Why not? Sometimes the call comes as anger.

He went down to Eastside Preparatory School, a successful charter school in East Palo Alto. They had an entrepreneurship club extending from their economics class. George volunteered to help the club. The school asked him to fund-raise instead. Okay. George had the best of intentions, but the culture shock was severe. Internet culture taught him to find inefficiency repulsive, but nonprofits do not exist to maximize efficiency. Every time a meeting was unnecessarily canceled, or dragged on too long, George got frustrated. The executive director of the school, Chris Bischof, was a charismatic leader who raised money wherever he spoke. George revered Bischof, but couldn’t put him in a PowerPoint presentation. Without Bischof the pitch was unarticulated. In the language of the Internet, Bischof didn’t *scale*. One of the Internet axioms was, “It’s easier to raise \$100 million than it is \$10 million.” People want to believe and invest in big ideas. Why not a whole chain of Eastside Preps, doing good throughout the country’s inner cities? But charter schools are busy saving the world one kid at a time. They ignored George’s input. He had never been treated this way.

George wasn’t famous on the Internet scene, but he was well enough known that at every party someone recognized him. He had earned notoriety and respect, which translated into people listening to him and getting done what he wanted done.

“I was spoiled by my recognition, my power, my ability to make things happen,” George said.

He realized nobody in education reform was going to listen to him unless he met them halfway. For half a decade he’d been looking at the world through Internet glasses. While he held those values dear, he

reluctantly had to shake them.

To begin this conversion, George decided to discover his roots. George's grandmother had come to Pittsburgh from Italy when his mother was young, and they had never been back. George decided to meet his long-lost cousins and aunts, who lived in the small impoverished city of Eboli, down near Naples.

George spoke some Italian from studying in Siena a few years earlier. So he called a cousin out of the blue and told him he would arrive at the train station on such and such day and time. George made a hotel reservation too, thinking, These people don't even know who I am. He didn't want to impose. He flew over there, took the train, and was met at the station by the cousin. And another cousin. The cousins fought over who got to drive George around. In the next three days, he was introduced to twenty-five households. He'd go from one house to another without a break. Never made it to his hotel. They fought over whose house he ate in, who he sat next to at the table, and whose bed he slept in. George had never seen such an incredible outpouring, such love, simply because he was *family*. The only thing he had in common with these people was their genes. Many of them were only semiliterate. George thought he knew what family meant—but he found it impossible to comprehend the depth and power of the family bond in his relatives.

In San Francisco, a man was measured by his ability to raise millions of dollars. Eboli was still recovering from an earthquake that struck in 1980, so nobody had any money. In Eboli, a man is measured by how dutiful he is to his mother. In Italy, 50 percent of the men live within one kilometer of their mothers. One of a man's duties is to give his mother grandchildren. So on the doorstep of every household, George would be introduced with a snicker:

"This is your long-lost American cousin, grandson of Consulata Manzione. He is thirty-six, *unmarried!*—and lives *five thousand* kilometers from his mother."

What a different way of looking at the world!

On the way back from Eboli, George spent some more time in Siena. He was fascinated with the Palio, a medieval horse race that's reenacted every spring in Siena. George wanted to buy a big house on the parade route as a family vacation home. He had the money, he was ready to make an offer. But you know how Italians are! *Come on over, we'll have some espresso and talk it over.* And George would go over for coffee and they'd chat and never get around to the paperwork. *Hey, meet my friends!* George was ready to wire the money, but he finally gave up.

So . . . being a do-gooder didn't work out, and his relatives thought he was a freak . . . what else could he do? The words of his cousins kept ringing in his ears: *never been married*. It was worse than that. George had never been in love. Not really. Girlfriends sure, but never truly, madly in love. He would love to be married and have kids.

So last February, George bought a personal ad on Match.com. Met a venture capitalist right away, and they fell madly in love. Inexperienced with these powerful feelings, George figured he was a quick learner. But love isn't like that. Nine women can't have a baby in one month.

Well, George's gut instinct was that she was the one for him. George told her, "You're my new start-up." I know that sounds terribly unromantic, but she was a VC, she knew what he meant: he was going to devote himself to their relationship, 24/7/365. It would be his focus, his passion, the thing he wanted to perfect. She found it endearing. Secretly, he figured they'd be married in less than a year. Tops. Six months wouldn't surprise him.

And?

"I think I scared her off."

"No duh. Why did you ever believe you could come on so strong?"

“She liked it. At first.”

“Absolutely. But it takes time to reconcile this new intense lovey-dovey lifestyle with who you were before you fell in love. You have to let that happen naturally. You can’t force it.”

“That’s sort of what she said.”

I got a chance to meet her only in passing. They were friends now, and as friends they got to know each other better. Now they realize they were never right for each other. I can’t tell if George’s heart was broken. I figured it had to be, but he talked about it somewhat matter-of-factly without revealing any emotion.

George had not worked in a year. He’d made valiant first tries at community service, discovering his roots, and falling in love, but I wasn’t sure how much he’d really learned. His internet values still lingered. He told me that it was hard to focus on more than one thing, that he was happiest in attack-and-conquer mode. He also said, “I’m a big disbeliever in balance.” To him, a balanced life suggested mediocrity. When a friend tells him she’s living a more balanced life now, George suspects she simply hasn’t found anything she cares enough about to embrace wholly.

He said, “It’s hard for me to think about limits.”

And a moment later, “I have an appetite for big goals. Reading this stack of books is nice, planning a trip to Kauai is fine, but as goals go, they’re too small. I need something meatier.”

Even though he vowed never to start another company, he itched for it. Badly. Compared with start-ups, real life felt so *bland*. I thought about how so many other people changed only because they absolutely had to—they saved themselves only when pushed to the brink. George seemed cursed by his nine million dollars. He didn’t *have* to change. He had nine million dollars of padding to insulate him

from pain.

So what now? He was building on the little he'd learned. His trip to Italy had really affected him. The tightness of their bonds there made him aware of how tenuous our bonds are here. He wanted to do something about the loss of community in our culture. But he couldn't pin down what that something should be. In the meantime, "my goal is to have one meaningful conversation every day," he said.

The next time I went up to Potrero Hill, George was packing for another trip to Eboli. His flight was in the morning. This time he was taking his mother and his sister and her five young children. Friends told him he was crazy to travel all that way with five kids. What a nightmare! Did he have any idea how hard it would be to corral them? Five feeding schedules. Five nap schedules. San Francisco to Pittsburgh. Pittsburgh to Rome. Rome to Naples. Naples to Eboli by train. Shuttles, double taxis. Impossible! They advised him to take two kids now, and bring the other three on his next trip. But George found pride in its difficulty. He wanted to be a dad, he wanted his own family. He would be the father figure on this trip. He would learn what it was like. Anyway, that was the plan.

George got rid of his Internet glasses somewhere on that second trip to Italy. Maybe it was some combination of seeing how Italians view the world and simultaneously how little children see the world that helped him realize his old way of seeing the world was not the only way, or even the best way. He was finally ready to begin the rest of his life. Shortly after he got back, he bought a house a few blocks away from the one he had rented, and he put down his roots. He met another woman and fell in love again, this time for keeps. They live together now.

On the day of September 11, between replays of that morning's tragedy, George read Diane Ravitch's *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms*. TV Screen. Book. TV Screen. Book. That night, his past finally faded away, and George decided to make a career change

into education reform. He recognized that this would not be a thing he could solve, rather a problem to devote himself to. He volunteered again at two charter schools in San Francisco and Oakland, and got certified as a high-school level social studies teacher. He's now at Stanford, earning his Master's in education and getting some classroom experience. He hopes to help start charter schools when he graduates.

I tell George's story a lot, and it's usually when I want to push people to be aware what kind of glasses they're wearing. Our surroundings may have changed, but our perspective lags. We all have our ways of looking at the world, and we have to ask, "Am I looking through my own eyes, or am I looking through glasses I don't even realize are there?"

REVIVING WHAT YOU NEGLECTED

I get laughed at when I try to convince people that the Internet generation wasn't solely motivated by greed. Those last ugly years of the boom put an indelible stamp on the whole arc, tainting it forever. As a society we will never look back on the early days with a sense of loss and remorse, wondering what happened to those things we used to believe in. But individually that's exactly what the faithful were thinking. Those early years *were* special. Nobody made a dime until 1997, and nobody cared. People were giddy to have a job where they could wear a skintight latex bodysuit or skateboard down the hallways. The Internet reinvented work culture, and in so doing turned on a generation, tapping into its potential for the first time.

The business plans weren't the only thing proven wrong. So were the ideals and values that so excited this crowd. A short list: That smarts is better than experience. That a passionate life is better than a balanced one. That young people will rise to the occasion if given a piece of the action. That risk is the path to reward. With these ideals dashed, dot-commers had to find a new reason to get up in the morning.

It didn't matter how much money they had. From the youngest programmers to the richest executives, it was time to do the kind of work they'd long neglected.

Dylan MacNiven's dad, Jamis, was a former Greenwich Village bohemian who owned a coffee shop. Dylan grew up with modest means but surrounded by extravagant wealth, because his dad's

coffee shop, Buck's Roadhouse in Woodside, became ground zero for venture capitalists. Jamis is a friend of mine, he's jolly and happy-go-lucky. I first met his sons at a party held at Buck's for the release of my last book. Dylan is the left-brained one, by his own description. He was a sophomore at UC Santa Cruz studying computer science. He was not above wanting the wealth that his high school friends had, and so he went after it. At the expense of intellectual diversity, he carried a double load to graduate a year early, even as he coded for a start-up at night.



The day of his last final exam, a limo showed up at his dorm. His start-up had been sold. He and his friends partied till he puked. Someone fed him hash brownies, and they wouldn't stay down. He was worth \$400,000 on paper. Bought a BMW 328i. The stock went to 100, then fell to 3. What a killjoy. He never sold any of his shares because he'd seen sell-offs before and always believed the market would recover.

What next? Dylan met Maartje, a Dutch girl, on the streets of Santa Cruz. He fell in love and followed her home to Amsterdam to work on her parents' farm. He's tall and blond and figured he'd pass as any other Dutch kid, but work in the tulip fields was backbreaking and endless, nothing romantic about it at all. He was hunched over in the

rows alongside immigrants who couldn't teach him Dutch. And in Amsterdam, he didn't pass at all. Everyone assumed he was an American who'd stepped off the train to smoke some hash. He didn't want to be a tourist, he hated being treated like one. But he *was* a tourist. He was a tourist to Amsterdam, he was a tourist to the whole European ethos, he was a tourist to adulthood, he was a tourist to reality.

Some things take time. But he's twenty-two; that's not what he wants to hear. He had to come home to sell his BMW to raise the cash to cover the tax bill he got from the IRS. Even though he never sold his stock and never profited, he was subject to the alternative minimum tax and owed \$19,000. He had \$9,000 in savings and borrowed the rest from his dad on the stipulation that he come sell his car to pay it back. Dylan came to see me on the way to dropping off the Beemer. We talked for hours. I was frustrated and felt helpless. I'd done all this research, and nothing I said seemed to interest him or help him. I told him story after story, and his eyes remained glazed.

He'd looked for work and had some offers, but couldn't get interested. At twenty he'd been treated like he was thirty, and it was hard to go back and accept being a peon. He used to earn \$40 an hour; making half that seemed purposeless. He recognized he'd lived too narrow a life, but he was young, it wasn't time yet to go deeper and understand this stuff. He needed more adventure, more experience. He wanted to have fun. A month later, a friend called from Portugal. He was driving a waterski boat at a resort on the Mediterranean. They needed another driver. Dylan was on a plane four days later.

Jamie Nicholson was another young programmer. He made enough money at Netscape to pay off his student loans and buy a used car. But he found it alienating. Every night there were launch parties to hang out at, sushi to eat, but he was utterly unable to carry a conversation. He'd been in a zone all day, concentrating on a few dozen lines of code, and his brain was in a fog. He'd meet people and be unable to say anything significant. He hated who he was becoming. Who he was.

Thinking a vacation in the Caribbean might help, he went to the bookstore to look at guidebooks. There was a cute girl in the aisle. She was reading about Cuba. So he read about Cuba, hoping to strike up a conversation. He didn't get anywhere with her, but he did end up in Havana, where he met another girl, an American college student who was a lot more interesting than he was. She told him their week together would be a glass jar, and at the end of the week they'd seal it up forever, only to observe and remember it. He was not allowed to call her or e-mail or mention her name afterward. She wanted no baggage in her Caribbean flings. She wouldn't let him talk about computer work. They discussed Che Guevara, sex, waitressing, and politics. She knew several languages.

"This girl had enhanced herself and her value to other people," Jamie said.

Jamie realized how narrow his life was—he was a niche person, only good for one thing. This couldn't have been clearer than a time she wanted to swim out to a sailboat. Jamie didn't really know how to swim. He could paddle around and fake it in a pool, but in the open water of the gulf, he was having a hell of a time. He shouldn't have been out that far. She was floating on her back, and he was practically drowning, thinking, How lame am I! What good is knowing advanced transistor physics if you can't even swim!

He stayed until his money ran out and came back vowing not to change his career, but to change himself. "Specialization is for insects," he said. He enrolled at San Francisco State University, not to get an advanced degree. Simply to broaden. He's taking classes in swimming, Spanish, journalism, guitar, and philosophy. They make him feel like a more complete person. He's still programming on a contract basis to make ends meet. But he can sustain a conversation. I can tell that the girl he met in Cuba is in his inner circle, even if he can't contact her. He respects the limits she set for their fling. She's called a few times out of the blue, but he has no pictures, and he fights time to hold on to her face.

Recently he met with a career counselor at State, to see if it might help. He was a little more of a handful than she was accustomed to. She gave him the Myers-Briggs and the Strong Interest Inventory. She wanted him to come back every week for a while, and he would probably do it, but with great reluctance. He felt she was trying to label him, to narrow him down when he wanted to uncover his latent gifts.

"It's too early to ask 'who am I?'" he said. "I'm just getting started."

I was impressed that Cynthia Ringo was willing to share her story. She was the CEO of a profitable telecom company in San Jose with 250 employees and one hundred million dollars in sales, and her recent decision to resign was not yet public knowledge. Typical CEOs speak in a bland legalese that makes them incredibly boring. But Cynthia was mature, confident, and centered.

She started out as a police officer in Roswell, north of Atlanta, then went to several FBI schools to become a sex crimes investigator for the Fulton County district attorney's office. She wanted to do something of service, and she was good at it. But after two years she knew she didn't want to be doing this at forty. The work was important but she dealt only with the worst of crimes. It was making her bitter, suspicious of men, hard. She remembers well the day she was driving to work and started asking herself "What should I do with my life?"

It was a natural transition to law school, and then to a law firm, but to spend more time with her year-old son she moved over to a software company. She discovered that she loved business. Her company bought and sold other companies, and when they did so they gave the management a battery of psychological tests to see what they were made of. One day her company asked Cynthia to take the tests. She had no experience with technology, but the next day they asked her to go run one of their divisions.

This was back in the eighties, when the PC industry suffered a boom and a bust every other year. She went through two recessions in six years, and was so freaked out by the cycles, so paranoid that she

would lose her job, that she decided to attack and conquer her fear. She quit and became a consultant, to know that she could get by without a job. But she wasn't out of a job for long. Each boom was bigger than the last one. She was now on her third start-up, all of which were successful.

She'd given up hope she could slow down. "I have one speed. Pedal to the metal." But she wasn't patting her own back. She knew this was her greatest weakness. It was hurting her marriage and her relationship with her son, who's now twenty-two.

Last year her current company, Coppercom, was supposed to go public. Now it won't for another few years. The situation required her to redevote herself for another five years, and to spend half her time in Boca Raton, Florida, where half the company is located.

"I'm used to it," she said in her slight Georgian accent. "I've been gone half the time for the last eight and a half years. But I'm tired of living out of suitcases. I've slept in too many strange beds. I couldn't make that commitment."

CEOs do not give up. CEOs do not take vacations. CEOs do not lose sight of the number-one objective, which is to make their investors ten times their money. CEOs do not let their personal lives prevent them from making the right business decision. So Cynthia decided she shouldn't be CEO.

Her investors were pissed. "This whole thing has been a bet on *you*," they said. They invested because she ran it. She was their comfort factor. They felt betrayed. It was already hard enough in this market. They'd understand if she had a breakdown, or had an addiction or a disability, but resigning simply because she *wanted* to was selfish and unprofessional. She tried to convince them it would be unprofessional to pretend she didn't need a break. Eventually they shut up. She's too tough to be swayed by their pressure.

Now her son's trying to figure out what to do with his life. He's at the

opposite end of the spectrum from Cynthia, as flaky as she is capable, but she doesn't pressure him. He feels bad that he won't finish school until he's twenty-four. She tells him to take until he's twenty-five and not rush it. Try on as many things as he wants. He's tried cooking in restaurants and being a personal trainer.

"We ruin kids by implicitly pressuring them," she said. "Simply by asking them all the time, 'What do you want to do when you grow up?' or 'What's your Major?,' they get the false impression that they're supposed to have an answer. They feel bad for not knowing. Nobody knows. Not at his age. I wish people stopped asking him that. It does nothing but stress him out."

Louis Borders talked about his daughters.

Louis is the founder of the Borders bookstore chain, which he sold many years ago, when it had about twenty-five stores. He leveraged that success to create Webvan, which is perhaps the costliest failure in e-commerce. During the months Webvan was sinking fast and regularly making headlines for its attempted bailouts, Louis reached out to me and we became friends. By that point, he was no longer involved in management and, I believe, had been forced out or resigned. I didn't find those details interesting enough to even ask about. I read in the newspaper that he lost \$1.3 billion, taking out only \$2.7 million three weeks before the company went bankrupt. He did not reach out to me with hopes he could spin the news, or alter his legacy. It seemed like he needed someone other than VCs to hang out with. He came to a bash at the Grotto, a community of artists where I have an office. We had a drink together that night, and a few months later he started coming by for lunch.

At one point, regarding the crash, he said it had been a good thing. He was grateful for it.

"Why?"

"Because it's been good for my relationship with my daughters."

The younger was only two and a half. The older was twenty-seven.

Louis's father was a successful businessman who raised his large family as if they didn't have any money. He wanted his children to be self-sustaining and have a hard work ethic.

"I believed I'd done the same with my own daughter. After selling Borders, I maintained the same lifestyle. When I started Webvan, she was a grounded person. But in the last year, it started going to her head. She was sort of a minor celebrity in the scene. It was really hard to watch and not be able to do anything. A dad can't meddle in his daughter's life, you know. So when it crashed, I think it put her in her place. Brought her back to earth. And you probably won't believe me, but I mean it. It's worth it to have her back."

With his free time, he's trying to do nothing. "I'm trying to stay fallow for a year. It's been six months and I have another six." He was looking for a mentor to help him through this process. In the meantime, he had plenty of energy for his younger daughter. Not to *give* her attention, but to *pay* attention. To listen to her. She's already her own little person with her own moods and opinions and desires. It's something he never had time for with his older daughter—to look at her and be able to read her face, feel what she feels, know what she wants, trace her curiosity, and empathize with her confusion. *I know, girl. I know.*

It's easy to envision these stories as parables of dot-commers who neglected their souls. But these stories were replicated in Washington among Clinton-Gore alumni, who worked just as hard for eight years. Being unemployed wasn't as bad as they feared—they could work on their vegetable garden or pick up the sax again, or, even more ephemerally, try to be a better person, in all the vague, hard-to-describe (even harder to measure) ways. A better listener, say, or a better friend, less abrasive, less dogmatic. Which brings us to the next question: working on "yourself" is indeed so immeasurable, so indescribable—how do we honor these internal accomplishments, so they carry as much merit as the external accomplishments that land on

our résumés? How do we translate between the world within and the world around us? This next story, of Nicole Heinrich, is about exactly that struggle. She learned to tell her story in a way that portrays far more than her flashy résumé reveals.

VALUING INTERNAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Nicole Heinrich had lived out several of the entrepreneurial adventures young people commonly fantasize about. After graduating from the University of Wisconsin, she flew to Tokyo, Japan, and became a translator for high-powered Japanese executives from the electronics industry. When she'd milked that for all it was worth, she journeyed to Nice, France (her parents were French immigrants), and founded a successful bed-and-breakfast for American tourists called the Cultural Oasis. A few years later, Nicole felt the call for something new, so she returned to Chicago and looked around for a good idea. She saw an opportunity in printer toner, seized it, and cofounded one of the fastest-growing companies in the Midwest. Nicole became known in the industry and around Chicago as "The Toner Queen." She was a regular at all the young society events, like the Shark Ball and the Green Tie Ball.

Nicole began e-mailing me in the spring, and by my own metrics she seemed like a good candidate to profile. She was young (thirty-three) and intrepid and culturally worldly—she was a great role model, wasn't she? But I couldn't get interested. I had a hard time saying why—I guess I couldn't find the hook in her story. I was interested in people who had overcome their weaknesses, and Nicole gave the impression of being a natural-born risk taker.

I challenged her on this, so she kept sending more details of her life, which didn't alter my first impression. Her story was always laced with upbeat philosophizing, as if all one had to do to succeed was never let

anything wipe that smile off your face. Her story should have been deep but it came across shallow.

Partly this was because she had an odd formality and an official quality to all her correspondence. Her very first e-mail had referred me to her bio on her company website, which made her sound like Superwoman. When I asked her to share some stories about the bed-and-breakfast in Nice, she sent back an indented list of the seven positives and the five negatives, but not a single anecdote. I felt like she had trouble communicating her emotions. By then I'd already decided she wasn't going to make it into the book, and I even went to Chicago to visit some other people and didn't call her.

The only things that kept me conversing with Nicole were basic politeness and the fact that I could never figure out why she had contacted me in the first place. Why was she so stubborn about getting her story told? Did she need me? She didn't seem to. Eventually she mentioned she wanted to leave her company and start a fourth career as a motivational speaker. She was practicing her speeches every other Tuesday at a local gathering of Toastmasters, a nationwide group that helps people overcome their fear of speaking in public. I guessed (correctly) that Nicole had adopted her forced upbeat cheeriness from other speakers. Part of me wanted to work with her to deprogram that template, but I was suspicious she was gunning for publicity to launch her fourth career. I never accused her of this—I just stopped writing her.

A couple months later, she wrote me again, conveying that she felt rejected. (That was her first sign of honest emotion.) She wanted to know *why* I'd decided not to use her story in my book. I'd told her all along *why*. But in the months of silence I'd started to see real value, not so much in her story, but in how she was learning to tell her story. In the late nineties, there was such pressure to define ourselves by our external accomplishments. What we learned about ourselves got drowned out. How do we tell our story so that it reflects our full depth?

Nicole and I spent some time on the phone for a week, and by asking blunt personal questions that would never be asked in a business interview, I discovered an incredibly deep woman who was well aware of her weaknesses and behavior patterns, but who was suffocating inside a persona she had created for herself. I was shocked. "I've grown accustomed to hiding behind the guise of corporate bitch," she said. "It's easier to be a loner. I can't let my feminine side out. I've always let men I'm in business with take advantage of me. But I'm thirty-three. And it's time to ask, 'What do I really want to do with my life?' Not, 'What does my corporation need?' or 'What do my business partners want?'" The urge to be a motivational speaker was the urge to be herself in front of others.



I flew to Chicago ten days later. I gave her a hug hello at the airport, which I knew was pushing it because she'd warned me that she used to be uncomfortable with hugs. She still is, but she tried. She's very attractive, sandy blond, about five feet nine, but a bit stiff in her carriage. She has a nice smile but only flashed it when I took pictures of her for my scrapbook. She spoke in full sentences with a Wisconsin accent, listened hard to every question, and frequently remarked, "Oh, that's an interesting question." She was trying very hard. We rarely digressed from the topic of her life. She was unusual; on one hand, she spoke about herself very extensively, drawing upon a lot of introspection and therapy, but on the other hand she believed she didn't quite know herself, and I could feel that this was true.

She drives a metallic green VW Beetle that's a mobile billboard for her employer, audaciously and sadly smothered in huge logos. (No wonder she felt defined by her work.) She owns what's called a "3-Flat" in the Logan Square neighborhood, but she rents out the two best flats and lives on the third floor in what is basically an attic studio. "That's typical of me," she said, "I never think I'm deserving of the best space." This pattern was reproduced at her office. Even though she was the president of the company, she only kept a desk on the sales floor, while the CEO and others had private window offices. We spent only a short time at her office, and the rest was spent around town in museums and restaurants, or just walking between places.

This is how we worked: We started with how she'd been presenting herself to the world, as manifested in her corporate bio and her public image, and we began to list all the truths about her that her Shining Success image was hiding. We retold her story several times, a level deeper each time. I didn't have to dig for this stuff; she was dying to confess it all. I was primarily her witness, and secondarily her story editor. What follows are her words, not verbatim, but reassembled by me from her comments and quotes.

Admitting the Failures

I went to Japan because nobody would hire me out of school. I taught at an English language school, and though some of my "students" were important executives, I wasn't privy to their business negotiations. When I returned to the United States, the only job I could get was at an employment agency, placing ex-cons into the workforce. In Nice, the "bed-and-breakfast" was a youth hostel with nine beds. When I left it, I didn't get compensated for my equity in the hostel. Back in Chicago, I was fired from my first job selling computer parts. I've been fired three times, actually. Though I was a cofounder of the toner company, it was not my idea, and I didn't even know what toner was. I'm a salaried employee. I have some money but far less than people might expect. Our company has grown to forty-seven employees and \$26 million in annual sales, but it's become stagnant and I'm unhappy there. I want to leave.

Again, United by a Theme

My parents had old-world European values. They worked hard to save money to support their children. They sought *safety*. I wanted to rebel against that. I wanted intense experiences. Okay, Japan didn't make me happy? Maybe Thailand will. Okay, Thailand didn't? Maybe France. Okay, those people who have money seem happy. I'll go make money. I thought when I had a certain amount of money and recognition, that would be *it*, I would have *arrived*, and that would be all I had to do. On the outside it looks like success, but the truth is I've never been able to shake this low-grade-fever dissatisfaction with what I do. I'm exhausted; I did all these things to make me happy, and none worked. I'm embarrassed to explain what pushed me to realize I had to break this cycle. A woman at work is from Czechoslovakia, and her relatives make crystal glasses. One day she was accepted by the Home Shopping Network to sell her crystal. And she was so elated, absolutely joyous! And I was so jealous, because I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt elated, I couldn't even remember what elation felt like. I hated my jealousy. And I knew I would always be miserable unless I stopped chasing this idea that I'll only be happy if . . . I don't want safety, and it's not quite contentment, either, because that sounds boring. It's a stillness I'm after—I want my mind to be at ease with my place in the world.

Again, United by a Theory of Why She's Unhappy

My mother was very submissive to my father, and though she resented it deeply she did nothing about it. My dad was a carpenter, and I worked for him even when I was very young, hanging drywall, digging a foundation, or setting up a C-wall. I've perpetuated this subservience to men in my adult life. In Nice, when I was twenty-six, I fell in love with a forty-four-year-old doctor named Axel. The bed-and-breakfast was my idea, and I did almost all the work—he had his patients to see—but I let him take 70 percent of the money and leave me only 30 percent. I left France because Axel was a real womanizer. I put up with it for a long time, but when he started sleeping with the guests at the hostel, that was the last straw. I was also involved romantically with Josh Tabin when we founded the toner company. He had his own job, so I did all the work for the first months, but I let him keep 85 percent of the equity. When he quit his other job, we broke up amicably and remain good friends. But he has received all of the recognition for the company; he was named the Entrepreneur of the Year, it's his name on all the plaques. I've tried my whole life to live unlike my mother, and she's urged me to stay away from men. Yet I am still stuck in her pattern. I get caught up in the current of men, doing their bidding, letting them decide what's best for me. I'd rather work for them and make them money than make it for myself. Since I've had this realization, I've recognized that the next thing has to be 100 percent totally for me.

And what would that next thing be? Nicole loved her every-other-Tuesday at Toastmasters. It was the highlight of her week. “I feel happier about giving a five-minute speech at Toastmasters than I do about landing a sixty-thousand-dollar-a-month toner deal,” she said.

When she first told me about her goal of motivational speaking, it was her dream to stand in front of an audience of female professionals and talk about her secret to overcoming fears in business: Baby Steps. “Every day, do one little thing to advance your goal, no matter how small it is.” It wasn’t a bad concept, and I could envision the workbook and infomercial, and the little superscript trademark always bringing up the caboose on the phrase Baby StepsSM. But it was hokey, and she’d be wearing a mask, because it required her to maintain the persona of Toner Queen.

By the time she and I were done, she’d been working on a speech about what she called her “Savior Issues” with men. It was far more personal and honest than the Baby Steps stuff. It was her dream to stand in front of an audience of ordinary women and talk about patterns in their relationships, and how to break the cycle.

She didn’t know if she could succeed. She didn’t even know what the next step would be—go to the Toastmasters Nationals? Find an agent? So with all that uncertainty in front of her, and the mountain to climb, she recognized that she still clung to a hope that *this* would finally make her happy. Would it? Was it any different from her previous hopes, her earlier mirages of happiness?

“Po, how am I to know the difference?” she queried me, time and again. “How do I know this isn’t another mirage?” The last time she asked this, we were sitting in her car outside my motel, and I knew this was probably the last time I’d ever see her. She’d turned her motor off, and it was getting cold fast.

I cautioned her not to attempt this new career if she only thought

success at it would make her happy. Wouldn't even failing at it still be good for her? "I've been all over the country," I said. "And what I've found is that . . . if you succeed at something in which you're honest to yourself, and in line with your values, and not wearing a mask to the world, then that *does* seem to make people happy. It's not a mirage. When you succeed and you're still unhappy, it's usually because in your heart you're conflicted about how you accomplished it or whether you really deserved it or, most likely, that you're conflicted about what you've presented about yourself to the world."

She asked, "Well, is it better to succeed at something you *don't* really believe in, or is it better to fail at something you really *do* believe in?"

"I don't know. You ask that question in such a theoretical way, as if there was one answer that applied to everyone. You already tried the former, so why not try the latter? You're only thirty-three."

She was freezing, and needed to get going. She was driving up to Wisconsin to spend the night at her parents'. Our hug good-bye was as quick as our hello.

In the next months, she quit her job and parted ways with her cofounder. She hoped to negotiate a settlement, but she eventually decided it wasn't worth it to be tied to her former savior. She started her own supply company—it was still toner, but this one was for her, and her alone.

33 The Once-Angry Minister

A NEW KIND OF SUCCESS STORY

What are we to do with this enhanced story of ourselves? Can what-we-do really be in alignment *that deeply* with who-we-are? I think it can, if we let “I’m going to be truer to myself” be the principle that drives our decisions every time we come to a crossroads. Through trial and error, we are pushed to greater recognition about what we really need. The Big Bold Step turns out to be only the first step.

No story demonstrates this more cleanly than John Butler’s.

The first time we talked, John was in his law office in Santa Clara. He’s about six feet one, with ruddy cheeks and short auburn hair and a diamond stud in his left ear. He still had the sweeping shoulders and tapered hips that he developed almost thirty years earlier, when he was ranked number two nationally in the 200-meter breaststroke. He’s forty-seven now. John was preparing to shut down his divorce mediation practice so that he might become ordained as a minister by the Unity Church. This was a two-year program at Unity’s world headquarters in Missouri. John expected to hear any day—and did, the next day, by letter. His application was turned down. The church told him he had “anger issues.” John had spent his life struggling to overcome his anger—he thought he *had* overcome it—so this rejection was doubly devastating. It almost extinguished his hopes.

The next time we talked in depth, we met in the Portland, Oregon, airport and traveled down to the southwest corner of the state, to a two-stoplight town called Bandon-by-the-Sea. The Unity chapter in Bandon

had given John a six-month contract as their interim minister, even though he was not ordained. Their regular minister was on sabbatical. John was two months into his contract (he'd come back to the Bay Area that week for training), and he absolutely loved it. It had convinced him his instincts had been right. "Already I can't imagine not being a minister. I'm not even sure I can go into the ministry training program next year. Why wait two years to do something I've already gotten to do and am good at?"

While this jump from lawyer to minister sounds like one of those radical 90-degree turns, John's been narrowing in on this his whole adult life, and the theme that's brought him here has been consistent. When he was young, he was abrasive and quick to assign blame—and he found work that aligned with that personality. But his life has been a gradual step-by-step away from that hostility. This latest step has brought him to the other end of the spectrum; now he's calm, good-natured, and forgiving.

That journey began shortly after college. He had a personal motive for becoming a lawyer—he'd suffered a great injustice in court. John had started out as a carpet salesman for a building materials wholesaler. They stiffed him on \$80,000 in commissions, so he sued. John hired a letterhead-litigator from one of San Jose's best firms to represent him, but the guy did a lousy job and was unprepared. John thought, "If this guy is supposedly the *best*, I'm in the wrong business." He took the LSAT a week later, paid the extra hundred bucks to be FedEx'd his score quickly, and persuaded Santa Clara's law school to take him at the last minute. He was sitting in property class a week later.

He flashed that same kind of bullheadedness after school, when he joined the San Jose district attorney's office. Within a year he was the lead misdemeanor attorney in the office. His specialty was drunk driving arrests. John went after everyone. He refused to settle. He was feverish with his righteousness. These people had done something *wrong*; they had to be *punished*. If that meant he had to work ninety-

hour weeks, he would do it. If it meant he tied up the courtrooms, so be it. There was no excuse for letting offenders plead to a second or third offense as if it were their first offense. There was no excuse for not making them go to AA meetings and fulfill their community service. John became infamous in Santa Clara County courts, and soon no attorney wanted to take him on. They began to plead guilty without a trial.

A couple of things ended this vindictiveness. First, John realized how much of the anger he had for drunk drivers was actually misdirected rage at his father, who drank excessively when John was young. As soon as he made the connection, he no longer felt this hatred for the offenders. His zeal for prosecuting these cases was gone. The district attorney bumped him up to felonies, and his first two cases were ones that the DA wanted to drop because they were too hard to prosecute. But John couldn't do that. When he saw blame, he would stop at nothing to get a conviction. One was a molestation case involving a patient at a mental institution, the other a child endangerment case. He took both cases to trial and won convictions, but they required an incredible amount of his energy. He could see that if he were to prosecute rapists and murderers, he would never escape from this cycle. His tendency to take these cases so personally, as if *he* were the victim, meant the cases would swallow him. He needed to learn not to take it so personally, something he would never do if assigned to criminal cases. So he quit and spent three months soul searching.



He thought about being a minister, but it was so far-fetched, “It was like a football player suggesting he wants to be a ballerina,” John said. John decided to go into bankruptcy law. He got two job offers from firms that specialized in corporate bankruptcy. The first was from a hardball litigation firm that took everything to court. The second was less prestigious and less money, but from a boutique that preferred to negotiate, use workout sessions, and help the debtor’s business turn around. John had a deep hatred of debtors (his wound from the \$80,000 in unpaid commissions hadn’t healed at all), but this second firm’s approach tugged at him. John went with them. It felt right. He found in their methods a better solution for his own resentments, which he held against his parents and his ex-wife.

