PICTURES OF NOTHING

fiction by Stephen-Paul Martin
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“Watch Out for Obscure Publications”
FIGHTING

I used to avoid fighting. I wouldn't fight with anyone for any reason, though at times I badly wanted to. I had many subtle ways of staying away from conflict, carefully neutralizing hostile feelings in myself, quickly moving away from such feelings when I felt them developing in others. Of course, I never discussed this fear of fighting with anyone else, and I was only vaguely aware of it myself, even though it informed and limited almost everything I did.

Then I got married, and fighting became unavoidable. I don't mean my wife likes fighting. It's just that her aversion to it is not as strong as mine. She accepts the reality that people in close relationships get mad and fight at times. I too accept this—in theory. In practice, fighting makes me sick, creating a nearly unbearable tension, as if I were trapped in a primitive kill-or-be-killed situation, yet somehow had to maintain a civilized facade. But recent events have led me to think I might be getting better. If nothing else, I've been able to think about a life-long problem with more clarity than I've ever had before.

Fighting is a controversial topic. Some say it's good to fight; others claim it's toxic, inherently destructive. I wish I could say that I completely agree with the second group, that because of my spiritual or ethical beliefs I'm against fighting under any circumstances. But in fact I have no such beliefs. I don't think non-violent fighting is necessarily destructive. Depending upon the situation and the people involved, fighting can be an agent of catharsis, illumination, personal growth. The important thing is to be honest about what you want and what you can tolerate, classifying yourself as someone who likes to fight, someone who fights if it can't be avoided, or someone who can't stand fighting at all.

Those who like fighting tend to be explosive. Almost anything can send them into fits of rage filled with verbal abuse,
accusations and threats. They may be addressing a real problem, but it’s almost never as serious as their reaction is making it seem. At times they appear sincerely upset, unaware that they’re blowing things out of proportion. At other times, their anger is clearly theatrical, driven by the pleasure of making a scene. And often even their sincerity seems to be that of a stage personality playing a part. Can they be reasoned with? Not until the rage subsides. Then they tend to be sheepish and contrite, even tender and passionate. But don’t be fooled. The calm after the storm is also the calm before the storm. Whatever set them off will set them off again quite soon. Or something else will. Apparently, they need to be set off, and though their therapists can probably tell you why, their therapists will also have to admit that self-awareness doesn’t always lead to self-transformation. Most people who fight quickly and easily stay that way for life, creating lots of excitement but also dangerous levels of stress.

More balanced and more complex are those in the second group: people who can tolerate conflict but won’t go out of their way to pick a fight. Such people may or may not see fighting as a healthy activity, but they know it’s part of being human. They generally don’t enjoy their fights—they feel badly about them later—but they won’t avoid the next fight if it develops in response to an issue that needs expression and clarification. Though they would rather discuss a problem than fight about it, they know that people in disagreements don’t always remain calm and rational. They also know that discussions often leave turbulent feelings unpurged, and that a more heated interaction may be the best way to address the trouble at hand. Such people are flexible enough to move in either direction—discussing or fighting. Of course, they won’t always choose what’s best. They may amplify a discussion into a useless fight when a calm exchange would have clarified crucial issues. Or they may choose to avoid fighting, only to find themselves filled with frustration that should have been forcefully expressed. If they are wise enough to accept their mistakes, there’s no problem. But they tend to be perfectionists who berate
themselves unmercifully when they fail to distinguish between situations that call for reasoned interactions and situations that call for emotional conflict. Unlike those who fight as a matter of course, people in this category know they have choices, and see themselves as being responsible for the results. Confusion and guilt are not unusual. Thus it’s best for such people to form close relationships with others of their type, with individuals who accept the burden of living with complexity and pressure themselves to do the right thing.

Indeed, they will have trouble if they bond with people in the first category, who rarely brood on the moral implications of their behavior, or with people in the third category, who can’t stand fighting under any circumstances. Individuals of this third type are furious at anyone who fights with them. They equate anger with abuse, and feel assaulted when even the most reasonable person moves beyond discussion to initiate a full conflict. Such people are often overcome with adrenaline if they find themselves in a fight. They are torn between terror and murderous rage; they retreat and charge at the same time. The split quickly becomes too painful and they shut themselves off altogether, backing away and brooding, plotting revenge. This vindictive tendency is perhaps the most difficult thing about dealing with these people. They don’t get mad, they get even, even if the other person had no intention of hurting them. Having been in this category myself, I’m ashamed at how many times I’ve punished people by resentfully withdrawing my friendship or sexual interest because “they had the nerve to pick a fight with me.” In such vindictive moments, I know I’m being unfair. Yet I also feel justified, morally superior to those I’m punishing. I pride myself on at least knowing that the impulse I’m surrendering to is delusional and unkind. But as I said before, self-awareness doesn’t always lead to changed behavior. The pleasure of getting revenge is hard to resist.

Equally hard to resist is the pleasure of telling people what to think—about fighting or anything else. Though this discussion
began as a descriptive classification, the words I’ve used clearly go beyond description, suggesting that we’d all be better off if we could honestly locate ourselves in category number two, reaching the point where fighting was simply one of many human activities, nothing more special than walking and talking. When I first saw that I wasn’t being objective, I thought of adjusting some of my language, changing words and phrases that sounded even remotely prescriptive. But this would have been mere cosmetic surgery, concealing a personal belief that would have been secretly shaping the reader’s response, shaping it all the more profoundly because it was doing it in secret, pretending to be impartial. This kind of pretense is so widespread in our society that most people don’t even notice it, and most of those who do notice it think it’s normal, acceptable. I think it’s dangerous. I think it’s better to plainly admit that even though I’m uncomfortable about proposing standards for human behavior, I have definite preferences and beliefs.

But if I support category number two as the healthiest approach to emotional conflict, am I advocating something that’s a realistic possibility for everyone? Can people in the first and third categories hope to achieve a balanced attitude? In theory, of course, the answer is yes. But before I start making prescriptions, I need to remember that people who live on rage and people who live to avoid it are struggling with firmly ingrained behavior patterns that have been years in the making. Can old dogs learn new tricks? If so, how fully can they learn them? How long will the process take? How difficult will it be?

There can be no general answers to these questions. Everything depends on how psychologically damaged a person happens to be. If the damage is extreme, it’s unfair to expect much change. A severely limited person in category one or three may lack the desire to achieve a more balanced attitude, may not be aware that there’s a problem, may not even think of fighting as an activity to be critically examined. And who am I to judge this person? Who am I to tell someone that her need to fight or not
fight is so intense that it needs to be challenged, or so intense that it probably can’t be improved, even though it should be? It seems to me that the only fair way to address these difficult questions is in the first person singular, using myself as an example and focusing on the improvements I mentioned earlier.

Several days ago, I went with my friends Frank and Rob to a small cafe on a cliff by the sea. I was looking forward to good food and conversation, but I could have gotten that in any decent cafe with Frank and Rob. The main reason we’d gone to this particular place was that all three of us love the ocean, which inspires us in the same way that a beautiful church, cathedral, synagogue, temple, or mosque inspires devoutly religious people. But our sacred spot had been desecrated. Apparently the cafe had been sold since the last time we’d been there, and the new owner was insisting on an atmosphere of loud top-forty music, with big-screen TV sets on either side of the outdoor patio.

