

# 10

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## In Search of the Dreamer

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**S**EX is at the root of everything. Isn't that what you fellows always say? Well, in my case you may be right. Take a look at this. It'll show you some interesting connections between my migraines and my sex life."

Drawing a thick scroll from his briefcase, Marvin asked me to hold one end, and carefully unrolled a three-foot chart upon which was meticulously recorded his every migraine headache and every sexual experience of the past four months. One glance revealed the complexity of the diagram. Every migraine, its intensity, duration, and treatment was coded in blue. Every sexual rush, colored red, was reduced to a five-point scale according to Marvin's performance: premature ejaculations were separately coded, as was impotence—with a distinction made between inability to sustain an erection and inability to have one.

It was too much to absorb in a glance. "That's an elaborate piece of work," I said. "It must have taken you days."

"I liked doing it. I'm good at it. People forget that we accountants have graphic skills that are never used in tax work. Here, look at the month of July: four migraines and each one preceded by either impotence or a grade-one or -two sexual performance."

I watched Marvin's finger point to the blips of migraine and impo-

tence. He was right: the correlation was impressive, but I was growing edgy. My timing had been thrown off. We had only just begun our first session, and there was much more I wanted to know before I would feel ready to examine Marvin's chart. But he pressed it before me so forcefully that I had no option other than to watch his stubby finger trace out the love leavings of last July.

Marvin at sixty-four had suddenly, six months ago, for the first time in his life, developed disabling migraine headaches. He had consulted a neurologist, who had been unsuccessful in controlling Marvin's headaches and then referred him to me.

I had seen Marvin for the first time only a few minutes earlier when I went out to my waiting room to fetch him. He was sitting there patiently—a short, chubby, bald man with a glistening pate and owl eyes which never blinked as they peered through oversized, gleaming chrome spectacles.

I was soon to learn that Marvin was particularly interested in spectacles. After shaking hands with me, his first words, while accompanying me down the hall to my office, were to compliment me on my frames and to ask me their make. I believe I fell from grace when I confessed ignorance of the manufacturer's name; things grew even more awkward when I removed my glasses to read the brand name on the stem and found that, without my glasses, I could not read it. It did not take me long to realize that, since my other glasses were now resting at home, there was no way that I could give Marvin the trivial information he desired, so I held out my spectacles for him to read the label. Alas, he, too, was farsighted, and more of our first minutes together was consumed by his switching to his reading glasses.

And now, a few minutes later, before I could proceed to interview him in my customary way, I found myself surrounded by Marvin's meticulous red-and-blue-penciled chart. No, we were not off to a good start. To compound the problem, I had just had a poignant but exhausting session with an elderly, distraught widow whose purse had recently been stolen. Part of my attention was still with her, and I had to spur myself to give Marvin the attention he deserved.

Having received only a brief consultation note from the neurologist, I knew practically nothing about Marvin and began the hour, after we

## LOVE'S EXECUTIONER

completed the opening eyeglass ritual, by asking "What ails?" That was when he volunteered that "you fellows" think "sex is at the root of everything."

I rolled up the chart, told Marvin I'd like to study it in detail later, and attempted to restore some rhythm to the session by asking him to tell me the whole story of his illness from the beginning.

He told me that about six months ago he, for the first time in his life, began suffering from headaches. The symptoms were those of classical migraine: a premonitory visual aura (flashing lights) and a unilateral distribution of excruciating pain which incapacitated him for hours and often necessitated bedrest in a darkened room.

"And you say you have good reason to believe that your sexual performance touches off the migraine?"

"You may think it strange—for a man of my age and position—but you can't dispute the facts. There's the proof!" He pointed to the scroll now resting quietly on my desk. "Every migraine of the last four months was preceded within twenty-four hours by a sexual failure."

Marvin spoke in a deliberate, pedantic manner. Obviously he had rehearsed this material beforehand.

"For the last year I have been having violent mood swings. I pass quickly from feeling good to feeling that it's the end of the world. Now don't jump to conclusions." Here he shook his finger at me for greater emphasis. "When I say I feel good, I do *not* mean I'm manic—I've been down that road with the neurologists who tried to treat me for manic-depressive disease with lithium—didn't do a thing except screw up my kidneys. I can see why docs get sued. Have you ever seen a case of manic-depression starting at sixty-four? Do you think I should have gotten lithium?"

His questions jarred me. They were distracting and I didn't know how to answer them. Was he suing his neurologist? I didn't want to get involved with that. Too many things to deal with. I made an appeal to efficiency.

"I'd be glad to come back to these questions later, but we can make best use of our time today if we first hear your whole clinical story straight through."

"Right you are! Let's stay on track. So, as I was saying, I flip back and

forth from feeling good to feeling anxious and depressed—both together—and it is *always* in the depressed states that the headaches occur. I never had one till six months ago.”

“And the link between sex and depression?”

“I was getting to that——”

Careful, I thought. My impatience is showing. It's clear he's going to tell it his way, not mine. For Chrissakes stop pushing him!

“Well—this is the part you'll find hard to believe—for the last twelve months my moods have been totally controlled by sex. If I have good sex with my wife, the world seems bright. If not, bingo! Depression and headaches!”

“Tell me about your depressions. What are they like?”

“Like an ordinary depression. I'm down.”

“Say some more.”

“What's to say? Everything looks black.”

“What do you think about in the depressions?”

“Nothing. That's the problem. Isn't that what depression is all about?”

“Sometimes when people get depressed, certain thoughts circle around in their mind.”

“I keep knocking myself.”

“How?”

“I start to feel that I will always fail in sex, that my life as a man is over. Once the depression sets in, I am bound to have a migraine within the next twenty-four hours. Other doctors have told me that I am in a vicious circle. Let's see, how does it work? When I'm depressed I get impotent, and then because I'm impotent I get more depressed. Yep, that's it. But knowing that doesn't stop it, doesn't break the vicious circle.”

“What does break it?”

“You'd think, after six months, I'd know the answer. I'm pretty observant, always have been. That's what good accountants get paid for. But I'm not sure. One day I have good sex, and everything's all right again. Why that day and not another day? I haven't a clue.”