He spent four years there, then started his own practice. It was another notch down in pay and prestige, but he thought he’d be happier representing consumers rather than corporations. Consumer bankruptcies were usually uncontested; the injured parties were banks and credit companies who didn’t take it personally. The whole process was designed to help a man turn his life around. Again, this felt right. John was very good at it, and highly sought after. He was in therapy at this time, and he was realizing how much better he felt *talking things out* than bearing grudges and fighting endlessly. One day after therapy, as he was sitting in the parking lot, the thought occurred to him, “Why don’t you become a mediator?”

He took a class on mediation with the goal of doing one divorce mediation by the end of the year. John became, rather quickly, the dominant and most successful divorce mediator in Silicon Valley. He'd been married for six years, had two children, and divorced during law school—he brought his own experience to his mediation sessions, and he was often in tears as he described his own experiences to the warring parties. He utilized *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* techniques to help divorcees communicate better in their sessions. John found the work very rewarding, and still does. But one of the keys to resolving marital separation agreements is always to push the question, “What do you *really* want?” She doesn't really want his car, she wants him to say he's sorry and to admit he handled it badly. He doesn't really want the home, he wants her to forgive him. And John Butler really wanted to be a minister. The thing was, he didn't go to church and didn't really believe. But he still wanted to be a minister! Somehow, it called to him, quietly. It didn't make sense, but the idea of ministering to people's problems seemed the next step in his evolution.

During this time, John took a theology class at San Jose State. It was very academic and not very spiritual. He looked into seminaries, but he didn't believe in any of those religions. Then he met a woman who was a minister, and he fell in love with her, and started going to her church, and they got engaged. John thought she was his soul mate. She was going to make this transition easy. Their plan was, after the marriage, John would become the co-minister of her church. He still hadn't found his belief yet, but the God part wasn't the appeal of it to him. Shortly before the wedding, she called it off and broke up with him. No soul mate, no ministry, no church.

“I see now that I was using her to make my dream happen,” John said. “And there was something false in that. I wasn't willing to do the work myself. It was devastating, but it was a real test. Was I willing to make the transition alone, without anybody's help? That's a lot scarier.”

John went looking for a new church. He tried the Unity church in Palo

Alto, and more for ritual and solace than religion, he kept going back. The Unity church did not convert him, not in the slightest. Slowly, gradually, as he learned more about Unity's teachings, he realized here was a church that he didn't disagree with or have misgivings about. Here was a church that aligned with how he'd come to see the world. One of the distinguishing beliefs of Unity is that the world is not a battle between good and evil. There are not good people and bad people, the right and the wrong, the saved and the damned. Unity teaches that all people are inherently good, even if they might have made some mistakes. This is exactly what John had slowly gravitated to in his work! Then, Unity teaches "practical Christianity," meaning it models how to handle life's everyday difficult situations, which are their own reward when handled well. Unity ministers don't wear robes and aren't the congregation's conduit to God. John found in the Unity Church a way to add a spiritual dimension to his evolving skills in handling conflict resolution. With everything in alignment, his spiritual belief gradually came to him.

"But being religious was not enough," John said. "And bringing spiritual ideas into my mediation practice was not enough. I still had a calling to be the one delivering the sermon."

John joined the board of the church and became a well-regarded mediator for church conflicts, both at his church and at others. It was at one of these mediation sessions, for a Unity chapter in another county, that John learned their minister had to leave town on a family medical emergency. Who was going to deliver Sunday's sermon?

"I'd love to do the sermon," John found himself saying.

He had three days to prepare. He'd never felt more alive. His mentor attended, and so did his mother and father. When John talks about his father, his voice trembles and cracks with emotion. "After the sermon, he came up to me and blessed me. It was—" He choked up, then let go. "It was the first time in my life he blessed me. He said I had a gift."

Over the next couple years, John delivered an occasional sermon

and took some weeklong classes at Unity's world headquarters in Missouri. (I discovered him through a friend who attends the Unity church in San Francisco, where John gave three sermons last year.)

When we talked last year, it amazed me that he was once an abrasive man, but he assured me that was the kindest word one might use to describe him. He understood himself enormously well and had nothing to hide. He was never afraid to reveal his weaknesses. I assumed he was going to be accepted to the ministry program—how could he not? He'd clearly done his work.

"Being told I had 'anger issues' was such a blow," John said, now nine months later. "I was infuriated at being rejected. I was angry at them. And yet every time I felt anger, it was like I was offering them evidence that I'm angry. *Of course* I'm angry, because I felt they were wrong, but I couldn't protest or appeal their decision, because they would see that state I was in and think they were right. Oh, it was a trap."

"How'd you get out of it?" I asked.

"Well, first, spending a lot of time forgiving them for what I perceived was their mistake. And then, kind of on the wings of that forgiveness, I realized they were probably right. I'd been a little on edge when I went for the week to Unity Village. I don't like being judged and evaluated. And they had these knickknack rituals that bothered me, sort of treated us like children. There was a dress code, just casual clothes, but I'm an adult. I dress appropriately. Then, I had to sign in for classes every morning, as if I might skip class. I'd paid over a thousand dollars for the plane tickets, hotel room, and rental car—was I really going to skip class? So these things put me on edge, and they could feel it when I was there. I had a bit of a grudge."

"So did you go back?"

"Yes, I went back for another week, to sit in more classes from the very teachers who had denied me permission to the program. That

was a real test. It would have been so easy to see them as my enemy, my tormentors, and bear a grudge. When they saw I did not bear this grudge, and I was no longer bothered by the knickknacks required, they realized I was a better man than they had known."

"It sounds like you will get admitted to the program next year."

"Yes, they've indicated that, and I've applied. But I don't think I want to go," he said.

"Why not?"

"Because I love being a minister so much. I'd rather find another short-term position than sit in school. My contract is up in June. That will be a very tough decision."

He told me the story of how he received this position in Bandon, Oregon. When he was back in Missouri, he grabbed a newsletter for Unity ministers. In the back pages were classified ads from churches needing ministers. Bandon had advertised. John called and sent them a CD of his sermons, but he was told they already had two ordained candidates they were interviewing. A month later, they called back. Neither of the two candidates was quite right. Could he be there in four days and deliver the Sunday sermon? John agreed, but then was told they couldn't pay for his plane ticket, which was about four hundred dollars. He bristled. It was standard procedure to pay for a candidate's travel costs. He didn't want to be taken advantage of. Finally, on a friend's advice, he decided to drive, a twelve-hour trip, spend the night, give the sermon, and drive back the next day.

The congregation loved him. He was offered the six-month contract.

"I know it now seems like a dream come true, but it still was very hard for me to accept," John said. "Most of my friends and my mentor thought I shouldn't take it. I would have to pay other lawyers to take over my mediation cases, and wrap up a practice I'd taken years building, for what? For a six-month gig that led nowhere. That offered

no next step, no future. My success is not measurable. I used to make \$250 an *hour*. This pays \$425 a *week*. It's not like I was unhappy with my mediation cases. I love that work. Plus, I really want to find a soul mate. Most of the people in Bandon are retired and older than I am." He went on with more excuses until I cut him short.

"But you needed to know if this was really for you," I argued.

"Yeah."

"Is it?"

"So much more than I ever anticipated."

Unity's chapel in Bandon is an aluminum-sided, aluminum-roofed barn across from an oil change shop off the coast highway. It's a humble place. There's no cross on the roof's peak. Inside, the walls are plastered and the ceilings are suspended and the light flickers from long fluorescent tubes. The floor is covered from wall to wall with cream carpet. There are no pews, just semicircular rows of ordinary metal chairs. I had no expectations, so I wasn't surprised. But now describing it, I'm at a loss—what makes it a church at all? It was entirely in the minds of the congregation. They hadn't inherited a place of worship. They'd started this chapter themselves, and the church required their participation or it would not exist. During the week there are children's classes, a writers' group, a science-of-mind class, a meditation class, a prayer support group, and at 9:30 on Sunday mornings, an adult class with about fifteen feisty people who wanted John to challenge them. This was incredibly refreshing. Most of them were retired. They'd come to tranquil Bandon from California's busy cities, but they weren't here to golf and play bridge. They'd gone north, not south. In their fifties and sixties, they were using this time for personal growth.

John had given them homework the week prior, and most had done the exercises. He'd asked them to write down their *limiting beliefs*—essentially, their opinions of themselves, reseen not as identity

statements but as self-constraints. One woman's limiting belief her whole life was that she wasn't smart and couldn't learn—she'd realized she *did learn*, but slowly. Another woman's limiting belief was that she could never ask for help. She had to fix everything, and by herself. John urged her to learn the feeling of helplessness. "Wow!" she exclaimed, unable to imagine ever going there, but willing to think about it. Another woman said that her limiting belief was that there was never enough money. One of the principles of Unity is to be aware of our "abundance," that we already have plenty and we will not go hungry, that the world will take care of us. She had real trouble accepting this, and as a result she was preoccupied with the material world.

I began to get the hang of this exercise, and I wrote down the limiting beliefs that had stopped me over my lifetime—that my dream of writing wouldn't come true and I needed to find another career, that my divorce had wounded me, that being a parent was not compatible with my calling, that nobody would read what I wrote unless I was funny. . . . Many of the constructs John was teaching these retirees were ones I'd arrived at over the course of this book—that our fears should be attacked, not run from. From our deepest wounds come our greatest gifts. Everyone in this book has overcome his or her own limiting beliefs. They've discovered that their hard-earned skills mean more to them than the talents they were born with. John said, "Most of us can trace our problems back to two or three limiting beliefs." In his own case, he had believed he was a fighter, and so he went looking for fights—in the swimming pool, in the courts of justice, and in his family. That fighter turned out to be a shell, and inside was a man who hated to fight.

At eleven o'clock the chapel filled with about seventy people. John took the microphone and led the service. People felt free to interrupt with questions or joke lightly with him. During his sermon, he involved several as actors in a skit. He never bludgeoned them with scripture, and quoted poets and philosophers and politicians more than Christ's disciples. In a voice quaking with feeling, he told long stories from his own life, from times when he was challenged to love unconditionally or

grant forgiveness.

He'd told me, "All week long, Sunday's sermon is on my mind. It really pushes me to think and observe. This is not about me lording over the congregation, me being better than them. I've got tons to learn. Delivering a weekly sermon accelerates that growth."

John's arc is, in my opinion, the clearest example of how I've come to think the question "What should I do with my life?" should be approached. What I so admired about John Butler's journey was *not* that he ended up a minister. Most people jump through life, asking what's next, and choosing based on where can they make the most money, what offers the most upside or opportunity. A conventional "success" story is one where, with each *next*, the protagonist has more money, more respect, and more possessions. I'd like to suggest an alternative "success" story—one where, with each *next*, the protagonist is closer to finding that spot where he's no longer held back by his heart, and he explodes with talent, and his character blossoms, and the gift he has to offer the world is apparent.

Changes of Scenery

DEEMPHASIZING THE QUESTION IN ORDER TO ANSWER IT

Answering this question makes me think of sweeping up a large spill. After one long, effective thrust of the broom, we have to reach back and come at it from the other side. That's where we are now. Backing away from the ideas recently discussed, this next sweep of stories explores the power of our environment over how we answer the question, then segues into travel and the adventure of working abroad.

I tracked a dozen people who'd recently realized that the too-competitive, rat-race pressure of their big cities was the source of their unhappiness. So they moved to small towns, which they chose either for their idyllic picturesque character, or because they'd grown up there and wanted to feel at home. A woman in Seattle moved to the hills of Vermont; a couple in Atlanta moved home to Lima, Ohio, et cetera. All of them struggled, and it was never the cure-all they hoped for. They grew bored, some because they couldn't find interesting work, others because they couldn't find interesting people. They missed the chaotic melting pot of the city. They still felt a need to be busy. The drop-off was too great. Many tried to split time, which was expensive and hard on relationships. Was there a way to get the best of both?

That was what people found in New Orleans. The Big Easy promised the perfect antidote: a big, culturally diverse city, free of rat-race tension. Unlike the Small Town Solution, nobody finds New Orleans uninteresting.

I first became interested in New Orleans four years ago, when my wife (then my girlfriend) took me there for Christmas. My wife was from Texas, but her mom grew up in the French Quarter and her dad in the Ninth Ward. All of her cousins and uncles still lived in and around NOLA. At Christmas dinner forty-five people sat down—just your ordinary-sized Catholic family. I had prepped for this dinner, peppering my girlfriend with questions throughout the plane ride. Most were tradespeople—nurses, electricians, forest rangers, salesmen, bookkeepers. But they didn't think of themselves that way. The most fascinating cultural indicator was that I was introduced to forty-five people, and *not a single one asked me "What do you do?"* Here I was, their cousin's new boyfriend, wanting to make a good impression, willing to pass whatever test they might have for me—and how I supported myself never came up. They figured if I could pay for a plane ticket to fly all the way from the West Coast, I must be doing all right.

I received a surprising number of stories from people who had either moved to New Orleans or left New Orleans. They were all college-educated, professional-class, in their twenties and thirties, and were tinkering with the effect of an environment on their ambition. They moved to New Orleans because they felt their ambition was running too high, like an engine, unsustainably, dangerously, burning too much oil. New Orleans succeeded in idling down their ambition, and helped them enjoy life. But frequently it succeeded too well, and their ambition shifted into neutral, and then just pattered out completely. Those who left did so because they needed a little social pressure, like a turbo boost, to remind them of what they could become with some hard work and a little opportunity. This was the constant tension of New Orleans—how to use its laid-backness effectively.

People weren't moving to New Orleans to party, or to slack. That wasn't the notion. In Chicago, or San Francisco, or New York, or Dallas, they adopted the bad habit of measuring themselves against others—by those external accomplishments. So they chased success, and often met it, but just as often at the expense of what they really

wanted to do, or who they really wanted to be. New Orleans was a place to get in touch with what they really wanted to do. Offices are empty by 5:30—plenty of time at night to get in touch with their dreams. Then, more tinkering with that carburetor, because it is not a culture where people work hard at anything, or very passionately, or fight to make their dreams come true. So most dreams are in hobby mode. As one woman described it, “In Los Angeles, if you say you’re a musician, you’re asked where you’ve played, who your A-and-R rep is, what label are you with—in effect, *are you, or will you be, successful?* In New Orleans, if you say you’re a musician, then people accept that you’re a musician, even if you only jam one night a week at some dive with no audience. In New Orleans, a dream doesn’t have to become a reality to be *real*.”

I went to New Orleans to observe this tinkering. On the first night, I was pulling into a parking space when the front wheel dropped down into a drainhole, which was missing a drain grate. The chassis crashed onto the concrete, damaging the underbody. I called for a tow truck and waited. A woman came out from the house. She said her husband’s car had fallen into that hole a bunch of times. The city hadn’t gotten around to replacing the grate in two years. I gave the tow truck four hours, then bummed a ride back to my hotel. So that was the tension of New Orleans—how to let the Big Easy work its magic on you, without getting stuck in a sinkhole. “New Orleans tends to quell motivation with the same success rate as an opium den,” I was warned.

I interviewed nine people in depth. I’ll share two stories, but the others equally contributed to my perceptions. The best place to start is with an obvious question: what makes a place, any place, *interesting*? It’s not just the mausoleums, wrought-iron balconies, weathered Victorians, and vintage streetcars. I was told it’s the friction—between old and new, blacks and whites, gay and straight, tourists and locals. Everyone agrees New Orleans is changing, but nobody agrees what it’s changing into—and that’s friction too. The density of a city makes collisions of cultures inevitable. Suburbs are designed for low density,

to guard against that collision. Suburban land is zoned for a single use; it can only be developed in that way, and the geography of the land can only be interpreted one way. Cities foster multiple interpretations, multiple readings. In New Orleans, I heard diametrically opposed observations spoken with equal conviction.

For instance, jazz is a collision of musical styles. I was told that New Orleans is a great city for jazz musicians, which is to say for any kind of musician willing to collide with other musical influences. Charlie Dennert had moved here from Birmingham; his band, Quintology, was an example of where jazz was headed. But I was also told that the jazz scene here is a "museum culture," which shies away from the avant-garde in order to cater to tourists. So the brass band is still the cornerstone of jazz here. At best New Orleans is on the tailwind of traditional jazz. Evan Parker and Dave Holland, two of the foremost musicians of the last forty years, had left town.

Another for instance: I was regularly told that very few people leave New Orleans; when they ask which school you went to, they mean which *high school*. They also ask which hospital you were born at. Someone whose family has only been here four generations can still think he's new to town, particularly if he hangs out with the Historic Preservation Society. But I was also regularly told that the intellectual capital that graduates each year from Xavier, Loyola, Tulane, Dillard, and the University of New Orleans flows out of town just like the natural resources flowed away over the last hundred years. *Nobody stays*. They go to Jackson to work for Nissan or WorldCom, or to Birmingham's medical industry and auto plants. Even the oil business has left town. The only jobs left are in the tourist industry, restaurants and hotels.

So which interpretation is accurate? Probably both. That's friction. That's what makes it interesting.

Marc Weidenbaum is thirty-four, tall and slender. He moved here a year and a half ago. He's an exotic here, because he's a Jewish kid

from Long Island via San Francisco who talks too fast and wears a backpack.

"You don't see many backpacks here," he said. "The backpack is a staple of New York and San Francisco. It says you're coming from somewhere, and you're going somewhere else, and you have things you *need* that you can't be without. Here, backpacks are unnecessary. People look at me and think I'm way too old to have a backpack. But I don't carry as much in it as I used to. Look. I don't carry business cards anymore. People don't swap business cards here. In another year I'll probably kick the backpack habit entirely."

Marc's learned to talk slower. He's had to. People tuned him out. They just stopped listening. He still has what he calls his "internal ass kicker," but he can now go to the dentist and sit in the chair for half an hour and not get stressed out about all that time being wasted. The checkout lines are still too slow at the supermarket. He's gotten used to the fact that he cannot get *The New York Times* home-delivered here; now he enjoys the stroll down to Magazine Street to get a copy. Recently, he found himself saying aloud, "It really doesn't take much money to get by." He shocked himself.

"It's not like New Orleans is really cheap. The homes in this neighborhood [the Garden District] would all cost several hundred thousand dollars. Many a million plus. Just like in S.F. But in New York and S.F., it was unacceptable for someone with talent to just get by. It's not radically cheaper here, but it's completely acceptable—normal—to make just enough to pay rent and have beer money. And it's amazing how little you have to work to do that."

In this culture, free time is more valuable than money. People work just enough to maximize their free time. So Marc edits comics and listens to electronic music and publishes his own music criticism on the Web. For money, Marc is the local editor for the website Citysearch. When he arrived, he told people he did "content." They didn't know what that was. Back in San Francisco, he'd been

Citysearch's editor in chief. He enjoyed the work but he hated the get-rich-quick mentality. Marc's dad still worked, happily, at age sixty-five—Marc had zero desire to score big and retire early. He decided to leave when he started seeing Bentleys while walking to work.



So he and his girlfriend had “that conversation,” the one that our parents never had, about balancing two careers. She was a sociologist who wanted the stability of a tenured position. She wanted to be in a culturally active city. As an editor, returning to New York was his obvious choice. But he hated New York’s superiority, the way New Yorkers talk like it’s indisputably the best place on earth. Marc pushed for her to apply in the South, even though he’d never been—he wanted to be the outsider. She was offered a position at Tulane, they were both happy, and they stuck together.

“We made the right choice. I used to wonder, What if I lived here, what if I lived there, what would my life be like? I’m aware how my life is different because I’m here, but that’s it. I don’t wonder where I’d be happy. My mind’s calmer. Here, when we go out, it’s to *enjoy* the music and to dance. In New York, it was culture consumption. You listened to the music so you could be an expert on it. Everything had a purpose that related back to status.” In New York, people engage in a sociology experiment on what life is. In New Orleans, people live their

lives.

Marc's not afraid he will end up stuck in a drainhole. He used to want to be an English professor. He doesn't fantasize about that anymore, but he interprets this as a sign of his being at peace, rather than giving up a dream.

"I still bring a lot of big-city stress wherever I go," he said. "And the tenure track at Tulane is a prominent stress engine." He says this like stress is food, and without stress they'd starve. "The people we know who've made interesting life decisions still tend to define themselves in large part by their work. New Orleans hasn't rid them of that. But it's helped them make decisions about their work that are not what their friends or family expected, or what their background steered them to." It's helped them find their own course.

Six months later, I met up with Marc in Austin; we were both in town for the South by Southwest music festival. He'd recently gotten a contract to write a book about electronic music for Temple University Press; the previous week had been his last with Citysearch. The contract wasn't for much money, but that wouldn't matter in New Orleans.

Julia Kamysz Lane was one of those Tulane grads who came, got educated, and fled. She went back to Chicago, where she'd grown up and where there were lots of driven workaholics like her. But after five years trying to climb the ladder at advertising firms, she came back to New Orleans. The place had a tug on her. Here, she didn't feel pressure to be on a career track. She was twenty-eight and it was clear that she was complex beyond her years. For money, she read the mail for a fifty-two-year-old blind jazz musician, took him for walks, and ran his errands. "There are demons in New Orleans," she said, cryptically, then changed the subject. NOLA celebrates the weird. There are voodoo trinkets sold in all the shops, and I just figured she meant something mystical of that sort, as if she were using black magic to cure her workaholism. Then, later, she used the word "demons" again, and made clear that these were not generic demons,

but *her* demons. She changed the subject again, but it was clearly a tease. *Chase this, I want to tell the truth.*

The moment was nine months pregnant. I felt Julia's hesitation, her urge to swallow her candor as she'd no doubt swallowed it time and again. So I began rambling about the harder periods of my own life. When I was done, she reciprocated.

She'd arrived at Tulane, eighteen years old, in the fall of 1990. She enrolled in premed classes. Her father was an electrical engineer, her mother a graphic artist. They didn't pressure her, but she had so much energy, and felt so bottled up in such a dark blind space, confused by what she desired to be versus what she could succeed at, and the only slim light of a path out was premed/med school/intern/resident/doctor/success. She put her blinders on, feigned confidence, and earned good grades. In the fall of her sophomore year, she went for her mandatory sessions with an academic counselor, who probed her thoughts about career choices. She does not remember what was said in those sessions, but she associates them with the incredible funk she fell into afterward, culminating with an *F* on a paper for organic chemistry. She got back to her dorm room and the walls started to spin, and she felt the floor sinking into a deep dark hole. She called her mother. Her mother called a counselor on campus, who suggested Julia get to the hospital. Julia's father was manic-depressive, so Julia's mother was scared but prepared that Julia might be as well. A friend—who'd feared that Julia was suicidal—drove her to the hospital. On the way, her friend said Julia should get back to her writing. Could all this come from swallowing her desire to be a writer?

Julia stayed on the campus psychiatric ward for a week. She did not take medication. She went to group therapy every day, and even there, she felt a competitive urge to outperform the others and prove she was functional. That Christmas holiday, she had a long talk with her father. His parents had emigrated from Poland. His parents had chosen his career as an engineer. He'd never had a choice, and he wanted her to

feel free to choose. He was concerned about this blind drive in her. He told her, "When you talk about your biology class, you are so serious, and you sound so unhappy. But when you talk about working for the student newspaper, you love that, you light up."

Where was this blind drive coming from? Julia fantasized about controlling the world around her. She let steam out by writing letters that she would never mail. These were letters to her bosses, her family, ordering them what to do to fix their nagging, entrenched problems. It seemed like some twisted permutation of frustrated ambition. Being competitive was a default substitute for following her dream. Being better than others was a default substitute for being true to herself. And after graduation, this pattern recurred. She worked in advertising (a common compromise for people who want to write) and became fiercely competitive, felt like her life wasn't moving, switched firms, kept getting bored, learned every skill she could but wasn't happy, and one day—four years into it—someone asked her "What's wrong?" and she burst into tears.

She needed a break from the salary life. She worked at a Starbucks and felt like a complete loser. She moved over to a Barnes & Noble, which was a little better, and she met her future husband, but she still couldn't summon the courage to have a go at writing. What would it mean to fail at the thing you really want to do? What would be left to dream about? That's when she felt the call to return to New Orleans, and to join the freelance/part-time culture, where everyone gets by somehow, fixing cars on the side, working one day a week at the museum writing grants, or at Kinko's for the health insurance, or designing websites. It is a culture in which you *cannot* fail, because even to try is to be legitimate. In New Orleans her demons were guarding the path she had not taken, at eighteen, when she took her first wrong turn.

So Julia and her now-husband Brian, a photographer, came to New Orleans and have found a way to get by. She started writing and editing for free, and it always evolved into paying work. She still fought

her workaholism, even here—for a while she was the managing editor of the local weekly *Gambit* and wrote some great stories uncovering petty graft being perpetrated on local merchants. But that urge to control came back, to tell every writer how to do the job, and she realized she had to quit and go freelance or the urge would ruin her again. Now she wrote book reviews and was writing an essay about race, informed by the blind jazz musician she worked for. He's black, she's white; they got a lot of stares on their walks. She feels the friction. It's interesting.

THE BENEFIT OF BEING AROUND LIKE-MINDED PEOPLE

Julia asked me, “Can writing schools really teach you to write?” I never thought that was the litmus test. Writing school helped me by surrounding me with people who aspired to the same ideals I did. I’d been a bond salesman—I didn’t know any other writers, and I’d never even met a writer. I didn’t even know any *readers*. If the other traders and salespeople read books, they never mentioned it. At school, for at least one night a week, I sat down beside people who thought nothing was more important than making a sentence sing . . . Who believed that having a story accepted by a small journal with a readership of a thousand librarians was just about the most prestigious accomplishment imaginable . . . Who had chosen, like me, to compromise their love lives and work lives to carve out time for being alone with their thoughts and a pencil . . . Who had received rejection letter after rejection letter, and who had been called “impractical” by their parents. I can’t emphasize enough the sway of being in a community of like-minded people. As New Orleans had its effect on Marc and Julia, my writing school helped support the choice I’d made. Because the hardest thing was not learning to write; the hardest thing was to *never give up*.

The publication of my first novel was my great chance to quit working and attempt to support myself by writing full-time. I imagined I might maintain an income writing for magazines. But I was going to finish my graduate degree around the same time. I would take the leap without my community, my three-hour-a-week lifeline that had nourished me for seven years. What would I do all day? Who would I talk to? I was

accustomed to waking up every morning and going to the office.

So with two other writer friends—Ethan Canin (whom I'd met playing pickup basketball) and Ethan Watters (who knew editors at magazines)—I rented a second-floor flat in a dusty Victorian on Market Street in a no-man's-land between the Castro and City Hall. This would be a place where we wrote every day. It had six rooms, two bathrooms, a kitchen. The rent was intimidating, and we were on the hook for the whole nugget if we couldn't find some creative types to occupy the other three rooms. So we threw a party. We made up a postcard invitation, but the address, 2148 Market Street, looked too lonely floating in the middle of the card. Who wanted to come to "2148 Market Street"? What was it? A restaurant? A bar?

"We need an enticing name," one of the Ethans said.

"What about 'The Grotto'?" said the other.

"You can't steal Jim's name!" I protested.

Jim was another writer who rented the basement room in my house as his writing space. He called it the Grotto.

"Jim's on vacation. He'll never know."

"But *I* know!" I fought back.

"What about 'The *Writers*' Grotto'?"

"That's the same thing!"

"Not quite the same."

So we stole Jim's name, and everyone we knew came to the party, curious about what the Writers' Grotto was. They came, they got drunk, they danced, they lit off fireworks, set a tree on fire, climbed up to the roof, broke the toilet, ruined the carpet, and left, still unsure what the

Writers' Grotto was.

"Do you *live* here?"

"No. Just work."

"Are you all writing a book *together*?"

"No. Just our own projects."

"How much does rent cost?"

"Two to three hundred."

"A month!?"

"Yeah."

"You can fly to Cabo every month for that!"

"I like to write."

"But you can write at home, for *free*."

We were going to get stuck with the whole rent. It was hard for people to understand what we were doing. There was nothing like it in the whole city. There were writing colonies, where people go and live and write for a month or two. There were writing conferences, where people take classes for a week. The rest of the time, writers cling to their outsider status, which they resent and defend at the same time, feeling it is somehow crucial to their sense of being special. At the conferences and colonies, writers notoriously got drunk and had affairs, so everyone suspected that was what the Grotto was really about—we had our clubhouse, the boys with the treehouse fort, a place to get drunk at two in the afternoon and screw women and never grow up. It took years before people stopped assuming the worst about the Grotto whenever they heard about it. Luckily, the three rooms were finally taken, by a filmmaker (David), a monologist (Josh), and a

struggling freelancer (Tessa) who had written a couple pieces for a British daily. She was the only woman at the original Grotto. She became our den mother. She made tea for us in the afternoons and listened to stories about our love lives, which were small-time dramas compared to the ones she'd lived through. The beauty of the Grotto is, when I have a bad day, at least I went to the office. A bad day working at home is a sad and lonely thing, and if a few bad days land in a row then an editing job starts to sound pretty appealing.

Our daily life was structured by the routine of work. I didn't want to become a writer so I could escape from work, to *not* work, or to get rich on royalties so I'd never have to work. I wanted to work. I craved work, as much as a sled dog or a packhorse, work that fulfilled me. We got up, had coffee at home, read the paper, drove to the Grotto, and then just let the benefit of being around each other rub off. I learned how to write features from Ethan Watters, I learned screenwriting from David, and I learned to speak extemporaneously in public from Josh. Nobody *taught* me these things; they were doing it, and made it seem possible. We created an environment where taking creative risks was *okay*. Nothing was formalized—the sharing and reading of each other's work was entirely spontaneous.

"What are you doing?"

"Making tea. Want some?"

"What kind?"

"Earl Grey."

"Naw."

"What are you moping about?"

"I can't get started on this article."

"When's it due?"

“In, like, five hours.”

“What’s it about?”

“Rock the Vote.”

“Why can’t you get started?”

“Because the truth is, I hung out with them for two days, and I just realized now, *I didn’t like them.*”

“Why not?”

“They were phonies. They just went around saying, ‘Chicken is the bird of the People. Duck is the poultry of The Man.’ ‘UPS is the parcel service of the People. Fed Ex is the tool of The Man.’ They made me sick.”

“Geez, that’s hilarious. You should lead with that.”

And he did. (*Spin Magazine*, October 1996.)

Tessa made the most amazing transformation. She’d started life over in San Francisco after getting divorced in London. Not long before she found us, she’d been cleaning houses as a maid in order to get by. She’d only written a couple of articles before we met, but she was soon writing for all the British and Australian magazines. That gave her great confidence, and, buoyed—this is the amazing part—she remembered that she’d always wanted to be a jazz singer. If she could become a journalist, maybe she could become a jazz singer. She was in her early forties and hadn’t sung since she was a young girl. “I was always told I had a great voice,” she said. So she moved to Manhattan and two years later had a famous singer as her mentor and was represented by a top manager. And she was not just singing—she was composing too. Her community there has helped her just as our community had helped all of us. I’m not saying the community is everything, but it makes success possible. Did we believe in each

other? Here and there, but not across the board. You would assume that's necessary, but it's not. The talent doesn't have to shine from the outset. Most people will perform if given a chance and a few role models.

After two years, rents started to creep up, and the landlord booted us to bring in some lawyers. We found a bigger place, this time with room for nine writers, more evenly balanced between guys and girls. It lasted another three years until the rents tripled (the mad rush of the dot-com boom). So we were out on the street, nine writers without a tree fort, and there wasn't anything left in the city to rent. Artists' cooperatives were all moving to the naval yards in Hunters Point and Alameda, but we didn't want to abandon the heart of the city. The only place left to rent in the city was an old dog and cat hospital above a parking garage near City Hall. It was scheduled to be demolished in two years to make way for a twenty-two-story condominium tower. It was huge; to make it pay, we were going to have to put twenty-two writers and filmmakers in there, and build the office walls and doors ourselves, put in skylights, rewire the electrical system—knowing with every hammer fall and screw turn that it would all be coming down in just two years.

But we clung together, and took a gamble on the pet hospital. We built the walls and taped the seams and mudded and painted and hung doors and threw another party to find thirteen others, and we became unwieldy for a while, until we got the hang of there being so many of us. We each have a chore—take out the recycling, clean the roof deck—and somehow, recently, we have the feeling that the Grotto would now survive the departure of any person or persons. For six years it was powered by the initiation energy we continuously supplied it; now it rolls onward with its own momentum.

I've learned that without structure, I become unstable and self-destructive fairly quickly. I have an ability to reimagine the world. I used to glorify this ability to pretend—it's the essential gift behind writing fiction, and it's a great coping mechanism for dealing with rejection.

But I'm not proud of it anymore. Sometimes, when things get tough, I run away—run away into my imagination, run toward a new life, like so many empty pages, ready to be filled. Enough of that, turn the page and write a new chapter. I've run from my parents, run from my first marriage, run from job after job where I felt misused. My struggle now is to stay grounded and to *not* indulge my imagination. To stick with *this* life. I've turned from fiction to nonfiction not just because I can, or because the magazines offer work—I do it because I need to pay attention to the ways of real life. The Grotto verges on being a self-created utopia, a huge loophole in the work/play continuum, and sometimes I wonder if I'm allowing myself to live in a dangerous fantasy. But the structure and routine it provides keep me sane. I'm absent-minded, forget to pay my bills, can't return phone calls, forget birthdays—I used to embrace these traits because they were evidence of having a “writer's” personality. But now I think there is no excuse for not taking care of myself or treating others with decency.

Which gets us to the hard part I've been avoiding. Inevitably, getting into an environment of like-minded people, whether it's building your own Grotto or moving to New Orleans or making friends with other social workers or switching to a college in Washington, D.C., where there are other young people interested in politics—*inevitably*, it means you have to ditch your old support system, family or friends or coworkers or dormmates. You have to inflict pain on people who love you. Oh, they can still be your friends, still love you—but the seat you've saved for them at your Inner Circle has to be given to someone new. And this is never done without the sting of rejection and the collar of guilt. Why do so many people hush the longing to be someone different? It's not because they have to pay their student loans. It's not because the economy is in a lull. It's not because they don't have notions of what they'd like to be. *It's because they don't want to be the kind of person who abandons friends and takes up with a new crowd.* When is it running away, and when is it the best thing for you? It always looks like running away to those you're leaving behind. And if you've ever run away before, you're open to that criticism. But just like Carl Kurlander wondered if being in Pittsburgh would ever really be different

from Beverly Hills . . . just as Ana Miyares got the courage to be rejected by her family by making friends with social workers . . . just as Rinpoche could find himself better by living around ordinary people in Phoenix than around monks in a monastery in India . . . just as Tim Bratcher took the heat off by moving to Atlanta . . . just as Bart Handford found his people on the second floor of the campaign headquarters in Arkansas . . . just as Bryce was under the sway of Big & Oily until he made friends with the other inspectors . . .

Put this power to work.

ENJOYING PEOPLE

“I know exactly what you mean,” said Claude Sidi, stabbing his foie gras and chasing it down with a gulp of wine. We were enjoying lunch at a restaurant belonging to a friend of his. “Environment’s everything.”

His dad had worked for the World Bank’s food and agriculture division in Africa and Asia, and Claude had always admired his dad’s zeal for his work. Claude wanted to be a marine biologist, and maybe an aquaculture specialist, so he could travel to developing nations and help them grow fish. He advanced to the Ph.D. stage, and was finally a marine biologist, with his own well-funded research project at a remote lab on the craggy Oregon coast. He woke to the smell of the ocean. Talked back to the fog and the elephant seals. Hiked through the rain forest.