Frank went ballistic. He firmly told the waitress to turn the music down, and when she aid she’d have to talk to the owner, he took action without waiting for a response. He started cursing, stood up in his chair and made a very loud speech to the other customers, claiming that the owner was a moron using trashy commercial noise to blot out the most beautiful of all natural sounds. Only three other people seemed to hear what he was saying, and they looked like they thought he was crazy. The rest were bobbing their heads to the music, staring at the TV screens. Rob tried to talk politely to the owner, a florid pot-bellied man in his mid-fifties who immediately got pissed off and scared Rob into submission. Rob was still trembling as he came back, sat down, and stared at his hands.

Normally, my response would have been similar to Rob’s. I would have been afraid to fight for what I believed in, though I would have wanted to—badly. After all, it wasn’t even end-of-the-century popular music that we were being subjected to. It was big-hit shit from the sixties, referred to by the DJ as “the music you grew up with.” There was lots of wonderfully strange rock music
in the sixties that rarely got played on the radio, and it was this music that helped give the sixties their quasi-radical profile. But instead of playing what we used to call underground music, the station was creating a fake picture of the sixties by recycling top-forty drivel.

History books are apparently burned in communist countries, and false versions of the past are crammed down people's throats. This is horrible, no question about it. But at least in communist countries people know that indoctrination is taking place. The people bobbing their heads and staring at TV screens on the cafe patio had no apparent awareness of how thoroughly they were being invaded, conditioned by information that was affecting not just their thoughts and feelings, but also—and primarily—their bodies, their metabolic microcellular selves, the foundations of motion, perception, consciousness, and health. It's one thing to be assaulted by an ideology; it's quite another thing to be penetrated in every pore of your being by sounds and images that have no significant verbal content. The former can be mentally resisted, cross-examined; the latter offer almost nothing mental and therefore can be interrogated only by the most rigorous critical thinkers. True, mass communication can in principle be avoided, but only if you're willing to block out most of mainstream social reality, staying away from noise transmission devices like those referred to above. And even then, you'll still be running into people with garbage in their heads, people transmitting noise in what they say and how they behave. I see no reason not to use the term evil in describing this situation.

But as I admitted before, until a few weeks ago my response to this evil would have been much like Rob's. I would have either left, or sat there cursing under my breath. My thinking would have been so blurred that I wouldn't have been able to sort out my options. Tension would have quickly spread all over my body, making me prone to headaches and fits of irritable distraction later in the day. Either that, or the instinctual understandings carefully stored away in various parts of my body would have turned into
questions, and these questions would have begun moving faster
and faster until they reached escape velocity, a tendency I learned
as a boy growing up in a home where my body was a dangerous
place to be, an easy target.

It's not that I got beaten. My parents would have found open
physical violence unacceptable. Their methods were more subtle,
mostly unconscious, unacknowledged, invisible except in their
effect, leading me to come up with psychological ways to get
outside my body, evacuation procedures I still depend on when I
don't know what to do. If courage is grace under pressure, as
some famous person once proposed, then I'm a coward in the most
basic sense of the term. In scary situations, I run away as fast as I
can, and even though my body stays in place, people can usually
tell I'm not really there. I don't mean they know exactly what's
going on. But they can non-verbally sense in such moments that
I'm not a complete person, that they can do whatever they want
with me and I won't do anything back. Often they don't do
anything. They just leave the interaction with a negative
impression, a feeling that they've just been with a man who can't
command their respect.

But this time things were different. I sat calmly, considering
various possibilities. If I'd left after letting the owner know I
wasn't pleased, I would have been making a statement, refusing to
pay for shit. This would have been better than sitting there feeling
victimized. But it would have left the owner free to conduct
business in a way that deprived people of a beautiful experience.
Clearly, the best way to handle the situation was to confront the
owner head-on, letting him know that we felt violated by what he'd
done to our favorite cafe, refusing to back away no matter how
obnoxious he became in response. I'm not saying Frank was right.
Though I admired him for taking immediate action, and though his
behavior would have been fun to see in a movie, I think his open
rage was counter-productive. Those people who did pay attention
to him weren't impressed, and soon the police arrived and Frank
spent the night in jail for disturbing the peace. Of course, the
person who should have been jailed was the cafe’s owner, who was not only disturbing the peace, but getting rich by doing so. It’s amazing how many ways there are to make money by making noise.

I knew I couldn’t just sit there. But I’d done it so many times in the past that I felt like I was glued to my seat. The calm feeling I’d had a few minutes before began to crumble. I started hating myself. I told myself that if I’d participated in Stanley Milgram’s experiments at Yale back in the late sixties, I would have been one of the people who obeyed the authority figure in the white coat and gave subjects the full jolt of electricity, long after they started screaming, begging for mercy. I told myself that gutlessness like mine had given genocidal tyrants throughout history the chance to carry out their horrible intentions, knowing that most people would lack the courage to resist. The tension was so intense that the word intense popped out of existence. Suddenly things changed. I knew what to do and knew I could do it.

Frank was making a scene with the police, commanding everyone’s attention. Now that he looked like one of the bad guys in a TV crime drama, he was momentarily worth watching, and this gave me the opportunity I needed. I took the steak knife off my plate, quietly walked behind the bar and cut the cords to the TV screens and radio. It took thirty seconds for anyone to notice the absence of noise and pictures. By then I’d become part of the crowd, repositioning myself in front of the police, arguing that Frank shouldn’t be arrested, that the owner was the one who’d committed a serious crime, that Frank was doing more or less the same thing people like John Brown and Thomas Payne had done—fighting oppression. The cops had never heard of John Brown, and they acted like they’d heard the Thomas Payne argument before and weren’t impressed with it. One of them, who might have been JFK in a previous lifetime, tried to reason with me. Pushing his hat back off his forehead, he said: How would you feel if you were trying to get a new business off the ground and some of your customers started making a scene?
I said: I'd be upset. But if they were making a scene for morally valid reasons, I'd listen to them.

He said: The owner of this establishment doesn't think you're making a scene for morally valid reasons.

I said: It's clear that we are.

He said: Not to him. And he's the one who's paying off the mortgage on this place—

I said: So just because he's got the money to call himself the owner, he gets to impose what he wants on anyone who comes near him? This used to be a beautiful and relaxing place. Now it's like one of those sports bars where idiots get drunk and shout obscenities at TV football players, or one of those clubs where the music plays so loud that people who've had too much to drink can't hear each other talk. You can find places like that anywhere. Why not leave at least one place—

At this point the cop who looked like JFK had to restrain a long-haired guy with a baseball hat from physically assaulting me. He looked like he wanted to hurt me badly, which might have meant a trip to the hospital, an absurdly expensive operation I would have to pay for myself. Either that or I would have had to sue him, which would have meant working with an absurdly expensive lawyer and wasting huge amounts of time and energy. So I'm glad the cop held him back, though it didn't change my opinion of JFK. I still resent the fact that in 1962, when I was a very confused thirteen-year-old, he took a minor problem and built it into the Cuban Missile Crisis, forcing the world to sit in sheer apocalyptic terror for more than a week. If there was ever a time when the impulse to fight became pathologically dangerous on a worldwide scale, October 1962 was it.