And so the hour went. Marvin's commentary was precise but stingy, slightly abrasive, and larded with clichés, questions, and the comments of other doctors. He remained remarkably clinical. Although he

## LOVE'S EXECUTIONER

brought up details of his sexual life, he expressed no embarrassment, self-consciousness, or, for that matter, any deeper feelings.

At one point I tried to get beneath the forced "hale fellow" heartiness.

"Marvin, it must not be easy for you to talk about intimate aspects of your life to a stranger. You mentioned you had never talked to a psychiatrist before."

"It's not a matter of things being intimate, it's more to do with psychiatry—I don't believe in psychiatrists."

"You don't believe we exist?" A stupid attempt at a feeble joke, but Marvin did not note my tongue in cheek.

"No, no, it's not that. It's that I don't have faith in them. My wife, Phyllis, doesn't either. We've known two couples with marital problems who saw psychiatrists, and both ended up in the divorce court. You can't blame me for being on guard, can you?"

By the end of the hour, I was not yet able to make a recommendation and scheduled a second consultation hour. We shook hands, and as he left my office I became aware that I was glad to see him go. I was sorry I had to see him again.

I was irritated with Marvin. But why? Was it his superficiality, his needling, his wagging his finger at me, his "you fellows" tone? Was it his innuendoes about suing his neurologist—and trying to draw me into it? Was it that he was so controlling? He took over the hour: first with that silly business of the glasses, and then with his determination to stick that chart in my hands whether I wanted it or not. I thought of tearing that chart to shreds and enjoying every moment of it.

But so much irritation? So Marvin disrupted the pace of the hour. So what? He was up front, he told me exactly what was troubling him as best he could. He had worked hard according to his conception of psychiatry. His chart was, after all, useful. I would have been pleased with it had it been my idea. Perhaps it was more my problem than his? Had I grown so stodgy, so old? Was I so rigid, in such a rut that if the first hour didn't proceed just the way I wished it to, I grew cranky and stomped my feet?

Driving home that evening I thought more about him, the two Marvins—Marvin the man, Marvin the idea. It was the flesh-and-blood Marvin who was irritating and uninteresting. But Marvin the *project* was intriguing. Think of that extraordinary story: for the first time in his life, a

stable, if prosaic, previously healthy sixty-four-year-old man who has been having sex with the same woman for forty-one years suddenly becomes exquisitely sensitive to his sexual performance. His entire well-being soon becomes hostage to sexual functioning. The event is *severe* (his migraines are exceptionally disabling); it is *unexpected* (sex never presented any unusual problems previously); and it is *sudden* (it erupted in full force precisely six months ago).

Six months ago! Obviously there lay the key and I began the second session by exploring the events of six months ago. What changes in his life had occurred then?

"Nothing of significance," Marvin said.

"Impossible," I insisted, and posed the same question many different ways. I finally learned that six months ago Marvin had made the decision to retire and sell his accountancy firm. The information emerged slowly, not because he was unwilling to tell me about retirement, but because he attached little importance to the event.

I felt otherwise. The markers of one's life stages are *always* significant, and few markers more so than retirement. How is it possible for retirement *not* to evoke deep feelings about the passage and passing of life, about the meaning and significance of one's entire life project? For those who look inward, retirement is a time of life review, of summing up, a time of proliferating awareness of finitude and approaching death.

Not so for Marvin.

"Problems about retiring? You've got to be kidding. This is what I've been working for—so I *can* retire."

"Will you find yourself missing anything about your work?"

"Only the headaches. And I guess you can say I've found a way to take them with me! The migraines, I mean." Marvin grinned, obviously pleased with himself for having stumbled upon a joke. "Seriously, I've been tired and bored with my work for years. What do you think I'll miss—the new tax forms?"

"Sometimes retirement stirs up important feelings because it is such an important milestone in life. It reminds us of life passages. You've been working for how long? Forty-five years? And now you suddenly stop, you pass on to a new stage. When I retire, I think it will bring home to me more clearly than I've ever known that life has a beginning and an

## LOVE'S EXECUTIONER

end, that I've been slowly passing from one point to another, and that I am now approaching the end."

"My work is about money. That's the name of the game. What retirement really means is that I've made so much money I don't need to make any more. What's the point of it? I can live on my interest very comfortably."

"But, Marvin, what will it *mean* not to work again? All your life you've worked. You've gotten your meaning out of working. I've a hunch there's something scary about giving it up."

"Who needs it? Now, some of my associates are killing themselves piling up enough money so they can live on their interest's interest. That's what I call crazy—they should see a psychiatrist."

*Vorbeireden, vorbeireden:* we talked past each other, past each other. Again and again I invited Marvin to look within, to adopt, even for a moment, a cosmic perspective, to identify the deeper concerns of his existence—his sense of finitude, of aging and decline, his fear of death, his source of life purpose. But we talked past each other. He ignored me, misunderstood me. He seemed pasted to the surface of things.

Weary of traveling alone on these little subterranean excursions, I decided to stay closer to Marvin's concerns. We talked about work. I learned that, when he was very young, his parents and some teachers had considered him a math prodigy; at the age of eight, he had auditioned, unsuccessfully, for the "Quiz Kids" radio show. But he never lived up to that early billing.

I thought he sighed when he said this, and asked, "That must have been a big wound for you. How well did it heal?"

He suggested that perhaps I was too young to appreciate how many eight-year-old boys auditioned unsuccessfully for the "Quiz Kids."

"Feelings don't always follow rational rules. In fact, usually they don't."

"If I would have given in to feelings every time I was hurt, I'd never have gotten anywhere."

"I notice that it is very hard for you to talk about wounds."

"I was one of hundreds. It was no big deal."

"I notice, too, that whenever I try to move closer to you, you let me know you don't need anything."

"I'm here for help. I'll answer all your questions."

It was clear that a direct appeal would be of no value. It was going to take Marvin a long time to share his vulnerability. I retreated to fact gathering. Marvin grew up in New York, the child of impoverished first-generation Jewish parents. He majored in mathematics at a small city college and briefly considered graduate school. But he was impatient to get married—he had dated Phyllis since he was fifteen—and, since he had no financial resources, decided to become a high school teacher.