“It was such a romantic place. Classically romantic. Absolutely stunning. But I got *really depressed*, right away.”

“Why?”

He threw his arms out wide. “Not enough people! I was lonely! I realized, Fuck biology, I like *people*. I’d never been without people around. It was *terrible*.”

So he quit and became a dentist in a big city full of interesting people. He *loves* it. Every day he sees his patients, they come in, chat,

laugh, share stories, and Claude helps them in his own small way. He snaps pictures of his patients and can tell you the names of their dogs.

“So you’re totally happy?”

“Yeah. I /love it. Been happy ever since.” He seemed it. “Let’s have some dessert, huh?”

REHEARSING FOR LIFE'S IMPROVISATION

I corresponded with numerous people who were traveling in different parts of the world, hoping that while away they might figure out what to do with their life. Some returned with a new courage, and an insight into themselves that guided their decision. Many didn't, though. They had a good time, saw the world, and often wished they could keep traveling for the rest of their years. But insight into what they would do with themselves if they had to stand still? They weren't able to milk that rock.

So when it helped, how did it? What was the causal link?

I'll start with the subtlest effects, and in the following chapters describe a few more substantive ones.

For those who simply feel trapped under their responsibilities and can't summon the initiative to quit, exposing yourself to how other people live loosens the mind. "Look at how happy they are with so little money!" for instance. You comprehend how many ways there are to get by. Choosing a new way seems possible.

At home, at work, at school, there are always a ton of external inputs coaxing you in the direction you're already going. Deadlines, parents chirping in your ear, friends wanting you to go out. Your life has a momentum. Traveling can take you away from all those influences, quiet their din, and allow you a kind of silence to consider who you are as an independent entity. It can be uncomfortable if you're not used to

it. You might come face to face with the fact that there's not much brainwave activity upstairs without all those influences to react to. "And when you start to think that you haven't been the pilot of your life for a long, long time, you have no other choice but to hear what your soul is saying," wrote one young man who found the courage to quit business school while traveling across Asia. "Am I the person I think I am if nobody is there to tell me who I am?"

Being uncomfortable is good. If you remain comfortable, you remain more or less yourself. The quickest way to make yourself uncomfortable is to travel *alone*. I found a high correlation between traveling alone and milking the rock. It takes courage to change your life. Sometimes, doing so, you feel all alone in the world. You can get used to this scary feeling by traveling alone, being by yourself for long periods of time, having to talk to strangers, having to get yourself from one city to another. You become accustomed to it. The fear of being alone will no longer stop you.

It also helped to travel without a plan. This was particularly true for young people who've segued from high school to college to a prize job they were recruited for without ever taking any great leaps of faith. They've never been off a path. With each step, they've known where it was likely to lead, even as they pretended they might opt out. They're uncomfortable with the prospect of not being associated with a respected school or company, since they've always had that. Traveling without a plan is a way to rehearse the improvisational approach, and opens your mind to the sense of adventure. You learn to trust the laws of chance. Perhaps, when you get home, you'll be willing to do the same.

When you subdue these fears, they no longer guard the gates, and you invite the truth into your life.

GIVING UP THAT IT'S ABOUT YOU

Perhaps, in your travels, you will discover something that is worth devoting your life to.

Will you be ready for it?

Mike Jenzeh was an unlicensed commercial real estate broker in Silicon Valley in the early nineties, when the economy hiccupped and the market paused. He'd been hustling for five years. He was the stereotype of a pushy salesman. All his deals—thirty a year—came from cold calls. He drove a 240Z and wore a tie. Jewish, but not practicing, he came to America from Iran when the shah fell. He was afraid of commitment. He'd almost been married once, but had backed out. "My life was all about *me*," he said. "About me finding the light, following the heat." When the real estate market tanked—largely because of the cutbacks in defense spending—he couldn't close a deal to save his life. He worked eight to five and made no jack. He had no control over his life. Frustrated, he simply stopped. He stayed in bed all day reading books. He was almost thirty.

Mike read a lot of poetry and religion. "I realized that the only way out of this rut was to give up *myself*, to make it not about *me*. To give what I could in my own way."

He was particularly struck by a passage in Isaiah 58. It was written to the religious who were pointing fingers at others. Mike was so struck by this passage that he rewrote it in his own words—he recrafted it into

the message he needed to hear. He called it his Success Formula.

When you stop pointing fingers,
Lying to yourself and others,
When you give yourself to the hungry,
And satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
Then your light will ride through darkness,
And your gloom will rise as the noondays sun,
And you'll continually find the desires of your heart in
scorched and dry places and strength in your bones,
And finally become like a watered garden,
Like a spring whose waters never fail.

He put this in his wallet. Hokey? Maybe. But he was ready.

With the vague idea that travel might be good for him, he cashed in some air miles for a trip to Costa Rica with his girlfriend. She wanted to snorkle and ecotrek. He didn't want to *consume* Costa Rican nature. He wanted to help these people from this friendly country. Providing jobs seemed the substantive way to help them. He was riding in a city bus outside San José, wondering if there was something they manufactured here that he could sell back in the United States. At a bus stop, Mike looked out the window and saw a leather shop. He got off the bus and went in. It was a little hole in the wall. Workers were bent over workbenches making leather goods—luggage and duffel bags. He met the master craftsman, who spoke some English. Could they make bags for him to sell in the United States? They could. Could they use vegetable-only dyes? They could. Were forests being cut down for grazing land for the cows? They

weren't. Mike took some samples and came back to the Bay Area. His girlfriend thought he was crazy. "Why don't you get a job!" she screamed at him. She left him because she thought his life was going nowhere.

Mike went around to banks in the Bay Area, showing these well-crafted bags and his business plan, hoping to receive a loan for a small importing business. He always showed them his Success Formula. He made them read it. He wanted them to understand he wasn't just going to be a bag salesman. He was that bricklayer who was helping to build a cathedral. He was helping the families of those guys at the workbenches in Costa Rica. He got a loan, bought some bags, and began cold-calling on Silicon Valley software companies, trying to get them to buy his bags as giveaways. It wasn't an easy sell, but he was in business. He called his operation the Joseph Company. It was difficult to keep faith. Often nobody cared who he was helping.

A year into it, he met a banker in Oakland who made it her business to help disadvantaged communities. Her mission was much like his, except she had a lot of experience in what she was doing. She suggested Mike buy a small warehouse building in West Oakland, where unemployment was 50 percent, and use that as his domestic warehouse. This would qualify him for special community-development loans she could offer. "I can't buy a building! I'm selling bags out of my car!" But she loaned him the money to buy a small two-story building, and then she went down to Costa Rica with him. Impressed, she urged him to buy the factory in Costa Rica and move it to a tax-free zone near the San José airport. That seemed way out of his league, but she coached him through the process and loaned him the money. He bought a factory with fifty workers, and he has four employees in Oakland. That's his life now. The bags and leather goods are not a big operation. He rents half of his Oakland building to a tenant, and the factory in Costa Rica still has all *its* customers, only Mike is now the owner. He's married with a baby girl. When he quotes poetry, it's hard to imagine he was once a pushy salesman:

“No eloquent words of a man can replace the pathless forest or the quietness of a rock.”

None of this would have flowered if he hadn't challenged himself to write down the standards by which he wanted to live, then let that guide him.

THE ADVENTURE OF WORKING ABROAD

Did you ever dream of working abroad?

I went to Hong Kong to look for stories because the city seemed an accessible frontier. It was the most modern and cosmopolitan of all cities in the world, with every convenience one might be accustomed to, from Pilates classes to chicken-ginger wraps. Those who spoke English there did so better than I. Yet it bordered China, then was handed over to China, and remained the gateway between capitalism and communism. If I was looking for a little adventure, but I still wanted to have a career in traditional business, that's where I would move. So I went to find people who had done just that.

No sooner did I get there than I was told this wasn't *the* place to be. "Oh, you gotta go to Shenzen, in the New Territories!" "No, no, you gotta go to Shanghai! That's where it's really at." The frontier is a state of mind. People who'd come to Hong Kong had grown accustomed to it, and now some other city took on the symbol of the frontier. But I wasn't looking for the ultimate frontier. I wanted a place that anybody could move to, and be gainfully employed, yet was *interesting*—which I'd learned in New Orleans was created by collisions of diametrically opposed extreme contrasts. By that measure, Hong Kong was the most interesting city on earth.

Everywhere, freewheeling *über*capitalism collided with China's state-run central plan. For one tiny example of how freewheeling it is, consider the typical twenty-dollar Hong Kong paper bill. Except you

can't, because there is no typical twenty-dollar bill. Many different banks are authorized to print currency, and their bills don't look alike. They're about the same size, but the Standard Chartered Bank's twenty is in different colors and a very different pattern and typeface from the twenty from the Bank of China or the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation. This didn't bother anybody, and they all were honored as legal tender. I felt like printing some twenties myself. Multiply this concept by every layer of the economy, and you begin to imagine how entrepreneurial you might become if you lived there a few years. Businesspeople I met carried at least a half dozen different business cards, ready to pounce whether I happened to be in real estate or semiconductors. The only reason this dynamism hasn't taken over the planet is that China stands in its way. In China, where entrepreneurship has met its match, the rules and customs for doing business are so convoluted and arbitrary that it will sap the spirit of all but Hong Kong's most relentless capitalists. There is no way to know how much money has to be spread around, no quoted price on bribing certain levels of bureaucrats. A deal is not a deal. Maybe your factory will get built, maybe not. The system must be worked continuously to have any chance.

So, despite the fact that so many businesses want to invest in China, many grow frustrated and focus instead on Hong Kong, which has become far and away the most expensive city in the world. Your basic Mid-Levels flat without a view would set an expat back \$6,000 U.S. in rent every month. Out of frustration, I might move across the harbor to Kowloon and try to buy; a 1,700-square-foot flat sells for \$1,100,000 U.S. How can all these taxi drivers and shopkeepers possibly pay their rent? Sure, I might be able to pay it, living on a hyperinflated expat salary, but how can a merchant hawking Baby Gap denim jackets for \$2.50 in an open-air market possibly compete? The answer is, they *don't*. They're locals. The government builds housing for them and sells it at a subsidized rate. Eighty percent of the housing is nonmarket. The government erects endless skinny twenty-five-story apartment towers on every possible scrap of land; each floor has two 500-square-foot apartments, which are sold to locals for about

\$140,000 U.S. They're cheaply constructed. Those who can afford it hire private contractors to tear it up and redo it to their liking. Only Carl Sagan could convey how many of these skinny towers there are. As *many as there are blades of grass on a football field* . . . All the way in from the airport, a forty-minute drive, the harbors are lined with these towers, one behind the other, up into the hills. Imagine every brownstone in Manhattan as a skinny twenty-five-story tower, with no bigger footprint. Every row house in Baltimore. Every Victorian in San Francisco. There are more people per square kilometer here than anywhere on earth. I was told the populated side of Hong Kong Island was ten times as dense as Manhattan. Ten times!

This is a city in love with skyscrapers. There are almost a hundred more than fifty stories tall. In my neighborhood stood the fifth and sixth tallest buildings in the world. Yet, unlike Manhattan, above this skyline is a mountain, Victoria Peak, twice as tall as the tallest building. The mountain is covered in a lush green tropical forest. Sixty percent of Hong Kong Island is national park. Nature competes hard with capitalism. A fifteen-minute cab ride through the tunnel in the mountain dropped me into a series of gorgeous small towns comprising Mediterranean-style houses gathered around perfect sandy beaches on soft aqua bays surrounded by tropical forest. The ideal South Pacific kick-it-back repose is *right there*, three kilometers away, butting up against the city bustle, and holding its own.

The expat's life traffics through these extremes. Spending \$4 a person on lunch in the markets, then dropping \$150 a person on dinner in the ultrahip restaurants of the Lan Kwai Fong clubbing district. The workweek is spent anonymously in the concrete anthill, then the weekend is spent in a communal beach house on one of many nearby tropical islands, a quick ferry ride away. Sometimes it seems incredibly diverse, with English spoken in so many nuanced accents, from Singapore, Nepal, the Philippines, Canada, England, and regions of India. Other times the expat is painfully aware of being an outsider, floating in a fat cream on top, while 96 percent of the population are Cantonese-speaking ethnic Chinese who have been

burned too many times by falling in love with or becoming friends with an expat who inevitably leaves after three or four years. Colonials have been coming here for four hundred years, and you're just another in a long line who wants to break some local's heart.

There's always a rapid turnover on the frontier, which means that even though you're young, you can be thrust into responsibility very quickly. This was the case with Allan Matheson. A year ago he was hanging out in Vancouver without a job, living with his parents and drinking away his meager savings. On a friend's tip, he learned of a job opening—the membership manager of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong. Industrious but unqualified, full of potential but lacking any experience, he talked his way into the job and came to Hong Kong. Today, at the age of twenty-four, he's running the Chamber.

This is a big deal. A huge pipeline of money and people moves between Vancouver and Hong Kong. Both the United States and Canada allow investor visas, which means if you have a million dollars to invest here, you can become a citizen. But the United States forces investors to choose—they can be an American citizen, or a Hong Kong citizen, but not both. Canada allows dual citizenship. So partly through investor visas, and partly through ordinary immigration channels, almost everyone in Hong Kong has either been to Canada to visit or has a relative who has done so. Before the 1997 handover of Hong Kong to China, 40,000 people a year moved from Hong Kong to Canada. They brought with them an insane amount of money. These flows have stabilized now since the handover, but the pipeline was built. In Hong Kong, there are 150,000 people who carry Canadian passports, and over 30,000 were born in Canada. The reason they're coming back is that the top tax bracket in Hong Kong is 15 percent. I don't know what it is in Canada, but I'd guess three or four times that rate.



So the Canadian Chamber is not one of those rinky-dink trade groups that throws cocktail parties nobody attends. Business in Asia is done with relationships, and so every Canadian company needs introductions to Hong Kong and Chinese business partners. When they have a new product for the Asian market, they often look to Allan to make these introductions. If they want to take advantage of cheap Chinese labor, they ask Allan for manufacturers. And it is through the Chamber that Canadian companies lobby the Hong Kong government to have environmental standards enforced and racial discrimination forbidden. When the Chamber throws a cocktail party, *everybody* comes, and businesspeople mix freely with diplomats and government officials.

Is Allan up to it? Or will the result be the same as when twenty-four-year-old guys took their Internet start-ups public? It's a scary thought. Hong Kong has that anything-can-happen vibe. Nobody's promising the upside, but the possibility is there, even for a slacker like Allan.

"I was basically a lazy guy," he tells me, when we go out for burritos on Elgin Street. "My only work experience was as a data processor in a hospital foundation."

That was during college at the University of British Columbia. With graduation nearing and no clue what to do, he bought a Eurail pass an hour before his last exam. After a few months in Europe, he went on

the Internet and found a language school in Beijing. He had taken one semester of Mandarin in college, which is not unusual. He arrived in Beijing and was quickly frustrated. These language schools are set up to attract U.S. dollars. They're filled with American businessmen and students, speaking English to each other. Allan wanted to immerse himself. So he walked over to Qinghua University, which was full of mainland Chinese students. He asked to attend their School of Business and Management. Their classes were only in Mandarin, and they told Allan his was not good enough. He persuaded them, "Well, listen, I won't pay you regular tuition. I'll pay you what I was paying that language school." He wanted to live in a dorm but they insisted on a hotel. In all other ways, he participated as a regular student, which is very unusual. At the end of the year, his laptop was stolen, which turned out to be insured, and the insurance paid him \$4,500, far more than it was worth. So he came home to Vancouver to live with his parents and party on his \$4,500.

Again, he had no clue what to do. Nothing seemed to pique his interest. One day he received a call from an old college friend, Stephanie (I later bumped into Stephanie on the street). She was flying through Vancouver on her way back to Hong Kong, and she was at the airport on a four-hour layover. Did he have time for a drink? He had all the time in the world.

At the airport bar, she mentioned this position was open at the Chamber. When she told him, the lightbulb went on. He wanted that job. He called and begged for four months. Finally they hired him. Which doesn't explain how he became the executive director seven months later. Nothing quite explains that. He was very good at being the membership manager, and the director happened to quit around the same time as one of her likely replacements also quit—the revolving door of expats left a hole to fill. The Chamber's board was recruiting from Canada, but Allan kept pushing them to hire him instead, and ultimately he convinced them. So far, everyone in town thinks he's doing a good job.

"I know I had never demonstrated that I had it in me," he said. "But I did. And I just had to get in the right environment, where I could really put all this energy to good use. Hong Kong turned me on. It turned me from a guy headed nowhere to a guy really doing something."

In Hong Kong, they appreciate that business is a form of diplomacy. It can serve a higher purpose in the struggle against communism and warlord feudalism. Capitalism begins with the basic concept of private property, which gives everyone with property a stake, and through that stake a desire to fight for individual liberty. Eventually, capitalism can create a middle class and bring prosperity. This isn't without significant trade-offs, of course, but many businesspeople in Hong Kong saw their work on these terms. They paid close attention to the political changes in Southeast Asia, and they felt that their work contributed, sometimes directly, to the weaving of an economic fabric that could hold these countries together despite political turmoil. One of those who thinks in this way is Brooks Entwistle, who is thirty-four and is a banker for Goldman Sachs.

During the nineties, Brooks worked for the United Nations with the Carter Center, helping to administer first democratic elections—in Cambodia in 1993, in Liberia in 1995, and in Mozambique in 1997. He flew to these countries and was assigned a precinct. He ran get-out-the-vote efforts, then helped to validate the results. It was enormously satisfying work, to see democracy in action, to watch people get to vote for the first time in their lives.

"But Cambodia and Liberia did not stay democracies for very long," he said. "They quickly fell back into the hands of warlords and the military. To the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and to Charles Taylor in Liberia. We learned that democracy cannot sustain itself without an economy, without people having a financial stake in it remaining free. Business is a huge democratizing force in India and northern Asia."

Brooks had put in two years as an analyst with Goldman right out of college. "But, you know, I didn't learn anything as just an analyst, didn't know any better. I learned to use the copy machine." So he went back

to Goldman, both to learn how business was done, and to help them seed capitalism throughout undeveloped Asia. Their Hong Kong office has been open eleven years; it's grown from a couple dozen to a couple hundred.

"Doing business here is not one-dimensional like back in the States," he said. "You have to learn languages, or learn to work with translators and communicate despite the language barrier. You have to understand economic policies. You have to be willing to work with local governments. And mostly, you have to be willing to have genuine respect for other people's point of view. You can't be bullheaded here. You wear many hats and draw on many disciplines."

The shelves in Brooks's home are not filled with marketing primers, they're filled with political biographies.

"One of my greatest joys is getting together with our friends on Friday night. During the week, people have been off doing interesting work. One guy has come back from Vietnam, and he has a story to tell. Someone else has been in Indonesia, and a friend of my wife's has been in Taiwan on a deal. When we get together to talk, it's *interesting*."

He said this with a little regret, a sadness. I probed, and he admitted he was considering moving back to the States. His daughter was the same age as my son, and his wife preferred to raise her back home. Brooks was visibly torn. He would only hint at it, but I could tell what he was hinting at, since I'd had this conversation with many other people who had as much talent as he did. In his heart he knew that his years at Goldman were not intended to be the pinnacle of his career. He meant them as training for his future contribution to the big picture, a stepping-stone to a bold venture that might more directly push democracy into Asia. He didn't know what that might be, but he was trying hard not to forget those vague ambitions.

Relationships and Family

STRUGGLING TO SATISFY DUAL CAREERS

Perhaps, in your travels, you'll stop traveling, because you've found the place where you most belong. For a long while this won't seem like an environment/culture story, but I assure you that it is.

I knew Mark Kraschel fourteen years ago. We were friendly during the two years I was at First Boston, where he also worked. Six years ago he and a girlfriend showed up in the crowd when I read at a bookstore, but that was our entire interaction in all these years. We knew each other once, and I'd moved on with my life, and he'd faded back into the rabble of strangers. Shortly after I put word of this project on my website, my phone rang. It was Mark. He had changed his life. Radically. He termed it "career suicide."

"And it's all your fault." He laughed.

A few things about Mark, from when I knew him fourteen years ago: He was a tall, uncoordinated, pasty-faced redhead with a bitter sense of humor, but none of his jokes were his own—he repeated quick one-liners he'd heard over the wire. He earned about \$160,000 a year as a money markets salesman. In the hierarchy of salespeople, money markets is bottom rung. Mark's special trait was that he could be brutally honest, particularly about himself. Mark never quite felt like he belonged—he loved it but didn't feel like he deserved to be there. He was no brainiac. He frequently quipped that you could teach a rhesus monkey to do his job (a borrowed line). Whenever someone wondered why the markets were moving, he'd answer, "Don't ask me, I'm a hick

from Oregon.” While everyone else on the floor had been recruited from the best business schools—Stanford, Wharton, Kellogg, et cetera—Mark had started with a two-week temp gig in the mail room, and brown-nosed his way into a sales assistant position on the floor. He attended business school in a night program at the University of San Francisco and was promoted from within, an extremely rare event at a firm so concerned with its employees’ pedigrees. His mail-room-to-money-markets arc wasn’t a point of pride with him. He credited luck and ass kissing. “I shouldn’t be here,” he’d confide, waving at the high-priced talent. “I should be selling these guys car insurance. I should be at H&R Block, filing their taxes.” He frequently reminded me that he had a twin brother, an identical twin, who was living in Portland, married, making \$30,000 a year as a real estate appraiser. “I’m a boring person,” Mark would say. “I’m white trash. My brother is living the life I should rightfully be living.”

Mark hung in there, and he survived the industry contraction after the ’87 market crash. They kept him because he was honest, had a submissive ego, and by Wall Street standards was cheap labor. Most employees from the top firms like First Boston were able to cash in on the firm’s reputation, trading down to less stressful jobs at less prestigious firms, often switching to the buy side to manage money. A few years later, Mark duplicated this trade into a position at Wells Fargo, where he patiently worked up the ranks, and, by the time I saw him six years ago, he was a vice president at Wells Fargo, managing four people and ten billion dollars. He’d paid his dues and outlasted the hotshots and grew to understand that Wall Street really isn’t that different from any other industry. Life is a series of trades. Don’t be a fool, and you can trade yourself right into the good life. Mark made \$250,000 a year, bankable (salary). He lived in a two-thousand-square-foot apartment on the top floor of the tallest high-rise in Pacific Heights. He was thirty-three years old. Life was as good as it gets. Was he comfortable in his skin? More so, but not quite. Was he an interesting person yet? Not really. He knew his life was a bit of a yuppie stereotype. He couldn’t make his relationships with women work. He started dating a beautiful twenty-seven-year-old German girl,

and it felt like First Boston, redux: “What’s a hick like me doing with a beauty like her?” He loved her. She was the one piece of his life that transcended yuppie stereotype. She made him interesting.

During this project, Mark and I spoke a lot over the phone. It did not carry the same immediacy as meeting in person. But our years as salespeople had taught us both to love the phone. We learned to recognize clients by the tone of their voice within the first syllable spoken. Introductions became unnecessary as our hearing developed an acuity. For a salesperson, the telephone can be as intimate as a candlelit dinner. And when Mark called out of the blue that day, it brought everything back. Faces change, but voices don’t.

Mark called from Portland. He was sitting at a desk in the Portland Unified School District trying to sort out a bug in his Excel spreadsheet. He’d been pretending to work on it for hours. He was surrounded by “fat ugly women” who had made the school district their life, and there was a woman down the hall who was very upset that Mark wasn’t “getting it.” She was making his life hell.

“How long have you been there?” I asked.

“A few months. I was hired to handle their finance. I thought it would mean managing their investment portfolio. Turns out they needed a clerk to handle accounting on a prehistoric non-double-entry bookkeeping system. It sucks. I’m making twenty percent of what I was earning just two years ago. I can’t believe how badly I screwed up.”

“You’re living your brother’s life,” I said.

“Except for the wife and kids and house part.”

“Are you still with that woman I met?”

He laughed, like *No way*. “Nicole? You remember her?”

“No, I’m being polite and pretending like I remember her. I only

remember you were with someone.”

“Well, she’s a big part of how I ended up here.”

“Oh, this is a love story.”

“I wish. We should talk. What are you doing tonight?”

I gave him my home number to call.

“Gotta hop,” he said, which is how one says good-bye in the markets.

The rest of the day I was insatiably curious. What did he mean by “It’s all *your fault?*” How had Mark fallen from such heights? I began writing down everything I could remember of him. We’d biked once in Marin and his legs, arms, and neck were badly sunburned. Another night I took him to an aerobics class, and he sprained his ankle within minutes.

I learned more that night and in the following weeks. It was quite a cautionary tale. It started two years ago.

“I was thirty-seven years old. I wanted to be married and raise kids. Nicole had had a hard time finding work in San Francisco, so she had gone back to Germany. I dated other women but I missed her. I had a great life but without someone to share it with, it wasn’t so great. I flew to Frankfurt to see her every month, just for the weekend, for two or three days. That seemed crazy. And I started thinking. Why am I not happy? What’s the point of life?”

He told himself the truth—his life had always been a little bit of a borrowed line. There had to be something more for him out there. He’d always admired how I had left sales and trading, despite having a talent for it, and gone on to find my true self. He also admired another coworker of ours who had moved to New Zealand. He respected the leaps we’d taken more than he respected any Big Swinging Dick on

Wall Street. Wall Street pretends to take risks, but it's only with money—the big risk is with one's life.

"I wanted to be a citizen of the world," Mark said. "I'm a small-town kid from Oregon. Most people I grew up with never left. They're still here. I didn't want to lead a safe mundane life out of fear. My parents were dead. This ain't no dress rehearsal."

Mark contemplated giving it all up and moving to Frankfurt. He'd climbed up the ladder here, and he could do it again there. Once he considered this, the idea had a sway over him. He'd always felt like he got his start at First Boston out of serendipity and luck. He felt like an imposter. Was his whole life a fluke? This was his chance to prove it wasn't a fluke. If he could rebuild his life in Frankfurt, he'd finally feel like he belonged, right?

"When you meet with success, it's natural to wonder, 'Can I do this again?' So I tried to repeat it."

He marched into his boss's office and resigned, leaving a \$250,000 job for nothing. Anyone on Wall Street would tell you he got the short end of the trade, but the sheer craziness of it had its own appeal.

"It's so easy to derail a career," he remarked. "It's scary."

He moved to Frankfurt. He talked to a headhunter and a guy from Deutsche Bank and one from J. P. Morgan. The language barrier was a much bigger impediment than he anticipated. And the labor laws made it difficult for them to hire a foreigner. Without a job, Mark didn't feel like a man. He got depressed and gave up after a month. He called Wells Fargo and begged for his old job back. They turned him down.

He moved into his sister's apartment in Seattle. He traded several steps down the prestige curve and ran money for a regional dealer. This was called "proprietary trading," and it was not like what he'd been doing at Wells Fargo, where he kept their money safely invested

at reasonable returns. Prop trading is day trading, and it requires a daredevil philosophy. Much as Mark wanted to think of himself as a daredevil (based on his recent life decisions), he really didn't fit in. It was not the kind of investing he'd learned. Very quickly, his boss threatened to fire him, so he quit.

He called Nicole in Frankfurt and begged her to move to New York City with him. She agreed after he proposed marriage and bought an engagement ring. In New York, he figured he'd have no trouble getting a job resembling the one he had at Wells Fargo. Wall Street was booming with Internet money. But in every interview, Mark had to explain why he'd ditched Wells Fargo, and this story didn't fly in New York. It was a big black mark. He had dozens of friends in the business. Nobody helped him out.

"When you check out, you realize how few friends you have. Most of those networks of friends are worthless."

He became a financial writer for Standard & Poor's. He hated it immediately but lasted a year. Nicole was a stock broker, which required her to schmooze clients most nights. Mark complained they weren't spending any time together. He pushed her to get a job that she could leave at the office. She didn't want to hear it. At the end of the year, Nicole moved back to Germany. Mark wasn't invited. Once again, Mark called Wells Fargo and begged for his old job back, or any job. They told him to forget it. So Mark gave up and dropped out.

"I was burned out on life."

Mark knew one other guy who had checked out from Wall Street. Talbott now owned a little marina on Candlewood Lake, near a tony enclave called Sherman, Connecticut. Mark went upstate and became a gas boy. Talbott couldn't pay him to pump gas, but Mark was welcome to the tips. Mark slept on the couch in the marina office. They drank beer all day, watched pornos, scarfed hot dogs, and waterskied. At times this life seemed like a salvation, but it was degrading to pump gas. Most of the customers were Wall Street brokers with summer

homes on the lake, a constant reminder of exactly how Mark had fucked up. To get tips, he had to tell them he was working gratis.

"A lot of people think they might be happier just working the dock at a marina," I suggested.

"That's what I thought. Say fuck it, give up, enjoy life. Some people can do that. I wanted that to be me but that's not me and I knew it."

Eventually Talbott's wife asked Mark to leave. She was a nurse. She was jealous that she had to change bed pans all day while her husband bummed with his buddy. Mark bought a bicycle and decided to ride across the country. It would be a pilgrimage. He filled his water bottle, packed his toothbrush, and pedaled into the sunset. He made it as far as Chicago. Twenty days on a hard seat alone with your thoughts is more than enough time to contemplate your navel. He wanted to work, had to get a job, felt disgusting. In Chicago he jumped on a plane and flew to Portland. He rented a room in the dank basement of a police officer's house for a month until he was hired by the school district, when he was able to rent a downtown loft. Recently he'd started dating a lesbian. The way he said that, it was as if he was still using women to make himself interesting.

"That's it," he said. "That's my whole fucking story. The moral of which is, I'm back where I began. Who am I? I'm a hick from Oregon. I have a shitty job, I'm alone, and I'm envious as hell of my brother, who has a beautiful little kid."

But that wasn't the end of the story. This is an environment story, remember? We haven't got to that part yet.

A month after calling me, Mark flew down to San Francisco for the day to beg for his old job again. He hoped that offering his apology in person might loosen the resentment that had cemented against him at Wells Fargo. It didn't. We had a drink that night at the Elite Café on Fillmore Street in Pacific Heights, and afterward we walked over to his old apartment building at 2000 Sacramento Street. The doorman had

changed.

“When I was young in the city, I always wanted to live here. It represented success to me. The tallest building in the neighborhood. It was full of very old rich people. And I threw it away.”

Mark blamed himself entirely. His fault was being ungrateful for how life had blessed him. That didn't sound quite right to me. He didn't take the big leap out of greed—he did it for love, right? But I was grateful he didn't resent me, since my leap had been one of his inspirations. We talked about my book. I told him I was constantly worried I would give readers false inspiration.

“Are you worried someone's going to blame you?” he asked.

“Not really. But I want to offer fair advice. I want to be responsible. Responsible to the consequences of failing, yet also responsible to that unborn person inside who's struggling to get out.”

“Why? Who cares? What's wrong with holding some things in?”

I said, “Because if you don't let that person out, it can haunt you, it can ruin you, and you will resent life, and resent others who have more courage than you, and most of all, it very likely will find its own way out, ripping a big hole in your life.”

“Or you could rip a big hole in your life trying to let it out.”

“Maybe.”

I took him to the airport.

That night I couldn't sleep. Mark's story made me question my entire project. No matter how realistic the stories were that I'd found, there was no doubt that I had a slant. Why was I bent on encouraging people to change their lives? Because I've watched my generation stop reading books, stop reading the newspaper, stop voting in local elections? Because I've watched money/salary become a proxy for

respect, and then a synonym for respect, and then the only kind of respect that counts? Because I have seen us judge books we have not read, politicians we have not heard, musicians we have not listened to, referendums we have not debated, and fellow citizens we have not met? Because I have seen us torn apart by jealousy for what others our age have accomplished, rather than celebrating those accomplishments? Because I have seen us glorify those who make decisions over those who enact decisions, prefer being a consultant to being fully engaged, being an investor to being invested in, being an adviser over being politically involved, being an expert over being partisan, being a news analyst over being a news gatherer—all in fear of the inflexible boredom of commitment?

Well, so what? Who am I to know better? Mark was right. Who cares?

I planned on going to see Mark in Portland the next month, but it never came together. That was because Mark got a call from a headhunter. Headhunters can be a little cagey, but this one explained he was looking for a portfolio manager to work in the UAE.

“The what?”

“The UAE. The United Arab Emirates.”

Would Mark come to Manhattan to meet with him? Mark had never heard of the UAE, but he was excited that *anyone* would consider hiring him again as a portfolio manager. What the hell? A few days later he was sitting in the open-air café of the Helmsley Palace lobby, talking to the headhunter. Then Mark met with two men. The job was with the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority, which managed the country's excess wealth from the sale of oil. It was sort of like the Alaska Permanent Fund and was supposed to help the nation and its people remain prosperous after the oil is gone. One of the things about Arab business culture is, they never tell you directly if they appreciate you. You hear secondhand. So Mark had no idea what they thought of him or who his competition was. He did learn how he'd been

recommended for the job—two of his old bosses at First Boston had put in a good word for him. That meant a lot to Mark.

When Mark got home to Portland, the headhunter had already called to say he wanted to offer Mark the job.

“What do you know about the UAE?” he asked, calling me and everyone else he knew.

“Nothing,” I said.

“I’m scared,” he said. “I’ve heard terrible things about the Middle East.” He was scared because he wanted to go. “Anything’s gotta be better than this.”



The headhunter offered to fly him to Abu Dhabi and see the country. Mark said no. He was afraid he might lose his courage, and he was

afraid—deep down—that they would figure out he was an imposter and didn't deserve the job. The last two years had crippled his confidence. The more time his employers spent with him, the more chance they had to rescind the offer. So Mark took the job, sight unseen, and moved to the Middle East.

"I go tomorrow," he said, another call. "What the fuck? I wanted the adventure, right? You're either able to say yes to the unknown or not."

"Wear sunscreen," I said.

"Will you come visit me?" he asked. "You gotta, for the book."

"Ah, man. I just got back from Hong Kong."

"Nothing like seeing it with your own eyes."

"I'll try. It's a long way."

"Work the trade, man. Make it happen."

"I'll try."

At last we get to the culture/environment part.

Mark Kraschel, hick from Oregon, found his place at long last in Abu Dhabi. This was completely unexpected. He went there blindly, seeking only adventure. But within months he was saying, "Now I wonder what all the fuss was about! I'm living on cloud nine, drive a brand-new Beemer, and am trying to figure out how to get my twenty-one-year-old Romanian girlfriend back into the country without marrying her." After a night out smoking *chicha* and drinking tea with his expat buddies, he'd come back to his empty office around eleven P.M., where the call to me was on the house. "I play squash at lunch and golf three times a week. I live in a spacious apartment overlooking the Gulf. My commute is less than five minutes. I work with a great group of very wealthy people. Life is good. Wells Fargo can kiss my ass."

Most of this was bragging, and Mark was using common symbols of success as evidence of his happiness. But even on a psychological level, the UAE was a great fit for him. The job he had, and the lifestyle he led, were almost identical to the ones he had in San Francisco. He was managing ten billion dollars, same as at Wells. Nice apartment? Check. Foreign girlfriend? Check. Sports car? Check. Outdoor recreation? Check. The piece that was different was the culture. He finally felt like things were right in his life because the culture made sense to him.