Some people will no doubt object to my use of the word fight in the previous sentence, arguing that a term like conflict would have been more appropriate, more in keeping with the supposedly dignified context of an international crisis. But I think we need to get past the facade that allows glamour boys like JFK to look like they're doing something more civilized than fighting. Besides,
Kennedy didn’t consistently restrict himself to so-called dignified behavior. He spent at least fifty percent of his presidential time fucking his brains out. He supposedly said that you haven’t had a woman until you’ve had her three ways. I wonder what he would have said if a woman had used these words, referring to a man or another woman. He probably would have been shocked but quickly called the shock annoyance, concealing the annoyance by smiling and waving at the inevitable cameras, gotten a quick injection to relieve the chronic pain in his back, then turned around and manufactured a crisis I’ll never forget. The word manufactured may seem extreme to some readers, who probably feel that Khrushchev deserves more than fifty percent of the blame. But I’ve studied this famous event quite carefully, and it’s clear to me that Khrushchev wasn’t asking for a crisis, that Kennedy made it a crisis by insisting on a confrontation at sea. I still recall how frightened I was. Even though I loved my underground rock music station, I wouldn’t turn my radio on. I was afraid that a serious voice might interrupt and say that a war had begun, that a flash and a crash and a conflagration were at most eight hours away. Though I felt sad a year later when JFK was killed, I now think of him as a dangerous egomaniac, a person whose need for power and fame hurt millions of people all over the world, and almost led to the end of the world in 1962.

Of course, those in power tend to make their opinions widely known, no matter how stupid those opinions are. I remember reading somewhere that Kennedy placed all men in two fundamental groups: those who dicks control their brains, and those whose brains control their dicks. The former like to fuck; the latter tend to beat their meat. The former tend to be men of the world; the latter tend to be dreamers. The former tend to fight; the latter prefer discussion. The key phrase here is “tend to,” which allows for exceptions to the rule. JFK didn’t use that phrase. It’s something I’ve added, and I probably should have taken it out at the final stage of revision. After all, it makes JFK sound more complex than he really was, and contributes not only to the
Kennedy legend, but also to a more general process that turns public figures of all kinds into mythic personalities. This goes against everything I believe in as a writer, thinker, and teacher. I suppose I could excuse myself by pointing out that I’m not alone, that many other writers—some of them quite famous—have produced this kind of mainstream mystification on a regular basis. Indeed, until the early nineties most Americans thought Kennedy was a mental giant, partly because his father had communication magnate Henry Luce under his thumb. Obviously, the people who wrote for Luce had to put bread on the table. They had to make sure they didn’t offend the wrong big shot. I myself don’t have that excuse. I support myself through other means. I don’t have to write for Luce or anyone like him. So why did I insert a phrase that makes JFK seem more sophisticated than he really was? And why did I leave it in the final version of the text, even though I knew it might promote precisely the kind of misunderstanding these words are designed to repudiate?

These questions indicate a high level of distraction, a gap in the conceptual system this discussion is based on. It’s possible that I should have redesigned the verbal surface to create the illusion of mastery, making my narrating voice sound firm and authoritative, beyond all forms of distraction. But I’ve already admitted that I’m prone to fits of distraction, and besides, it should be obvious that all human beings get distracted. We’re not designed to sustain the kind of concentration that a dog chewing on a bone is capable of. So those who claim I shouldn’t get distracted are telling me I shouldn’t act like a person, and I’m not sure what else I could be acting like. It’s precisely this insight—this sense of the gaps in my own value system and behavior—that allows me to forgive Kennedy and Khrushchev enough to write about them. I want to say that both Jack and Nikita were number ones, crisis-oriented people who liked the adrenaline rush that comes with stress and conflict. But were they number ones in all situations—political and personal? Or did they only become number ones when their
power got threatened? Can we really put people into categories when their behavior may vary depending on the situation?

I have no answers here. Nor am I convinced that providing answers is all that important. There's a lot about these words I can't be sure of, no matter how carefully I try to control their ambiguities. For example, I don't know exactly how much ironic distance my language is being propelled by, especially since it's occurred to me that the critical assistance here is not ironic, not exactly, and though I'm not sure what to call it instead, it might be compared to the process of drawing something so well it eats the rest of the space on the page, and then itself, or to the process of finding a severed finger on a shelf in a grocery store, and from that finger deducing precisely what kind of person it once belonged to, or if you prefer something religious, it might be compared to a powerhouse Virgin Mary dressed in a lime-green leotard spanking the baby Jesus in the presence of three witnesses.

It's tempting to take this final image and ask what categories Jesus and the Virgin Mary might belong to. Our answers will no doubt be affected by the thought of the Blessed Virgin wearing a leotard, spanking the Savior, and doing it in front of three witnesses dressed like Cold War men of business. What kind of mother would spank the Son of God with people watching her? Why would the people she invited or permitted to watch have chosen to wear mid-fifties business suits for the occasion? And what could the Holy Lamb of God have done to make his mother feel that she had to take such drastic action? Was it simply a case of "Spare the Rood and spoil the Savior"?

These are not insignificant considerations. Carried to their logical conclusions, they could easily stand the very notion of classification on its head. Still, we shouldn't let them distract us from the evidence at hand, which indicates that Frank is in category number one—he fights quite readily, and seems to like it. Rob is in category number three—he can't stand fighting, even when he's deeply upset and morally offended. Until quite recently, I too was in category three. But clearly my subversive maneuvers
in the cafe indicate that things aren’t what they were. What brought about this change? I’m not sure. All I can say is that something remarkable happened a few weeks ago, something so astonishing that I see no reason to assume that some people are just too emotionally crippled to develop a more balanced attitude about fighting.

I was having breakfast, reading a book called *Language and Identity*. I had just reached the end of chapter three, where the author claims that people are primarily the result of ascribing selfhood to those sites of narration we call human bodies, which means that the self is the product of discursive practice over an extended period of time, not a substantial entity that generates meaning and action. I wasn’t sure if I agreed with (or even fully understood) what I was reading, so I looked up and stared at the wall, something I often do before I re-read a difficult passage. At first I noticed nothing. My mind was still in the grip of the page. Then I saw something weird: a stone the size of a baseball on the kitchen wall by the window.