After six years of teaching trigonometry, Marvin felt stuck. He arrived at the conclusion that getting rich was what life was all about. The idea of thirty-five more years of slender high-school-teacher paychecks was unbearable. He was certain the decision to teach school had been a serious mistake and, at the age of thirty, set about rectifying it. After a crash accountancy course, he said goodbye to his students and colleagues and opened an accounting firm, which ultimately proved to be highly lucrative. With wise investments in California real estate, he had become a wealthy man.

"That brings us up to now, Marvin. Where do you go in life from here?"

"Well, as I said, there's no point in accumulating any more money. I have no children"—here his voice turned gray—"no poor relatives, no desires to give it to good causes."

"You sounded sad when you talked about not having children."

"That's past history. I was disappointed then, but that was a long time ago, thirty-five years ago. I have a lot of plans. I want to travel. I want to add to my collections—maybe they're my substitute for children—stamps, political campaign buttons, old baseball uniforms, and *Reader's Digests*."

Next, I explored Marvin's relationship with his wife which he insisted was extremely harmonious. "After forty-one years I still feel my wife is a great lady. I don't like being away from her, even for one night. In fact, I feel warm inside when I see her at the end of the day. All my tension disappears. Perhaps you could say that she's my Valium."

According to Marvin, their sex life had been wonderful until six months ago: despite forty-one years, it seemed to have retained luster and passion. When Marvin's periodic impotence began, Phyllis had at first



## LOVE'S EXECUTIONER

shown great understanding and patience but, during the last couple of months, had become irritable. Only a couple of weeks ago, she had grumbled that she was tired of "being had"—that is, being sexually aroused and then left unsatisfied.

Marvin gave much weight to Phyllis's feelings and was deeply troubled when he thought he had displeased her. He brooded for days after an episode of impotence and was entirely dependent upon her to regain his equilibrium: sometimes she brought him around simply by reassuring him that she still found him virile, but generally he required some physical comforting. She lathered him in the shower, she shaved him, she massaged him, she took his soft penis into her mouth and held it there gently until it throbbed into life.

I was struck in the second interview, as in the first, by Marvin's lack of wonderment at his own story. Where was his curiosity that his life had changed so dramatically, that his sense of direction, his happiness, even his desire to live was now entirely dictated by whether he could sustain tumescence in his penis?

It was time now to make a recommendation to Marvin about treatment. I did not think that he would be a good candidate for a deep, uncovering type of psychotherapy. There were several reasons. I've always found it difficult to treat someone with so little curiosity. Although it is possible to assist in the unfolding of curiosity, the subtle and lengthy process would be incompatible with Marvin's wish for a brief and efficient treatment. As I thought back over the two hours, I was also aware that he had resisted every one of my invitations to dip deeper into his feelings. He didn't seem to understand, we talked past each other, he had no interest in the inner meaning of events. He also resisted my attempts to engage him more personally and directly: for example, when I had asked him about his wound or pointed out that he ignored any of my attempts to get closer to him.

I was about to offer my formal recommendation that he begin a course of behavioral therapy (an approach based on changing concrete aspects of behavior, especially marital communication and sexual attitudes and practice) when, almost as an afterthought, Marvin mentioned that he had had some dreams during the week.

I had inquired about dreams during the first interview; and, like many

other patients, he replied that, though he dreamed every night, he could not recall the details of a single dream. I had suggested he keep a writing pad by his bed to record dreams, but he seemed so little inner-directed that I doubted he would follow through and I neglected to inquire about them in the second session.

Now he took out his notepad and began to read a series of dreams:

*Phyllis was distraught that she hadn't been good to me. She left to go home. But when I followed her there, she was gone. I was afraid I would find her dead in this large castle on a high mountain. Next, I was trying to get into the window of a room where her body might be. I was on a high narrow ledge. I couldn't go any farther, but it was too narrow to turn around and go back. I was afraid that I'd fall, and then I grew afraid that I'd jump and commit suicide.*

*Phyllis and I were undressing to make love. Wentworth, a partner of mine, who weighs two hundred fifty pounds, was in the room. His mother was outside. We had to blindfold him so we could continue. When I went outside, I didn't know what to say to his mother about why we blindfolded him.*

*There was a gypsy camp forming right in the front lobby of my office. All of them were filthy dirty—their hands, their clothes, the bags they were carrying. I heard the men whispering and conspiring in a menacing way. I wondered why the authorities would permit them to camp out in the open.*

*The ground under my house was liquefying. I had a giant auger and knew that I would have to drill down sixty-five feet to save the house. I hit a layer of solid rock, and the vibrations woke me up.*

Remarkable dreams! Where had they come from? Could Marvin have possibly dreamed them? I looked up, half expecting to see someone else sitting across from me. But he was still there, patiently awaiting my next question, his eyes blank behind his gleaming spectacles.

We had only a few minutes left. I asked Marvin whether he had any

## LOVE'S EXECUTIONER

associations to any aspect of these dreams. He merely shrugged. They were a mystery to him. I had asked for dreams, and he had given them to me. That was the end of it.

The dreams notwithstanding, I proceeded to recommend a course of marital therapy, perhaps eight to twelve sessions. I suggested several options: to see the two of them myself; to refer them to someone else; or to refer Phyllis to a female therapist for a couple of sessions and then for the four of us—Phyllis, Marvin, I, and her therapist—to meet in conjoint sessions.

Marvin listened attentively to what I said, but his facial expression was so frozen that I had no hint of what he felt. When I asked for his reaction, he became strangely formal and said, "I'll take your suggestions under consideration and let you know my decision."

Was he disappointed? Did he feel rejected? I couldn't be sure. It seemed to me at the time that I had made the right recommendation. Marvin's dysfunction was acute and would respond, I thought, to a brief cognitive-behavioral approach. Furthermore, I was convinced he would not profit from individual therapy. Everything weighed against it: he was too resistant; in the trade language, he had simply too little "psychological mindedness."