First, a few basic facts about the UAE. It was granted independence from Britain after World War II. When oil prices shot up in the early 1970s, the country was transformed overnight from a poor nomadic culture to one with one of the highest per capita incomes worldwide. Only about 20 percent of the population are native citizens. The rest, like Mark, have moved there in the last twenty-five years from other Arab nations, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and recently Eastern Europe. It is a land of opportunity, full of shocking contrasts. There's no crime, no beggars, no tax limits, and no speed limits. More Mercedes per capita, but also the highest vehicular death rate anywhere. A strict prohibition on premarital sex, as in any Muslim country, but one of the highest rates of STDs in the world. The government is run by Muslims, but the cities are grotesquely westernized, overrun by McDonald's and Pizza Hut.

Mark fell in quickly with the British expat contingent. He was one of only two Americans around, so Mark Kraschel, Mr. Boring, was suddenly exotic. He had a funny accent and an unusual vocabulary and one hell of a story to tell. Everyone wanted to meet him. It didn't take a girl on his arm to make him interesting. Remember, Mark was an identical twin; his whole life he'd sought the feeling of being unique. At last he was the outsider, not shadowed by a parallel self. Is it possible that being an outsider is what someone might need to feel at home? Plus, Mark had risen again to his old level, proving that he deserved this. It wasn't a fluke.

Mark was relieved to be off the career roller coaster and enjoy some stability. He thought he'd had stability at First Boston and at Wells Fargo, but now he realizes that a two-year contract *wasn't* security. He was always one bad trade away from being shown the door. The work culture in the UAE is old-fashioned, like something out of our early 1960s.

Mark explained, "In the U.S., the trend in the labor market is to make you disposable. I was a replaceable commodity. That's no way to live a life. I lived in fear. Job security is an important thing. People in the States are so used to it now they don't know any better. Companies here don't lay people off. I have a job I love and I have no chance of being fired. It's much more civil. They appreciate seniority and respect people who've put in the time. None of this worshipping the young hotshot. I work a thirty-eight-hour work week and get a two-month vacation. Two months! I'm appreciated by my coworkers. You can't imagine how good that feels. It's a sweet thing to have a good job and be proud of it."

Relationships between men and women were also old-fashioned. The Muslim influence rubbed off on the expats. They were big on formal introductions. Most women stopped working once married. The men are expected to support their wife, or wives, in a style they are accustomed to. Women demand their men put up or shut up after a year. It's not like in the States, where either side might string the other along for years before they're ready. In the States, the expectation for what marriage should be is so high. The Muslim way is much more pragmatic.

"They just want somebody to be with," Mark said. "It's not this American ideal of finding a soul mate. It's simple. Do you have fun together?"

"You don't want to find a soul mate?"

"My expectations are not huge. I want a woman comfortable with being a wife."

“Meaning not needing her own career?”

“My mom was a single career woman,” he said. “I dated women like her for a long time. I tried to make it work with Nicole. Two careers, two countries—a ship can’t have two captains. I respect how they do it here. It’s more workable. I want someone who’s around.”

“You don’t want your kids to go through what you went through.”

“Yeah. I know that sounds unenlightened, but I would disagree. They have *sharia* marriage here, as defined by Muslim law. It’s a no-fault marriage, and it’s an explicit arrangement, where things are worked out in advance, like the level of financial support, and whether you live in the same or separate bedrooms—”

“—Separate bedrooms?”

“Men and women lead separate lives here. The women go out with the women, the guys hang with the guys, and nobody feels guilty about it. The Muslim men can have multiple wives—”

“—Now I see the appeal.”

“It’s not for the sex. Guys who need sex on the side keep mistresses. The multiple wives is a pragmatic thing. Nobody wants to be alone. So a Muslim’s second wife might be his first cousin, so she won’t be a spinster. It’s a way of assigning responsibility for who is going to take care of people. Everyone is taken care of. Same as at work. There’s a stability in not having unrealistic expectations.”

“You’re going to sound like a misogynist.”

“Guys in the States treat their women with no dignity. It’s so casual it’s demeaning.”

Maybe I didn’t agree with it, but I found some empathy for what Mark was saying. I’d been on both sides. My ex-wife was from Tacoma,

Washington. She had a West Coast feminist mentality. When I introduced her, it was important not to label her as “my wife,” because that made her feel like a piece of property. She was her own person. I bought into that philosophy of equals and learned my way around these minefields, but after we got divorced, I was in another universe with Michele, who’s from Texas and has very different expectations of how a woman should be treated. It’s disrespectful to her if I don’t make it clear she is the most important person in my life when I introduce her. I *always* say, “This is my *wife*, Michele.”

Mark talked a good game but it was not so easy to shake his American expectations. He had fallen in love with a young Romanian woman named Elena. She had been working as a cocktail waitress earning \$200 a month. Elena had no desire to keep getting her ass pinched every night. She was only twenty-one, and considering she was from a formerly repressed country she might want a few years of freedom, right? No thank you. She wanted security. She took Mark back to Romania on vacation to meet her family. He did manage to get her back into the UAE without marrying her, but it took a few weeks, and once she showed up she put it to him: “Are you going to marry me?”

“I balked,” he said. “In that moment, I didn’t *know*.”

“Do you have fun together?”

“Absolutely. Ahh, man . . . We’d never talked about marriage before. She caught me by surprise.”

“So how did she react to you being Mr. United States ‘I Can’t Commit’?”

“She ran out.”

“When?”

“Yesterday.”

“Why didn’t you say yes, you dope? All that jive you gave me about not expecting too much?”

“Eastern European women are different. It was a little presumptuous. I mean, a marriage is a thing that should be talked about a little, shouldn’t it? What do we expect, what do we want, how many kids . . .”

“Hah! You still need a *little* bit of soul mate, don’t you?”

“Maybe a little.”

“Will she come back?”

“I don’t know.”

Elena came back two hours later, and they went to work on finding an in-between.

I was happy for Mark. I respected that he needed a culture where “a ship doesn’t have two captains,” and I recognized that he arrived at this solution only after five hard years trying to balance his career with Nicole’s. He moved to Germany for her, and then to New York for her—he tried. But not many couples are going to find solace in his story. *Honey, I’m leaving you for another country.* Dual ambitions will tear many relationships apart, inevitably, but no couple wants to accept that possibility. They want to find a solution. They recognize there are going to be some sacrifices, but the bottom line is, *breaking up is not acceptable.*

There are no right answers for how couples handle their dual ambitions, so I want to tread there only lightly. Yet it’s important to talk about, because fears of hurting your relationship can hold you back from finding your dream. I’d like to offer two portraits of happy couples. They’re at spots that a lot of couples fear and fantasize about. The first is a couple whose dreams, once so aligned, are beginning to part. The second is a couple who’ve quit their careers in order to work together.

WHEN PATHS BEGIN TO PART

Tom and Jennifer Scott first contacted me from an Internet café in Chiang Mai, Thailand, where they'd heard about my book. I imagined word of my project being passed along like an old 95-cent edition of *Tropic of Cancer*. Tom and Jennifer were four months into their five-month sojourn and Tom was dreading the trip's end, because he was no closer to figuring out what he wanted to do with the rest of his life than he had been on the day he left the States. They were refugees from Washington, D.C., where they'd spent the last eight years working in politics. They did not intend to return to D.C. They'd cleaned out their apartment, sold their car, and put their possessions in storage. They were not quite thirty.

Tom was waiting for an epiphany. He anticipated that without the intense daily obligations of national politics, his head would be clear to do the big thinking he never had time for.

"I really thought that one night I'd wake up in my sleep and realize, 'This is what I want to do,'" he said later.

The first month, he suffered withdrawal from politics. He was watching CNN every night from their hotels in New Zealand, trying to get the latest on the disputed presidential election. The second month in Australia and the third month in Malaysia, he reveled in the trip, procrastinating on that big thinking he'd planned. This last month he was no longer sleeping well as reality was setting in and the Decision was haunting him. You have thirty-six days to decide. You have twenty-

two days to decide. Fourteen days . . .

For the record, I'll say here what I told Tom when he landed back on our shores: Do not wait for the kind of clarity that comes with epiphanies. In the nine hundred plus stories I heard in my research, almost nobody was struck with an epiphany. It was one of my biggest surprises. Most people had a slim notion or a slight urge that they slowly nurtured until it grew into a faint hope which barely stayed alive for years until it could mature into a vision. Most people feel guilty about wanting what they want, and they feel foolish for wanting something impossible, and those censoring voices will bark like a pack of junkyard dogs, night after night. Don't doubt your desire because it comes to you as a whisper; don't think, "If it were really important to me, I'd feel clearer about this, less conflicted." My research didn't show that to be true. The things we really want to do are usually the ones that scare us the most. The things you'll not feel conflicted about are the choices that leave no one hurt.



Jennifer never had as hard a time. She'd been a speechwriter and then the deputy chief of staff for a Washington State Republican congressman who represented two wineries in the Columbia and Yakima valleys. From her first meeting with the winemakers she was intrigued. A lot of foodies develop an appreciation for wine, but

Jennifer kept abreast of the industry's needs, and she even took a class on the history of the wine industry. The culture of D.C. turns everyone into expert spinmeisters, so she figured she had the skills to handle public relations for a winery. The day before she left her job, she called the two wineries and asked for some contacts in Napa Valley. As they traveled through New Zealand and Australia, she kept dragging Tom to vineyards for tastings.

The day she and Tom landed back in the States, she felt like a string of lucky stars steered her right into a job in the industry. They flew into Reno, and in the airport won \$1,800 in a slot machine. They bought a car with it, and, thinking she had to *be* in Napa to get a job in Napa, drove down to find an apartment. Within hours they found a lady who had a cottage available for five weeks—enough time to see if they liked it. Tom was already lobbying for his backup plan, which was to return to D.C.—but Jennifer wouldn't hear it. She wanted 100 percent commitment. Tom had never seen her so passionate and determined. She called the names she'd been given, was referred to a PR firm, went in for an informational, and three days later was offered a job. She felt the guiding hand of destiny making it easy. Her first day on the job she filled out forms, and her second day I drove up to Napa to keep Tom from going stir crazy.

The sun was high overhead, the temperature a pleasant 78; Tom was in shorts and sandals, drinking chilled bottled water and otherwise completely miserable. On the other side of the country that morning, Jim Jeffords left the Republican Party, giving control of the Senate to the Democrats and throwing a monkey wrench in President Bush's agenda. This was the sort of inside baseball D.C. goes nuts over. Tom was three thousand miles away, sitting in his cottage, reading about it on the Internet, calling old friends, suffering painful withdrawal.

Tom was incredibly interested in my book. He said he'd been asking himself this question every day for the last two years.

"But I don't have any idea how to answer it," he said.

That said, he didn't want help. He preferred talking about the last eight years. He squirmed whenever I asked for more detail about his notions of what's next. He dreaded having to make a decision, but at the same time he liked being at this crossroads. He enjoyed the sense of infinite potential. He had a rare chance to reinvent himself into whoever he wanted to be. I realized he didn't want me or reality to take that away.

This was the first time his and Jennifer's paths had diverged. They met in 1992 at a bipartisan event for the delegations from Washington State. Tom was working for Democrat Al Swift, Jennifer for Republican Slade Gorton. They discovered they'd both grown up in Bellevue, lived only three blocks apart when at the University of Washington, and had birthdays only five weeks apart. Meeting at last was the closest thing to destiny they've ever felt. Lucky stars. They moved in together; they could see the Capitol from the balcony of their apartment.

Tom loved it. Many people get into politics because they care about the issues, but end up hating the game. The people who are happiest in Washington actually love the game. That was Tom. "Every day, we won or we lost. We won if we got our message picked up by the media and into the minds of the voters. And tomorrow, we woke up and played the game again." The issues mattered to him a great deal, but not as much as winning did. He became shrewd at second-guessing every so-called fact or statistic thrown his way. He slowly accepted and understood the necessity of compromise as a way to build a consensus. He learned that in D.C., having a lot of money doesn't make you important. Nobody in D.C. makes that much money. Your importance is measured by how many people work for you, and how many people you can influence.

They didn't know how long they would stay. The average job tenure for congressional staff is 2.3 years, so they both had to scramble a few times for new positions. Al Swift told them early on that they'd know it was time to leave when they drove past the Capitol and no longer had a sense of awe. Elections provide natural opportunities to leave, and

every election a few of their friends would peel off for new lives. In the way Tom envisioned his life, someday he and Jennifer would peel off too. He never expected it to last forever.

On their vacations they scoped out other places to live. They were drawn to quaint, picturesque towns, the Charlestons, Blowing Rocks, Galways, Santa Fes and Napas. They'd stay in bed-and-breakfasts and fall in love with the setting, trying to imagine starting life over. But they'd always get stuck at the same thought: *What would we do here?*

"You're about to find out," I said.

"I'll figure it out," he said, bucking up. He'd decided that Place was more important to his Happiness than Job. Or, $H = P > J$.

From the moment they first came here on vacation, Tom and Jennifer thought Napa was the right kind of place to raise children. Not anonymous like suburbs, not crime-ridden like cities. Plenty of open land.

"For the longest time, I felt the people out in the hinterlands, the people back in the state, didn't understand what we were doing in D.C. They didn't get the game. Didn't know how to play it, didn't respect it. I guess I looked down on them and thought they were naïve."

"What changed that?"

"I started traveling with the senator back to the state and meeting people. And I slowly realized they're the ones who know what's important in their lives and what really counted. They were the ones who were grounded. It changed my entire perspective of our life in D.C. How unbalanced it was."

Napa is even more of a one-industry town than D.C. The valley was preparing for that coming weekend's Vintners' Association Charity Auction, which is the biggest black-tie event of the year, lasting three days. It was the perfect opportunity for newcomers like Tom and

Jennifer to meet everyone in the industry, but tickets cost \$2,500 each. They tried to volunteer and discovered there is a three-year waiting list. To be a volunteer! The guy who coordinates the valet parking has been doing it for twelve years and holds the position like a tenured professor.

Tom didn't want to work in wine, which felt frivolous compared with politics. He spoke eloquently about free trade versus logging, salmon versus dams, and veterans' benefits versus budget constraints. The more we talked the clearer it seemed to me that Tom had never lost his love for politics. But he had a hard time honoring that.

He explained that on Capitol Hill, every press secretary is drilled to think in terms of an average Family of Four. What will this *tax cut* mean to a Family of Four? How will *school lunch money* affect a Family of Four? Tom was better at thinking about what a Family of Four needed than he was at thinking about what *he* needed.

I think he was suffering from having spent his entire adult life in politics. He'd flown to D.C. the day after college graduation. He didn't know anything else, and his intellectual curiosity was making him second-guess whether he was happy. He'd watched other friends go off to Wall Street, Hollywood, and Silicon Valley and make so much money. He reminded me of George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life*. When I told him so, he admitted that's exactly how he felt.

"Maybe it *is* curiosity," he said. "But how do I tell the difference between common curiosity and a future passion? I have these thoughts. These notions. Things I'm curious about. Things I've never had a chance to explore."

Tom was repeatedly asking, *Could I be happy doing* ? H = ? Happiness isn't a difficult standard to meet. He could be happy doing any number of things, fill in the blank. Beware of happiness chasing. The higher standard (and it's not for everybody) is to ask, *Is doing why I am here? Will be meaningful to me? Is what I want to*

contribute to the world?

"There's a lot of Clinton alumni in Sacramento now working for Governor Davis," I said. "Why don't you call them up?" Sacramento was only an hour east.

"Do you know anything about local politics?" he asked.

"Actually, I do. My first gig as a writer was covering San Francisco politics. I did it for two years."

"I don't mean to insult anyone, but the game's not as interesting at this level."

I'd already interviewed people who'd left Capitol Hill to work in Los Angeles, San Jose, and Sacramento. Tom was accurate that it was minor league by comparison, but people adjust.

I said, "It might give you the balance you need."

He didn't really want to talk about it anymore. Focusing on it was making him uncomfortable. "I'll figure it out," he said again.

I realized I should shut up. He didn't want to solve it. He wanted some time to play and be curious. Eventually, like George Bailey, he'd remember what gave his life meaning.

A few months later, Tom started working on a local campaign.

WORKING WITH YOUR SPOUSE

Nancy Latham is thirty-two, but looks younger, with a quiet baby girl. She looks down and away a lot when she speaks, toes the gravel with her work boot. Two years ago, Nancy was an installation manager at a small telecommunications company in Seattle, daydreaming of escaping from the corporate grind. She'd attended good schools but didn't have much initiative or ambition. By her nature, she was a ski bum. Nothing she liked more than kicking it on the slopes, slumming it in the bars, crashing on fold-out couches.

Coming out of college, she wasn't too resourceful in hunting for her first job. She scanned the classifieds in the newspaper, eventually found one as an office manager. It took her three years to get bored with that. She didn't look hard for what to do next. Her dad owned a small company that sold and installed business phone systems. He'd founded it in 1985, after thirty-five years as a gray flannel suit. He seemed happy, so Nancy thought why not?

She liked it. Didn't get itchy, didn't think much about what her life was adding up to. Nancy didn't care about phone systems, but she cared about seeing the business succeed. Phone systems were the macguffin, the company's plot device, the thing they happened to sell. It could have been software or tortilla chips or insurance, it didn't matter. Building the company was fun, in and of itself. It had that family-business feel. What she didn't know was that all along her dad was trying to get out of the business and retire. In her fourth year, the company was sold to some big telco, and everything she liked about

the job was gone. It was suddenly just *phone systems*. Nancy had a couple of new bosses, and was no longer a manager. The demotion was embarrassing. They moved her to an office in Kent, and she suddenly had an hour-long commute every day, each way. She was road rage waiting to happen. She gave two weeks' notice.



But phone systems was still a growing industry, so she had another job offer in no time. Not being a particularly brave person, she resolved to take the job and swallow her pride. There was just one thing. She drove over to their office to tell them, “One week vacation’s not going to work for me. I need more.” This seemed idiotic—who can live on only a *week* vacation? But they said no. One week, that’s it, same for everyone.

—I’m a ski bum! I can’t live on only a week!

On the Richter scale for life-changing moments, Nancy’s hardly rates. But for the first time, driving home from that visit, she woke up to the seriousness of these choices she was making, the endless compromises of how she’d really prefer to live.

Suddenly these ski-bum fantasies burst into her consciousness. She wanted to spend more time with her husband, Ross. She wanted to be

a bartender. Or a helicopter pilot. Do traffic reports. Maybe they could own a bar. Maybe own a bar, and park the helicopter on the roof, and call the joint the Traffic Jam. And do traffic reports. Sure, she'd be a white-collar dropout, but if she did this with Ross, maybe she wouldn't feel the shame of that.

What I'm about to tell you is going to sound like she's purposeful and direct and the master of her own destiny, but really, she's not—she's simple.

She went home that night, a Thursday, and when her husband Ross came home, she said—*Honey, I've made a decision.*

—Okay. Is it something I should I sit down for?

—Yeah.

He sat down. —Go ahead.

—I'm buying a business.

He laughed. She was only half serious. Wouldn't that be nice, though? Ross was a telecom consultant, and not enjoying it much more than Nancy was.

So, the business-to-business classifieds only come out twice a week. On Sunday, Nancy grabbed that section out of the *Seattle Times*. Why not? It's where she had found her first job.

Businesses for Sale:

ESPRESSO STAND . . . naw . . .

JANITORIAL SERVICE . . . nope . . .

RESTAURANT . . . mmm . . .

NURSERY FOR SALE. No nursery skills necessary, just people and business skills. Will train.

Hey, now that looks interesting.

—Ross, you gotta call this guy.

—No, you call him, you can do it.

—No, I don't know what to ask. Please?

On Monday, Ross called. The owner was fifty-two years old, an ex-drummer from Texas, and his wife wanted to go back to the South. His company wasn't a regular nursery. Its name was Big Trees, and that's what they specialized in. When the owner started the business, he didn't know a thing about trees, so he was confident he could train Ross and Nancy. He promised that if they bought it, he would stick around for two months and make sure they knew the ropes.

Ross and Nancy drove up to Big Trees. It was a warm July day. The Snohomish River Valley lies thirty miles north of Seattle. Emerald green dairy pastures run for miles. At its edges, evergreen hills climb into snow-capped mountains. It's a postcard from any angle. Big Trees sat plumb in the middle on twenty-eight acres. A large aluminum-sided barn had been fashioned into plain offices for the staff of twelve (now nineteen). Some serious heavy equipment stood out back, including a hydraulic spade truck, which operated a four-bladed spade that is big enough to bite the root ball of an eighty-foot, sixty-ton tree right out of the ground. The acreage was surrounded by a nursery of diverse trees—bigger than you can buy at a local nursery, but still young—most are ten to twenty feet. Umbrella pines, jacquemontii birches, weeping willows, katsuras, paperbark maples, pyramidalis. They sell three thousand trees a year to places throughout Greater Seattle.

Nancy and Ross fell in love with the place instantly. The owner was

really nice and reassuring. Trees weren't brain surgery, he said.

They drove straight to the library and checked out four books on trees and four books on how to buy a business. Where would they get that kind of money? The books said sometimes banks will finance the purchase, paying down the debt over ten years with income from the business. The books also said they should get an attorney. Ross knew an attorney, and the attorney knew a banker, and . . .

—Can we tell him the price?

—I don't think we should say the price.

—I don't want to come across like we have something to hide.

—It was about on par with the cost of buying a really big house.

—Yeah. A really big house.

. . . so for collateral, the bank wanted their house, as well as their unfinished cabin in ski country. Until then, that house was their rock, and that cabin was their dream. What if they lost their house? They had a real bout with fear. The scope of this loan was way out of Nancy's comfort range, and the gears of the transaction had begun to turn, and Nancy panicked. Started to lose sleep. Cry. I asked her how she got over that fear.

—I don't know how I got over that, said Nancy.

—It was when the bank okayed the ski cabin, said Ross.

—Oh right. The bank wanted us to finish building the cabin.

—Because it was better collateral finished than half-finished.

—Sure, but the message to me was, "You can still go ahead with your life." That was symbolic.

I suspected that Nancy's dad had helped her. But other than by being a role model, apparently not. He certainly could have, because he's wealthy, and maybe he would have, if Nancy had asked—but she didn't want to.

As the day neared, they started to realize: *I may never have to work in an office ever again.* I am my own boss. And it's *trees!* Trees!

On September 10, less than two years ago, they signed the papers and were handed the keys to the barn and the keys to the trucks. They went out to breakfast with the old owner to celebrate, and then they came back to the barn to start their new life.

"When we were going through the purchase," Ross said, "we'd try to imagine ourselves here, in this life, and ask, 'Is that *me*? Can I do that? Will I like that life?' I had doubts, because it was so different. My life was putting on a suit, getting on a plane, going to a meeting, flying home. But I'm amazed how much that life *wasn't* me. This *is* me."

The business has grown a little, but it hasn't really changed. They're doing more environmental work—they won contracts to reforest the banks of salmon streams throughout King and Snohomish counties.

I asked them if they ever feel like they dropped out from the professional ranks, and if that ever bothered them. But it didn't. They had no trouble embracing this life as the good life. But they both, separately, mentioned they expected a class divide between them (the managers) and their nineteen employees (the labor). But that hasn't been the case. They socialize together by night, and everyone grabs a shovel by day.

Nancy and Ross live spartanly, because the profits go to the bank. They bring their dogs to the barn. They wear what they want to wear. They carry walkie-talkies and drive big equipment. People *love* trees. Trees are like books—they have an intangible psychic significance far beyond their utility.

The couple is so ecstatic about this new incarnation that they can't describe it or talk about it without pausing to wonder, "Do I deserve this? Do I deserve such a wonderful life?" It came so easily to them, it doesn't feel like they *earned* it. It's like they're afraid if they can't explain it, justify it, the dream might end. They keep trying to figure out *why us*, why were we worthy among the millions of unhappy people out there?

They don't have many answers. But once they were at their ski cabin, and they found an old list in a coffee table drawer. They'd made this list back in 1997. They'd been driving out to their half-finished ski cabin, and they were playing a Tony Robbins audiotape that Ross's sister had sent them. They didn't know who he was, and they weren't turned on by his message or anything, but it was a long drive and they had time to kill, so, inspired by his tape, they made a list. Goals. Things they would like to someday do. Nothing unusual. Work together, work outside, work for themselves, that sort of thing.

The list stayed on the coffee table in their cabin for the weekend, then was soon relegated to the drawer, then the back of the drawer, and long forgotten. But when they found the list, they thought, "Maybe this is how it started."

—I think, we put it out there, in our heads.

—We didn't do anything about it, but *subconsciously* . . .

—If it's there, you tend to get to those goals.

—Just write it down.

So here's what I wanted to know: How much of their bliss is attributable to running their own business, how much to working outside with trees and trucks, and how much to getting to work together as husband and wife? The answer, sort of, is yes, yes, and yes. The threads are knotted tight. They never would have fallen in love with the company if it sold, say, toner. And Nancy never would have

taken on the debt or the responsibility without Ross to shoulder it with her. Nancy's friends can't believe she enjoys going home with the same guy she works with, sees him all day every day and doesn't get sick of him. But that probably says something about her friends, and their husbands. Nancy can't explain why it works so well and doesn't try. That's who she is.

THIS IS YOUR OWN RESPONSIBILITY

Trust me for a moment on where this is headed.

I remember wanting what Nancy and Ross have. I remember wanting that *so badly*. When I was young and drifting, I fantasized about working alongside my girlfriend, and occasionally did. It was always my first fix. Sharing made everything more interesting. And in the later years, when she became a reporter and editor, sharing writing was when we were closest. She got me started, long ago. When I was twenty years old, she presented me with a notebook to write down my thoughts. For twelve years, she was the first reader of every word I ever wrote.

When I left her (I didn't have "reasons," I was confused, our relationship's patterns were forged when we were very young, and I felt trapped by my past, and despite therapy and writing and painting metaphorical visualizations of the Man I wanted to be . . . instead I gave in to temptation, had an affair, then felt terrible shame that became an even bigger wedge, drove away my friends, slept at the office . . . and started over, started over with nothing but my mom's couch and my soccer cleats and my ability to write, except—)

. . . anyway, when I left her, I *couldn't* write. How could I write? I need regularity and calm, and had neither.

For eleven months, I sat down every weekday morning and tried to complete the magazine assignments that I had due. I would string

sentences together, but could not “hear” their effect. Everything sounded flat, and it was. A piece of writing has to seduce the reader, it has to suspend disbelief and earn the reader’s trust. I lacked these facilities. I was in a state of permanent disbelief, not worthy of anyone’s trust, and quickly ruined any seductions I started. Out of obligation, I turned a few articles in, but they were rejected outright with a kill fee, or were sent back with the instructions “throw this away and start over.” I grew discouraged and was unsure if I’d ever be able to write well again. My second novel arrived in bookstores during this time (I had written it before I threw my life away), and it was receiving strong praise, which only made me feel worse—“look what you used to be able to do!” *Look at what you’ll never be able to do again.*

How did I get past this? My work wasn’t yet the topic of therapy, but my love life was. During therapy, I found I was evaluating other women with my old expectation that, ideally, we should be very alike. I’d never learned to appreciate differences. I concentrated on learning this, which was embarrassingly hard, and when I got a little strength I was able to look back and see that I had used my ex-wife’s support for my writing as a crutch. I was that guy whose leg had probably healed long ago, but was afraid to let go of his crutch. On my journey toward being a writer, this was a major test, and I’d been ignoring it. So what if I had two best-sellers if I couldn’t write alone? Do you remember the story of John Butler, who wanted to be a minister? He faced this same test. He wanted to be a minister, so he fell in love with one, and hoped to marry her and be her co-minister. They broke up and he had to find his way to being a minister by himself. It’s a very common test. Often the crutch is not your lover—it might be your company, if your success has only occurred at this one company, or it might be a mentor, or an agent, or a business partner. Whatever we have relied on too heavily along the way. Whatever we secretly fear we could never succeed without.

So I deliberately attacked my weaknesses as a writer—my lack of various reporting skills. I procrastinated calling strangers, and I had a strong tendency to rely on my imagination rather than research. I never wrote straight nonfiction. My ex-wife had these skills, so I never had to

learn them myself.

I'd been assigned articles about Silicon Valley—a big topic in those years—so I used these assignments as means to retrain myself. I got on the phone, I went to see people, and I stopped fictionalizing events to serve my ends. I wrote only what I saw, and I dug to find where reality was weirder than fiction. I fought hard for access to events that had always been shrouded in secrecy. Not even the people who knew me best were aware that this was what was driving me. I only talked about it with my therapist. I was not trying to wrestle Silicon Valley, I was trying to heal. I was trying to learn the skills I had relied on my ex-wife for. The book that came of those three years, *The Nudist on the Late Shift and Other True Tales of Silicon Valley*, put me on the cover of magazines. I was interviewed hundreds of times, and I was held up as one of the foremost experts on the Valley. Maybe I was, but that didn't matter to me. I was enormously proud that my weaknesses had become strengths. I never tried to explain my real motives—I might have, but nobody ever asked, "Why did you write this book the way you did?" True writers have a lot more invested in *the way* they've written their books than in what those books happen to be about. The way I wrote that book was a meaningful accomplishment for me. Far more meaningful than being a Silicon Valley know-it-all.

This period of chaos that had threatened to snuff out my writing ended up being a gift that made me a far better writer.

I'm married again now. Is Michele supportive and helpful? God, yes. And I hope I'm helpful to her. We have an incredibly rich marriage, with many bases of connection. When it comes to my work, I relish her support but don't cling to it. It's healthier. I do not overindulge. I'm careful not to let my work be an obsession that gets between us. I know that if writing is my dream, then it's my responsibility alone. I never again want to use another person that way.

This was the biggest surprise: in the years after the divorce, out of that pain and sadness came an ability to empathize with people I

interviewed on a level I had never reached before. To empathize is to be able to see the world through other people's eyes. I too knew the feeling of wanting life to end, the feeling of not wanting to cause any more pain, of having hurt the one person who loved me the most, of believing I was broken, of having a hole in one's self, of not being able to get out of bed, of wanting to throw it all away and start over again, and again, and again . . . and when I would sit down with subjects to talk about life, I had a new respect for their emotions, a respect they could feel, and they talked to me differently, they revealed themselves differently . . . and I realized I had never been good at interviewing before because I did so only on an intellectual level. My therapist listened to me for three years, and from her I learned what it meant to listen. Before my divorce, I was only interested in my own life, for that was the only life I could truly relate to. I could only learn from firsthand experience, from my own mistakes. I was uninterested in History. Afterward, other people's lives became rich and cathartic for me. I was able to live a little through them, and accept some of their wisdom. Sometimes I don't even have to hear their story—just being in their presence is instructional.

With a book like this—a book of stories—I recognize that some readers will be hungry to extract the intellectual components, but they won't genuinely feel for the people I've written about. They need to make their own mistakes. This book might help them argue away some misconceptions, but it won't release their fears. The suggestion that they even have fears will seem ridiculous. Who doesn't feel fearless at twenty-five? I wasn't afraid! I was ready to try anything! But that brazenness is usually hiding something. For the first six years out of college, my biggest fear was that the working world would push my wife and me apart. My choices were ruled by that fear, but I never would have called it a fear. I would have advertised it as one of the few things that I knew mattered to me. I would have called it self-knowledge. You want to know where your fears are hiding? Tell me what you know about yourself. Tell me what you can't live without.

RESISTING PARENTS' PRESSURE

Most of the people in this book are Generation X'ers or Baby Boomers. A few of the most important stories are of those older and wiser, but the bulk aren't. Why have I chosen that? Why not more from my parents' generation, or my grandparents'? They've asked this question too; they still do. They might answer it a little differently, with their own perspective, but shouldn't that be included? I did collect their stories, maybe a hundred or so, and I found many tragic or dramatic, but very few did I seek out and research in depth with the intent to include here. Why? I went with my gut. The stories that spoke to me—that made me want to pay for plane tickets and hotel rooms and rental cars and sometimes leave my family—were from my own generation.

Prior generations went through something that's had time to percolate into a story. This story is filled with common placemarks, and to even mention those placemarks conjures a known meaning, a legacy. For my grandparents: the Depression, World War II, the social conservatism of the fifties, the Cold War. For my parents: civil rights, Watergate, Vietnam, feminism, the huge spike in divorce, the return of former housewives to the workplace. On the shelf at my mom's house, and on the shelf at my dad's house, are the excellent books that tell this story. They've been on those shelves since I was a child.

There's a common reaction when we hear tales from other generations. The reaction is, "I can't compete with that. Nothing momentous like that will happen to me." And it sends us back into thinking we have no story, into a sort of creative futilism, rather than

stubbornly working to build a story with the few leads life does present. My generation's story hasn't had time to percolate. Or we've missed our chances to do so. As a result, many people of my generation have *a harder time telling their own story and finding its meaning*. They don't have the placemarks and legacies to draw on. They use irony to poke fun at the hole in the center.

It's that hole I'm aiming at. The stories in this book are of people who've taken what life has offered, good and bad, and said to themselves, "I'm going to learn from that. I'm going to change."

The tension between generations is a common theme in these pages. So many have had to challenge their parents' philosophy of life, fighting to get across that *just because we're doing it differently is not a sign of disrespect*. The young people in this book do understand their parents' choices. Every single one has told me, "If I were in their shoes, I would have done the same thing."

Chi Tschang was one of these young people.

Chi is a twenty-five-year-old schoolteacher at one of the most successful public charter schools in the country, the Academy of the Pacific Rim, which is in Hyde Park, Massachusetts, about a half-hour southwest of Boston. APR is an educational "start-up," and is still very much in start-up mode, meaning the core group of young teachers works start-up hours, eight in the morning until nine at night, and is often in on Saturday. They have a sense of ownership in the school, though there are no stock options to say so. It was founded five years ago by a Harvard Business School grad who was interested in education reform, took a trip to Japan, and was inspired by Asian education techniques. Its first class will graduate high school in spring 2003; all will go to college, and many to the best colleges in the country.

APR has no entrance requirements; its students come from low and middle-income neighborhoods. Sixty-five percent are African American, 25 percent Caucasian, 5 percent Hispanic, and 5 percent

Asian. When they come to the school, in the sixth grade, many can't read or write. A third flunk their first year and take sixth grade again. By ninth grade, only a tenth flunk, and by the end of high school they will be top students applying to the Ivy League. In education, this is the true measure of success—getting kids who would have floundered in public schools and sending them to really good colleges. Chi says the benefit is mutual—it's made him a better person. He's in his third year here, and he's enormously proud of what he's helped build. He fights on the front line of one of the most important issues facing our country, and he's not merely "making a difference"—he's winning the battle.

Yet his father refuses to acknowledge that Chi is doing something good. He never asks about Chi's work. He wants Chi to be a doctor or a lawyer, or at least make money. Last summer, when Chi flew home to Fresno, he timed his father to see how long before he brought this up. Chi walked off the plane, greeted his family, and headed toward baggage claim. Fifty-three seconds after his arrival, his dad let fly, "So, how's business school sound?" Fifty-three seconds!

"He loves me to death," Chi said. "But he pretty much disowned me for my choices."

I told him that's a pretty strong word.

"He hates it. He says, 'So, I guess you'll be a teacher the rest of your life?'"

"Why such a strong objection?"

"It's a common hypocrisy in Asian immigrant culture. We prize being educated, but we don't respect educators. My dad believes in Confucian circles of responsibility. You take care of yourself first, then your family, then strangers. In his mind, I'm helping poor black kids before helping myself. He doesn't believe that I like this, that I feel it's good for me, that I'm doing this *for me* as much as for my students."