For perhaps thirty seconds, I had no response. After all, it was strange, but not *that* strange, not as strange as the supernatural or extraterrestrial things many people claim they’ve experienced. Yes, the stone was ignoring the force of gravity, resting against the wall with no apparent support, about four feet from the floor. But it wasn’t glowing or buzzing or talking, wasn’t accompanied by a solar eclipse or lightning storm or cyclone, didn’t seem to be changing the temperature or creating an electromagnetic disturbance. It wouldn’t have worked very well in a special effects movie. In fact, after my initial surprise, I began to suspect that it had come into being at precisely the instant I became aware of it, as if it needed my attention to manifest itself. Are there objects that don’t exist until they find people or situations that allow them to stop not existing? If so, what was it about that particular situation, or about my involvement with it, that gave the stone a chance to come into the world?
I carefully checked everything on page 96 of *Language and Identity*. But I saw nothing that even remotely suggested this new development. This bothered me greatly. Like many people who read a lot, I'm susceptible to the dubious assumption that events which occur at the same time—or objects that exist in the same space—generally have some connection to each other. Perhaps one is the cause or effect of the other, or a symbol of the other. So I told myself that the limitations of my individual human perspective might have been keeping me from seeing that a certain arrangement of words on the page could have conjured the stone into being. After all, what might strike me as a thoroughly mundane pattern of syllables might actually be something profound when viewed from a perspective human beings have no access to. For instance, after closely inspecting the page five times, I saw that it contained fifteen words that rhymed with wall. Perhaps the rock or stone was on the wall because the words rock, stone and wall rhymed fifteen times with words on the page. What was it about the number fifteen that had made a stone appear on my kitchen wall? Would the numbers fourteen and sixteen have also made it appear?

I've always thought numerology was stupid, so I called my wife into the kitchen to verify what I was looking at, and also to make sure it wasn't some kind of joke she was playing. She shared my reaction. She found it surprising, but not radically so. I thought of calling the police, but before I could get to the phone she pulled the stone off the wall. It came off with no effort. As I'd initially suspected, there was no adhesive or hook, nothing holding it in place. We both held the stone in our hands, inspecting it carefully. There was nothing odd about it. It wasn't a perfect oval or sphere. It had all the irregularities of a normal stone, and an ordinary combination of colors—gray and brown and wedgewood blue, all of them dull and slightly dusty. We looked at each other and shrugged. Then it happened.

The stone slipped out of her hand. But instead of dropping down to the floor, it went sideways, hitting the wall. We tried it
four times. Each time it did the same thing. Instead of dropping, it went sideways, making the same sharp noise it would have made landing on the floor, resting on the wall as if gravity were holding it in place. The thought of gravity led me to wonder: Was it possible that this ordinary stone was somehow part of a world in which our wall was the floor, our floor the wall, a world perpendicular to the one we inhabit, co-existing with ours and essentially identical to it, but vibrating at a frequency our senses can’t normally perceive?

I have to say I was quite pleased with myself for coming up with something so clever on the spot. But my wife wasn’t all that pleased when I told her about it.

She said: Why do you always have to turn everything into philosophy, or poetry, or whatever it is that you call this kind of nonsense?

I said: I don’t turn everything into philosophy.
She said: Yes you do! And I’m sick of it.
I said: Why not just enjoy it? Why not share the pleasure I get from doing it?
She said: Because it’s not meant to be shared. It’s meant to be displayed. You don’t care about communication; the only thing you care about is getting approval from people who think you’re being clever. When you say retarded things like that, the only thing I can think of is mental masturbation. Only a voyeur could find pleasure in it.

I could tell she was working herself into a fit. I said earlier that my wife was a number two, a fairly balanced person who doesn’t mind conflict but fights only when it can’t be avoided. Yet here she was, acting like my first wife, one of the most extreme number ones I’ve ever met. It occurred to me that her shift in behavior was connected to the mysterious appearance of an object that might have been from another universe. In that other world—that world in which the floor was my kitchen wall—was I still married to my first wife? The thought was terrifying. But just as I was about to call her by my first wife’s name, I realized that if
she'd been my first wife in a different universe, she would have been standing and walking on the wall.

I almost caved in with relief, and something was different, substantially different, different in ways I couldn't fully grasp at the time. Of course, it's rather lame to use words like different when making substantial assertions, where precision is crucial not only in presenting a clear picture, but also in establishing the legitimacy of the claim. After all, people make all sorts of claims, and most of them are dangerously self-deceived, secretly self-serving, essentially vacant, or downright cynical. Words like different are like a squid's ink, obscuring the interpretive encounter, helping an assertion sound impressive, remaining vague enough to make substantial responses impossible. Think about how often words like different are used by politicians, lawyers, business people, sportscasters. How seriously can I expect someone to take my claim when I lapse into the same bland or deceptive tendencies as the mainstream world I tell myself I'm challenging?

Unfortunately, I can't find an adjective that would do justice to the change I experienced. What occurs to me instead is a kind of picture, an egg revolving in dark and apparently infinite empty space—or rather, not revolving in anything, since the egg is the only thing that exists; and not revolving either, since revolving implies a larger non-revolving space to revolve in; and not even really an egg, since nothing hatches, nothing is born, there's nothing inside what might have otherwise been called an egg. So is this a picture of nothing? I don't think so. There's no such thing as a picture that doesn't picture something. Even a work of abstract art is a picture of something. Who cares if what it pictures can't be named? It still exists. And if it exists it can't be nothing. It may be an absence, but only if absence can be defined in terms of presence, and not as the opposite of presence, but rather its partner, each making the other not only possible, but distinct and persuasive. So as I said a few minutes ago, I almost caved in with relief, as if the questions that otherwise would have been feeding
on my body, eating themselves and spitting themselves back out, had suddenly become answers, but not answers to the questions whose places they were taking.

I looked at my watch. It was later than I thought. I felt that time was running out, that I had to do something right away. I cleared my throat and calmly told my wife: There's nothing wrong with voyeuristic pleasure, and there's nothing wrong with quasi-poetic speculation as way of dealing with mysterious events. In fact, most scientific revolutions begin with quasi-poetic speculation of one kind or another. I know it must be upsetting for you to see something like this that you can't explain, right here in our kitchen. But there's an easy way to solve the problem without building it into a crisis.

I took the stone and released it in front of the open kitchen window. It fell sideways out the window, fell sideways over an open field, fell sideways over the ocean beyond, fell sideways out of sight.

I quietly but firmly said: I'm sorry you got so upset. But I don't think you were treating me with respect. You don't have to get pissed off just because you don't have full control of a situation.

Of course, these words need to be taken with a grain of salt. Certain situations over which people don't have control call for precisely the kind of response my wife was making, or maybe for a more thoughtfully measured version of it. In fact, Frank's behavior in the cafe, if he'd been able to get his anger out more carefully, more strategically, would have been quite appropriate. He knows I have connections with the local press. Together we could have produced an article denouncing not just this one cafe, but all cafes, all public places, and in fact all modern developments of any kind that blot out nature, thought, and conversation with invasive noise. We could have turned this unfortunate situation into a full-scale campaign against noise pollution, identifying it as a global cancer destroying the world just as surely as (and perhaps more subtly than) other forms of pollution.
But Frank is a number one and I’m just barely not a number three. Though I enjoy his company in small doses, I can’t imagine spending lots of time with him, working on a long-term project. Besides, I’d rather focus with gratitude on the fact that I’m finally finding ways to fight that don’t leave me feeling destroyed. I’m not sure I’d call myself a number two at this point—maybe a two point five or a two point seven—but I’m convinced that change is possible. In some cases the changes may be more subtle than the one described above, but even minor improvements are worth celebrating. Indeed, minor improvements may well be the ones most worthy of serious attention. There’s something about the more dramatic psychological changes that’s not quite believable, as if they had no depth and couldn’t sustain themselves over time. In fact, I may as well admit that I’m haunted by fears of losing the gains I’ve made. After all, my transformation is only a few weeks old. The stone that was on my wall might soon be right back where it started from, having fallen slowly all the way around the world.
WHATSOEVER

Some time ago, it became clear to me that I hated making decisions. Over and over again, I’d been forced to choose between alternatives without knowing what the consequences would be. The tension of trying to figure things out was too much. It wasn’t that I’d ruined myself by making reckless decisions. Far from it. Carefully sorting out each situation, I did what I thought was right, and things turned out fairly well, though not in every case as I had hoped or expected. But the turmoil of making choices, the accumulating tensions I faced as I tried to reason things out, left me confused and fearful, drained of the energy I needed for the things I cared about most. It was in this state of mind that I met Natasha.