Nonetheless, it was with regret that I passed up the opportunity of working in depth with him: the dynamics of his situation fascinated me. I was certain that my first impression had been close to the mark: that his impending retirement had stoked up much fundamental anxiety about finitude, aging, and death, and that he was attempting to cope with this anxiety through sexual mastery. So much was riding on the sexual act that it was overtaxed and, ultimately, overwhelmed.

I believed that Marvin was entirely wrong when he said that sex was at the root of his problems; far from it, sex was just an ineffective means of trying to drain off surges of anxiety springing from more fundamental sources. Sometimes, as Freud first showed us, sexually inspired anxiety is expressed through other devious means. Perhaps just as often the opposite is true: *other anxiety masquerades as sexual anxiety*. The dream about the giant auger could not have been more clear: the ground under Marvin's feet was liquefying (an inspired visual image for groundless-

## *In Search of the Dreamer*

ness), and he was trying to combat that by drilling, with his penis, sixty-five feet (that is, sixty-five years) down!

The other dreams gave evidence of a savage world beneath Marvin's placid exterior—a world seething with death, murder, suicide, anger toward Phyllis, fears of dirty and menacing phantoms erupting from within. The blindfolded man in the room where he and Phyllis were to make love was particularly intriguing. When investigating sexual problems it is always important to ask, Are there more than two people present during lovemaking? The presence of others—phantoms of parents, rivals, other lovers—vastly complicates the sexual act.

No, behavioral therapy was the best choice. It was best to keep the lid of this underworld sealed. The more I thought about it, the more pleased I was that I had restrained my curiosity and had acted selflessly and systematically in the best interests of the patient.

But rationality and precision in psychotherapy are rarely rewarded. A few days later, Marvin called and asked for another appointment. I had expected that Phyllis would accompany him, but he arrived alone, looking anxious and haggard. No opening ceremonies that day. He came right to the point.

"This is a bad day. I feel miserable. But first, I want to say that I appreciate your recommendation last week. To be honest, I'd expected you to advise me to come to see you three or four times a week for the next three or four years. I'd been warned that you psychiatrists did that regardless of the problem. Not that I blame you—after all, you guys are running a business and gotta earn a living.

"Your advice about couples therapy made sense to me. Phyllis and I *do* have some communication problems, more than I really told you about last week. Actually, I understated the case to you. I've had some difficulties with sex—not as bad as now—which caused me to flip back and forth in my moods for twenty years. So I decided to take your advice, but Phyllis will not cooperate. She flat out refuses to see a shrink, a marriage therapist, a sex therapist—anyone. I asked her to come in one time today to talk to you, but she has dug in her heels."

"How come?"

"I'll get to that but, first, there are two other things I want to cover

## LOVE'S EXECUTIONER

today." Marvin stopped. At first I thought it was to catch his breath: he had been racing through his sentences. But he was composing himself. He turned away, blew his nose, and wiped his eyes surreptitiously.

Then he continued. "I'm way down. I had my worst migraine ever this week and had to go to the emergency room night before last for an injection."

"I thought you looked drawn today."

"The headaches are killing me. But to make things worse, I'm not sleeping. Last night I had a nightmare which woke me up about two in the morning, and I kept replaying it all night long. I still can't get it out of my mind."

"Let's go over it."

Marvin started to read the dream in such a mechanical manner that I stopped him and employed the old Fritz Perls device of asking him to begin again and to describe the dream in the present tense, as though he were experiencing it right now. Marvin put aside his notepad and from memory recited:

*The two men are tall, pale, and very gaunt. In a dark meadow they glide along in silence. They are dressed entirely in black. With tall black stovepipe hats, long-tailed coats, black spats and shoes, they resemble Victorian undertakers or temperance workers. Suddenly they come upon a carriage, ebony black, cradling a baby girl swaddled in black gauze. Wordlessly, one of the men begins to push the carriage. After a short distance he stops, walks around to the front, and, with his black cane, which now has a glowing white tip, he leans over, parts the gauze, and methodically inserts the white tip into the baby's vagina.*

I was transfixed by the dream. The stark images took form immediately in my own mind. I looked up in amazement at Marvin, who seemed unmoved and unappreciative of the power of his own creation, and the notion occurred to me that this was not, could not be, *his* dream. A dream like that could not have sprung from *him*: he was merely the medium through whose lips it was expressed. How could I, I wondered, meet the dreamer?

Indeed, Marvin reinforced that whimsical notion. He had no sense of familiarity with the dream and related to it as though it were some alien text. He still experienced fear as he recited it, and shook his head as though he were trying to get the dream's bad taste out of his mouth.

I focused on the anxiety. "Why was the dream a nightmare? Precisely what part of it was frightening?"

"As I think about it *now*, the last thing—putting the cane in the baby's vagina—is the horrible part. Yet *not when I was having the dream*. It was everything else, the silent footsteps, the blackness, the sense of deep foreboding. The whole dream was soaked in fear."

"What feeling was there *in* the dream about the insertion of the cane into the baby's vagina?"

"If anything, that part seemed almost soothing, as though it quieted the dream—or, rather, it tried to. It didn't really do it. None of this makes any sense to me. I've never believed in dreams."

I wanted to linger with the dream but had to return to the needs of the moment. The fact that Phyllis was unwilling to talk to me, even once, to help her husband, who was now *in extremis*, belied Marvin's account of his idyllic, harmonious marriage. I had to proceed with delicacy here because of his fear (which Phyllis obviously shared) that therapists snoop out and fan marital problems, but I had to be certain that she was inexorably opposed to couples therapy. Last week I had wondered if Marvin hadn't felt rejected by me. Perhaps this was a ploy to manipulate me into seeing him in individual therapy. How much of an effort had Marvin really made to persuade Phyllis to participate with him in treatment?

Marvin assured me that she was very set in her ways.

"I told you she doesn't believe in psychiatry, but it goes far beyond that. She won't see *any* doctor, she's not had a GYN exam in fifteen years. It's all I can do to get her into the dentist when she's got a toothache."

Suddenly, when I asked for other examples of Phyllis being set in her ways, some unexpected things came pouring out.