"Has he ever visited the school?" I asked.

“No. Never even come to Boston.”

“This kills you, doesn’t it?”

“In Chinese families, we are raised to respect our elders.”

“Respect, or behave?”

“Respect their wisdom about how to live.”

“So you feel a ton of guilt, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you think about going off to make money?”

“Never. I love what I do. I remember, the summer after college, I told my Dad I was joining City Year, an AmeriCorps program, to tutor kids in a housing project in Providence. My Dad e-mailed me back . . .” Chi tightened up.

“What’d he say?”

“He said, ‘I regret ever sending you to Yale. I refuse to support you as long as you are doing this.’ And he meant it. It broke my heart, but it didn’t change my mind one bit. He couldn’t believe his son would choose to do something *any* high school grad could do. He’d invested a lot in me, a lot of time and a lot of money. He was mad he wasn’t going to get a return on that investment.”

“Wow, Chi, the way you say that, it’s like you’re not mad at him. Like you agree with him.”

“I can see his point of view.”



At Yale, Chi was the head of “Ex Com.” During the days of dot-coms, they had Ex Com at Yale, with very different motives. Ex Com was the nickname for the Executive Committee, the ten students who ran Dwight Hall, which was the community service center at Yale. Yale had been transformed by an article that ran in GQ, “The Death of Yale,” which accused Yale of completely neglecting the slums of New Haven that surrounded the school. In response to the article, Yale students got involved in huge numbers. During Chi’s years, 80 percent of students performed community service in seventy various programs run through Dwight Hall. Not all were do-gooders at heart; putting in time was prestigious. Chi was shocked when, upon graduation, eight of the ten members of Ex Com abandoned community service and went off to McKinsey Consulting, Goldman Sachs, law schools and medical schools. Were they prestige whores? Or did two years of volunteering entitle them to get theirs? Chi didn’t harbor any resentment, but he was a little confused by it, and even more confused by his own plans. He had none.

Chi’s degree was in history, but his favorite subject was urban studies. The summer after graduation, he stayed on to help two of his professors. That summer popped his belief in what he calls the Academic Bubble World Myth—the notion that a student can “know” a subject merely by reading books about it and writing papers, without ever having experienced it firsthand. Everything Chi had learned about

urban studies had come from lecture halls and library stacks, rather than the streets. "What do I really know?" Chi kept asking himself. He joined City Year to fill in this void.

City Year groups students into teams of six. Chi's team—most of whom were only high-school graduates—were placed in a housing project in a Hispanic neighborhood of South Providence. They wore red jackets and were paid a stipend of \$138.52 a week. During the week, he volunteered at an elementary school. Without any parental support, Chi lived on food stamps. He ate a lot of thirty-nine cent hamburgers at McDonald's. He would hear stories of his Yale friends at Goldman Sachs dropping a thousand bucks on brunch.

Chi keeps a memento from that year in his wallet. It's an Amtrak stub, for a thirty-dollar ticket from Providence to New Haven. After Chi purchased it, he had only thirty dollars left to his name. He showed me the stub, and I took a picture of it.

I asked him to tell me why it was so important to him.

"It reminds me I can be happy without money. It was, financially speaking, my lowest point. But even at my low, I was still happy."

I thought there was a little more to it. "It sounds to me like it mirrors the story of your dad that you've told me so often. The stub says to you that you are following in your father's footsteps, even if he doesn't recognize it."

"Yeah. I guess it does."

The story Chi told me many times goes like this: his dad had grown up in Taiwan, moved to Singapore when he was eleven, and was in Hong Kong for high school. When he came to Chicago for college, he had only seventy dollars in his pocket. During the summers, he would take the train to New York, where he would work as a dishwasher in Chinatown restaurants, living in a cot in the back room with the other employees. He went on to Duke Medical School, and now runs a

pathology lab at Saint Agnes Medical Center in Fresno. Rags to riches.

Chi, like many Asian Americans, is very aware of being what they call “lottery winners.” A parent’s choice to come to America radically improved their chances of thriving. Chi traveled through China last summer, and he was shocked by the Chinese preteens working long hours with no hope for an education. If not for the choices of his parents and grandparents, that could be Chi—nine years old, malnourished, pulling a cart piled high with rice bales. He’s extremely grateful for this opportunity. But how should he use his winning lottery ticket? This question tears at his mind and soul. Is he obliged to secure the riches, prestige, and job security that his ancestors never dreamt of? Does he owe that to his family and his heritage and the 1.3 billion Chinese who never won the lottery? Or is this opportunity a chance for more than material gain—is it a chance to do something great, to *be* Great?

Chi wrote me, “Call me romantic, but deep down I want to be great. I want to believe in a cause or an idea bigger than my individual financial or career progress. Deep down, that’s why I can’t get myself to look seriously at law or business school applications. Tell me, is there really anything—anything at all—‘great’ about working for a firm or corporation? And so here I am, chasing greatness.”

Chi never considered being a teacher while growing up, but at the elementary school he discovered how rewarding it was to work with kids. At a City Year roundtable discussion, he met one of the founders of the Academy of the Pacific Rim, which was then two years old. Chi interviewed for an opening, and the next fall started teaching sixth graders. (He now teaches eighth and tenth graders.)

That first year stripped him of every notion he’d learned at Yale. “At Yale, we were taught that people in the cities are poor because of factors outside their control. I used to think that inner-city kids only needed to connect. They needed love and understanding. And so if they were disorderly in class, I would let it go as a way of making them

my friend, currying their favor. And they kicked my ass. They abused me. If I gave an inch, they would take a mile. I couldn't connect with them. They did not respond to kindness, they took advantage of it. My class would be continuously disrupted. I learned the hard way. What they need is someone to teach them habits that lead to success later in life. They need someone to tell them when they've done something wrong. Kids face a thousand choices, and they need someone to teach them to make the right choices. How to handle social situations, how to take responsibility and not make excuses. I've become much more conservative by working here. It's the last thing I expected. It's much more like how my father raised me, with tough love. I wrote a little essay about my changing perspective, and I sent it to my father, who's a real conservative."

"What'd he say?"

"He said 'Good job.' It was only the second time he'd ever said that. The other time was when I got into Yale."

I spent a day in the classrooms at Academy of the Pacific Rim, and I witnessed this tough love in action. I was also there at night, for a poetry slam. APR occupies two floors of an old glass factory. They have no auditorium or gymnasium, but the heat is on, and the lights work, and there's not a scribble of graffiti anywhere. The kids wear khaki pants with either a red polo shirt or a white button-down; at the high school level, they're allowed a blue button-down in the rotation. School days begin with a school-wide gathering for announcements (there were 295 students at the time). Every morning, one student is chosen for having shown excellent character, and their teacher gives them the Gambatte Award. *Gambatte* is Japanese for "Fight to the end!" Then the students join hands—like at a church. Classes begin and end with similar rituals—with the students standing silently at attention, prepared to learn, the teacher pronounces "Good morning!" and students take seats. This is followed by a five-minute quiet period, where students read a passage and write answers to a question or two. It's very quiet. The students meet with their adviser every Friday to

review grading; Chi has had the same ten student advisees for his three years—he knows their parents well, and he has their home phone numbers memorized. When a student drifts off in class, or makes a time-wasting remark, or whispers to a friend, the teachers dock them a break or send them to the office with a quick, curt remark, midsentence. Students are not allowed to ruin the learning environment for others. They're also not allowed to disrespect their environment—they can't go to lunch until they vacuum their homeroom's carpet and Windex the windows. The night custodian only cleans the bathrooms. The rest of the school is cleaned by the students. Rather than athletics, they take tai chi every day. They're young, boisterous, fidgety—junior high schools are very hard places to learn, but at APR they manage to keep these outbursts out of the classroom. At the end of the day, it's an odd sight. As the students file out, they shake their teacher's hand and look them in the eye. Then, as they leave the school, they shake the principal's hand and look her in the eye. Coming down the staircase, they gaze at a big mural, *The Road to College*. Their school day lasts two hours longer than at other schools, though most of the additional time is spent in study hall, completing their homework. The school year is six weeks longer. The teachers are paid a bonus of up to \$5,000 a year if their students perform well.

None of this quite explains the school's success. It'd be a police state if it was only rules and slogans. "We teach character," Chi said. "I didn't know what character was when I came here. I was chronically late, and my body language was distant. I had to learn character in order to teach it, and I'm a much better person now. I handle situations better." *Handling situations* is how character is routinely coached. When a student is sent to the office, they're not merely punished. They fill out an incident report on themselves, which they review one-on-one with the disciplinary officer. The situation that got them in trouble is replayed in conversation, moment by moment, and the students are repeatedly asked how they could have handled the moment differently. It's drilled into them that they make choices. They become aware, and they stop acting without thinking.

This same concept of moral choices is applied in the classroom. In their English classes, they write essays on whether high school students should be required to do community service. In their history classes, they debate Supreme Court cases, and are pushed to justify how they would vote. Every Friday, during the advising period, the students are presented with a moral dilemma and asked to write in their journals about how they would handle it. They are never asked to memorize—they're only asked to demonstrate exemplary character: perseverance, integrity, respect, responsibility, courage. The highest honor in the school is not a 4.0 GPA—it's to receive the Gambatte Award for exhibiting character. This can be for an act of generosity, or for resisting peer pressure, or for avoiding a fight.

Chi has stayed true to his path by continually emphasizing these virtues and applying them to his own life. He treated me with enormous respect—he insisted on picking me up at the airport, found teachers I could stay with, made sure every teacher (and most of the students) knew who I was before I'd arrived. When I had a question, he wrote me long earnest essays ruminating on his answer. During winter break, when I couldn't make it down to Fresno, he drove up to the Bay Area. His correspondence over the year's time showed him maturing and his beliefs clarifying. The issues he focused on seemed more to the point. "The truth is, I don't really think about what I should do with my life," he said, late in the year. "I love my school, and I stopped thinking about it."

I challenged him, though. He was leading an unbalanced life. He'd had only one date thus far that school year, and it was a very good date that he hoped would go farther—and yet, even then, during dinner, he was half-thinking about his next day's lesson plans. When I'd call him on his cell phone late at night, he'd commonly still be at school. He eats most nights at a small family restaurant on his route home to Jamaica Plain; they close at 9:30, and Chi slips in right before the door closes to get take-out. On Friday nights he works at Rosie's Soup Kitchen from five until eight, then drives the van the rest of the night, delivering meals. With the performance bonus, Chi earns about \$43,000 a year. That figure stepladders up a decent amount each

year, but he did the math and it's about \$5.00 an hour, considering his hours. APR is a start-up—the teachers are learning what works and what doesn't, refining their lesson plans and their methods. It's very intense. But I smell danger anytime a work culture romanticizes the hours they log. Of the forty school staff, only three have children, and of the teaching staff, only one.

I argued that it wasn't responsible to trust these students' futures to the goodwill of super-dedicated teachers. That's not a stable organization. "You can't call this a true success until you transition toward a sustainable lifestyle," I warned him. "Or burnout will undermine the success you've had."

"It's on our minds all the time," Chi admitted. "Some of the teachers are about to get married; we're facing a challenge." Yet he went on to argue that in most companies, 20 percent of the people do 80 percent of the work. APR was no different. Contributions are always unequal. He was only giving lip service to the notion of scaling back his commitment. I warned him not to confuse commitment with hours. And I warned him not to use work to fill the void of not having a girlfriend or much of a social life. But I understood this feeling. When I was his age, I slept four hours a night in order to carve out three hours of writing time each day. I had no social life.

"Maybe it's okay for now," I said, pulling back on my critique. "But you can't stay a start-up forever."

Chi gave so hard because the students needed it. Clearly. And yet, his journal reflections, which he shared with me, indicated he viewed himself in the context of his peers at Goldman Sachs and McKinsey Consulting. At the dinner table of his inner circle, he'd be surrounded by Yale friends who'd gone off to make money, and at the head of the table would sit his father. A teacher or two might be allowed an appetizer—and maybe I would be there too, now that we are friends—but for the main course, he'd face the people who represented the lives not taken. Chi spent a lot of time at this table in his mind. And so the hard work was a way to compete. If his friends at Goldman Sachs

were working until midnight, he would work until midnight. If his friends were at high-tech start-ups, he was at an educational start-up. If they bragged of intensity, Chi would admonish them that they don't know a thing about intensity. If his dad told the story that showed off his dedication and perseverance—"When I arrived in Chicago, I had only seventy dollars in my pocket"—Chi could prove he was his father's equal. And when the topic turned to why keep doing what you're doing if you're already a success, Chi could top them all:

"A few weeks ago, I have a conversation with a parent," he wrote in one of his journals. "A forty-year-old woman who works as a crossing guard and moonlights as a clerk at an Osco drugstore—who pulled me aside and, in the most heart-felt way imaginable, asked me—practically begged me—not to leave the school until her two middle-school daughters graduated from high school. Eat your heart out, Mastercard—those five minutes of gratitude were as priceless as it gets. A teacher, you say? Nah, call me the luckiest guy on earth."

FINDING INSPIRATION IN OUR ANCESTRY

Kurt Timken grew up in northern Ohio living a life of privilege. His father was the CEO of the Timken Company, a Fortune 150 multinational corporation known for steel and ball bearings. The company had been founded by Kurt's great-great-grandfather a hundred years ago. Kurt followed in his father's footsteps to the Phillips Academy Andover, and later to Harvard Business School. He was being groomed to fill his dad's shoes at the company, just as his father filled his grandfather's shoes, and so on. He trained four years at the family company, and then another three years in management at Rockwell. But the long hours destroyed his marriage to his college sweetheart, and when he got divorced he started asking the big questions about why he's here and where he could make a real impact.

At thirty years old, he spit the silver spoon out of his mouth, listened to an inner voice, and after a major test of his conviction, he's now a police officer working the graveyard shift in El Monte, California, which is a few highway exits east of East Los Angeles, one of the highest-crime cities in the state. He works the graveyard shift because that's when the hot 911 calls come in, and the drugs are moved, and the transvestite prostitutes work the streets. It's when the beer hits the bloodstream and, under the influence of alcohol or coke or meth or greed, people do terrible things to each other. The graveyard shift is when he can make an impact.

His shift begins at 6:00 P.M. with a briefing from the sergeant, and

runs twelve hours and fifteen minutes. Most of that time he is alone in his patrol car, hunting for “bad guys.” He had me sign a waiver, and he issued me a flashlight and Level 3 body armor, similar to the one he wore underneath his uniform. Handgun rounds will not pierce the armor but will still cause blow trauma. He explained where the different gang turfs were divided, and rattled off the addresses of seedy apartment complexes where crimes were commonplace. He taught me how to approach a car of gangbangers and use my spotlight to blind them. Then he rechambered his shotgun, which is kept locked to the grille above our headrests. He pointed to a button. “This is the switch that unlocks it, in case something happens to me out there, and you need a weapon.” It was around then that I stopped thinking that what Kurt has done is really cool and started wondering whether the risk was worth it. Did I really need to witness an El Monte night? Yes, if I was going to shed my TV-inspired, schoolboy-fantasy preconceptions. Yes, if I was going to understand Kurt and tell his story.

While getting dressed in the locker room, Kurt had said, “Everybody needs fuel for their engine. Making seven figures on Wall Street is cheap wood, it burns up too fast. I need something that burns well. That’s substantive. That’s real.” By the end of the night, I understood what he meant.

Kurt is five-ten, thick, tanned, freckled, with a solid jaw and brown hair swept over the side. When remembering his past, he speaks slowly with his eyes nearly closed, like he’s going back to that old place in his mind. He still has many friends from the world he left behind, and in a way, he returns to his past every day to get away from what he sees in El Monte. He lives in a spotless luxury condo on the oceanfront at Venice Beach. There’s a hot tub on his deck and a restored antique Brunswick pool table in his living room, and upstairs, in the center of the master bedroom, a two-person steam shower. After a shift he’ll sit in there and forget, and wash the night away. He calls the condo his “countervailing force.” Kurt likes the dichotomy. There’s no shame about his background. He drives to El Monte in a Mercedes ML 320, license plate NYSE TKR.

Kurt's great-great-grandfather built carriages. He had some ideas about how wheels and shafts turn, and the kind of stress that is put on ball bearings when there is a heavy top load and side load. This was going to be even more important in automobiles. He penciled out designs for the first tapered roller bearings, which could handle those two loads better than standard bearings. It took awhile, and the auto industry was reluctant, but Timken bearings became the new standard, and are used to this day in every vehicle where wheels meet shafts.

After Kurt graduated from Pomona College, he did his four years of training at the Timken Company. They sent him to France and India, and he found it fun and interesting, but with his whole life ahead of him he didn't hold it to an especially high standard. That changed after Harvard Business School. You come out of HBS thinking that you can change the world in an instant, and you're hungry to find the place where you can make that happen. The years start to add up, and pretty soon it's natural to wonder, "Is this really the choice I want to make?" The family expected him to train at Rockwell and come home when he was thirty. But Kurt was working eighty-hour weeks there, as was his wife, at Disney corporate. They rarely got to see each other, and when the marriage fell apart, Kurt was bitter about what work had wrought. It seemed like you had to choose: do you want a marriage or a career? He would have preferred a relationship, but it was too late.



"I spent almost ten years in business. I was at great, innovative companies, with super management, not trapped in layers of bureaucracy. I received great evaluations, and frequent promotions, and was always challenged and given responsibility. And I was still not hopping out of bed in the morning, excited to get to work."

Kurt had always been interested in law enforcement. He didn't know anything about it. He'd never known a police officer. He'd never seen a trailer park, never hung out in a bad neighborhood. He felt it in his gut, not his brain. Business was about growing the bottom line; if it helps people, it does so indirectly. Kurt needed to serve people directly.

At Harvard, Kurt took marketing with a fairly famous professor named John Quelch. Quelch taught the Monkey Law. The monkey swinging through the jungle must never let go of an old vine until he has a firm grip on the new one. That's how businesses operate, and that's how people trained in business operate.

"I decided to violate the Monkey Law," Kurt said. "And plunge into the jungle, without a plan. I went into Rockwell and gave them my pink slip and said thanks."

His father tried to be neutral, but it was very hard for him to understand. He'd invested a lot in Kurt. They were of two generations; Kurt's dad never had a choice about whether to fill his own father's shoes. Kurt tried to explain that in our generation, it's important to look around a little. Kurt, though, couldn't get hired in law enforcement. He went a whole year being rejected. It was the first time anyone had ever said no to him. It was a real shock. You come out of Harvard pretty much thinking the world works for you. In business, you can move laterally between industries, and most of your skills are transferable. But in law enforcement, as in medicine, you start over from *scratch*. The FBI turned him down, the LAPD turned him down, the L.A. County Sheriffs turned him down. They took one look at him and saw a

bookworm. He didn't *need* the job; would he be there as backup in a gunfight? Law enforcement is a nepotistic career; most officers got into it through a cousin, uncle, father. Kurt kept taking the different cities' physical and mental tests, and polygraph tests, passing them all, and that's when Kurt's dad came in with unexpected support. He was offended that nobody would hire his son. "Keep taking the tests," he urged. "It'll happen."

Finally, Kurt paid his own way through the Rio Honda Police Academy. He graduated fourth in his class, and still—nobody would hire him.

"It was a test of my resolve," Kurt said. "It was not going to be handed to me."

Some guys Kurt went to the Academy with were hired by El Monte. They bugged their chief to hire Kurt. The chief sent Kurt over to the Community Relations Anti-Gang Unit. This was the prevention arm of their task force, and it tried to get ex-gang members jobs and teach them life skills. They told Kurt if he would volunteer for a whole year, he'd have a job on the force at the end.

A whole year?

"Yup."

So you went two years without a job?

"Yup."

Without even any real idea what was involved?

"I was learning. In all my interviews, I was learning. And at the Academy I learned. And at Community Relations I learned."

Did he feel like he belonged in the community of cops?

"Not really. I live a different life than most of them."

So why?

“I was hungry to do it. I thought the glove would fit. I’m a bulldog, real tenacious, and a quick thinker—I would be good at it and it would have real purpose.”

Still, though. Two years. It’s amazing he didn’t give up.

Kurt reached for his wallet and pulled out a photocopy of a note. It was written by his great-grandfather to his great-great-grandfather, the inventor. The sons were having trouble getting the auto industry to adopt their father’s tapered bearings. The note read, “Dear Father, I hate to think we are putting troubles on your shoulders. We’ll hang in there like grim death. We’ve got grit if we don’t have sense.”

Kurt explained, “I carried this in my wallet, and whenever I despaired, I read it again. I knew it didn’t make sense that I wanted to be in law enforcement, but I had grit.”

In his year volunteering, Kurt revamped a defunct tattoo removal program, and turned it into one of the most successful in the country. He put in twenty to forty hours every week. He became a gang specialist, building an intelligence base about the five gangs in El Monte. At the year’s end, the El Monte Police Department kept their word. A job was waiting.

On his Sam Browne (his belt) he carries a Colt .45 pistol with seven rounds in the magazine and one in the pipe. He carries pepper spray, a flashlight, a tape recorder for statements, a key ring for his baton, two sets of handcuffs, a department-issued cell phone, and a small holder for five rounds for his backup pistol, a .38 Special jammed into his back pants pocket. In his pockets he carries gloves for a fight, a leather sap, and a second cell phone. All of this adds weight. The weight is not measured in pounds. The weight is measured in the somberness and seriousness of his profession.

Around the department and before the briefing, the office chatter was of the five new bonus positions that the chief would be hiring, and of the acting sergeant's promotion that night to sergeant, and of who would take the fourth K-9 if his partner became a detective. Kurt slipped into this chatter easily. He didn't quote Hegel at these guys, didn't throw out business school maxims. They all put Timken Bearings in their boats, but they don't connect Timken Bearings with Kurt Timken.

No sooner did we leave the lot than Kurt had me running license plates through the onboard computer, hoping to find a GTA, grand theft auto. Every Honda and Toyota I saw, I ran their plate hoping for a hit. It was the lottery. The more plates I ran, the more likely I'd get a hit. We did this with zeal. If we spotted either make, Kurt would gun his cruiser and ride up the car's ass until I could make out the plate. This would scare the shit out of the driver, which was the whole point.

"Sometimes they freak out and take off, and then you've got probable cause."

There were a lot of Hondas and Toyotas. We were looking for bald heads, or ski caps pulled low to hide bald heads. It was night, so we flashed our spotlights on every face that passed. Every pedestrian on the sidewalk, every juvie hanging out on their front stairs, every bicyclist crossing the street—we blinded them with the spot. We watched their hands, to see if they threw anything away. More probable cause.

"You couldn't do this in Beverly Hills," Kurt said. "They'd be on the phone complaining to the city council a second later."

We were on our way to investigate a report of a potential child abuse case. Reading the statement, which was taken from the nine-year-old boy's teacher, it seemed very likely his big sister had simply kicked him in the groin before school. But we had to make sure, which would mean ruining some nice immigrant family's night. This was a Level 3 Priority call, and not the most effective use of our time. Before the shift, I sat with the 911 dispatchers for an hour, watching the calls

pile up. Level 1 calls were for imminent bodily harm, Level 2 for imminent harm to property, and Level 3 for sleepers. Kurt decided we needed to pick up the dispatcher's dinner from Denny's, so that they'd cut us some slack the rest of the night and leave us to hunt bad guys.

On the way, Kurt barked "known prostitute" and spun a U-turn on Garvey and pulled tight to the curb, where a transvestite was standing under the bus stop sign. We talked to him/her for a while. I recognized her from the intelligence database Kurt had assembled in three-inch binders he kept in his trunk. There were about seventy transvestites who worked El Monte. Most came in from Hollywood; only a dozen lived in the neighborhood.

"You working tonight?"

"I'm waiting for the bus."

"Have I arrested you before?"

"No . . . Wait. Maybe. At the donut shop that time."

"Are you on any drugs?"

"No."

We stepped out for a chitchat. Kurt held a pen light to her dull eyes to check her pupils, which were constricted, indicating heroin. But her pulse was racing, indicating meth. I found a tie-off strap in her purse, but no needles. Kurt talked to her long enough to conclude her small pupils were a chronic condition, from overuse, and the pulse was from codeine, the poor man's methadone. He checked her for tattoos and showed me the back of her hand, where the heroin crusted up under the skin like extra knuckles when a vein was missed. Many times he assured her he wasn't taking her in, and tried to use this to pry a little information out of her for her profile in his database. She was friendly but didn't trust him.

“Do me a favor,” he said. “Don’t work here tonight.”

“Okay,” she said.

Kurt works the prostitutes because nobody else on the force was doing it. It was how he was trained in business—find where you can add value and improve the situation. Make an impact. A few have become priceless informants for Kurt. Prostitutes are both perpetrators of crimes and common victims of crimes. Not only hooking; they’ll move drugs, steal wallets, and set up johns to be rolled by gangs. The johns drive in from all over Greater Los Angeles. Seventy percent of the prostitutes are transvestites, because that’s what’s popular, and because the transvestites seem to enjoy their work more than the women do. El Monte is one of the last places in Southern California where hookers still strut the streets. When he started on the force, Kurt wanted to crack down right away, but that’s not how it’s done, and he’s had to slow down, build the database, and wait until the chief tells him it’s time.

“Law enforcement is twenty years behind the corporate world, in terms of its culture. Here they promote by seniority, not by contribution. We don’t have a customer, other than the city council. They don’t demand better performance. So the culture is, don’t stick out, don’t rub elbows, stick to what is. Work your beat and don’t come up with new ideas. A lot of officers in El Monte are good enough to wow our bosses, but they don’t.”

Kurt hasn’t let this mindset infect him. He never just works his beat, never plays it safe, never hesitates to be the backup when another car is assigned a call. We never code-seven to eat. “My idea of law enforcement is not pulling cats out of trees,” he said. “That’s why I’m in El Monte.”

There’s a deadly cycle of violence here. Kids grow up watching their mothers and fathers drink and fight, and then they do the same. The El Monte Flores gang runs El Monte, except for when it kowtows to the MA, the Mexican Mafia. The Mexican Mafia is a prison gang. When

inmates get paroled, they're often sent to El Monte, and given housing vouchers which are good at a number of seedy motels on Garvey Street.

It's here we go hunting.

With lights off, we gun into the parking lots of these motels, hoping to surprise someone. The attitude is always suspicion; we presume guilt and look for probable cause. Kurt pushes me to learn this.

"Why could I pull that car over?"

"Fog light out."

"And that Infiniti?"

"No license plate."

He flashes his spot into the car. Four young men. Another U-turn. We pull them over, blind them, approach. I shine the light on their hands. We do their wallets one by one. We run them for warrants. Kurt chitchats. He asks them flat out if they're gangbangers.

"No, *paisanos*, man," the driver says. Just four guys getting off work at the plant. One admits he's on parole.

We could ticket them for the license plate, but then they wouldn't have a car to get to work. The tough call is when they don't have a driver's license, or their license is suspended. Kurt doesn't want to take them in, but people who don't have driver's licenses tend to flee the scene of an accident, and nothing pisses citizenry off more than being the victim of a hit-and-run.

We scare the life out of a drunk driver, but don't take him in. We tell a pregnant woman at the bus stop not to work this corner tonight. We tell two juvies to get home, it's after curfew. One of his transvestite informants tells him that the driver of a certain taxi is moving dope; the

soda can he's carrying has a false bottom with a lot of meth inside. We scope out every taxi we see.

This work trains the mind. To be a good cop in El Monte, you need to be suspicious. You need to believe that every bicyclist is moving dope, every woman at the bus stop is a man selling blow jobs, every ski cap is hiding a bald head. Every tattoo is gang-related. Every hand you can't see is holding a bag of dope or a weapon. Every Monte Carlo belongs to a gangbanger, every El Camino to a Title 8, every Lincoln Continental to an MA. Every windowless Toyota minivan is a possible getaway vehicle for an armed robbery. In every car parked behind a warehouse is someone sleeping, or someone getting their dick sucked. Every restaurant, unless otherwise known as friendly, will have someone working in the kitchen who will piss or spit in your food because you locked up her brother. The number 13 is for the thirteenth letter in the alphabet, *M*, or Mexico, i.e. the Mexican Mafia, the real bad guys. Apartment complexes breed criminals. A mouth whistle is a sign that we've been spotted. It probably sounds terrible, to live night after night in this frame of mind, but the alternative is worse. Catch them before they commit more crimes. Make it hard. Crack down on the little things. When all you're doing is harassing guys coming home from their busboy jobs, it feels like a power trip gone bad. "But when I catch a bad guy, and take him off the street, it feels so incredibly rewarding. It's what I live for."

If the law of business is the Monkey Law, the law of the street is, Nobody Tells You the Truth.

"I couldn't believe this at first," Kurt explained. "Where I grew up, you always told the truth. In business, you always told the truth. I'd never been lied to before. Here, nobody ever tells the truth. Even to a police officer. Especially to a police officer."

He tests me on this. When we question people, he continually tosses the situation my way: "Do you believe her?"

I shake my head. "A second ago she said she got off baby-sitting.

Now she says she's waiting for her sister who's in the laundromat."

"Right. Because . . ."

"Because who would wait outside on a cold night like this?"

Again, another. "Do you believe her?"

"She pointed that way but now she's walking the other way."

Again, "Do you believe him?"

"That he was beat up by his roommate with a pipe?"

"That he was robbed."

"No."

"Why not? There was no money in his wallet."

"He had a Big Gulp and two bags of chips he'd just bought."

People are drunk. They lie terribly when drunk. Just by not being drunk, we're sharper than they are, faster, quicker.

"He won't tell us where he lives."

"Let's follow his dog home."

We use our *brains*. This was my big surprise. How much we had to use our minds to get the jump, to process the situation, to assess the risk, as it was happening, before bad things happened, to read the signs, to call for backup—and the stakes were shockingly high. You had to play it right. You had to be a move ahead. Before anyone gets suspicious of an informant, make a big show of taking her away in handcuffs. Before cruising into an apartment complex known for gang activity, send another out back to catch any runners as they jump the fence. Before going into a warehouse with the alarm blaring, call for

the helicopter to patrol the roof, and call for the K-9s to sniff the burglars out.

This underworld exists. But why choose it? Not for the eight-weeks-plus vacation, though that sure makes it nice. Not for the three-day workweek, though that's sweet too. When I was up in the police helicopter, an off-duty officer was filling his tank at a gas station and witnessed an armed robbery of the station attendant. He pulled his gun, was shot in the leg, and still managed to take down both perpetrators and get them into custody. We were above the scene in a minute and a half. Patrol cars had already reached the gas station and had it under control. It was a big deal. It's very likely that if the officer hadn't been so ready to intervene, he wouldn't have been shot.

Is this a way to live, being suspicious, always hungry to intervene? One of the things I've learned from this book is, don't pretend what you do doesn't shape you. Can a steam shower and the Venice Beach sun wash off what gets rubbed in at night? Kurt's been in a lot of fistfights and scrums, and he's pulled his gun many times, but he's never had to fire it. This is his third year on the force. I told him about Cynthia Ringo, a sex crimes investigator in Atlanta who had to quit after two years because it was making her jaded about the human character.

"Was she young?" Kurt asked.

"Yeah. Early twenties at the time, I think."

"If I was in my early twenties, doing this, it would get to me, too. But you learn how to protect yourself, keep your distance, and you just know yourself better. And when you've had to fight to know yourself, you don't give that ground back, not to anything."

Kurt is a good man; he doesn't seem poisoned by his calling. If anything, the work seems to intensify his goodness, refine it, give him a spine, strengthen the spine, straighten it. He's working his turf, a turf defined by city limits on the east and north and Peck Road and Interstate 10 on the west and south. It's a bigger challenge to tackle

than any he could face in business, but it's not so big that he can't make a significant impact, and not so big that he doesn't feel, every night, like he made this world just *that* much better, taking that bad guy off the street, protecting that woman from her drunk husband, steering gang members into the workforce, giving the new Americans in this city a chance. Crime is bad in El Monte, but crime is down in El Monte; there are many reasons for this, but when Kurt steps out of his steam shower at dawn, and crawls into bed, he knows *he's* one of those reasons. And after five or six hours' sleep, he'll wake, and hop out of bed, and be excited to get back there.

FEARS ARE INHERITED, TOO

I learned that you're much more likely to answer the question with integrity if you've worked things out with your parents. Some of the things we think we need from our work, like the respect of peers, might be things we really never got from our parents. Or we inherited their fears. Sometimes it goes deeper than we think. This story is one brief example.

A year ago, Marc Sirkin was a thirty-year-old managing engineer who spoke the language of Business 2.0, worked nonstop at his third start-up, had a house in Carlsbad and a half million dollars of stock in IXL. He thought his problem was that the NASDAQ was crashing, and he had to readjust his financial expectations. He offered to talk with me about this.

I blew him off.

Three months later, Marc Sirkin's IXL stock was worth nothing, but he'd adjusted to that. He still thought that building websites for companies was the good life, as lucrative as an advertising firm or management consulting. His problem was that it was kind of boring now, and he had to adjust to how fun, or unfun, one's work should be. He offered to talk with me about this.

I blew him off.

Then another three months later . . .

Marc Sirkin's father's multiple sclerosis finally killed him, and Marc went back to the Bronx to spread his dad's ashes in Monument Park, behind the left-field wall in Yankee Stadium. Yankee Stadium was their temple. Harold took Marc to opening day every year when growing up. Harold developed MS when Marc was ten; by the time he was twelve, Harold could no longer throw a baseball. On this trip, Marc wondered why he lived in California, not back in White Plains, and he realized, in a kind of epiphany, that his entire life had been defined by his avoidance of his dad's crippling illness. When he was seventeen, he lied to his mother and told her he'd received a baseball scholarship to Florida State. He needed to get away, and he'd never gone back. He'd been running from the illness his whole adult life.

In the eight weeks after the funeral, Marc lost twenty-five pounds, but more surprising were the traits he'd shed from his psyche. That inexplicable anger he'd been carrying for years, that led him, occasionally, to put his fist through a wall? It was gone. Those get-rich-quick schemes he was always coming up with? That constant hunger to have more money? Gone. The whole reason he'd learned computer engineering was how much money you could make doing it. That was the Marc his friends knew. Scheming. Intense. But much of his personality consisted only of symptoms of a deep unwillingness to confront what had happened to his family when his dad developed MS.

Mark offered to talk with me about this, and this time I didn't blow him off.

He was on a crusade to get to the bottom of these things. He said there was a huge hole in his self.

I asked him what his dad did for a living.

"He was a CPA, and miserable doing it. A few years ago he sent me a poem he had written, way back in 1977. It was about how his pinstripes were his jail bars, holding in all this sexual energy, urging himself to come out. 'Come on out, motherfucker, I know you're in there.' It was called 'Who's in There?'"

“Did he stick at it for the money?”

“Yeah. You know, to provide.”

“Do you think your urge to get rich quick is a way to avoid being trapped like him?”

“Sure. It would mean freedom.”

“Sounds like you inherited from him this notion that it’s one or the other, money or jail time.”

“I used to think I’d be happy if I had money. But when I had money—when I had that half million in my account—I wasn’t any happier. I was less happy.”

He asked me if business was as empty as he’d started to think it is. I told him no—if you’re in it for the right reasons, it can be incredibly gratifying. I asked him what he thought he was going to do.