I’d reluctantly gone to a party. I was only there because my absence might have offended the host, a slight that would have been professionally dangerous. As I walked out onto the patio where guests were standing with drinks, chatting cheerfully, Natasha looked at me with what I thought was recognition, even though I’d never seen her before. In the conversation that followed, I soon confessed that I was extremely anxious most of the time, terrified about having to make decisions. She acted sympathetic, carefully following everything I said and asking sensitive questions. I can’t recall having ever had a more intelligent interaction at a party. Nonetheless, I had the feeling that she had something else on her mind, and it turned out I was right. Just as the conversation was turning toward her problems with her ex-husband, she cleverly changed the subject, asking me to participate in a series of experiments she and her colleagues were conducting.

I didn’t know what to say at first. When she’d opened the conversation by telling me she was a therapist, it hadn’t occurred to me that her job included scientific research. She didn’t seem like the type, whatever that meant. And why was she asking me,
of all people? She quickly explained that my turbulent condition made me the perfect subject. They needed someone who was deeply upset but could still express himself with rational precision, someone whose background included regular periods of confusion without regular bouts of insanity. I agreed to participate almost immediately, mainly because if I’d given myself a chance to think about it, I would have had another decision to make, another chance to drive myself crazy.

I met Natasha at a medical center in uptown Manhattan. She was dressed in a white coat and carried a clipboard, an outfit that made her even more appealing to me than she’d been at the party in a revealing evening dress. She told me I’d be spending the night in what she and her colleagues called the Dream Laboratory. She asked me to go to sleep and dream about a painting, real or imagined. When I asked her why, she told me everything would become clear later. When I objected that I had no control over my dreams, she told me that most people shared this misconception, but that research had revealed that people can influence the shape of their dreams if they choose to do so.

The Dream Lab turned out to be a small but pleasantly furnished room with a fabulous view of the city. Brian Eno’s *Music for Airports* was faintly drifting in through hidden speakers in the ceiling. She gave me a copy of “Kublai Khan” to read before I went to sleep. When I woke the next day I followed instructions, recording my dream in a small blue notebook. I could recall only two distinct images, neither in any clear way connected to Coleridge’s poem: the churning of a train receding slowly into silence, and a clock on a mantelpiece beneath a large rectangular mirror. I told Natasha nothing about the dream, as instructed, and went home to my apartment about thirty blocks away.

The next day, reaching with closed eyes into a large box filled with prints of famous paintings, she selected *Time Transfixed*, by Rene Magritte. Anyone familiar with Magritte’s work will quickly see the remarkable connection. *Time Transfixed* is a painting of a train coming out of a mantelpiece into what
seems to be an empty room with broad floorboards. There's a
clock on the mantelpiece beneath a large rectangular mirror.
Natasha called and asked me to read what was in my notebook,
then told me about the Magritte painting she'd selected. I was
amazed. But before I could tell her how shocked I was, she asked
me if I'd be willing to dream again, under different circumstances.
Because I didn't want to make a decision, I quickly said yes.

This time they piped in the first movement of Beethoven's
third symphony. The shades were closed and the room was filled
with crimson light. Natasha came in and told me to take my
clothes off. When I hesitated, expecting her to go outside, she
smiled and told me not to be concerned, that her instructions were
completely in line with standard scientific procedures. Since I
almost always do what authority figures tell me to do, I got
undressed. She gave me a long French kiss and played with my
penis. Just as I was about to come, she left and the music stopped.
There was nothing to do but finish things myself. Then I fell
asleep, dreaming about a cannon shooting at cumulous clouds in a
bright blue sky. One by one they collapsed, looking at first like
burning blimps, then like burning cardboard on the tiles of a
bathroom floor.

I meant to transcribe the dream exactly. But what I wrote in
my notebook had its own designs. The violently sexual images of
my dream became people dancing in a rustic village, a tall church
surrounded by sparse trees in the background, and a man's falsetto
voice warning me that for the rest of my life my name would
depend on the kind of room I was in.

I wasn't sure what was going on, so I paced around the room
for a while, then tried again to write down the original dream. But
the very same translation came through my pen and appeared on
the page, as if the words were contained in the ink itself. Or
maybe they'd been carefully concealed in the blank depth of the
writing surface, triggered into revealing themselves by my pen
pressing into the page. The next day, Natasha selected Brueghel's
Peasant Dance from the box of pictures, a painting that contained
the images in my notebook but had nothing to do with cardboard clouds or the tiles of a bathroom floor. When I told her what had happened, she said nothing at first, then tried to sound pleased and assured me she would call back after lunch.

I sat down hard on my battered sofa, stared at the ants on the floor, watching the sunlight try to force its way through filthy windows. I wasn’t sure what to do, so I called my friend Susan, a freelance textbook writer who worked at home and was almost always in the mood for intimate conversations. An hour later we were in a coffee shop talking. In addition to being a careful and sensitive listener, Susan was irrepressibly flirtatious. We knew we were attracted to each other. But we’d been friends for years without having sex, and I hadn’t wanted to risk losing the friendship by getting physical. She seemed to feel the same way, though I wasn’t sure. It was possible that she was just waiting for me to make the first move, and if I did, she’d see if she felt like responding. I know if she’d gotten assertive, I would have responded. But she’d never done anything more than play at being provocative, leaving me to decide if I wanted to take the risk and push things further. It was another one of those choices I kept running up against, and in this case it seemed safest to keep things friendly.

The coffee shop we were sitting in was new to me, and I wasn’t used to the kinds of people who seemed to be regulars there. A teenage guy sitting two tables away looked like his brain was sitting on top of his head. In back of him was a tall blonde woman with a ladybug moving slowly across her forehead. Right beside her was a man with a monocle whose hands were made of asparagus. I thought of pointing this out—subtly of course, so I didn’t embarrass the other customers—but Susan looked so eager to hear what I had to say that I quickly recounted the past two nights in the Dream Lab.

She said: This is really strange. Just now, while you were talking, I remembered this dream I had last night where the President shot himself in a laundromat, and the sound of the gun
somehow forced the scene to change, and I was in a restaurant very much like this one, talking to someone very much like you, when suddenly the sound of my voice dropped out, even though my lips kept moving, and in the next booth was a guy with a huge ladybug on his forehead, and a woman with a monocle whose hands were made of—

Her lips kept moving as if she were still talking. But her voice was gone. All the other sounds in the coffee shop continued. But her voice was gone for maybe fifteen seconds. Then it came back.