"Well, I might as well tell you the truth. No sense of spending good money and sitting here and lying to you. Phyllis has her problems. The

## LOVE'S EXECUTIONER

main thing is that that she's afraid of going out of the house. That has a name. I've forgotten it."

"Agoraphobia?"

"Yeah, that's it. She's had it for years and years. She rarely leaves the house for any reason unless"—Marvin's voice grew hushed and conspiratorial—"it's to escape another fear."

"What other fear?"

"The fear of people visiting the house!"

He went on to explain that they had not entertained guests at home for years—indeed, for decades. If the situation demanded it—for example, if family members visited from out of town—Phyllis was willing to entertain them in a restaurant: "An inexpensive restaurant, since Phyllis hates to spend money." Money was another reason, Marvin added, that she opposed psychotherapy.

Moreover, Phyllis did not permit Marvin to entertain at home either. A couple of weeks ago, for example, some out-of-town guests called to ask if they could view his collection of political buttons. He said he didn't bother to ask Phyllis: he knew she'd raise hell. If he tried to force the issue, it would be, he said, "a month of Sundays" before he "got laid again." Consequently, as he had done many times before, he spent the better part of a day packing up his whole collection to exhibit it in his office.

This new information made it even more clear that Marvin and Phyllis very much needed marital therapy. But there was a new twist now. Marvin's first dreams had so teemed with primitive iconography that, the week before, I had feared individual therapy might break the seal of this seething unconscious and thought marital therapy would be safer. Now, however, with this evidence of severe pathology in their relationship, I wondered whether couples therapy might also unleash demons.

I reiterated to Marvin that, all things considered, I still believed the treatment of choice to be behaviorally oriented couples therapy. But couples therapy requires a couple, and if Phyllis was not yet willing to come in (as he immediately reaffirmed), I told him I would be willing to see him in a trial of individual therapy.

"But be forewarned, individual treatment will most likely require

many months, even a year or longer, and it will not be a rose garden. Painful thoughts or memories may emerge which will temporarily make you more uncomfortable than you are right now."

Marvin stated that he *had* thought about it during the last few days, and wished to begin immediately. We arranged to meet twice weekly.

It was apparent that both he and I had reservations. Marvin continued to be skeptical about the psychotherapeutic enterprise and showed little interest in an inner journey. He agreed to therapy only because the migraine had brought him to his knees and he had nowhere else to turn. I, for my part, had reservations because I was so pessimistic about treatment: I agreed to work with him because I saw no other viable therapy option.

But I could have referred him to someone else. There was another reason—that voice, the voice of that being who had created those astonishing dreams. Buried somewhere within Marvin's walls was a dreamer tapping out an urgent existential message. I drifted back into the landscape of the dream, back into the silent, dark world of the gaunt men, the black meadow, and the black-gauzed baby girl. I thought of the incandescent tip of the cane and the sexual act that was not sex but merely a futile attempt to dispel the dread.

I wondered, If disguise were unnecessary, if the dreamer could speak to me without guile, what might he say?

"I am old. I am at the end of my life's work. I have no children, and I approach death full of dread. I am choking on darkness. I am choking on the silence of death. I think I know a way. I try to pierce the blackness with my sexual talisman. But it is not enough."

But these were my reflections, not Marvin's. I asked him to associate to the dream, to think about it, and to say anything that came to mind. Nothing came. He merely shook his head.

"You shake your head no almost instantaneously. Try again. Give yourself a chance. Take any part of the dream and let your mind wander with it."

Nothing whatsoever.

"What do you make of the white-tipped cane?"



## LOVE'S EXECUTIONER

Marvin smirked. "I was wondering when you'd get around to that! Didn't I say earlier that you fellows see sex at the root of everything?"

His accusation seemed particularly ironic because, if there were one conviction I had about him, it was that sex was *not* the source of his difficulty.

"But it's *your* dream, Marvin. And your cane. You created it, what do you make of it? And what do you make of the allusions to death—undertakers, silence, blackness, the whole atmosphere of dread and foreboding?"

Given the choice of discussing the dream from the perspective of death or of sex, Marvin, with dispatch, chose the latter.

"Well, you might be interested in something sexual that happened yesterday afternoon—that would be about ten hours before the dream. I was lying in bed still recovering from my migraine. Phyllis came over and gave me a head and neck massage. She then kept on going and massaged my back, then my legs, and then my penis. She undressed me and then took off all her clothes."

This must have been an unusual event: Marvin had told me he initiated sex almost all of the time. I suspected that Phyllis wanted to expiate her guilt for refusing to see a couples therapist.

"At first, I wouldn't respond."

"How come?"

"To tell you the truth, I was scared. I was just getting over my worst migraine, and I was afraid I'd fail and get another migraine. But Phyllis started sucking my cock and got me hard. I've never seen her so persistent. I finally said, 'Let's go, a good lay might be just the thing to get rid of some of this tension.' " Marvin paused.

"Why do you stop?"

"I'm trying to think of her exact words. Anyway, we started making love. I was doing pretty well, but just as I was getting ready to come, Phyllis said, 'There are other reasons for making love than to get rid of tension.' Well, that did it! I lost it in a second."

"Marvin, did you tell Phyllis exactly how you felt about her timing?"

"Her timing is not good—never has been. But I was too riled up to talk. Afraid of what I'd say. If I say the wrong thing, she can make my life hell—turn off the sexual spigot altogether."

"What sort of thing might you say?"

"I'm afraid of my impulses—my murderous and sexual impulses."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you remember, years ago, a news story of a man who killed his wife by pouring acid on her? Horrible thing! Yet I've often thought about that crime. I can understand how fury toward a woman could lead to a crime like that."

Christ! Marvin's unconscious was closer to the surface than I thought. Remembering I hadn't wanted to take the lid off such primitive feelings—at least not this early in treatment—I switched from murder to sex.

"Marvin, you said you're frightened also by your sexual impulses. What do you mean?"

"My sex drive has always been too strong. I've been told that's true of many bald men. A sign of too much male hormone. Is that true?"

I didn't want to encourage the distraction. I shrugged off the question. "Keep going."