“I thought I’d quit and get an MBA. I convinced myself I wanted one. I had all the applications lined up—Wharton, Stanford, UCLA. But then I

was laying in bed, wondering what the hell I'd do *after* I got an MBA. I realized I only wanted an MBA to help with how people *perceived* me. It wasn't going to help me figure out what *I* needed."

"What will?"

"I think I want to move home. Back to the Bronx, or to White Plains. My wife's from Jersey. She wouldn't mind either. I don't know if I'd be able to find work. But something's telling me that if I'm going to reorient my life, and try to find what's meaningful to me, I need to start *there*."

I told him he should probably listen to that.

Marc did listen to that.

Three months after we spoke, Marc Sirkin sold his house in Carlsbad and drove across the country with his wife and two girls. They moved in with his mother, temporarily, in the house he grew up in. He turned down several jobs and went to work for the March of Dimes instead, rebuilding and administering their website. This was a cultural shock, but it was good for him. He couldn't get used to being home for dinner *every single night*. He no longer carried a cell phone. He started to read books—not software manuals, but *real* books. When he woke up, he wrote down his dreams.

A month ago, I went to see him. I told him I wanted to meet his whole family, so he drove them down to meet me at the Christmas tree in Rockefeller Center. His mom even brought her boyfriend.

"Moving home has been even *more* of a factor than I expected," Marc said. He couldn't exactly explain why. He was no longer on a crusade. He'd calmed down. He was trusting what this new lifestyle was bringing him, without trying to know what that might be in advance. He said that working from only nine to five felt like stealing. He'd be the last to leave, and he still walked out feeling guilty.

"In a year, I went from wanting to change the world to wanting to get

rich to wanting to make a decent living to just wanting to fit in. And you know? I *like* fitting in. It's good for me."

47 Accepting a Gift

WILL I HAVE TO PUT MY ASPIRATIONS ASIDE?

Some quotes, to warm up the next topic:

"I've thought about this question every day for the last five years. But soon it won't matter anymore. I'm going back to New York to marry my girlfriend, and I figure, when we have kids, they'll bring us so much joy, it simply won't matter anymore what I do with my life."

—from a thirty-five-year-old attorney in the Justice Department. He's a former candidate for Congress in the Eighth District who dreams of being a sports agent, but is afraid there's no way in.

"I'm afraid to have kids yet. I need to accomplish more with my work first. I know it's selfish. But it's also responsible. I don't want to end up being one of those moms who, fifteen years from now, develops terrible regrets, throws a midlife tantrum, sleeps with my husband's best friend, and secretly resents my kids because I gave it all up *for them*."

—from a thirty-three-year-old senior editor for a magazine, who's accomplished *plenty*, but whose mother exhibited all of the above.

"I always assumed I would get swept away into Mommyland if I had a baby. This wasn't a comforting thought. And by Monday I'd started to panic, and I realized, I'm not ready for this! But it was too late. By then I was already pregnant. Two years later now, it's changed my entire outlook on life, and yet, I've never been swept away into Mommyland, even though I stay at home and take care of the baby and arrange play

dates and go to the zoo with other mommies. The truth is, the question of what to do with my life is back on my mind, it's there all the time, and my craving to figure it out is as intense as ever. Obviously, I can't mention this when I go to the zoo."

—from a thirty-four-year-old mother/MBA who always wanted to find something that really engages her.

"Because I'd recently lost my job, while my wife still had hers, our revised plans called for me to stay home after our daughter was born. I had every intention of finding a new job after six months. That milepost passed a year ago. I've had interviews, but not the desire. I'm perfectly content. How long this will last, I have no idea, but it suits me fine. I realize my daughter's probably not the only factor. I used to work sixty-hour weeks. That's what 'work' conjures to me, a one-dimensional life. No wonder I'm scared to go back."

—from a thirty-one-year-old former computer engineer.

"I'd kinda always wanted to be a science teacher, but I never had the guts to give up the big commissions and, I guess, my superiority complex. That was my image of a man. When my son was born, it freed me, in a way. I was no longer trapped in that image of Man the Provider. I found myself loving my son in a way I had been afraid to relate to anyone else. Nurturing, I guess. It wasn't sudden, but my son helped me see what was important."

—from a thirty-eight-year-old former real estate broker, studying toward his teaching credential.

I accumulated a hundred stories from recent parents, and I could make only one broad observation: many of our fears and misconceptions about our careers stem from our fears and misconceptions about being a parent. We treat one or the other like a highly explosive liquid compound which we've heard has to be handled gingerly. When it comes time to mix them, we'll do this studiously, in the laboratory, under controlled conditions. We do so deliberately, with a plan.

Many of us grew up watching our parents go through a midlife crisis. Our parents jumped into their adulthood quickly, saddling themselves with responsibilities like mortgages and children, and often

compromising their dreams to support the family without quite realizing that's what they were doing. Later, they wanted to recapture the youth they'd abandoned too soon.

Now it's our turn, and is it any wonder we're wary of taking on responsibilities before we're ready? We're extending our youth, getting married later and waiting to have children. If we have a midlife crisis, it's the other side of our parents' coin—we realize that endless youth isn't endlessly fulfilling. It gets old. One by one, we add those meaningful responsibilities into the mix. We do this with great ceremony. They've been built up in our minds as threats to our freedom, so to undertake them is now "courageous." Even if we get married young, or have children young, we usually don't do it blindly—we have pretty strong expectations about the trade-offs we're making, and we have a script for how we're going to manage. We pray we get it right.

Despite this careful planning, so many people reported that it did not go according to plan. It was more meaningful than they expected, or less, or more stressful, or less. It was easier to mix these explosive compounds, or harder. What people expected and what they discovered often had no correlation. Which suggests that our expectations often do us no good. They get in the way. Our expectations are frequently only veiled versions of our wishes and fears.

Becoming a parent can trigger a return of meaning, a sort of *meaning audit*. The relationship with your child is so meaningful it can reveal just how meaningless other things in your life are. And people deal with this information in opposite ways. Many people suddenly are relieved of the burden of finding meaningful work. They're perfectly content to punch the clock; family provides meaning now. If they can afford to, they'd rather stay home with the kids. But just as commonly, this meaning audit compels people to hold a higher standard to their life; they can no longer waste half their waking hours on some job that doesn't do it for them. They don't want their child to watch them lead a

dispassionate life. Almost half the people in this book are parents.

Katt Clark was one. Katt and I began corresponding as she was facing a very tough decision—whether to give up her dream for her daughter.

What was compelling about her story was that this was not the first time.

The first time was in the mideighties. In high school, Katt stood out. She was different. She was not accepted into any clique. She had an outspoken personality, and she was embarrassingly big and strong. Six feet two, and bulked up with muscle. The only place in high school that she did not feel weird and out of place—the only place where her size was not socially awkward—was on the track team. She threw the discus 175 feet and the shot put 50 feet, which placed her second in the state of California. Her goal was to compete in the Seoul Olympics in 1988. She was a natural, and she was driven. She took all the rejection and poured her revenge into the weight stacks. During her senior year, she had scholarship offers to attend the best track colleges in the country. But she leveled with herself. She really didn't like school. She didn't feel comfortable at school.

So she joined the marines as an enlisted person. The marines had a track team that sent its athletes to the Olympic Trials. She told her recruiter this was her goal. He promised her that she could join the Camp Pendleton team, and she would do nothing but prepare for the All-Marine Team and the Olympic Trials.

A year later, the All-Marine Team was two months away from being chosen for the Olympic Trials. Katt's distances were certain to qualify her for the team. But then, disturbingly, she lost some of her strength. She couldn't leg-press her normal workouts. Her throws fell short. She tried to fight through it, train harder, run six miles a day. She started to fear she'd not be selected. She wasn't feeling well and wanted to vomit. At the last minute, she went in for a physical.

She was at work on base, waiting for a phone call from her coach to be notified whether she made the team. When the phone rang, instead it was the team doctor. Katt was eight weeks pregnant. She thought this was impossible, because she was on the pill. Being a mom was the last thing on her mind. But the news put the biggest smile on her face. The doctor told her that if she wanted to keep the baby, she would have to give up her training fairly soon.

The baby or the Olympic Trials.

The choice was easy for her. The father was not in the picture. She wanted the baby. A few days later, that other call came—she'd made the All-Marine Team. She turned them down. There was no question.

Her daughter, Marlaena, grew into the most beautiful girl. Katt raised her alone, devoting her life to parenting. She never regretted it, and never thought about track again. Katt developed endometriosis, and after two miscarriages and four laproscopies, she gave up ever having another child. For work, Katt became an executive assistant to various CEOs of Silicon Valley companies. Marlaena was the world to her. They're like sisters. Telepathic. They could always guess what the other got for Christmas. When one was asked a question, the other one answered. Sometimes they answered together, using the same words. They adopted three dogs and three cats. Every day, Katt would take a break from work at 2:30 to pick her daughter up after school and take her home, before returning to work. Marlaena's softball and volleyball trophies lined the mantel. Her pictures are all over Katt's desk. Despite scoliosis, Marlaena batted .306 in softball. She was the third-chair flautist in the Bay Area's Honor Chorus.



Fast-forward to last year. Katt decided to do something about that college degree she never went for. She enrolled part-time at De Anza Community College. And one day, on a lark, she went down to the track coach's office. She was afraid to knock, so she wrote down his phone number and called him when she got back to her car. She explained her situation, and wanted to know if she was still eligible to throw the shot and discus. He looked her up, found her state records, and told her he would absolutely love to have her on the team. She would have to carry a full academic load, though—part-time students aren't allowed to participate in NCAA athletics. He introduced her to a trainer, who flogged Katt back into shape. After thirteen years, Katt had added weight, but at thirty-two was able to regain all her strength in a few short months. The following semester, she enrolled in fifteen units and joined the track team. She was working at her job every day, attending classes three nights a week, and working out five nights a week. Her form was perfect. Already, she was throwing farther than she had at nineteen. This strength gave her a renewed confidence in herself.

"I wanted to go to state, I wanted to work towards going to the Olympic Trials again in 2004, I wanted to recapture my youth that was taken away when my wonderful daughter was born," Katt wrote me, shortly after. It sounded, at the time, like an inspiring story—a woman who waited until her daughter was old enough to regain her dream.

When Katt left for work in the morning, Marlaena was still asleep. When Katt came home at night, Marlaena was going to bed. "From her

attitude, I knew that she wasn't happy, and yet all I could think about was what made *me* happy," Katt said. When the semester ended, Katt chose to work nights at a metaphysical bookstore during the Christmas rush. Marlaena was an excellent student, but had developed terrible testing anxiety. Her finals would be in early January. She needed her mom to tutor her, but Katt didn't have time. Two days before Christmas, Marlaena confronted her mom.

"Mom, I am lonely. You are never home anymore."

Katt was facing the choice again. Marlaena's critique jolted her out of Selfish Mode, and she now hated herself for having lost touch with the one person who meant more to her than anything. But what to do with this natural talent she clearly had? It was now or never. When the semester resumed, should she go back to the team? Should she continue her classes? She'd always wanted to be a high school teacher. Could she pursue that—find another outlet for her desire to transform?

She invited me down to talk with her about it, but I was reluctant to be involved in such a crucial decision. I backed off. It echoed times in my life that were shameful to confront, like how selfishly I had handled leaving my wife. I thought of Carl Kurlander, whose mom had left him to be an actress when he was fifteen. When I was fifteen, my mother gave us up to my father in order to try to become a stockbroker. I *never* thought of that as selfish. Hell, I made it harder for her—I balked, refused to move into my dad's home, once ran away (to my mom's). I was the selfish one. Was the stress I caused a factor in why she had to go back to being a secretary?

I waited two months before going to see Katt again.

She had dropped the track team, and shortly after dropped her classes altogether. She spent her nights going over homework with Marlaena. She could feel her strength eroding. Her muscles itched to be used. Occasionally she resented her sacrifices. They snipped at each other. But then Marlaena received her grades, which were

excellent.

"That's when I knew I had made the right decision," Katt said. "My time invested made a difference. Any resentment I had vanished."

I commented that it sounded a little too Hallmark—*Being a Mother Makes It All Worthwhile* . . .

She clarified. "The most frustrating thing about parenting is not the sacrifices—it's when you try everything and they still won't eat, or they shut you out and won't accept your comfort. You feel helpless. And the opposite is the most fulfilling—when being there for them actually helps." So the fulfillment wasn't in merely being a mother—it was in being a *great* mother, in spending a lot of time with her daughter and really being aware of what she was thinking and feeling—having that telepathic-like connection.

They went to an NSync concert together. One weekend they went down to Pebble Beach for the Pro-Am to ogle the celebrities. Katt became girlish around Marlaena. It was pretty clear that she was reliving a bit of her lost youth with her daughter, but nothing was wrong with that. Katt never talked about her decision as a sacrifice. She loved spending time with her daughter. It made her happy.

Katt also felt a clarity in having a singular purpose. When she could fudge her various responsibilities, the many directions of her ambition tore her apart. When Marlaena made the stakes clear, Katt could embrace that one thing, and enjoy doing it well.

"I'm trying to accept myself for who I am," she said. "One of the reasons track was so important to me is my size. How big I am. When I was working out, even though I'd get bigger, I felt immune to how people looked at me. I want that confidence." She started dating again.

So is her story a cautionary tale? Is it what every parent with a career plan fears? On one hand, she had to give up her dream. Twice! On the other hand, she found being a mother incredibly rewarding,

despite the sacrifices (not to mention having to raise Marlaena without a husband). I tell Katt's story here because it reflects the ambiguity I found in the whole of my research.

Katt was philosophical now. "I think of Marlaena as the greatest gift. It's not for me to criticize or change the nature of this gift. It's like when you witness a miracle. My job is to accept it, as it is, whatever it brings."

I thought that was wise, and I remember it when I get stressed about having less time for my own needs. That's pretty much how I got over the mental hurdle—by learning to give up control, and accept whatever kind of gift I would receive. My wife, Michele, had always wanted children, and was vocal about it. I was never sure. One day, she put it in different terms.

"I've been on the pill since before I ever had sex. I'm tired of preventing my body from doing what it does naturally. I want to stop *not having* a baby. If it takes years, that's okay."

Those words changed me. I saw my life on different terms. It wasn't my freedom I'd been protecting—it was my monopoly over life. I was a control freak masquerading as a bon vivant. And that's not who I wanted to be. So I decided to let nature take its course. That's still how I think of it—we have very little plan. We'll find out.

Huge numbers of young people are choosing to never have kids. Now that I am on the other side of that choice, it makes me sad. But I have no doubt why they've opted out. Becoming a parent is routinely characterized by new parents as a "life-changing" event. It's played up to be a significant break from what was. If I ever mentioned I was considering becoming a parent to someone who already was a parent, they eyed me sternly and played God for a moment, and delivered a clear warning: "Your life's going to *change*." For good and bad, they would imply, but *say goodbye to who you used to be* was their point. It came across as a threat. Anyone who enjoys their life would wonder, "Geez, I'm already happy. Do I want to screw it up?" I can't tell you how

much it helped when one of my Hollywood producers, a father of three, leveled with me: “In the fall, on Sundays, you can’t watch all four quarters of the football game. You catch a few plays and watch SportsCenter after they’ve gone to bed. Otherwise, life goes on.” On the television show, most of the other writers had babies or toddlers; we still had a blast. This was eye-opening.

Does your life change? Sure. Do you make sacrifices? Absolutely. But nature takes care of us. We get nine months to prepare. For the first half year of babies’ lives, they only need love and milk. They sleep more than they’re awake. *You have time to get accustomed to these rhythms.* Life changes, significantly, but at a pace we’re built to handle. In the same way women have the hormones that loosen the hip ligaments in order to let a baby move through that canal, we have the psychiatric makeup to adjust to being a parent. Not everyone, but most. People have managed to raise kids since the beginning of time. Most of the great men and women from history had kids—the notion that your career success hinges on being child-free is overplayed. If you need to wait, that’s legit. If you don’t ever want to be a parent, fine. But telling yourself it’s for your career is not a fact, it’s a fear.

When I was in New Orleans, one young man who was not yet a parent, but considering it, said, “I’ve noticed that people who don’t have kids never quite see themselves as a success, and people who do have kids never see themselves as failures.” It seemed dead true to me, but why? Are kids an “achievement” that makes you feel like a success? Not quite. I stared at his quote for six months before I could see the cause and effect: *having kids will teach you to be accepting.* Not to be submissive, but to be patient. Tolerant of minor delays. You don’t measure yourself on the conventional success/failure spectrum. Many parents talk about how it’s made them better people, and this is one of those ways—it forces the mind to be a little more flexible.

Another benefit is that it teaches the joy of being generous. By giving so much to our kids, we become accustomed to how satisfying this is. We open ourselves up to a whole range of emotional rewards that we

didn't give much credence to before. We find these rewards not only in our kids, but everywhere.

When you put these gifts together, and recognize them, you don't end up in the usual me-or-my-child trade-off, sacrifice or be selfish. You discover that your child has given you a new outlook, maybe one that solves your permanent unease.

This next story, of Rick Olson and his son, Patrick, illustrates this beautifully.

CHILDREN HELP YOU REMEMBER WHAT'S IMPORTANT

Since Rick Olson was now a long-haul trucker, and regularly crossed the country in three days, he was willing to meet me with his eighteen-wheeler anywhere on my travels and take me to the next place I needed to be. Later, I took him up on that, but for our first meeting I wanted to meet him near his home in Pittsburgh, and specifically, to revisit a place in Pittsburgh called the Incline. The thing to do at the Incline is ride an old mining tram to the top of Mount Washington, which offers a spectacular view of the Golden Triangle downtown and the river fork where the Monongahela joins with the Allegheny to form the Ohio.

On a Saturday afternoon three years ago, Rick came up here with his son, Patrick, then seven. That day began a chain of events that led Rick, now forty-two, to change his life.

So we came here first.

Rick liked Nascar, hunting and fishing. He played ice hockey and was learning the guitar. He smoked. He almost never drank; on the Fourth of July he'll buy a case of long-necks. That lasts him a couple months during the hot weather, but the rest of the year he has no taste for it. His cowboy boots were splattered with mud. He's six-one, medium build, skinny legged. His voice hits many high notes; there's a drawl in it, even though he's originally from Minnesota. His most distinctive feature is the bone structure of his eyebrows; they're slanted in an upside-down V, so the look on his face is permanently receptive

and compassionate. He stood with his fingers jammed in his front pockets, his shoulders in a shrug.

Patrick was not his biological son, but from the moment Rick first picked him up and held him, at ten months old, the bond between them was permanent. Rick had met Patrick's mother, and married her, and divorced her, and none of that really mattered. Rick said, "She and I were brought together to bring him and me together." Patrick needed a dad, and Rick was it. After the divorce, Patrick really looked forward to his Saturdays with Dad. And this one particular Saturday, he woke up and told his dad he wanted to go to the Incline.

They rode up to Mount Washington and then stood at the railing at the overlook. Rick had been here a hundred times in his life. Patrick started to look around and ask questions.

"Hey, Dad, look at that sign flashing on Three Rivers Stadium."

"Hmmm." Rick had never noticed the sign before.

"Hey, Dad, look at that boat on the river. What kind of boat is that?"

Rick had seen boats like that his whole life, but didn't know what they were called or what they carried. So he pointed out a sand barge.



“Hey, Dad, how do they get the sand out of the railcars and onto the barges?”

Again, he didn’t know. So they looked around, scanned the visual field for clues, and figured it involved a big crane and a funnel.

“Hey, Dad, which building do you work in?”

Rick pointed out his downtown tower, where, at the time, he was a corporate lawyer.

“What’s that building next to it?”

It was a perfectly logical question for a kid to ask, and Rick had walked right past that building every day for five years, but he didn’t know. How could he not know?

“Hey, Dad, look at that bridge.”

“Hmmm.”

“It’s painted blue and gold. Pitt colors.”

Rick had driven across that bridge a thousand times, and while he knew it was colored, he’d never associated it with Pitt.

“Hey, Dad, can we wait here until the Geyser goes off at the Point?”

“Sure.”

“Hey, Dad, which river goes south to north? Is it that one, or that one?”

Every schoolkid in Pittsburgh learns about the oddity of how the rivers meet and one seems to flow upstream. Rick had moved here when he was seventeen; he’d lived here twenty-two years, and he’d

never learned such an obvious thing. He'd never thought to ask. He'd never really paid attention to things like that. But today, Patrick was *making him* pay attention. They didn't snap a picture and go after five minutes like most people. Patrick stood there for *two hours*, asking question after question, noticing thing after thing that Rick had never in his life noticed. This had a profound effect on Rick. It was like his son was sent to him to teach him to pay attention and treasure the moment.

Three years later, Rick turned to me from this very same spot. "My eyes were more open that day than they ever had been with him. I loved my son dearly. But until that day, my mind was always six hundred places. I'd never focused on him one hundred percent."

After two hours, they walked down the street for an ice cream cone, and then they went back to Rick's apartment, and Rick made his son dinner, played with him, put him to bed, read him a story, kissed him good-night, and came downstairs to his couch. Rick sat there and tried to figure out what had just happened. But something *had* happened.

One thought kept recurring, haunting him: "I'd been here twenty-two years, and never noticed all those things. What else in life have I been missing?"

Rick was a corporate lawyer specializing in radio station mergers. He nicknamed himself "The Mechanic," meaning he was good at closing deals but terrible at bringing in business. He'd been passed over for partner and didn't make much money, forty or fifty thousand a year. The hours were long, and he'd been doing it too long to enjoy it anymore. Doing it for what? Doing it only because he'd always been doing it, ever since Henry the Eighth? Certain memories came back to him, like the time his wife had gallbladder surgery. On the way over to the hospital, a partner handed Rick a cell phone and suggested he make calls while in the waiting room. Or like the time his son had to sit in his office all night while Rick met with clients. Or all those vacations he'd supposedly gone on, but every morning at seven AM was checking the hotel fax machine and returning calls before his family

woke. It was suddenly so clear to Rick: your job runs your entire life. Even if you work only eight hours a day, it stills controls your life. What you wear and when you wake up and when you eat and when you come home and when you go to sleep are all *scheduled around work*.

"I had a permanent edginess back then," Rick explained, though it was hard to imagine because he was now so peaceful. I commented on that, and he said, "It really has so much to do with multitasking. Even as I'm talking to you now, I'm trying to remember everything I want to tell you, and it hurts my brain to think two lines at once. I've become that sensitive to it. But I used to think six lines all the time. And stupidly I was proud of it. I thought it was who I was, but I see now it was a symptom of my work. And I see now that multitasking creates a sense of guilt that you're selling everyone short, including yourself. God forbid anyone accuses you of being less than one hundred percent there, because then you're just defensive. That defensiveness, and that guilt, become a skin you wear every day, a skin you wake up in. You talk too fast, you drive too fast. I felt twenty pounds lighter when I shed that skin and learned to pay attention."

Rick's wisdom always came out perfectly like that. He had become a great philosopher, but not by reading books (he read Tom Clancy and Robert Ludlum) or talking to other philosophers. He hadn't met many other people who'd changed their lives, and he hadn't told his story to many strangers. I don't think he realized how eloquent he sounded. He'd spent all that time alone in his truck, driving, being in the moment, noticing the road, the view, the beauty of the country, and somehow, because of that, when it came time to talk, these articulate words spun from his lips.

That day with Patrick pushed Rick 80 percent of the way toward quitting. So he went looking for the other 20 percent. He called his father in Minnesota, a retired engineer, and told him he needed to quit. His father said, "You're thirty-eight years old. You gotta stop squeezing into a round hole if you're a square peg. You're going to have a heart attack in five years. You've won it all and lost it all several times,

playing a game you just don't want to play."

The rest of the 20 percent came when Rick started playing ice hockey again in the adult leagues. Shortly into the season, Rick crashed into the boards at a flukey angle. He woke up later in Presbyterian Hospital, and was told by the doctor that his ankle was shattered into eleven pieces, both of his legs were broken, and his heel had been sheared off. Rick heard this and started laughing.

"Why are you laughing?" the doctor asked.

"They just unlocked the gate. This is my chance to walk away."

"You won't be walking anywhere for a while."

"That's fine by me."

His rehabilitation took ten months. He couldn't leave his bed. He had a house he'd recently bought that was halfway torn up in a remodel. He had bills he couldn't pay. He had a Siberian husky that couldn't get out, and peed on the living room carpet. He had to declare bankruptcy. He endured two lengthy surgeries, the insertion into his body of fourteen inches of steel plate and seventeen screws. But the whole time, he was laughing because he was finally free. He didn't have to quit. He'd already stopped. It was liberation without exposing himself to the usual critiques.

"The injury was the Great Precipitator," Rick told me. "The link in the causal chain. The accident could have made me need the money more. But I was looking for my catalyst."

He was going to have to start over no matter what he did. The only question was . . . where?

For twenty years, whenever work got frustrating, Rick's retort was, "I'd rather drive a truck." He'd done so one summer in college, for a student moving company. So he fell back on this old skill.

“I needed to do something different,” he explained. “I didn’t anticipate that I’d fall in love with the job.”

We went out to the bulk terminal where Rick’s beast was kept. It’s a 1998 Century Class Freightliner with 450,000 miles on its 330 Cummings engine. He’s due for a new engine soon. On the passenger seat is a cooler, in which he stores sandwiches and milk. Behind that seat is a small closet in which he hangs several outfits. Behind this is a guitar, and behind that a mattress and bedding. Rick sleeps here rather than in motels, and he eats what he buys in grocery stores, avoiding fast food. He spends 60 percent of his life in this rig. His only indulgence is his stereo system; he listens to Steve Earle and John Prine. Rick makes 32 cents a mile, which at three thousand miles a week works out to \$52,000 a year.

Long-haul trucking has cleaned up its act. CB radios have been replaced by satellite computers and cell phones. It used to be about making a statement; today it’s about making a living. In the old days, you could bank a lot more, but you took your life in your hands, and everyone else’s on the roads. A full tanker weighs 65,000 pounds, and that’s now considered a very serious responsibility. There’s a professional ethic taking over the industry. Recruiting is aimed at drivers who handle the clients well and the hazardous materials procedures with care. The company takes care of maintenance; drivers don’t need to be mechanics. Drivers can’t work more than twelve days straight; eight or ten days is the usual, then a few days off. They can’t drive more than ten hours straight, or sixteen hours out of every twenty-four. Your permit logs can’t show you made it from Chicago to Tennessee in four hours; it has to be six hours, an average of 64 miles per hour. Always 64 miles per hour, or else the driver and his company get fined.

Rick’s employer is Schneider, whose trucks you will recognize on the highways by their orange cabs and their shiny steel tankers. Inside those tankers are liquid chemicals, like latex resin, oils, water treatment, or haz mats. Because of their dangerous payloads, tanker

guys are the elite among truckers. Rick's not in the strip clubs at night, and he doesn't hang out in the truck stops telling war stories.

I met his buddies, an incredibly diverse group—a former accountant, a southern bigot, a Ukrainian immigrant, a former Wendy's franchise owner, a former army officer. They have in common only one trait: they don't like being told how to do something. It took me a while to understand this. Because I would have thought if Rick's sleeping in his cab, and he's on the road ten days out of every fourteen, his life is even more controlled by his job than when he was a lawyer. But Rick said no, and his buddies backed him up. The difference is, Schneider gives him an appointment: have this tanker in Jackson, Mississippi, by 8:00 AM on Tuesday. The rest is up to him. Rick decides when to leave, what roads to take, when he wants to stop, sleep, eat.

"Most jobs, you're consumed by answering questions about why you're doing what you're doing and how you're doing it. And in the hallways, everyone's complaining about how they're second-guessed by their bosses. In this job, we're *never* told how to do it. Just make your appointment, drop the load, and relay home. I have autonomy. I have a window seat, with a view that changes every mile. Nobody ever comes into my office without asking. I enjoy this job, but I'll be the first to admit it's not like what you do. It's not my passion. I'm doing this for the wages, and I'm doing this because it doesn't eat me alive. So when I come home, I pick up Patrick and take him out to our house, and I'm one hundred percent there for him. I have several days straight with no distractions. Can you see what kind of a turnaround that is, from where I was three years ago? He knows the difference. Patrick tells me all the time how much more he enjoys me now. Everyone does. I went to Rome for a wedding last month. The bride called me yesterday and said, 'It's amazing how relaxed you look in the pictures.' I'm always being told that. My dad tells me that. 'You look so relaxed.'"

We hit the road for a while.

I kept thinking how hard it was for Rick to quit—how it took having his leg shattered to get him out of there. It suggested how deep the

need for prestige is rooted. So I asked him, once he'd broken the vise-grip, did that need for prestige evaporate? Or does it still haunt him? Does he struggle with being a "prestige dropout"?

"When I drive by the Golden Triangle, I never feel a magnetic tug toward those downtown buildings," he said. "I didn't leave any unfinished business there. I *had* my chance. I was turned down for partner but I can't say I never had the opportunity. Several times I was given the resources to become a rainmaker, and I didn't have it in me. I had some good years. It was a good ride in life's amusement park. I wouldn't appreciate what I do now if I hadn't spent so much time in an office. I wouldn't appreciate Patrick so much if I hadn't not been there for him earlier on."

I thought about the other truckers I'd met at the bulk terminal. "No disrespect to your friends, but do you ever miss the intellectual stimulation? Being surrounded by smart people?"

"Hah! People think that's an issue, but really ask yourself, how many stimulating conversations have you ever really had in an office? You talk about work. My legal work was a glorified version of filling out forms. There was not a big intellectual challenge in it. I'm not trying to put down the law. My best friend is a lawyer, a good one, who hangs his own shingle and loves it. One man's hell is another man's salvation. So what I get in trucking is the benefit of perspective from very diverse people. They're not brilliant, but they've seen things I'll never see. I learn from how they see the world. I'll take that any day over a bunch of other white, college-educated smart alecks like myself. And anyway, I get a lot of intellectual stimulation trying to teach Patrick about the world. Because he asks good questions. He asks more interesting questions than anybody I've ever worked with."

It always came back to Patrick. Almost every question I asked him, he'd work through his thoughts and evaluate what he'd said so far and gravitate, back again, to the thing that brought him most meaning. I could tell you more about Rick's life on the road, or about how, months

later, we were crossing Wyoming and saw a herd of a thousand antelope. Everything Rick saw, he wanted to show to Patrick. It comes back to Patrick.

They read *Harry Potter* every night they're together. This helps, because Patrick is at a remedial reading level in school. He loves chess. He's starting to sing in glee club. He's a weenie on the baseball field, but he's tough at hockey, taking after his dad. He's in the Scouts. Rick and Patrick bought a house together, picked it out together, a few months after that Saturday at the Incline. Patrick liked the peach tree in the backyard. Rick managed to hang on to it through his bankruptcy. It cost only \$36,000, which boggled my mind. Patrick picked out the bathroom tile, and they laid it together. "We're growing into it together," Patrick said. He has his father's facial expressions, especially the upturned eyebrows, quizzical, as if I were about to say something, and he was waiting patiently for me to say it.

THE HARDEST THINGS ARE THE MOST LIBERATING

I learned that the hardest things are the most liberating.

Such as for Kurt Slauson.

It's very important in this story, when the point comes, not to get bogged down wondering why Todd Slauson, Kurt's older brother by two years, committed suicide at twenty-nine. Nobody really knows. Kurt and his family were thrown into a state of impenetrable unknowing, of retroactive guessing, without any conclusions, even to this day. They couldn't make sense of it. Todd wasn't around to ask. So when I tell this story out loud, I've seen that listeners want to ask questions about Todd, not about Kurt. They want to figure out that which cannot be known. So you'll know a tiny, tiny bit of how confused and frustrated Kurt felt, but the answer is not there, and I won't try to chase it or speculate about it here. I promised the family that. This is a story about Kurt, not about Todd.

I first heard a little of Kurt's story from a guy in New Orleans. I'll share exactly what I learned:

My friend K. is thirty-one and married with a new daughter. He's a chef in Seattle but is about to move to some remote resort town in eastern British Columbia, near where his wife's from. When I first met K. (studying English at the University of Montana), he was solidly en route to becoming a scholar of contemporary avant-garde poetry, the far-out stuff stemming from Pound, and had completed his coursework at the University of Victoria for his Ph.D. when his brother, a roommate of

mine in Montana, trekked into the woods and shot himself with a deer rifle. The brother, T., was older by a few years, a solid ESPN-watching outdoorsman type who worked at a sporting goods store and fly-fished, hunted elk, et cetera. He was a great guy and lived the life people in cities with desk jobs dream about. Still, he committed suicide (bashing my own belief that dedication to fishing was some sort of mental salvation) because, among other unknown reasons, he didn't seem to be "headed anywhere." And a few months after the suicide, K., seeing his brother in himself, dropped out of his Ph.D. program and went to culinary school in Seattle, a career swing that seemed and still seems out of the blue—he wasn't a natural cook and had never pursued it even as a hobby. But he graduated at the head of his class and is happily employed, loves his work, and works hard to support his wife and new daughter, all thoughts of Ezra Pound forgot.

He gave me Kurt's e-mail address, and I sent off a missive. I didn't try to insert myself or push. I simply offered to listen if he needed to talk. If he had unresolved issues, maybe it would help him to hear that other people have gone through a similar swing.

I didn't hear back.

That was fine, but after a month I started to wonder—if Kurt was moving to Canada, maybe his e-mail address had changed. Had he ever received mine?

So I called information for Kelowna, British Columbia, which is a six-hour drive east of Vancouver, in the middle of the Okanagan Wilderness. They had his phone number. I called and left a message.

A week later, his wife Laura telephoned. Kurt had received my e-mail and phone message, and they'd been talking about whether it was a good idea to contact me. She thought it was because he still had a lot of unresolved issues, was holding a lot in. She thought he should talk to *someone*. She'd worked at a bookstore in Victoria and had sold my books. I described my research as plainly as I could, and she said they'd talk some more.

Another month into the summer, Kurt left me a message. I could hear

the reticence. We traded messages for a while. I think we were both nervous. We got used to the timbre of each other's voice, replaying the messages.

Finally, in August, I reached him. His voice was deep and scratched; he peppered his words with a raw slang. A meat-and-potatoes guy's guy. He may have been a poet, but he wasn't used to showing his weakness. He asked how I was doing my research, how I was choosing people, and how did I see his story fitting in? I said I didn't know. From the little I'd heard, his story spoke to me. It was that simple and straightforward. How was the book organized? I didn't know that either. Did I have a message? He was snooping for a hidden agenda. He realized I didn't have one. That seemed to pacify his edge. He paused . . . considered it . . . and said, "Okay."

Five minutes into his story, he stopped and said he'd feel a lot better about this if we were talking over a couple of beers in person. "It's a little too intense to talk about over the phone."

"What's your schedule like?"

He was sitting around, waiting for his landed immigrant application to come clean. Until then he couldn't work. I was welcome any time.

"I'll be there in two weeks."

A few hours into our time together, after a few beers, Kurt felt he needed to tell me *why* he'd let me into his life. "I thought your process would lead to something good," he said. "I wanted to be part of it. Maybe my story will help someone else out there, who's going through what I went through."

I hoped it would.

He had been thinking about what he wanted to tell me. My imminent visit had pushed him to reflect. It had led him to track down his high school English teacher, who, in his sophomore year, had turned him on

to poetry and lit a fire in him. She was now in South Carolina. He also called old friends to tell them how much they meant to him. "You hadn't even got here yet, and yet you started some good things," Kurt said.