She said: Just now, while you were talking, I remembered this dream I had last night where the President shot himself in a laundromat, and the sound of the gun somehow forced the scene to change, and I was in a restaurant very much like this one, talking to someone very much like you, when suddenly—

Her voice dropped out again. I took her hand and started laughing. She didn’t seem to like the physical contact, even though we often touched each other in a friendly way.

I said: Susan, what’s going on? It’s like you just pressed the PAUSE and REPLAY buttons on a tape recorder.

She said: What?

I was afraid I might have made her mad by comparing her to a machine, so I said: Just now, while you were talking, I remembered this dream about being in a luncheonette at half past one in the morning. It occurred to me that the only other customer, a woman sitting three red swivel stools away, was trying to stop herself from making seductive eye contact with me, so I started to say something to her—something harmless just to break the ice—when the guy working the counter looked at me sternly, like I was being a bad boy or something. His angry face was big and red, and he pointed at something outside. But just as I spun around in my seat and looked out at the dark street, I woke up.

She pulled her hand away and looked offended. Ten very awkward seconds passed in silence. I felt like a blimp collapsing in flames above a cardboard ocean. Then she said: So why don’t
you get on the phone and call Natasha? I’m sure you’ll find that she’s just picked another picture from the box, Edward Hopper’s Night Hawks.

I said: That’s what you got from my dream?
She said: It’s ob-vious.

I always hate it when people tell me something is obvious. They generally say it with contempt. They might as well just tell me I’m an idiot. And that’s precisely the problem. Sometimes, I am an idiot. In tense or unexpected situations, I often say stupid things, and the fact that I never know when I’m going to say them makes it hard for me to socialize with people who want consistently intelligent conversation. The wonderful thing about Natasha was that she didn’t seem to mind when anxiety led me to put my foot in my mouth. Susan had always been like that too. But now she seemed annoyed, perhaps because I’d held her hand in a way she didn’t like.

I wasn’t sure what to say. Susan just sat there with a blank look on her face. Normally I would have tried to say something to fill the silence. But something told me to leave the silence alone, and that if I said nothing, important things would be revealed. So I tried to return her expression.

She said: Why are you trying to copy my facial expression?
I said: I’m not.

She said: Yes you are. And you’re not doing a very good job. If you really want to replicate the way I look right now, you’ve got to strip your face of all emotion, and the only way to do that is by draining your whole body of any feeling whatsoever.
I said: Why would I want to do that?
She said: I don’t know. I didn’t ask you to. You’re the one who’s trying to look like me.
I said: I can’t help it. It seems like the only safe thing to do.
She said: Why does everything have to be safe? Nothing is ever safe, so why bother?
I said: I guess you’re right. Okay, I’ll take a big risk, right here and now, without any fancy words and without any other
techniques of evasion. Here's the all-too-dangerous truth: I always get the feeling you like flirting with me, and I certainly like flirting with you. I'm pretty sure both of us want more, but we're nervous about making the first move. That's the way it's always been for us, and we've accepted it as part of our friendship. So when you pulled your hand away a few minutes ago, I was upset because I thought you liked it when I touched you in a vaguely erotic but non-threatening way. Was I mistaken?

She said: Yes and no.

Every once in a while I can get myself to act like a tough guy in a gangster movie. I took a deep breath and said: Sorry, Susan. That won't do. It's got to be one or the other. Yes OR no.

The OR floated awkwardly between us, getting bigger by the second. Soon it was so big that it went beyond the boundaries of the coffee shop, and might well have gone beyond the boundaries of the universe, were such a thing possible. The R collapsed, and when I looked through the O, all I could see was a larger O, and when I looked through that, an even larger one, and so on, until the zero contained more space than I could see or even imagine, more space than anyone anywhere at any time could imagine, even if he or she had been meditating every day for years. I cleared my throat, as if that might rectify the situation, as if the situation called for instant rectification, as if I'd ever been able to rectify anything. It occurred to me that modern science recognizes only those objects that can be approached by scientific methods of observation, analysis, and conceptual representation. It eliminates everything else. But if an infinite number of divisions can be made within the space of an inch on a ruler, and twice as many can be made between two inches on a ruler, then infinity comes in different sizes, and what seems infinite may actually be much smaller than it seems. In other words, to formulate a meaningful definition of meaning, we need to think about what meaning might be in nonhuman communication systems, so that we can see our subjective experience of meaning as a particular case of something more general. Of course, the transition from where we are to
where we’re going is ruled by a few chords that play over and over again, approaching from all directions, making the very notion of a direction problematic. The medium triggers a change in the state of the system, and the system triggers a change in the state of the medium. The adaptive connection between a system and its medium is always the result of a complex history of interactions, like splitting open a word and finding the very same word inside, removing sheets from a bed and finding no bed underneath, or waking up and finding a dirty fishbowl where your head should be, an uncooked hot dog smeared with mustard stuck between your legs.

Susan said: Okay, you win. Meet me tonight at midnight at the S&M Cafe. I’ll introduce you to a special friend of mine.
I said: The S&M Cafe? Is that what I think it is?
She said: Yeah.
I said: Where is it?
She said: The southwest corner of Twenty-third and Broadway. It’s a fun place, if you like that sort of thing.
I said: I like it in my head, but my fantasies are private. I don’t share them with anyone.
She said: It doesn’t make any difference. My friend works there, and she gets off at midnight. From there we’ll go to her loft in Hell’s Kitchen.
I said: Why don’t we just go straight to her loft.
She said: This is the way she insists on doing it. I’ve never asked why.
I said: And what happens when we get to her apartment?
She said: I’d rather not say.
I said: You’re being rather mysterious, aren’t you? What sort of game is this?
She said: Call it a game if you like. I just thought my friend could throw some light on your situation. In fact, I know she could. But if you’re not up for it—
I wasn’t up for it at all, but I said I was. I like to give people the impression that I’m spontaneous, adventurous, though nothing
could be farther from the truth. My true goal is to find a pattern of
activities I enjoy and carefully sustain it, making sure nothing
interferes with my ritual of comfort, trying out new things only in
extreme situations. But something about the tension of the
moment led me to call it an extreme situation, even if ten years
later I might look back on it with amusement, or might not
remember it at all, or might remember it incorrectly, getting some
of the details wrong or getting all of the details wrong, as if I’d
been in Cincinnati with a woman named Loretta, walking through
an amusement park beside the Ohio River, going into a tent that
featured a twelve-year-old clairvoyant, a girl with long red hair, a
pale blue stone on a table in front of her. The stone began to glow.
Slowly the tent became transparent, revealing dense vegetation,
huts on a cliff looking out on a raging sea, disembodied voices
incorrectly describing the scene, depicting the sea as a dingy
laundromat in downtown Pittsburgh. Someone fired a gun. I
heard a scream. The girl collapsed in her chair, blood spurting out
of her neck and spreading quickly over the table. A short man
wearing a blue tuxedo grabbed the stone and ran outside. The rest
of us sat there looking around in fear, avoiding each other’s eyes.
Loretta got up and tried to speak to the crowd, but nothing came
out of her mouth. Someone turned a radio on outside, a weather
forecast, a carefully modulated voice predicting a tornado.