"Well, I've had to keep it under rein all my life because Phyllis has got strong ideas about how much sex we will have. And it's always the same—two times a week, some exceptions for birthdays and holidays."

"You've got some feelings about that?"

"Sometimes. But sometimes I think restraints are good. Without them I might run wild."

That was a curious comment. "What does 'running wild' mean? Do you mean extramarital affairs?"

My question shocked Marvin. "I've never been unfaithful to Phyllis! Never will be!"

"Well, what do you mean by 'running wild'?"

Marvin looked stumped. I had a sense he was talking about things he had never discussed before. I was excited for him. It had been one hell of an hour's work. I wanted him to continue, and I just waited.

"I don't know what I mean, but at times I've wondered what it would have been like to have married a woman with a sex drive like mine, a woman who wanted and enjoyed sex as much as me."

"What do you think? Your life would have been very different?"

"Let me back up a minute. I shouldn't have used the word *enjoy* a few minutes ago. Phyllis enjoys sex. It's just that she never seems to *want* it.

## LOVE'S EXECUTIONER

Instead, she . . . what's the word? . . . dispenses it—if I'm good. These are the times when I feel cheated and angry."

Marvin paused. He loosened his collar, rubbed his neck, and rolled his head around. He was getting rid of tension, but I imagined him to be looking around the room, as though to assure himself no one else was listening.

"You look uncomfortable. What are you feeling?"

"Disloyal. Like I shouldn't have been saying these things about Phyllis. Almost like she'll find out about it."

"You give her a lot of power. Sooner or later we're going to need to find out all about that."

Marvin continued to be refreshingly open during the first several weeks of therapy. All in all, he did far better than I had expected. He was cooperative; he relinquished his pugnacious skepticism about psychiatry; he did his homework, came prepared for the sessions, and was determined, as he put it, to get a good return on his investment. His confidence in therapy was boosted by an unexpected early dividend: his migraines mysteriously almost disappeared as soon as he started treatment (although his intense sex-spawned mood swings continued).

During this early phase of therapy, we concentrated on two issues: his marriage and (to a lesser extent, because of his resistance) the implications of his retirement. But I was careful to tread a fine line. I felt like a surgeon preparing the operative field but avoiding any deep dissection. I wanted Marvin to explore these issues, but not too searchingly—not enough to destabilize the precarious marital equilibrium he and Phyllis had established (and thus drive him immediately out of therapy) and not enough to evoke any further death anxiety (and thus ignite further migraines).

At the same time as was I conducting this gentle, somewhat concrete therapy with Marvin, I was also engaged in a fascinating discourse with the dreamer, that vastly enlightened homunculus housed—or, one might say, jailed—by Marvin, who was either ignorant of the dreamer's existence or allowed him to communicate with me in a spirit of benign indifference. While Marvin and I strolled and casually conversed on superficial levels, the dreamer drummed out a constant stream of messages from the depths.

## *In Search of the Dreamer*

Perhaps my discourse with the dreamer was counterproductive. Perhaps I was willing to permit Marvin a slower pace because of my encounter with the dreamer. I remember beginning every hour not with excitement about seeing Marvin, but with anticipation about my next communiqué from the dreamer.

Sometimes the dreams, like the first ones, were frightening expressions of ontological anxiety; sometimes they foreshadowed things to come in therapy; sometimes they were like subtitles to therapy, providing a vivid translation of Marvin's cautious statements to me.

After the first few sessions, I began to receive hopeful messages:

*The teacher in a boarding school was looking around for children who were interested in painting on a large blank canvas. Later I was telling a small, pudgy boy—obviously myself—about it, and he got so excited he began to cry.*

No mistaking that message:

“Marvin senses he's being offered an opportunity by someone—undoubtedly you, his therapist—to start all over again. How exciting—to be given another chance, to paint his life all over again on a blank canvas.”

Other hopeful dreams followed:

*I am at a wedding, and a woman comes up and says she is my long-forgotten daughter. I'm surprised because I didn't know I had a daughter. She's middle-aged and dressed in rich brown colors. We had only a couple of hours to talk. I asked her about the conditions of her life, but she couldn't talk about that. I was sorry when she left, but we agreed to correspond.*

The message:

“Marvin, for the first time, discovers his daughter—the feminine, softer, sensitive side of himself. He's fascinated. The possibilities are

## LOVE'S EXECUTIONER

limitless. He considers establishing ongoing communication. Perhaps he can colonize the newfound islets of himself."

Another dream:

*I look out the window and hear a commotion in the shrubbery. It is a cat chasing a mouse. I feel sorry for the mouse and go outside to it. What I find are two baby kittens who have not yet opened their eyes. I run to tell Phyllis about it because she's so fond of kittens.*

The message:

"Marvin understands, he really understands, that his eyes have been closed, and that he is finally preparing to open them. He is excited for Phyllis, who is also about to open her eyes. *But be careful, he suspects you of playing a cat-and-mouse game.*"

Soon I received more warnings:

*Phyllis and I are having dinner in a ramshackle restaurant. The service is very poor. The waiter is never there when you want him. Phyllis tells him he is dirty and poorly dressed. I am surprised that the food is so good.*

The message:

"He is building up a case against you. Phyllis wants you out of their lives. You are highly threatening to both of them. Be careful. Do not get caught in a crossfire. No matter how good your food, you are no match for a woman."

And then a dream providing specific grievances:

*I'm watching a heart transplant. The surgeon is lying down. Someone is accusing him of being involved only in the transplantation process and being uninterested in all the messy circumstances of*

*how he got the heart from the donor. The surgeon admits that was true. There was an operating room nurse who said she didn't have this privilege—she had to witness the whole mess.*

The message:

“The heart transplant is, of course, psychotherapy. [Hats off to you, my dear dreamer friend! “Heart transplant”—what an inspired visual symbol for psychotherapy!] Marvin feels you're cold and uninvolved and that you've taken little personal interest in his life—in how he got to be the person he is today.”