And what were his unresolved issues? I felt them right away. He had an emotional distance from the things he should have most dearly embraced. They'd bought a new house in a pretty subdivision at the base of a mountain. Kelowna is renowned as the Napa Valley of the North; it has an exquisite charm, not quite rural, not suburban, the best of both, with a picturesque old town center on the lakefront. Kurt showed me his house with a stiff real estate agent tour, and he copped to this stiffness. "Isn't it great?" he said, and then a moment later, hearing the hollowness in his voice, he covered with, "Maybe I'm just not used to being in a subdivision yet."

This was also true of his feelings for his daughter, Maya. She'd turn one in a week. She brought Kurt joy, but when talking about her he fought awkwardly for words. It's hard for a new parent to describe what it's like, but I was a new parent too, and there's a comfortable self-deprecating conversational ritual that centers on poopier diapers and feeding times and hours of lost sleep. Kurt was uncomfortable with such talk—it was like he was trying to *sell me* on how great his new life was. Again he caught his own false note. "Maybe I'm not yet acclimated from my old bachelor bohemian poet life," he suggested, even though it had been two years since he'd read a word of poetry. Four times he made some version of this comment. He was clearly holding his emotions back. He had a great new life here in Kelowna, and yet he couldn't seem to enjoy it, or wasn't letting himself embrace it.

He suggested a pint and a smoke might loosen him up, so we went down to the harbor and took a seat under the warm sun. Soon the amber ale blurred our sense of the moment, and we rode its daze back in time. Kurt is tall and slender, freckled—his most distinctive feature is a birth defect called Poland's Anomaly; his left forearm is shorter and some of his fingers are only a couple knuckles long.

Since he was sixteen, Kurt had always wanted to be a professor of poetry. He knew this going to college at the University of Oregon, where he wowed the TAs and hung out with grad students. He knew this at the University of Montana, where he received his master's. He wrote his own poetry but it was academia that called to him. This was esoteric analysis. His shtick was the history of shared influences, placing contemporary poets in a continuum from the nineteenth-century Romantic tradition. He was highly focused on language, not artifice, nor craft or metric standard. Most of this terrain had been trampled a thousand times by every graduate student in the country; it was hard to offer novel commentary. It was as if the deeper he got into it, the less air there was to breathe—a thousand scholars in the same room, suffocating on each other's carbon dioxide. At the University of Victoria, this asphyxia started to wear him down. He passed his grueling second-year exams, for which he had to practically memorize every word from fifty novels, forty poets, twenty playwrights, and one hundred years of American Lit. He was a leading presence in the department, but at night he watched hockey games rather than read for pleasure. What could he do but grind it out and hope his spirit came back when he started teaching? For as long as he could remember, he'd told everyone he wanted to do this. His career choice had a momentum of its own. How could he tell his wife and family who'd supported him all these years that he no longer wanted to do it? On the cusp of success, there was no love of poetry left. He was unable to pen his thesis. He could find not a drop of inspiration. He could no longer sleep. He was filled with dread.

One Monday in November of that year he got a phone call from his brother's boss at the sporting goods store in Missoula. "Todd didn't show up for work. Has he called you?"

The next day, with still no word, Kurt flew to Montana. They found Todd's car parked up near Schwartz Creek, on elk hunting grounds. Search parties began combing the mountain in grids. This was a heavily wooded area. For six days, Kurt and his father sat around the house, wondering if they'd ever find him. They were going to call off the

search party that day. It started to snow, covering any tracks they might find. Two miles into these woods, they found Todd's body with his brains blown out. Beside him was the deer rifle he'd used. In the stock of the rifle he'd carved a note. He'd carved it with a penknife. The note read, "Sorry, can't hurt anyone anymore."

Sorry, can't hurt anyone anymore.

Telling me this, Kurt cried frequently. Not with the sadness of Todd's death, but with the sadness of his brother, sitting there on the north slope of their beloved hunting grounds, taking the time to slowly carve this note. How long might that note take to carve? What kind of grief was he in during that time? "I can hardly bear to think what he was going through. It breaks my heart even to imagine that time passing. A penknife. A fucking penknife. That took a long time. A rifle butt is hardwood. Plenty of time to get a grip on himself. Plenty of time to change his mind and hike back to the car."

Sorry.

Can't.

Hurt.

Anyone.

Anymore.

S.

O.

R.

R.

Y.

"You want to know one of the weirdest things?"

"What's that?"

"His best friend from high school had come out that week to go hunting together. So he wasn't lonely at the time. Russ was sleeping on the couch. His favorite companion, his chocolate lab, Angie, was sleeping on his bed. At four AM Russ heard the screen door slam; it woke him for a moment." Kurt sobbed some more, lit another cigarette, rubbed at his eyes. "It's terribly sad. He was the last person you'd ever suspect would do something like this."

After the funeral, Kurt went back to Victoria to write his thesis. He got nowhere. He was overwhelmed with grief. He'd wake up in a cold sweat. He was so depressed, he started to wonder why more people didn't kill themselves. Why the hell not? Life is hard. Kurt drove around, screaming at the brother in the passenger seat who was no longer there. "I was so mad at him. I was so incredibly pissed off at him. In Catholicism, we're taught that suicide is a selfish act, and that's how I felt. I thought what he'd done was so selfish. I wanted to scream at him. And I did. In my mind, that's all I could think: 'You could have called us!' 'If you were unhappy, you should have said something!' 'You had options! You had other choices!' 'You could have changed!' 'It might have been hard, but you could have started over!' 'If you felt guilty for something, we could have forgiven you!' I couldn't get past this anger. And then one day, I turned it on myself."

"What do you mean?"

"I realized, yeah, I was yelling at him. But I might as well have been yelling at myself. Maybe I *was* yelling at myself: *I can change. I can start over. I have other choices. I don't have to stick it out with poetry. I can find something else to do. I can finally tell people how unhappy I am. I*

have to, or I'm going to end up like my brother."

"And how'd you end up a chef?"

"That was all I could do in my grief. I could hardly read. I watched the Food Network and started reading cookbooks. Every day, Laura would come home, and it was all I'd done that day. So, once, she says, 'Why don't you just become a chef?' And I was defensive. 'What? You don't think I can finish my thesis?' But it was planted in my head. She'd given me permission to consider it. And so at a Christmas party, after I'd had a few drinks, I just said it out loud. 'I'm going to cooking school. What about that?'"

She told him it was a good idea.

"Fucking A, let's do it then."

A month later he called her at work to tell her they were moving to Seattle.

A culinary academy is where a cook is turned into a chef. I'd talked to other people who, like Kurt, had turned to cooking after a midlife crisis. There's something about nourishment, and nourishing others, that helps people to heal. Half the student body of most culinary schools are people in emotional transition. This was true of Kurt's class, too. Half were twenty-year-olds who didn't want to go to college; the other half were former nurses, alcoholics, accountants, caterers, who needed a second lease on life.



Kurt said emphatically, “Changing my career saved my life. You tell people that. You put that in your book. *Changing my career saved my life.*”

There’s a romantic notion of being a chef as creative person, an artist working in the food medium. Cooking school jolts that naïveté. “Being a chef is fucking *brutal*,” Kurt warned, even as he said, “I knew *at once* it was for me.” The hours are terrible. You get no holidays or vacations. At school, if the master chef doesn’t like your soup, he might throw it on the floor and tell you to clean it up.

Kurt didn’t say this outright, but it was clear from his comments that he loved the physical intensity of cooking in a restaurant, 120 steaks going on the grill, firing and plating, no time to be pensive or lost in space. Later, watching him whip up some Vietnamese *pho*, I could see he grooved on the action of chopping vegetables, flashing his knife skills, talking about a good fish stock. It was the polar opposite mental state of being an academic, where the joy is in letting the mind wander, with few deadlines, and the product of one’s labor is intellectual—an obscure idea, or a few good lines of verse. Kurt no longer wanted to live in his mind. He needed the pressure, needed to be pushed, needed rules and standards that were enforced, needed to be part of a team, with a customer who would send it back if it wasn’t cooked right. He’d found that he was much happier with his mind squeezed down to a peanut, and he could take a break from the kind of terribly sad thoughts that preoccupied it.

It was those thoughts that returned, time and again, as Kurt talked about his life. I could see these thoughts rock him, see them cloud his face, and his heavy voice would stop, could go no longer, and he'd be overtaken. I put my hand on his shoulder.

"Were you close?"

"Growing up, we played hockey and lacrosse together. We were always close. When I lived in Montana, we were chums. I lived in that house with him. He had a hard time when I left for Victoria. I'd been paying the house bills and ran the ship. When I left, it went to hell in a handbasket."

"Why?"

"Todd always had champagne taste, but he lived on a beer budget. Dad bailed him out a lot. He was never a great student, and he didn't aspire to a career. He'd been a bartender for a while, and he really liked being the assistant manager at the sporting goods store. But he liked *things*, the things that making a little more money might afford. He had to have the newest sneakers, or the latest skis, or the coolest car. The gym membership, golfing at the country club. He liked that image of himself. They gave him a sense of power. He always wanted what other people had, but he never had any desire to put his nose down to work for those things."

"When was the last time you saw him?"

"About a month before. He'd met a girl at our wedding that summer . . ." Kurt paused a second. Something flashed in his mind. A memory. He finished the sentence, but it was clear that thought was his preoccupation. It made him sob again.

"Did something happen at your wedding?"

"He, uh, gave a speech." Kurt almost can't say it.

“What did he say?”

“It was not very articulate. It was rambling, and not just for the delivery did it come off a little odd. He talked about how he felt, seeing his little bro get married. It was clear he felt awkward. ‘Here’s my little bro, getting married before me!’ And about how he’d watched me get my master’s before him. When I got that degree, he really thought of it as an achievement, a sign of true success. It was just an English degree, which you and I know at best can bring you not much coin, maybe thirty grand a year. But to Todd it was the thing he could *never* get. He was so proud of me when I graduated. But in that speech, it was those words he kept using, ‘before me,’ like it was a competition. All these milestones I’d reached before him. I haven’t been able to watch our wedding video.”

I said, “In your mind, do you think that your getting married, and your imminent Ph.D., were making Todd feel inadequate, like he was a failure? Do you feel like that was one of the causes?”

Kurt couldn’t speak. He held his lips tight. He nodded. I don’t think he’d admitted this to anyone. He gathered himself, and added, “Sometimes he thought of me as the privileged one. Sometimes I think if he were still alive, and if he were to come here, to Kelowna? With the life I have now? If he saw my daughter? He’d be a great uncle for Maya. I know that. But I also think that my daughter would be a fragile blow to him.”

That was one of the saddest things I’d ever heard. Kurt was blocked from letting his love out for his daughter, because he felt that his successes had made his brother be unhappy.

“Kurt, can I say something?”

“Please.”

“You have to give yourself permission to enjoy your daughter and your wife and your home.”

"I know!" he sobbed, having no idea how to do such a thing.

"You've earned this life you have. It wasn't a privilege. It wasn't handed to you on a silver platter. My god, you've had to fight for every bit of it. You weren't lucky. You paid for it with sweat and tears."

"You think so?"

"God, Kurt, listen to your own story. It's a heroic story."

"Thank you."

"Listen, my friend. You *have* to give yourself permission. You cannot do this to Maya. You cannot let her grow up in a house where you associate the birth of your daughter with the death of your brother. You have to uncouple those events. You have to free yourself to love her completely. You can't let this go unresolved for years. You have a responsibility to her!" By now I felt an incredible urgency in my voice. I wasn't yelling, but I was saying this with a ferocity.

Kurt said, "Have you ever done anything like that?"

I had.

"Will you tell me about it?"

"My baby was going to be born last March. I'd bought a new house with Michele, and we'd gotten married in October. My life was filling with these joyous things, but I couldn't let myself enjoy them, because I felt guilty. Terribly guilty for how I'd left my ex-wife, and how badly I'd hurt her. I'd needed to move on, but I'd never quite let myself move on, carrying this guilt for four years. Some of this guilt descended from my parents' divorce, and from how they'd fought for decades afterward. I projected some of my mom's pain onto my ex-wife. She and I had become civil, and we talked on the phone every six months or so. But I could never tell her about Michele, or about our house, because that always hurt her more. It was twisting the knife. She'd hang up the

phone, or tell me never to mention Michele's name. So last February, I was taking stock, and trying to prepare for being a dad. And I realized I had this unfinished business. I had to tell my ex-wife, even if it meant hurting her. I had to do it, because I didn't want to run into her at the grocery store a year later, with my son in my arms. Or pull up at a stoplight and see her in the next lane, with my son in his car seat behind me." Now I found myself crying into my beer, tears running down my cheeks as I imagined those moments.

"Why not?"

"Because that wouldn't be fair to my son. My love for my son shouldn't be complicated. It shouldn't be dragging a parachute of guilt behind it. I owed that to him. He wasn't born yet, but I owed it to him. So I called my ex-wife up, and I asked her to have tea one morning."

"And you told her?"

"Yeah."

"Did it hurt her?"

"The thing was, *no*. She was happy for me, proud for me. She'd come so far, healed herself, that she had no resentment. That was the greatest gift, I think, that anyone has ever given me—the permission to love my son without any regrets. I was so much more ready for him to be born."

I'd never told this story to anyone. I'd never put it into words. But here I was, telling it to Kurt, and I think it was helping him, but it was also really helping *me*. I had no guilt left, but I had memories of guilt, and sometimes I didn't know what to do with those memories.

After some time, Kurt said, "Todd's not around to give me that gift."

"Well, maybe you can have that conversation in your head. You need to tell him, 'I earned this life. I have a right to love my daughter.'"

“Like how I used to yell at him, even though he was gone.”

Nobody could say why Todd Slauson killed himself. But in the absence of knowledge, we try to craft theories. Kurt's mind had stitched together a theory, which he had harbored in secret, which was saddling him with guilt.

Two men, drinking, sitting in the sun, letting time pass, letting their pasts drift away, giving themselves permission to come back to the present, and seize it like the way, when you've swum underwater the entire pool length, you break the surface and inhale.

The
Appropriate
Time Frame

WHEN IS IT TOO LATE TO START OVER?

A few blocks from the Chancery Lane tube stop in London, I darted through an alleyway and stepped up into 11 Stone Buildings, which was both an address and the name of a chamber of barristers, as a firm of lawyers is termed in the British legal system. I asked for Sidney Ross. I was escorted back outside, four doors down, and into the basement, where Sidney welcomed me into his office. Sidney is seventy years old. After twenty-seven years as a professor of chemistry with tenure, he gave up his security to start a new career in law. His legal specialty is matters of inheritance, such as trusts and estates, but he's also had some fun representing defendants in professional misconduct cases, i.e., white collar crime. He is not a famous lawyer, nor a rich one—just a happy one. I sat down on his piano bench beside his electronic-organ keyboard.

“When I feel like a bar of rehearsal, I rehearse,” Sidney asserted. “Many chambers look askance at this, but in mine, nobody gives a damn as long as I don’t frighten the horses. I do what I want with my life and when I want to do it. If I want to go to Venice for five days in October, I put it in my diary, and nobody says I can’t do it.”

He has sung in choirs most of his adult life. On Tuesdays he sings the Eucharist at Church of Saint Andrew by the Wardrobe. That coming weekend, he’d arranged for a cat-sitter so he and his wife could go to North Oxfordshire, where Sidney would sing and his wife would ring church bells. Sidney often walks to work from their home in Islington, 2.5 miles north. He is an avid reader of “police procedurals,”

a genre of detective novels. His wife is a scientist, as are their twin daughters—one at MIT, the other at IBM. For most of his life, Sidney was a scientist, too. He has a master's degree in solid-state physics, and a doctorate in inorganic chemistry. When he became a professor, "tenure" meant what it's supposed to imply—lifetime employment. But he was pushed into early retirement and rather than beg some other university to give him a class or two, Sidney admitted to himself that sheer stupidity had taken him into chemistry in the first place.



When the war broke out in 1940, Sidney's elementary school in London's East End was evacuated. Sidney was awarded one of only three scholarships from the London County Council to attend Christ's Hospital, an elite school founded in 1552. "And they'd been wearing the same kit ever since," Sidney teased. "Long blue gown, knee britches, shirt and collar with bands. I felt quite conspicuous parading in that gear." He was nine years old. The British school system forces students to narrow their area of study early and often. Sidney was only thirteen when he specialized in science. It was his worst academic subject. He didn't like the teachers who taught the language arts in which he excelled. "I simply made a daft choice out of personal pique," he said, chastising himself. "I never asked anybody's advice. It wasn't a sensible or rational decision." The system didn't intervene to

straighten him out. "I didn't figure in their calculations. The school was unashamedly elitist. They were not interested in changing their system for the benefit of students. We were lucky to be getting such a quality education. If one made a mistake, one had to take the consequences." The consequences were sticking with it through his high school certificate, which in turn determined his university entrance requirements.

In those days, chemistry had artisan connotations: grubby overalls in a laboratory. If Sidney had studied Greek, he would have gone on to Oxford or Cambridge. Because he studied physics, he went to a small technical college affiliated with the University of London. "The higher echelons were barred from me because I was not from the higher echelons." His parents were Hungarian immigrants. Sidney put in two years with the signal corps, and this class structure dissolved in the military. Soldiers rose through the ranks based on merit. It was very liberating. England didn't create anything like the G.I. Bill we had in the States, but the romantic notion of a classless society was similar. In the 1950s, this widely shared sentiment led to the first real Socialist government. "We all wanted to be part of something that was going somewhere," Sidney explained. "I wanted to build the new Jerusalem. I thought I could make my contribution to this enterprise by teaching other students how to *think*." He got an assistant lectureship at a college in London that he'd prefer not to name. Many of the students were older and attending university classes again because they felt they'd missed something the first time through. They were highly motivated and a pleasure to teach.

This growing social consciousness peaked in the mid-1960s when the prime minister, Harold Wilson, touted "the white-hot technological revolution." Suddenly scientists like Sidney were highly regarded. Research money was made more widely available on the promise that if English scientists built a better mouse trap, the world would beat a path to their door. Sidney published papers on the electrical properties of various materials and consulted for private companies on diabetes drugs. While his work was reputable, he described some of it as

"sheer graffiti," meaning the system rewarded teachers for pumping out papers and never gave them credit for being great teachers. So even in the heyday of a technological revolution, chemistry was hitting a false note for Sidney. By the late 1970s, "the white-hot technological revolution had burnt down to dull ashes," and it was apparent to Sidney that chemistry was no longer attracting talented students. His students took chemistry because it was one of the only things on the menu. They hadn't passed the minimum requirements. Their minds were on subjects where there was more money to be made.

Sidney was bored. "I started to cast about for something to occupy my mind."

He cashed in a life insurance policy he had taken out twenty years prior and took his wife on holiday in Norway. There, he resolved that upon his return he would take steps toward a part-time prelaw degree. He had no intention of changing careers. It was purely an intellectual endeavor. He had always enjoyed reading what he called "legal reminiscences." Why not take a correspondence course?

"Upon my return, I went down to an old office in the city, which looked like every solicitor's office I had ever read about in Dickens—dark, heaps of dust on yellowing papers attended by an elderly gentleman—and exchanged a check for the forms. At night, I sat at my desk and applied myself to their version of what I needed to know in order to satisfy the whim of the external examination board." For four years, he mailed his assignments off to a tutor, who marked them up and sent them back. This was not associated with any law school. "I was studying law simply because I wanted to study law. I took a course because I thought I'd do it better within a framework where there was something to get out of it at the end." It was merely a hobby with structure.

That changed when his university decided it needed only half of its chemistry professors. They couldn't sack Sidney, because of his tenure contract, but they could make him feel unnecessary, and they induced him to retire early by offering a payoff of twenty thousand

pounds. It surprised me that's all it took. They might have considered him old, but he hadn't saved enough to stop working. How long would twenty thousand pounds last? He was still going to have to find another income. "What I was doing was pointless," he said. His wife encouraged him to make a clean break. She had recently left science and trained in the gem business.

"I finally listened to where my talents are," Sidney said.

Now, if anyone ever had the justification to say, "It's too late to start over," it would be Sidney. I assumed he came from a generation where people postwar were happy to have any job at all. Instead, Sidney described decades of idealism and techno-boom much like the ones I have lived. He talked about the promise of social mobility that began when his parents emigrated from Hungary and continued with his daughters becoming chief scientists in America at institutions that two decades ago would never have allowed women at the top. I pressed Sidney quite a bit about this moment at the precipice, when he was about to enroll in law school at the University of London alongside students thirty years younger. Law school is grueling. Wasn't he scared of starting all over as a minion? Wasn't he afraid the young kids would outwork him? Wasn't he afraid his life would become unbalanced? Wasn't he afraid that when he went looking for a job as a barrister, nobody would hire him?

"If I had those fears," he said, "I simply put them out of my mind."

Even as I was inspired by his twilight bravery, I was dissatisfied by this answer. What if you can't put it out of your mind? What if you can't conjure this necessary illusion? Sidney's actions were new-era, but his attitude was very old-school: *I simply put it out of my mind*. I'd been trying to gain some perspective on this question, "When is it too late to start over?," and too often I heard the obligatory "It's never too late," which always struck me as one dimensional. Surely there are times when it's too late, no? But I never could define these conditions. Everyone I asked had embraced a sink-or-swim philosophy, i.e., *you'll*

get over your fears if you're in a situation where you simply have to. I still don't know what to make of it. Sidney didn't seem scared of the huge loss of status associated with falling from professor of chemistry to legal peon. He implied that status games and competition for competition's sake were largely the make-work of young people looking to prove something to themselves. If you know your own worth, it's easier to handle. "I was simply not interested in competing with anyone else," he said.

It's safe to say that if Sidney had known what was coming, he might never have done it. He wouldn't use the words "discrimination"—maybe because he's a lawyer—but he was certainly discriminated against repeatedly. Despite graduating in the top 3 percent of his law school and rightly expecting to be highly sought-after, no firm would take him on. He applied to twenty-four different chambers, and each one rejected him. Time and again, he was told "It would be difficult to fit you into the structure of our chambers." Or, "Your age would create stresses in our structure that we're not interested in undergoing." In the United States, when you pass the bar exam you're entitled to practice law and hang out your own shingle. Not so in England. The first year of employment is a compulsory internship; an established barrister agrees to take responsibility for you, train you, ensure that you learn the ropes. You cannot practice law without having completed the year under this sponsorship system. Despite being a top graduate during the beginning of an economic boom, Sidney was shut out from earning a living. He became depressed, even though in his heart he felt certain it would work out all right.

Nine months after passing the bar exam, Sidney heard about a vacancy at 11 Stone Buildings. He applied and was interviewed by a prospective "pupil master," who asked Sidney if he would have a problem being taught by someone fifteen years younger. "Not at all," Sidney replied. On that basis, a job was offered in good faith. The next day it was rescinded, then put in limbo. The head of chambers, the firm's top banana, wanted to interview Sidney. He seemed to bear a grudge, as if he suspected the other attorneys of doing an end-run on

his authority. He fought with those who wanted to hire Sidney, and they compromised. Sidney was offered a job, but only for six months. At the end of that time, he would not be allowed to stay under any conditions. (It was common to split one's year and learn two specialties, but usually at one firm.) In the meantime, Sidney was advised to lie low and avoid the head of chambers.

What could he do but accept, and hope it worked out? Sidney began quietly drafting documents for his pupil master and a colleague. As in law school, he was doing work commonly done by those thirty years younger. But Sidney didn't mind. "I made the percentage decision," he said. "I had moments of depression as others got 'the shot' on interesting work. I didn't think I was entitled. I believed I would succeed on my merits eventually." That August, when one of his bosses was on summer vacation, Sidney went looking for a document in his office. On the desk was a synopsis of a textbook this barrister had contracted to update, with many arcane thirteenth-century references to Markets and Affairs. Little of the book was written, and it was due to the publisher. When his boss returned, Sidney pleaded his case to help with the book.

"I'm a published author."

"You are?"

"Over sixty articles and two books. I'd be happy to help out."

Sidney finally started to curry favor. Come October 9, his six-month internship deadline came and went. Sidney was officially a "squatter," but by avoiding the head of chambers, he heard no complaints. "I didn't want another period of probation. I preferred to sit it out." For one senior member he wrote an opinion of whether a farmer's milk quota could be sold separately from the land apportioned to that quota. It was about £2,000 worth of work, for which he was paid £250. He had no grounds to demand more. He was skating on thin ice.

At the end of the year, the head of chambers came into the office of

the clerk. He was quite cross. He needed help on a case, and his junior barrister was away on holiday. The clerk told him that Sidney Ross was available. Old animosities resurfaced. *Is he still here!?* But there was nobody else to perform the research, unless the head of chambers wanted to spend his holiday in the library himself.

“As it was, I did a first-class job on it,” Sidney remembered. “From then on, I did a ‘vault fast’ from pariah to jewel in the crown. The head of chambers got me involved in his large-scale fraud cases, which took us as far as Singapore and Hong Kong. With the caveat that I needed to look a little more respectable—I hadn’t bought a new suit in many years—he persuaded me to accept a position as permanent member of the chambers.”

Sidney went to the tailors on Fleet Street to have a suit made. When he showed up at work in it, the entire staff pretended not to recognize him.

He loves the law. He has a mind that loves puzzles, and cases are puzzles—timelines, cross-references, stories with motives. That said, the law is not just brain candy to him—all he’s had to go through to get here is what makes it so special. He doesn’t mind representing the occasional white-collar criminal. “I gave thirty years to this country. I’ve earned the chance to enjoy myself.” We spent the entire afternoon at the restaurant he frequents, emptying a bottle of wine. Why not? As Sidney pointed out in many ways, “The moral is to not set yourself goals which don’t leave you any freedom to maneuver.”

He’s often called by people who want to know the secret of his success. He has none. He sat it out and endured until his chance came. In one of his favorite “police procedurals,” a mergers-and-acquisitions banker realizes that the life he’s leading is not fit for a human being. “That’s very much how I felt,” Sidney reflected. “I hit the point where I knew I ought to do something while my faculties were still reasonably intact, and not waste the rest of my life.”

KEEP IN MIND EVEN WHAT YOU CAN'T DEFINE

These last few stories are reminders to keep an eye on your Big Picture. By that I mean not everyone's got it figured out just yet, but in the meantime you can build skills that you might be able to draw on when the time comes to make *your* contribution, X. Maybe you can't even define X, but that's no reason not to prepare for the day you do figure it out.

People who can define it usually keep their Big Picture to themselves. Big Pictures sound too audacious and far-fetched. My wife has one. She didn't tell me about it for three years. I keep her secret a secret, but I thought it was incredibly cool that she had one. I remember that feeling, back when I was a bond salesman, and I dreamed that someday I would write books. Mentioning this invited smirks. *Yeah, right. YOU?* I learned to keep my mouth shut.

Phil Caplan had been telling me his story for a while. One afternoon, we were sitting in his corner office, twelve stories up, high enough that we could look over the Potomac at Washington's many monuments. Phil is the kind of guy other people go to for advice, so he had told his story many times, and it usually impressed them. But something about it suddenly wasn't adding up. On paper, he was on top of the world. Why was he so incredibly interested in my book? The people *most* drawn to my book didn't have it figured out. Phil was managing a venture hedge fund for Northern Virginia's hottest investment bank, FBR. Before that, he was President Clinton's staff secretary, which is one of the coolest jobs to have in the White House. Many Clinton

alumni thought Phil had masterminded the perfect exit transition, segueing from one corridor of power to another. He was set. His story should have been all in the past tense. Except there were clues.

1. He was absolutely feverish about my book, an indication of something unresolved.
2. His office had no mementos from his years in the White House or running AmeriCorps—the past was not cluttering his future.
3. He asked me quite a few questions about Seattle and Washington State, as if that might be in his future.

Then it came to me—he was still looking for his X! He hadn't forgotten about his Big Picture.

I called him on it. "This isn't the end of the story, is it?" By *this* I meant the investment bank and its hedge fund. "Everyone thinks this is it, but you know better, don't you?"

He paused, leaned back, and smiled.

I took a guess. "You going to run for office in Washington State? Governor? Senator?"

"I'm not sure," Phil said. "I've thought about it. My wife's from Seattle. I ran the state's operation for the ninety-two election. A politician has to be from somewhere. If I put my time in there . . . Or maybe it's running a company. I'd like to lead people. CEOs are heralded as our leaders today. I think I can do a good job."

"It's okay if you don't have it figured out. As long as you don't stop figuring."

"I appreciate you saying that. I've had these windows into these two worlds, politics and the New Economy. And I don't want to burn through my experiences like some trash novel that's gone from my mind as soon as it's finished. I want my experiences to add up. I want them to be useful, and to come together. I don't really know how they fit together, but I think about it all the time. They have to add up to more."

I admired Phil, because he took his responsibility to his Big Picture seriously, even though it might have come in and out of focus a few times. Phil had unique integrity. Most people who work in politics have no intention of ever becoming a politician. Phil saw his years in the trenches as training that he would draw on when it was his time to run. When he decided to leave the White House, in 1999, it surprised everyone around him.

"Everyone thought I had the greatest job in America," he said.

"Did you?"

"I did."

The White House is about a five-hundred-person organization. There's the president, his chief of staff, and his cabinet, and then everyone else is divided into nine departments. The whole world wants to sway the president, and their opinions come in through these nine offices. Mayors who want to talk to the president come in through Intergovernment Affairs. Congresswomen come in through Legislative Affairs. Health and Human Services issues come in through the Office for Policy Development. Religious issues come through Public Liaison. Can you imagine, for a moment, the huge number of people who want to sway the president? The center of this funnel, which pipes all these concerns up to the president, is the Office of the Staff Secretary. It is the center at the eye of the storm. It is the gatekeeper of access. The staff secretary decides what the president needs to see and not to see. After a few months of getting to know each other, President Clinton and Phil took care of business mostly by paper. Phil would write one-page memos, summarizing the opposing positions of

constituents. Then Phil would make a recommendation, and at the bottom put two boxes for the president to check:

Agree Disagree

Sometimes Phil would present two options for the president to choose. Option 1. Option 2. Phil controlled the autopen, and was authorized to sign on behalf of the president for anything except a bill from Congress.

"Wow!" I exclaimed, when Phil explained this to me. "You were practically running the day-to-day business of the country!"

"I don't like to think of it that way," he said. "I was sorta the president's personal assistant."

"It sounds incredibly cool."

"It was."

"So why did you leave two years early?"

"Well, I never pretended that *I* was somebody important. It wasn't *me*. It was the *chair*. My power and influence came from sitting in the staff secretary's chair and having that business card. The Secret Service didn't open doors for Phil Caplan, they opened the door for the staff secretary. CEOs didn't return Phil Caplan's phone call, they returned the staff secretary's call."

"You didn't think you deserved it?"

"That's not what I'm suggesting. I just didn't let it go to my head. I knew our term there was finite. And I knew that when it was over, and I stepped outside, I would be a normal guy. I wanted to know that I could succeed in life without flashing that business card, without having to say I come from the White House. In Washington, you can build a career as a lobbyist leveraging the two years you worked on Capitol Hill. But I didn't want to be riding out my years, with my best years in my

past, begging old friends for favors. That possibility made me very uncomfortable.”

“Because it would have been a waste of your potential?”

“Exactly.”

“Why’d you leave politics for business? And why two years early?”

“I wanted the education. I wanted to learn business. Throughout the nineties, I could see that business leaders in America were more trusted than politicians. A lot of successful businessmen ran for office, and their business experience was seen as a real asset. They were fiscally responsible. They had proven their ability to motivate their employees. They took care of their employees. I realized that working in business would be good training, and I might learn traits and habits and ways of leading that would serve my future. People don’t normally talk this way about business, but they should. They talk about the military this way, that a few years in its culture is good for you. Well, I realized I’d worked in politics my whole life, and I didn’t have any business experience, and a few years would be good for me. And as soon as I realized that—I was thirty-five, my clock was ticking—I knew I had to do it, even if it meant leaving the best job in America.”

Phil took this need for an education so seriously that he was willing to completely humiliate himself. He went across the river to meet with one of FBR’s founders, Russ Ramsey. Russ was only three years older than Phil—the kind of guy someone like Phil might normally be competitive with. Russ had a crazy life and didn’t have time for all the work he had to do, let alone errands like picking up his dry cleaning. Russ needed a bionic personal assistant, someone smart but egoless. Capable of both attending meetings on Russ’s behalf *and* getting his lunch. Russ called this a “Personal COO.”

Phil suggested, “Well, at the White House, we call that the staff secretary, and if I can do for you what I did for the president, I think I could help you.”

They agreed to a deal: Phil would receive a hundred times better education than any business school could give him. In return, he agreed to do *anything* that Russ needed for two years, no matter how humiliating. The job would pay less than Phil was making at the White House, which wasn't much. After the two years, assuming they were still friends, Phil would be given real responsibility and autonomy.

Phil sat at a little desk in the corner of Russ's office. He showed me the office—the desk is gone now—and it's an office 100 percent surrounded by glass. One side looks out over the Potomac toward Georgetown. The other side is a fishbowl looking onto the sales and trading floor, where about seventy macho guys and girls could watch Phil sitting at his little table. One year he's practically running the country, the next year he's a peon—because he believed in learning this point of view. Phil hired Russ's secretary, he helped out Russ's mom, and he picked up Russ's dry cleaning. But he also became the voice of Russ wherever Russ was stretched too thin to be there himself. Deal negotiations, pitches from start-ups, board meetings. By being willing to be subservient, Phil learned business at its highest level, without having to work his way up to that point.

Before the two years were up, Russ and Phil went out and raised \$200 million for a hedge fund. Phil is managing it—to be clear, not choosing the investments (he doesn't have *that* kind of experience).

Now the question is: How long will this suck him in? Will he become trapped by the fat salary, the house big enough for his kids to have their own bedrooms? I don't get the feeling that will be a problem with Phil. I don't think he's going to forget.

"Do you know the story of Lawton Chiles?" he asked.

"From Florida?"

"The senator, then the governor. When I was twenty-two, I read about this thing he pioneered. He called it 'work days.' He would regularly go

out and work an entire day doing different jobs. Cutting sugar cane in the Everglades, picking in the citrus groves, the assembly line in a car factory. He walked in the shoes of the people he represented. It wasn't a photo-op. He wanted to understand them. I was profoundly influenced by this. I still think about it."

"Well, remember, you're going in my book. You've got too much to offer the world not to shoot high. If people like you don't become leaders, then *who*?"

"I appreciate that," he said.

With most people I got to know, we would agree to check in again in a few months, or maybe next year. With Phil, that wasn't the appropriate measuring increment.

"I'm going to look in on you in ten years," I vowed.

"Ten! Not five?"

"The bigger the picture, the longer it takes," I said. "That's okay. I can wait."

BUSINESS IS A TOOL TO SUPPORT WHAT YOU BELIEVE

Joe Belanoff's Big Picture came into focus in the last couple of years. He's forty-four. If you don't know where you're headed when you begin, it can take that long, easily. But it's worth it.

Joe is an easygoing, amiable guy. We met the first time at his office, which was inside a law firm in Menlo Park, but I'll reveal later what his office is for and what he's doing there. He's not a lawyer.