On my way to the S&M Cafe that night, I was anxious. Part
of my tension came from the city itself, from Times Square and its
neon bombardment, the huge obnoxious ads that critics like to call
artistic. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Because of these
ads and billions of others like them, the world is far worse than it
might otherwise be. We’ve become a nation of shitheads, and
though it’s wrong to blame it all on Madison Avenue, it’s not
wrong to put maybe sixty percent of the blame on Madison
Avenue, and of course on the economic system it sustains.

But aside from this, I was nervous because I figured there
would be all sorts of wild things going on at the S&M Cafe, people
chaining each other up, spanking and beating each other, and I
always hate it when I feel I have to act like I’m driven by bizarre libidinous urges. I’m not. Yes, I grew up in the sixties, did drugs on a regular basis, had long hair, played psychedelic music, made speeches against the Vietnam War, but I still don’t always feel comfortable around supposedly radical behavior. I’m pleased that people today can do almost anything they want, but I resist the assumption that in order to be certified as a liberated person, I have to do anything I want, even if I don’t want to.

Susan knew I felt this way, and she and her friend were nice enough to meet me outside, where I didn’t have to prove how cool I was. I was expecting Susan’s friend to look just like Susan, and when she didn’t, I was surprised and disappointed, unable to get a clear sense of what she looked like, even as I was looking at her. In the thirty blocks we walked, passing back through the neon fascism of Times Square, I managed to deduce that she called herself Alexandra, but everyone else called her Pam, and her legal name was Heidi. Beyond that, most of what she said bounced off my forehead, landing with a light splash in curbside puddles. Her loft was a fifth-floor walk-up, a run-down place, which didn’t surprise me, given the small salary she most likely made at the S&M Cafe. She seemed to know exactly why I was there, even though Susan had assured me that she wouldn’t give Pam any information about me. She told me to sit down on her bed, which was nothing more than a mattress. She sat facing me in a blue canvas deck chair, and told Susan to come back in exactly twenty-eight minutes.

My first impulse was to tell her how much I liked her place. I really did like it a lot, but I doubted she would believe me, so I didn’t say anything. I was about to tell myself how strange it was to be there, how much it was like being in a postmodern or perhaps neo-Gothic work of fiction. But the truth was that it didn’t feel strange at all, though maybe the fact that it didn’t feel strange was strange enough in itself. The word strange has become obsolete. It’s been used to describe so many fake situations, and used so many times in response to situations that aren’t strange at all, that
it's become boring, offensively vague, like a man with a brain on top of his head, a duck with a plastic bill, an incense-bearing tree, or caves of ice in a wax museum. And if we apply the same standards to the word *boring*—especially to the offensively vague way it's used in the sentence above—it quickly caves in, leaving only a small pile of black sand on a white linoleum floor. A similar fate awaits maybe ninety percent of the words in our language.

Pam said: The first thing you need to know is that I'm not interested in telling the future. My specialty is the present. Right now, you're in a loft very much like this one, talking to a woman very much like me. You're not immediately present to yourself, but neither is anyone else. Your job is to accustom yourself to this fundamental condition.

I said: Do you say this to everyone who comes up here?
She said: That's right. Everyone's more or less the same, at least on the level I'm addressing.
I said: I guess you're right.
She said: You're listening to words very much like the ones I'm speaking right now, and you're thinking that being here might explain the Dream Lab and your weird conversation with Susan this morning. You're also thinking that what I'm saying will help you to begin to make decisions without so much anxiety. Like most people, you're waiting for things to make sense. But that's not what things make. Things don't make anything. They just are. If you really want things to make sense, you'll have to make it yourself, knowing it may not correspond to what it's making sense of. Several years ago, I was—
I said: How do you know all these things about me if Susan told you nothing.
She said: I don't know how I know. I never know what I'm going to say in advance, and I don't remember anything later. I just start talking and the right things always come out. Several years ago, I was working as a clerk at the post office in Brooklyn Heights. Someone came to the counter to buy stamps. I was just
about to say thank you and have a good day, when she told me that
if certain events had not taken place twenty-six hundred years ago,
around the time of the Greek mathematician Pythagoras, history
would have developed in a radically different way. There would
have been no such thing as cause and effect.

I didn’t know what to say. I could have said at least five
different things: 1) That’s odd. 2) I know exactly what you mean.
3) What happened after that? 4) What happened around the time of
the Greek mathematician Pythagoras? 5) I used to live in Brooklyn
Heights. Any of these would have been a perfectly acceptable
response. But I couldn’t decide which one to say, and the space of
my indecision became a balustrade of angels, a pyramid less than
half the size of a cell of blue-green algae, a long prepositional
phrase in which the word laws became the word loss, a man of
water shaking hands with a man of fire in Paris, subtracting the
result from the same thing happening in Detroit.

She said: You’re trapped right now in a painful sense of
uncertainty that’s firmly established itself as part of your identity.
Choose any one of the five responses. All of them are appropriate.

I opened my mouth but nothing came out. It occurred to me
that my voice was trapped in silence, perhaps the very same silence
that cut off Susan’s voice in the coffee shop that morning, as if
there were too many words in the world and silence was getting
revenge. Pam leaned over and stuck her tongue in my mouth, ran
it along my upper teeth. It felt like it might be a snake. I
wondered if and when it would bite. She sat back and said:
Choose any one of the five responses. All of them are appropriate.

I said: I know exactly what you mean.
She said: See? That wasn’t difficult.
I said: I used to live in Brooklyn Heights.
She said: See? That wasn’t difficult.
I said: What did this Pythagoras-woman look like?
She said: I don’t remember. All I know is that later, when I
tried to recall her face, the only face I could think of was my own,
and I’ve never had a clear sense of what I look like, even when I
see my face in a mirror. People say my lips are too thick and my nose is too long. But what do they know? Their concept of beauty is the product of mass conditioning.

The doorbell rang and Susan walked in. I expected her to look just like Pam, and when she didn’t I was surprised and disappointed, unable to get a clear sense of what she looked like, even as I was looking at her, even though we’d been friends for years and I’d always liked her face. She wasn’t what most men are trained to call beautiful. Her lips were too thick and her nose was too long, though as soon as I caught myself thinking this way, I quickly wondered what her lips and nose could possibly be too thick and long for, emphasis on FOR, and the word fell apart—the F caved in, and the OR floated awkwardly between us, getting bigger by the second. Soon it was so big that it went beyond the boundaries of Pam’s apartment, and might well have gone beyond the boundaries of the universe, suggesting the sound of small bones getting snapped, suggesting a place where each beginning starts and ends in the middle, which means that to formulate a meaningful definition of meaning, we need to think about what meaning might be in nonhuman communication systems, keeping in mind that the adaptive connection between a system and its medium is always the result of a complex history of interactions, like an endless ellipsis replacing an empty center, like plans for the human mind getting lost in a cluttered celestial workshop, like a book in which the protagonist is obsessed with picking meat from his teeth, or an ancient academy getting attacked by a thousand playful chimpanzees, books and filing cabinets joyfully thrown through stained-glass windows, chairs and desks and blackboards getting smashed, fountain pens consumed, huge oak doors torn down, corridors filled with torn diplomas.