The dreamer was advising me how to proceed. Never have I had a supervisor like this. I was so fascinated by the dreamer that I began to lose sight of his motivation. Was he acting as Marvin's agent to help me to help Marvin? Was he hoping that if Marvin changed, then he, the dreamer, would gain his release through integration with Marvin? Or was he chiefly acting to alleviate his own isolation by taking pains to preserve the relationship he had with me?

But regardless of his motivation, his advice was sagacious. He was right: I was not truly engaged with Marvin! We stayed on such a formal level that our use of first names seemed ungainly. Marvin took himself very seriously: he was practically my only patient with whom I could never joke or banter. I tried often to focus on our relationship, but aside from some barbs in the first couple of sessions (of the “you fellows think sex is at the root of everything” genre), he made no reference to me whatsoever. He treated me with much respect and deference and generally responded to my inquiries about his feelings toward me with statements to the effect that I must know what I'm doing since he continued to remain free of migraines.

By the time six months had gone by, I cared somewhat more about Marvin, yet still had no deep fondness for him. This was very strange since I adored the dreamer: I adored his courage and his scorching honesty. From time to time, I had to prod myself to remember that the dreamer *was* Marvin, that the dreamer provided an open channel to

## LOVE'S EXECUTIONER

Marvin's central nucleus—that whorl of the self which possesses absolute wisdom and self-knowledge.

The dreamer was correct that I had not plunged into the messy details of the origin of the heart to be transplanted: I had been far too inattentive to the experiences and patterns of Marvin's early life. Consequently, I devoted the following two sessions to a detailed examination of his childhood. One of the most interesting things I learned was that, when Marvin was seven or eight, a cataclysmic secret event shattered his family and resulted in his mother banishing his father permanently from her bedroom. Though the nature of the event was never revealed to Marvin, he now believes, on the basis of a few stray comments by his mother, that his father had either been unfaithful or a compulsive gambler.

After his father's exile, it fell upon Marvin, the youngest son, to become his mother's constant companion: it was his job to escort her to all her social functions. For years he endured his friends' jibes about dating his mother.

Needless to say, Marvin's new family assignment did not increase his popularity with his father, who became a thin presence in the family, then a mere shadow, and soon evaporated forever. Two years later, his older brother received a postcard from their father saying he was alive and well and was sure the family was better off without him.

Obviously, the foundation was in place for major oedipal problems in Marvin's relations with women. His relationship with his mother had been exclusive, overly intimate, prolonged in its closeness and had disastrous consequences for his relationship with men; indeed, he imagined he had, in some substantial way, contributed to his father's disappearance. It was not surprising, then, to learn that Marvin had been wary of competition with men and inordinately shy of women. His first real date, with Phyllis, was his last first date: Phyllis and he kept steady company until their marriage. She was six years younger, equally shy and equally inexperienced with the opposite sex.

These anamnestic sessions were, to my mind, reasonably productive. I grew acquainted with the characters who peopled Marvin's mind, and identified (and shared with him) certain important repetitive life patterns: for example, the way he had re-created part of his parents' pattern

in his own marriage—his wife, like his father's wife, wielded control by cutting off sexual favors.

As this material unfolded, it was possible to understand Marvin's current problems from each of three very different perspectives: the *existential* (with a focus on the ontological anxiety that had been evoked by passing a major life milestone); the *Freudian* (with an emphasis on oedipal anxiety which resulted in the sexual act being welded to primitive catastrophic anxiety); and the *communicational* (with an emphasis on how the marital dynamic equilibrium had been unsettled by recent life events. More about this was to emerge shortly).

Marvin, as always, worked hard to produce the necessary information, but, though his dreams had requested it, he soon lost interest in past origins of current life patterns. He commented once that these dusty events belonged to another age, almost another century. He also wistfully noted that we were discussing a drama in which every character, save himself, was dead.

The dreamer soon gave me a series of messages about Marvin's reaction to our historical forays:

*I saw a car with a curious shape, like a large, long box on wheels. It was black and patent-leather shiny. I was struck by the fact that the only windows were in the back and were very askew—so that you could not really look through them.*

*There was another vehicle with problems with the rear-vision mirror. It had rear windows with a kind of filter that slid up and down but it was stuck.*

*I was giving a lecture with great success. Then I started having trouble with the slide projector. First, I couldn't get a slide out of the projector to put in another. It was a slide of a man's head. Then I couldn't focus the slide. Then people's heads kept getting in the way of the screen. I moved all over the auditorium to get an unobstructed view, but I could never see the whole slide.*



## LOVE'S EXECUTIONER

The message I believed the dreamer was sending me:

"I try to look back but my vision fails. There are no rear windows. There is no rear-vision mirror. A slide with a head in it obstructs the view. The past, the true story, the chronicle of real events, is unrecoverable. The head in the slide—my head, my vision, my memory—gets in the way. I see the past only filtered through the eyes of the present—not as I knew and experienced it at the time, but as I experience it now. Historical recall is a futile exercise in getting the heads out of the way.

"Not only is the past lost forever, but the future, too, is sealed. The patent-leather car, the box, my coffin, has no front windows either."

Gradually, with relatively little prompting from me, Marvin began to wade into deeper waters. Perhaps he overheard scraps of my discourse with the dreamer. His first association to the car, the curious black box on wheels, was to say, "It is not a coffin." Noticing my raised eyebrows, he smiled and said, "Was it one of you fellows who said you give yourself away by protesting too much?"

"The car has no front windows, Marvin. Think about that. What comes to you?"

"I don't know. Without front windows you don't know where you're heading."

"How would that apply to you, to what you're facing ahead of you in your life now?"

"Retirement. I'm a little slow, but I'm beginning to get it. But I don't worry about retirement. Why don't I *feel* anything?"

"The feeling is there. It seeps into your dreams. Maybe it's too painful to feel. Maybe the pain gets short-circuited and put onto other things. Look how often you've said, 'Why should I get so upset about my sexual performance? It doesn't make sense.' One of our main jobs is to sort things out and restore the feelings to where they belong."

Soon he reported a series of dreams with explicit material about aging

and death. For example, he dreamed of walks in a large, unfinished, underground concrete building.