Ironically, Joe worked at this very law firm the summer after college, 1979. He was an English major at Amherst and figured he might go to law school, but one summer in the xerography department cured him of that idea. He drove back East to look for a job. Early in his trip, he stopped at Lake Tahoe and gambled for four days. He knew how to count cards, and he raked in \$1,200.

"So when I got back East, and I went in for interviews, I had a *story* to tell people," Joe explained.

And who would be impressed with a card-counting gambler? Wall Street. The attraction was mutual. Wall Street was the antithesis of his summer bent over the Xerox in a suffocatingly quiet law firm, where it would take seven years to make partner. Wall Street was going to work with a track suit on. As long as you made the firm money, it didn't matter if you were unshowered or stubbed your cigarette out on your own shirt. In October 1979, Joe went to work for Mabon Nugent. They specialized in technical arbitrage, the simultaneous buying and selling

of the same security—for instance, buying gold at 500 while selling gold futures at 520. Joe was one of the first guys on Wall Street to trade bonds versus bond futures. He was good at it, and by the time he was twenty-five, he'd left, and with a few friends started their own arbitrage shop, Miller Tabak & Hirsch (now Miller Tabak & Co.). The goal on Wall Street was early retirement, and starting their own firm was the fast way to that end. Get their money and get out. None of them expected to still be working at age thirty-five.

But Joe's Big Picture gyroscope kicked in, mucking up that plan. He realized he didn't want to retire at thirty-five. He wanted to find his life's work, and he hoped that once he found it, he would be of use to people his whole life. At the end of a trading day, what did he have besides money? Numbers on a page. He wasn't a "stuff" kind of person, so he didn't need the money *for* something. He'd taken advantage of market inefficiencies. Was that going to be the full sum of his contribution to the world—eradicating market inefficiencies by taking advantage of them? His was a very narrow life. He hadn't learned anything new in several years.

Joe started thinking about what he really wanted to do with his life. His girlfriend was in med school, and he found what she was learning very interesting. He enrolled in premed night classes at Hunter College and NYU, showing up in pinstripes. He took four semesters of science and the MCATs while holding down his day job—hoping this wasn't a mistake, a mirage. The doctors he talked to were down on their profession, frustrated by reductions in their compensation inflicted by HMOs. But those concerns never seemed to matter when they were in a room with a patient. Joe longed for that human contact, making a difference in people's lives. He began medical school at Columbia when he was thirty-one. When he told people on Wall Street that he was leaving, it was very hard for them to fathom.

"Currency is the only currency on Wall Street," he explained. "I still have lots of friends from those days. I ask how's it going, and they tell me where the long bond is at."

During medical school, Joe gravitated toward psychiatry. One reason was his desire to be active his whole life—psychiatrists were leading good lives, well into their sixties, without burning out. Scientifically, he was interested in the brain as an organ, which we know so little about. And he loved the window into people's lives that psychiatry affords. Psychiatrists spend more time with their patients than any other doctor. Joe was fascinated with the cases he saw. The Ivy Leaguer who claimed George Bush senior was having an affair with his wife, Princess Diana. The college student who was in the ER after a suicide attempt. The lightheaded ballet dancer who everyone thought was simply starving herself, and turned out to have hyperthyroid. By treating them with the right medication, he was able to help them resume their lives. Indirectly he helped their friends and family, made their lives easier too. This work had a ripple effect.

Joe came to Stanford for his residency, to work with the department chairman, Dr. Alan Schatzberg, whose particular interest was psychotic depressives. Psychotic depressives are not manic depressives. It's a very common form of depression but one that few people talk about because there is no approved treatment for it. They often have no previous signs of depression or illness. They can be CEOs or doctors. Half of them suffer only a single episodic bout, which never returns. It starts with lots of stress, which leads to their feeling depressed. Then they become incredibly suspicious. Their brains begin to piece together clues wrongly, weaving closed doors, glances, and whispers into the pattern of their suspicions. They suspect their coworkers of manipulating to get them fired, suspect spouses of having affairs, and often think they're about to die or be killed. This advances to the point of hallucinations. They become "crazy," in the old-fashioned way, and 20 percent commit suicide. One hundred thousand cases of psychotic depression are logged in the United States every year, which means almost two thousand people a month commit suicide under its spell.

Unfortunately, the only available treatment is electroshock therapy. I didn't know this still went on—I thought that since Ken Kesey exposed

its horrors in the sixties, it had gone the way of bloodletting. I was wrong. So I went down to Stanford Hospital to watch. They still have a case a day. Patients are knocked out with general anesthesia. A current is run through the patient's brain until it forces a seizure, which medically is a tremendous release of neurotransmitters that basically triggers a cold reboot of the brain. The patient will have to undergo electroshock six to ten times in thirty days.

Joe arrived at Stanford and was disturbed that electroshock therapy was the prevailing treatment. "I kept asking, 'This is the best we can do?' These were very sick people, receiving very crappy treatment. In the age of Prozac, we were still using these medieval methods."

Dr. Schatzberg had been hunting for a cure for some time, and Joe enlisted to do his research. This kind of biomedical research is very hit and miss, and miss, and miss. You press forward, testing assumptions derived from the little that's known so far, and most of these assumptions don't test out. Eventually, your triangulation might come up with a target, a very particular brain receptor that needs to be juiced or neutered. To borrow the lock-and-key metaphor, this receptor is the lock, and then you start all over again looking for the key that fits that lock. Most keys fit about twelve locks, which creates all number of side effects. So you hope for a key that, ideally, would fit only your target lock.

Psychotic depressives have elevated levels of cortisol, a long-acting adrenaline that's usually triggered by stress. Their research narrowed in on a type of brain receptor with a superaffinity to cortisol. This was the lock. Where was the key? Joe read up on metastatic cancer tumors that were pumping out cortisol. Back in 1980, a cancer researcher in Europe had tried a compound called C-1073 on these cancer cells, and in the course of twenty minutes he discovered that it blocked both cortisol *and* progesterone. This researcher was not looking for a progesterone controller, but he knew that was a big deal—a complete accident, but a big deal—and the compound has been used throughout Europe to control progesterone ever since. It was

such a big deal that its implications for cortisol were overlooked, and never explored. Joe read this, and wondered if C-1073 might work on psychotic depressives.

They wrote to the FDA and received approval to try it on five patients. This was around Christmas, 1996. All five patients got better right away, and none experienced side effects. "These were unbelievably sick dudes," Joe said. "To get them back to their life was so rewarding."

At this point, the two doctors faced a choice. Should they license their discovery to a big pharmaceutical company? Or should they pursue it themselves? They were doctors, not biotech executives, and unfamiliar with the regulatory procedures required to bring a drug to market. Despite this, the fastest way to get it to market was to do it themselves. "Two thousand patients every month were committing suicide," Joe explained. "We decided we had a responsibility to take the fastest approach. I'd made a promise to myself that I would never do business again. I liked my doctor life, my patients, my classes, my students. I didn't want to run a company. But it was the right thing to do."

Joe went back to his closet and dusted off his suits. He took leave from Stanford. A local venture capitalist funded a larger trial of thirty patients at six academic hospitals. The drug showed similar miracle results. Joe raised another \$26 million to conduct a final, pivotal trial, which is currently in process. His law firm lent him some office space, and he's in there with about twelve employees. Their company is Corcept Therapeutics.

This may be the fastest way to get C-1073 to market, but nonetheless they're required to do all the FDA trials. It requires a great deal of patience. Every month, another two thousand suicides. Joe has gone back to seeing patients one day a week at Stanford, and he teaches one course every fall. He has two kids, six and ten, and doesn't work in the evenings.

Imagine making that significant a contribution—saving twenty thousand lives a year. Joe didn't invent a cure. He discovered what was already there, and in that sense, he was lucky, but he never would have discovered it if he wasn't looking for it. I think that's a fairly good illustration of how to live up to your own notions of a Big Picture—it doesn't require genius or heroics. You'll discover something if you keep looking.

“I used to use business to make money,” Joe said. “But I've learned that business is a tool. You can use it to support what you believe in. I'm using business to extend research and treat my patients.”

NO BIG PICTURE IS TOO BIG

If business is a tool to support what you believe in, Deni Leonard takes it to another level. For him, it's not just a tool, it's more like . . . a magic power. Business is one of many magical powers he can conjure to fight for his Big Picture, which is to economically empower indigenous groups around the globe. His other powers include law, education, governance, and international relations. He is a Native American from the Warm Springs reservation in Oregon, and he lives in Mill Valley, north of San Francisco. He is fifty-six years old, but the fruitful phase of his career has only recently begun. This is according to plan, and it's because he *planned* for it to take this long that I was so impressed. What patience! What vision!

Here's how I heard about Deni. After one of our weekly pickup soccer games, I was raving to another guy about how I loved the multicultural aspect of soccer. It's one of the few places where people can embrace their national or ethnic identity and still play together by the same rules. Soccer assimilates without breaking down heritage and style. Where else can we see such a great thing? Our schools are bogged down in identity politics, every kid wanting to belong to a disadvantaged-hyphenated-minority, while our business markets tip in the other direction, every company pushing itself to be professional, i.e. colorless. This country's becoming so diverse. We need more examples of integration sans cultural annihilation. My friend said I ought to meet Deni Leonard. He'd met Deni only briefly, but had kept his business card.

Deni was exactly what I was looking for. I followed him around several days throughout the year, and I also took several people in his circle to lunch. I attended one of his conferences, in which he educated tribal leaders on how to finance and build power plants on their reservations. Once a month, on Saturday afternoons, Deni gathered with the other members of the Water Mushroom Club at Café Trieste to drink red wine and listen to the waiters sing opera. The Water Mushroom Club is a multiethnic, multigenerational network comprising business leaders who've decided to stop chasing minority set-asides and find other ways to compete outside the white man's mainstream. It's one of a dozen networks Deni has a hand in founding.

You're familiar with the term "parallel universe"? A parallel universe is in our midst but we can't see it. Well, that's sort of like what Deni's up to. He's spawning an entire parallel economy, using sources of capital you didn't know existed, building factories and power plants you'll never see, on land and in neighborhoods you'll never go to, and selling the output to customers you didn't know were buying. If it continues to grow according to plan, it will slow or reverse the migration away from reservations . . . it will diversify Native Americans away from their reliance on gambling casinos . . . it will restore lost traditions . . . it will bring jobs to inner cities . . . it will teach young people self-reliance . . . it will give tribes an identity they can be proud of.

Deni is medium height, solid. His skin tone is quite brown and etched with scars from his youth. His hair is graying only slightly; he wears it swept back and neat, with a pinky finger's worth of ponytail hiding in back, often tucked into the collar of his dress shirt. He wears top-dollar banker suits and ties. He has a sly sense of humor, chuckles a lot. He's often hard to pin down—never evasive, but will switch the subject to a different venture mid-sentence. He seemed to enjoy my confusion when I tried to chronicle everything he does. So with the caveat that I might have missed half of it—that I probably saw only a little of his parallel universe—here is a bit of his story.

He didn't leave his tribal land until he was nineteen. He attended San Bernardino Valley College and worked as a grocery store clerk at night. He was profoundly affected by the assassination of Bobby Kennedy and the Vietnam War, and by the time he was twenty-five, he was an antiwar leader. This was 1969. He had tons of energy and no sense of how to direct it other than through protest. The army decided to make an example of him. At his draft hearing, he said that as a person of color, he couldn't go kill other indigenous people. They sent him to boot camp anyway. On the walls were framed pictures celebrating the army's history, including many photographs and drawings depicting the slaughter of Indians. He protested again, and was told his pacifist ways were undermining troop morale. They came one night at three in the morning and dragged him off to his court martial. He explained that he was bound by a treaty never to pick up arms—this was a treaty his forefathers had signed with the U.S. government. Now the government was telling him to pick up arms? He refused. They imprisoned him in the Presidio stockade (a half mile from where he lives now). For seven months he was treated terribly, and the day he walked out, his stories triggered an investigation into brutality. The stockade was shut down; he was its last prisoner.



Deni went up to the mountains east of Eureka, into the lands of the

Hupa tribe. He went there to think. To intensify his thinking, he fasted for ten days, drinking only water. After several days, in a slight delirium, he began to have a vision for his life. It was a raw vision, somewhat impractical, hallucinatory but genuine. Was fighting back the best use of his energy? Why were Indian ways disappearing? Tribes had their own land and their own sovereignty over it. Why were they losing people, why was their wealth draining away?

He realized that everyone in the sixties who wanted to help Indians was, in fact, making them dependent. When a check shows up every month in your mailbox, you're the one who loses, because you lose your own survival skills. The handout system had turned Indians into eunuchs. Assimilation had gone too far. Education was nothing less than a cognitive drug. When you lose your identity, you lose your source of power. How could they regain this power? First, there were 107 tribes in California alone—if they could *connect*, and work together, they would have a collective power. Second, young Native Americans needed to have their identities restored. Tribes had fought for political sovereignty, but they had never paid attention to their economic sovereignty. They had neglected learning business. Deni walked out of those mountains determined to write a new curriculum that embraced ethnic identity and emphasized self-reliance.

He wrote a business plan that set out his objectives for the next twenty years of his life. He would train himself for five years in four different areas: education, business and banking, indigenous government, and international relations. "I had to learn the white man's ways to save the non-white man's ways," he explained.

I won't go into the details, but he stuck to his plan marvelously. Five years in each skill set. Degrees from Harvard's Kennedy School and the University of Oregon. He taught at Berkeley and the University of Washington. He consulted with the Department of the Interior and the Department of Education. He learned investment banking and insurance underwriting. He traveled the world helping indigenous groups defend their rights in Samoa, Saipan, Mexico, Ecuador, and

New Zealand.

In 1990, at the age of forty-six, he began to take that raw vision he had in the mountains and refine it into something practical and solid. This took another five years. He formed an investment bank and several other financial service firms under a subsidiary, DLA Financial. The basic premise was that reservations are special economic redevelopment zones. Corporations on these lands do not have to pay taxes. At the same time, commercial banks are pressured to lend a small portion of their portfolio to economic redevelopment zones; they do this in order to stem federal regulation. A small amount of initial seed capital—from tribe bank deposits, for instance—could be vastly multiplied using a variety of loans and tax advantages. In addition, the federal government has a purchasing program called Section 8(a), instructing the government to purchase from businesses that are owned by Indians, native Alaskans, and Hawaiians. Whatever they brought onto the reservation—courtesy of government tax breaks—they could turn around and sell back to the government—courtesy of more government breaks. The tax laws and the purchasing programs were already in place, waiting to be played. Indians didn't need cash aid, and they didn't need any more help.

Deni started with a single piece in the midnineties. The key was to stop the flow of money off reservations. Many Indians kept their scant deposits in non-Indian banks. Deni taught tribes to set up their own co-op banks, and then he managed their assets for them, like a mutual fund. This was the seed capital to get started. He kept working up the food chain. Native American companies were buying worker's compensation insurance from national firms—again, pennies on the dollar flowing off the reservation, never to return. Deni underwrote their insurance. Payroll services were next—more pennies on the dollar to keep around.

Then he became aware of a gross injustice, which he quickly foresaw as a huge opportunity. Indians were paying twelve cents per kilowatt-hour of electricity, almost twice the national average price of

seven cents. Deni began financing the construction of cogeneration power plants. Co-gen plants are small; they're powered by natural gas, are built around jet engines, and each turbine costs about \$1.3 million. They produce electricity, which can be sold in the newly deregulated power markets, and they produce lots of steam, which can be used to heat buildings on the reservation or to create even more electricity. Rather than buying electricity at twelve cents, why not make your own, at two cents, and sell the leftovers at seven cents to pay for the whole thing?

Well, why not?

Nobody could see a reason why not, other than it wasn't the sort of ambitious thing tribal councils normally did. How would they pay for it? Deni would float the bonds. Who would buy the bonds? Deni's customers. Who were these customers? Banks. It sounded like white man's hocus-pocus to them. Which was exactly the point. White men did this stuff all the time.

What if there were no buildings nearby on the reservation to heat? Build a large greenhouse and create an herb farm, growing organic herbs for the farmers' markets! For every objection, Deni had yet another way to add jobs and make money. He kept working up the food chain. He trusted that if it worked with small cogeneration plants, it would work with a big geothermal plant. So he raised \$180 million to build a 250-megawatt plant for the Elem Pomo Indian tribe. After enough cogeneration plants had been built, he started to wonder, "Why pay someone else to do this?" And so he purchased a power-plant construction company. He folded his banking company into a larger holding company, United Native Depository Corp., and created the first and only publicly traded company majority-owned by Native Americans.

Then he discovered another gross injustice. There was a ton of oil wells on reservations in the Southwest. Indians were routinely paid a 10 percent royalty on their oil when the going rate was 20 percent. Many of these wells had nearly dried up anyway. Deni found an

inventor in Odessa, Texas, who could clean oil wells by flushing them with water and a small concentration of a surfactant he'd invented. Wells usually dried up because salt would make the ground swell, clogging off the veins that the oil moved through. This surfactant caused salt to drop out of water; I saw it demonstrated in a glass of dissolved salt water. The salt undissolved and fell to the bottom. When this same process occurred underground, the wells returned to 60 percent of their peak levels. Deni offered to flush everyone's wells. He would pay for it; each well would cost about \$6,500. It would cost them nothing; they would split the additional earnings. Again, it sounded too good to be true. Those wells had been dry for years! You're going to make us money off them? At no cost to us?

Deni was turning dust into oil, turning land into power, and turning nickels into dollars. Here's how he'd turn a nickel into a dollar: he worked with an immigration attorney named Eugene Wong. Eugene would be contacted by businesspeople in Indonesia who wanted to come to America. Eugene would secure them an investor visa, an EB-5. This normally requires an agreement to invest a million dollars, but three thousand EB-5s are set aside each year for investing in special economic zones. These can be had for a half million dollars. Eugene sends the money to Deni, who uses it as seed capital, and pairs it up with another \$9.5 million in bank loans, which he's free to invest in something safe and predictable, like a power plant. Thus, nickels into dollars. Is it a trick? It seems so. Too good to be true. More white man's magic.

So where do all these dollars go? Back into education. Deni is a board member of no less than fourteen councils, task forces, and associations. They've created an American Indian Charter School in Oakland, and nearby, a Native American Cultural Center. He's helping strengthen the only Native American-run university in the country, DQU, which is two hours north. DQU is an impoverished school, terribly underfunded by the state (another gross injustice!) and struggling to survive. But Deni sees these students as the future leaders of the businesses that'll spawn on the reservations. He'll give

them a reason to go back to the land they came from.

His list of projects is endless. Every time I called him, it was something else.

“What are you working on today, Deni?”

“Oh, we’re building an ecotourism resort in Costa Rica run by Indians.”

“What are you working on today, Deni?”

“Oh, a billionaire in China owns the world’s biggest sapphire, and he wants to put it on display at the Pequot casinos in Connecticut. I’m trying to insure it.”

“What are you working on today, Deni?”

“Oh, I’m learning a little about hydroponics.”

“What are you working on today, Deni?”

“Oh, we’re trying to repatriate this dead guy’s bones back to Hawaii.”

“What are you working on today, Deni?”

“Oh, a water theme park to be run by the Morongo tribe in SoCal.”

I could write a story on any one of these ventures. Deni resembled a venture capitalist, continually shopping for opportunities, hooking people up, throwing his weight around when deals stalled. But he waded into the morasses that venture capitalists feared: government regulation, politicking and lobbying, the cacophony of school districts, the idiosyncrasies of military requisition procedure. Bureaucracies didn’t behave like bureaucracies when he came calling. The waters parted. He said it’s because he speaks their language. “They hang funny things on the wall and speak a language you can’t understand,”

he said. "They have ways of doing things. If you respect their ways, they'll work for you. If you respect their *sovereignty*, they'll continue to help you."

Deni reinforced so many of the lessons I'd learned during my research. Patience, long-term planning, resilience. That when you embrace your true identity, you will discover a productive power you never imagined having. That no Big Picture is too big. That you must be willing to speak the language of others (that you must walk in their shoes). But it is the one I first mentioned—that business is a tool to support what you believe in—that I keep coming back to.

For the past nine years, I was the chairman of Consortium Book Sales & Distribution. It is based in St. Paul, Minnesota, and is the exclusive distributor of some of the finest independent publishers in the country. My relationship to the company was always odd; I had no equity and only occasionally received a nominal stipend for being one of its three directors. It's not really much work—it's more of a responsibility. The company grew 500 percent during this period, and ran fine with minimal guidance. I was appointed to the position back when I worked in small press publishing. It's the one stray orphan from those years still tagging along in my life. I did it because it was fun; I did it because I'm very good at it. I did it because I believe in books. Books have been my classroom and my confidant. Books have widened my horizons. Books have comforted me in my hardest times. Books have changed my life.

The thing is, book publishing is an absolutely crazy business. Most books lose a lot of money. Large publishers smooth out this roller coaster by being big and spreading their risk. Small publishers ride up and down this roller coaster with total abandon, going in and out of bankruptcy, narrowly averting meltdown by taking out a third mortgage on their homes, et cetera. Small publishers routinely take levels of risk that any classically trained businessperson would find completely unacceptable. They're either that stupid or that smart.

I like to do my part to make sure that the books I treasure so deeply

don't become endangered species. It's one way I give back. I could donate money as well, and do, but I've found the best way to help is to do what I can to ensure that these small publishers have a distributor that is on a sound financial footing. The distributor is the backbone of their network. It is the custodian of their trust. It lends them money, encouragement, and manpower to help them survive the occasional freefall. At the same time, a distributor should never profit at its publishers' expense. It wouldn't be right, morally. Greed has no place.

This past year, we lost both our CEO and our owner. Both decided they wanted out after nine years. The responsibility of holding down the fort and replacing them fell to the directors, and we weren't looking forward to the work involved. I considered resigning but knew that would only leave the company weaker.

We began to market the company. From my years writing about Silicon Valley, I knew dozens of rich young men with time on their hands who might like to own the company. But I didn't call them. Largely due to what I've learned from this book, I thought about the question differently from how I might have before. Rather than asking, "Who has the money to buy this company?" or "Who has the experience to buy this company?," I asked myself "Who has the *character* to own and run this company?" Who would be a worthy custodian of our publishers' trust? Who has demonstrated the moral sobriety this company needs? Who will do what is best for publishing, rather than what is best for himself?

And I came up with a name: Don Linn, the former investment banker turned catfish farmer whom I visited in Mississippi. He truly loved books, and if he could motivate farmworkers then he would do great with our twenty Spanish-speaking warehouse workers. He was a whiz at finance. If he'd learned agribusiness, he could learn book distribution. He'd made moral choices in his life. He was not in it for the quick profit.

I e-mailed him to ask if the farm was sold yet.

The ink was almost dry.

Did he have a job at a biotech start-up yet?

Not yet . . . biotech was tough to break into.

Did he still want to move to a big city?

He did.

Did the Twin Cities count as a big city?

Big enough. What did I have in mind?

I told him only the basics, and then we sent him our offering memorandum. I didn't push him at all. I knew how easy it would be to sell him on it. But I'd learned that it's either a fit or it's not—our publishers wouldn't be served by someone I'd hornswoggled into a deal. Don flew to Minnesota two weeks later to meet the staff. He became excited. He came back, weeks later, with accountants and lawyers to kick our tires. By this time, I'd beaten the outgoing owner into submission, and he'd agreed to a reasonable price, and to take a note rather than all cash. It was not that much money. We had plenty of other willing buyers, but the staff and the directors and the publishers all loved Don. They were nervous because he had zero book experience, but once they met him they were quickly won over by the same traits I was. His business mind was very keen. He showed them respect.

Don moved to Minnesota two months later. He found a furnished condo—his family wouldn't join him until the summer—and he began taking Spanish classes. He took to the business much like everyone else in this book—he loved being a book guy, and because he loved it, he seemed innately great at it. He kept us on as directors, and I have faded back into the wallpaper, there only when called upon. I made not one penny on the deal, but it was richly rewarding to have done a good thing.

“I have only one demand,” I said, before signing his letter of intent. “This is just between us.”

“Shoot.”

“I’m not dropping you from the book. Everything between us as directors of the company might be private, but everything you’ve told me up until now is fair game.”

“Deal.”

I’d committed the cardinal sin of journalism—I stepped into the frame and changed the outcome. I felt funny about it. It’s okay if our writing changes people’s minds, but not if our actions do. It’s like tampering with a crime scene before the police photographers show up. Who knows what Don Linn would be doing today if I hadn’t sent that e-mail? Maybe he would be floundering and miserable, suffering his inevitable punishment for leaving Wall Street behind.

But I’d rather help than watch. I’d rather have a heart than a mind. I’d rather expose too much than too little. I’d rather say hello to strangers than be afraid of them. I would rather know all this about myself than have more money than I need. I’d rather have something to love than a way to impress you.

THE REWARDS ARE FOR ONLY THOSE WHO LISTEN
ATTENTIVELY

I don't think of the people in this book as the best stories out there. Rather, they're the ones that came into my life. Once I heard a story, I was willing to get on a plane, and I was willing to be honest. In order to know people personally, I might have gone to great lengths, but I didn't go to great lengths to *discover* them.

If some of the stories are amazing, it suggests to me that amazing stories must be everywhere. If the stories are inspiring, then inspiring stories are everywhere. If the stories are ordinary—which is how I think of them—then many ordinary people, everywhere, are daring to be true to themselves.

I began this book with nothing more than a glimmer. I was sitting in my office, staring into space, unable to write, when I asked myself: What was on people's minds? A lot were wondering what to do with their lives. That big, obvious, threatening, looming question. Unconsciously, I got up and knocked on my friend Ethan Watters's door, threw myself down on his minisofa, and asked him what he thought of the idea. "How would you do it?" he asked, naturally. I didn't know. I had one instinct: writing about my own friends would be cheating. I needed to sample real people from around the country. "How would you find them?" he asked. I didn't know. I secured votes of confidence from my agent and my ex-editor (who had left publishing, but I trusted his opinion, and it turned out he came back to books two months later). I set to work, trying to figure it out. I didn't know where I

was headed, but this seemed like what I needed, to plunge into the unknown, guided only by my muse.

I didn't know that I would meet so many wonderful people. I never expected how honest they would be with me. I didn't know that I would learn so much from them. I didn't know that this book would become a vehicle for me to express a new voice. I didn't know that my desire for this book would survive my son's birth, or the catastrophe of September 11, or our parents' falling ill. All that unfolded for me later, like a reward for trusting my instincts.

Here's my point: usually, *all we get is a glimmer*. A story we read or someone we briefly met. A curiosity. A meek voice inside, whispering. It's up to us to hammer out the rest. The rewards of pursuing it are only for those who are willing to listen attentively, only for those people who really care. It's not for everyone. If we are the victim of an injustice, it is up to us to find a meaningful way to channel our anger. If we suffer a terrible crisis, only we can transform this suffering into a launching pad for a new life. These are the turning points from which we get to construct our own story, if we choose to do so. It won't be easy, and it won't be quick. Finding what we should do is one of life's great dramas. It can be an endless process of discovery, one to be appreciated and respected for its difficulty.

There will always be those who say it's impractical. I respect that we have to be practical in our approach, and we have to live up to our responsibilities. But it's not impractical or vain. The reason is, people who love what they do are much more productive than those who are doing it for the paycheck. If we can find work we care about, our productivity will explode. Our value will increase radically. We will be the source of good ideas. And we will be rewarded.

I studied economics in college, so let me address the question of whether this is practical from a macroeconomic point of view.

While writing this book, I was invited by Michael Dell, of Dell Computer, to be on a panel at a gathering of the Business Council, a

group of over one hundred CEOs from some of the biggest companies in the country. Together, they pretty much *are* the economy. Or a huge chunk of it. It was an honor to be invited to address them. My panel would last an hour, and I was one of five participants, so I would probably only get one shot to deliver a coherent message. I might never again speak to such an influential crowd. This was my chance. If you had a few minutes to address the leaders of the economy, what would you say?

We had a great lead-in. Before our panel, the podium was turned over to Dr. Lawrence Summers, the president of Harvard and a noted economist. He reviewed some frightening demographics for any CEOs in the audience who were bullish on the economy. He asked the question, "Where will the economic growth come from, if at all?" In the preceding twenty years, we've had the wind at our backs. The number of prime-age workers (ages twenty-five to fifty-four) increased by 54 percent. The percentage with a college degree increased by 50 percent. In other words, the economy has grown since 1980 largely because the number of people participating in the economy has grown.

Looking ahead to the next twenty years, during which many baby boomers are expected to retire, we can expect *no growth* in the number of workers. The percentage that are minorities and immigrants will increase by 50 percent, and there will be no change in the fraction with a college degree. In other words, unless these trends are changed—or unless there are unforeseen boosts in productivity per worker—the economy won't grow much, if at all.

In other words, audience, if you sell John Deere tractors, there will not be people with lawns to mow. If you sell Boeing airplanes, there won't be people to fly in their seats. If you sell Tide soap, there won't be people who need their clothes washed.

It was a pretty intense moment as this sank in.

Could the most powerful CEOs in America change something about

that? That's what this conference was for. The entire next day's schedule was devoted to education reform. The notion was, it would be up to the educational system to transform the unproductive and uneducated into productive consumers.

The question our panel was asked to address is, "What do employees want?" What would it take to get more commitment out of them, more ideas out of them, more value out of them? The panelists chipped in with their ideas about benefits, flex time, day care, free M&Ms on Wednesdays, stock options, small companies versus large ones, cubicles versus private offices, and various methods of showing standout individuals a little extra appreciation. At this point, the conversation was passed to me.

I leaned forward in my seat. "What do people really want?"

They want to find work they're passionate about. Offering benefits and incentives are mere compromises. Educating people is important but not enough—far too many of our most educated people are operating at quarter-speed, unsure of their place in the world, contributing too little to the productive engine of modern civilization, still feeling like observers, like they haven't come close to living up to their potential. Our guidance needs to be better. We need to encourage people to find their sweet spot. Productivity explodes when people love what they do. We're sitting on a huge potential boom in productivity, which we could tap into if we got all the square pegs in the square holes and round pegs in round holes. It's not something we can measure with statistics, but it's a huge economic issue. It's a great natural resource that we're ignoring.

The tone in the room shifted. To my surprise, people agreed with me. The value in their companies came from the employees who were passionate about being there. The extra effort came from them. The new ideas came from them. I didn't tell this audience anything they didn't know. I only reminded them of it.

In other words, with the wind now at our faces, it's impractical to

settle for less than a life we love.

How are we to think of the search for a calling? We have to go looking for it, and yet what we're looking for is inside us. Is there a metaphor that properly characterizes this search?

Lately, I've closed my eyes. I imagine I'm in a dream. It's one of those dreams in which I toss and turn for a while. It's dark out. It's night. I'm walking in a neighborhood. There are a lot of stray dogs moving through the shadows. Some seem to be following me. It's making me nervous. In this neighborhood are some of the houses from the Seattle neighborhood I grew up in, but others I don't recognize. This confusion triggers a great urgency. I have to get home! Where is my house? I like houses a certain way. I think I know what my house will look like, but my vision is a little blurry.

I approach certain houses, but it feels like Halloween night—a lot of these houses scare me. Dogs are barking. That light in the window scares me. I don't recognize that car. That's not my house. I'm getting spooked. I can't walk all night. It's going to get cold. I keep walking. I'm sure I'm never going to find it. Maybe I should just go to a friend's house. Maybe I can find an empty garage where I can get some sleep. Why does it seem like everyone has a house but me?

Now I'm walking with Carl Kurlander in Squirrel Hill. Now I'm walking with Chi Tschang through Jamaica Plain. Now I'm walking in the snow with Nicole Heinrich through Logan Square. Now I'm walking with Ashley Merryman through Culver City. Now I'm walking in the rain with Ana Miyares through Little Havana. They're looking for their houses, too. But look at all these different types of houses people live in! I used to be afraid of houses like these! It's okay now. I want to find my house, but I'm not going to stay there forever. It doesn't have to be permanent. I'll stay there as long as one stays in a house. I think back on all those houses I was so sure weren't mine—was I just afraid because they were unfamiliar? Was I afraid of the barking? Maybe that dog was barking to tell me to come home. Maybe my wife left that light on in the window so I would be able to find it. Damn! Should I go back? This is

not a dream I can go backward in. So I tell myself, there's another one out there. And I vow that I will not be scared of what it looks like. I'm sure I have lots of fears, but I won't let them paralyze me. I'll get rid of my prejudices. So when I come across it—and I know I will, eventually—this time I'll be ready. And I'll walk in the front door. And I'll feel at home.

“Why am I here?” asked the first-year MBA at Harvard, who was frightened by the debt he was saddling himself with by attending grad school only to please his mother.

“What should I do?” asked the doctor at a prestigious academic hospital, after she had lost faith in universities when falsely accused of manipulating research data by a former lab assistant with a grudge.

“Where is my place?” asked the engineer who faced emigration back to Taiwan after being laid off by a friend.

“Should I go?” asked the woman who heard a voice telling her to go to Mexico.

“What should I do now?” asked the advertising salesman who took four months off to spend with his brother, who died of a brain tumor.

These were not questions I could hide from. These were not dramas existing only on the page. I'm clumsy at ministering, but I have been, at times, pulled into that role. I prefer not to generalize, so I couch my advice in a person's story. That person is me. I used to have all these notions that I no longer have—thanks to hearing stories from people like them.

I used to think certain jobs were “cool,” and more likely to inspire passion. Now I know passion is rooted in deeply felt experiences, which can happen anywhere. I used to think life presented a five-page menu of choices. Now I think the choice is in whether to be honest, to ourselves and others, and the rest is more of an uncovering, a peeling away of layers, discovering talents we assumed we didn't have. I used

to treasure the innocence of first love. Now I treasure the hard-fought. I used to want to change the world. Now I'm open to letting it change me.

Exercises and Resources

If you wish to continue this discussion, I highly recommend seeking the counseling of those who have professional experience in this field, such as career counselors, coaches, therapists, and online resources. In the meantime, I believe we can help each other, via inspiration, and we can help ourselves, by keeping these thoughts alive in our minds. My notes to this book (including further elucidation of my conclusions, debates of interpretation, and—occasionally—updates on the characters) are on my website, www.pobronson.com.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In PO BRONSON's growing body of work, the individual is always struggling to hang on to his soul against the crushing forces of technology, prestige, and greed. Bronson investigates places other literary writers tend to overlook—bond salesmen on Wall Street, brainiac engineers at research labs, migrant entrepreneur-hopefuls flowing into Silicon Valley. He relates to his characters with the empathy of Studs Terkel and describes them with the madcap energy of Tom Wolfe and Joseph Heller. Although all three of his books have been critically acclaimed bestsellers, Bronson began work on *What Should I do with My Life?* because he was asking himself that very question. For answers, he crossed the landscape of America to find people who have struggled to unearth their true calling—people of all ages, from all classes, of every profession, who have found fulfillment: those who fought with the seduction of money, intensity, and novelty but overcame their allure; those who broke away from the chorus to learn the sound of their own voice.

He is on the board of directors of Consortium Book Sales & Distribution and the editorial board of *Zoetrope: All Story* magazine. He has written for *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Wired*. He graduated from Stanford with a BA in economics and San Francisco State with an MFA in creative writing. He lives in San Francisco. For more information on Po Bronson, go to www.pobronson.com.

Also by Po Bronson

The Nudist on the Late Shift

The First \$20 Million Is Always the Hardest

Bombardiers

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