We caught a cab outside Pam’s building. We sat close to each other. She leaned over and put her tongue in my ear. For a split second I thought the range of my hearing had been expanded, that I could hear ancestral voices prophesying war. The she leaned back and looked straight ahead, as if nothing had happened. I
didn’t know what to do. Should I ask what her action meant, or should I just do the same thing or should I do something similar though not exactly the same? I decided on the third option, but wasn’t sure what that similar thing should be. I could have done five different things: 1) Put my hand on her thigh. 2) Kissed her jugular vein. 3) Turned her face toward me gently and kissed her lightly on the mouth. 4) Put my head on her shoulder. 5) Given her a Wet Willy. I knew she hated Wet Willies, so I quickly ruled that out. Rather than face the tension of weighing the other four choices, I grabbed her hand and kissed it, then put it down between my legs. At first I thought her hand had become a hot dog smeared with mustard. But when I looked down I could see that this wasn’t the case. Nothing happened. She kept staring straight ahead with no expression, the very same lack of expression I’d worked on replicating that morning. I kept her hand between my legs but wasn’t sure what to do next. I looked at the cabbie’s eyes in the rear-view mirror. I looked outside at the city lights, then back at the rear-view mirror, back at the city lights and then again at the rear-view mirror. I knew if I didn’t stop doing the same thing over and over again, I might get stuck in a cycle of compulsive repetition, and something that had happened before might happen again. I’ve always been drawn to the notion that in certain extreme situations temporal sequence gets disturbed, and either time forgets to flow in a linear fashion, coming to a complete stop or moving in sudden fits and starts, or things can fall out of alignment, out of sequence, and events that have happened before can happen again, though some of the details may be slightly different.

Susan kept staring straight ahead with no expression. Something about the tension of the moment led me to call it an extreme situation, even if ten years later I might look back on it with amusement, or might not remember it at all, or might remember it incorrectly, getting some of the details wrong or getting all the details wrong, as if I’d been in Cincinnati with a woman named Loretta, walking through an amusement park beside the Ohio River, going into a tent that featured a twelve-year-old
clairvoyant, a girl with long black hair, a pale green stone on a table in front of her. The stone began to glow, emitting disembodied voices, depicting the sea as a dingy laundromat in downtown Memphis. Slowly the walls of the tent became the inner walls of the pale green stone. I heard a scream, the sound of a train receding in the distance. The girl collapsed in her chair. Everyone saw that she was fake, made of cloth and stuffed with crumpled film reviews and comics. A short man wearing a black tuxedo grabbed the stone and tried to get out, but the pale green walls of stone allowed no escape. I started laughing. Loretta got up and tried to speak to the crowd but nothing came out of her mouth. Someone in the back turned a radio on, a weather forecast, a very sexy voice predicting heavy wind and freezing rain, another sexy voice predicting a night of theatrical pain, another sexy voice repeating verbatim what the first one said, but stopping half-way through the relative clause at the end of the sentence.

I dropped Susan off at her apartment. Then I walked down to the luncheonette on the corner and had a hot dog and a cup of coffee. The guy behind the counter burped and mopped his big red face with a dirty napkin, then looked at me if I’d been talking too much. I always hate it when people look at me that way, especially since I’m a fairly quiet guy. In fact, I’m the kind of guy people who talk too much love to talk too much to, since I won’t fight them for my fifty percent of the interactional space. With all the words these people produce, and all the words produced by mass information, it’s no surprise that increasingly large portions of the world’s population have shut their ears to the outside world, at least on a part-time basis, a condition that becomes especially embarrassing when your need for silence occurs about half way through a sentence, and the speaker’s lips keep moving even though you’re blocking out the sound. I think it makes sense to think of a conversation as a game of ping pong, people verbally knocking a topic back and forth, without keeping score. But I’ve met lots of people who seem to think a conversation is like talking into a tape recorder, cramming in as much as they can before the
tape runs out, then playing it back and hearing their words all over again, as if for the first time, delighted by their brilliance.

I thought I should tell the guy behind the counter that he wasn’t being fair to me at all, but as I think I said before, it’s very rare that I can get myself to speak openly to people when I’m angry. I always imagine my voice dropping out in the middle of what I’m saying, even though I keep forming the words with my lips. So I thought I better just sit there and act like nothing was wrong, which may well have been the case—the guy behind the counter may have meant no disrespect. Though words can be deceiving, even when we don’t mean them to be, silence can also be deceiving, especially when it speaks through what we see in other people’s eyes, an observation that became even more important when it occurred to me that the only other customer, a woman sitting three red swivel stools away, was trying to stop herself from making seductive eye contact with me. So I thought I might say something to her—something harmless just to break the ice—when the counterman pointed at something outside. I spun around in my seat and looked out at the street. But all I could see was my own scared face reflected in the window.

When I got home there were five messages from Natasha on my phone machine, apologies for not keeping her promise to call back after lunch. I felt neutral about the first apology, hated the next one, but liked apology number three a great deal—until the machine got weird and cut her off. I pressed the PAUSE button and sat on my battered sofa trying to figure out what the rest of the message might have been. But the phrases I proposed to myself were out of sync with Natasha’s voice, acting like people dressing up for a Halloween party they were planning to attend only because their absence might be offensive. So I left the message unfinished and started the tape again, responding sympathetically to the last two apologies, which sounded like she was nervous about talking to a machine. It’s funny how some people still don’t like phone machines. I think they’re great. For ninety-five percent of the calls I make, I’d rather just leave a message. Of course, now
that most people have e-mail accounts, I almost never make phone
calls. Some people would no doubt say I've become an
automaton. They'd be about eighty percent correct. But I'm not as
bad as those people who live on their cell-phones, climbing
magnificent peaks in national parks while tensely telling their
brokers to buy and sell stocks and bonds and futures.

In any case, her messages said that the experiment had been a
contrivance, a secret way of getting to know me better. The real
reason she'd taken me to the Dream Lab was that she'd fallen in
love with me. She wanted us to have dinner the following night.
This left me with two decisions: whether to meet her for dinner,
and whether to get involved. Making one decision would have
been hard enough. Making two felt overwhelming. I felt like a
temperamental musician going deaf in the act of composing a
revolutionary symphony.

I pulled the shades, very slowly sipped half a bottle of Wild
Turkey, put on a scratchy Robert Johnson record I listen to only on
special occasions, turned the volume way down low. I thought of
at least five paintings the scene in my room reminded me of. Then
I stretched out on my long brown battered sofa. My hand reached
in through a rip in a cushion and found my secret gun. I knew just
where it was. I knew the time was right, absolutely. I got my
thoughts in order, knowing precisely where they had to be. I held
the gun to my skull and pulled the trigger. The bullet went in one
ear and out the other, flashing through the empty space I'd made
by dividing my thoughts, sending half to the northern side of my
brain and half to the south. With nothing obstructing its path, the
bullet had no effect whatsoever.
This edition is limited to 60 copies.

This is Number 40.

[Signature]