One dream, in particular, affected him:

*I saw Susan Jennings. She was working in a bookstore. She looked depressed, and I went up to her to offer my sympathy. I told her I knew others, six others, who felt the same way. She looked up at me, and her face was a hideous mucous-filled skull. I woke up extremely frightened.*

Marvin worked well with this dream.

"Susan Jennings? Susan Jennings? I knew her forty-five years ago in college. I don't think I've thought of her once till now."

"Think about her now. What comes to mind?"

"I can see her face—round, pudgy, large glasses."

"Remind you of anyone?"

"No, but I know what you'd say—that she looks like me: the round face and oversized spectacles."

"What about the 'six others'?"

"Oh, there's something there, all right. Yesterday I was talking to Phyllis about all our friends who have died and also about a newspaper article about people who die immediately after retirement. I told her that I had read an alumni bulletin and noted that six persons in my college class have died. That must be the 'six others who felt the same way' in the dream. Fascinating!"

"There's a lot of fear of death there, Marvin—in this dream and in all the other nightmares. Everyone's afraid of death. I've never known anyone who wasn't. But most people work on it over and over throughout the years. With you it seems to have exploded all at once. I feel strongly that it's the thought of retirement that's ignited it."

Marvin mentioned that the strongest dream of all was that first dream, six months ago, of the two gaunt men, the white cane, and the baby. Those images kept drifting back into his mind—especially the image of the gaunt Victorian undertaker or temperance worker. Perhaps, he said,

## LOVE'S EXECUTIONER

that was a symbol for him: he had been temperate, too temperate. He'd known for a couple of years that he had deadened himself all his life.

Marvin was beginning to astonish me. He was venturing into such depths that I could scarcely believe I was talking to the same person. When I asked him what had happened a couple of years ago, he described an episode he had never shared before, not even with Phyllis. As he was flipping through a copy of *Psychology Today* in a dentist's office, he was intrigued by an article suggesting that one attempt to construct a final, meaningful conversation with each of the important vanished people in one's life.

One day when he was alone, he tried it. He imagined telling his father how much he had missed him and how much he would have liked to have known him. His father didn't answer. He imagined saying his final goodbye to his mother, sitting across from him in her familiar bentwood rocker. He said the words, but no feelings came with them. He gritted his teeth and tried to force feelings out. But nothing came. He concentrated on the meaning of *never*—that he would *never, never* see her again. He remembered banging his fist on his desk, forcing himself to remember the chill of his mother's forehead when he kissed her as she lay in her casket. But nothing came. He shouted aloud, "I will *never* see you again!" Still, nothing. *That* was when he learned that he had deadened himself.

He cried in my office that day. He cried for all that he had missed, for all the years of deadness in his life. How sad it was, he said, that he had waited until now to try to come alive. For the first time I felt very close to Marvin. I clasped his shoulder as he sobbed.

At the end of this session, I was exhausted and very moved. I thought we had finally broken through the impenetrable barrier: that finally Marvin and the dreamer had fused and spoken with one voice.

Marvin felt better after our session and was highly optimistic until, a few days later, a curious event occurred. He and Phyllis were just commencing sexual intercourse when he suddenly said, "Maybe the doctor is right, maybe all my sexual anxiety *is* really anxiety about death!" No sooner had he finished this sentence, than—whooosh!—he had a sudden, pleasureless premature ejaculation. Phyllis was understandably irritated by his selection of topics for sexual small talk. Marvin immediately

began to berate himself for his insensitivity to her and for his sexual failure and toppled into a profound depression. Soon I received an urgent, alarmed message from the dreamer:

*I had been bringing new furniture into the house, but then I couldn't close the front door. Someone had placed a device there to keep the door open. Then I saw ten or twelve people with luggage outside the door. They were evil, awful people, especially one toothless old crone whose face reminded me of Susan Jennings. She also reminded me of Madame Defarge in the movie A Tale of Two Cities—the one who knitted at the guillotine as heads were lopped off.*

The message:

“Marvin is very frightened. He has become aware of too much, too fast. He knows now that death is waiting for him. He has opened the door of awareness; but now he fears that too much has come out, that the door is jammed, that he will never be able to close it again.”

Frightening dreams with similar messages followed rapidly:

*It was night, I was perched high on the balcony of a building. I heard a small child crying below in the darkness, calling for help. I told him I would come because I was the only one who could help, but as I started down into the darkness, the stairwell grew more and more narrow and the flimsy banister came off in my hands. I was afraid to go farther.*

The message:

“There are vital parts of me that I have buried all my life—the little boy, the woman, the artist, the meaning-seeking part. I know that I deadened myself and have left much of my life un-lived. But I

## LOVE'S EXECUTIONER

cannot descend now into these realms. I cannot cope with the fear and the regret.”

And yet another dream:

*I am taking an examination. I hand in my blue book and remember that I haven't answered the last question. I panic. I try to get the book back, but it is past the deadline. I make an appointment to meet my son after the deadline.*

The message:

“I realize now that I have not done what I might have done with my life. The course and the exam is over. I would have liked to have done it differently. That last question on the exam, what was it? Maybe if I had taken a different turn, to have done something else, to have become something else—not a high school teacher, not a rich accountant. But it is too late, too late to change any of my answers. The time has run out. If only I had a son, I might through him spew myself into the future past the death line.”

Later, the same night:

*I am climbing a mountain trail. I see some people trying to rebuild a house at night. I know that it can't be done, and I try to tell them but they can't hear me. Then I hear someone calling my name from behind. It is my mother trying to overtake me. She said she has a message for me. It is that someone is dying. I know that it is me who is dying. I wake up in a sweat.*

The message:

“It is too late. It is not possible to rebuild your house at night—to change the course you have set, just as you are preparing to enter the sea of death. I am now my mother's age when she died. I am

overtaking her and realize that death is inevitable. I cannot alter the future because I am being overtaken by the past."

These messages from the dreamer drummed louder and louder. I had to heed them. They forced me to take my bearings and to review what had been happening in therapy.

Marvin had moved fast, too fast perhaps. At first he was a man without insight: he could not, would not, direct his sight inward. In the relatively short period of six months, he had made enormous discoveries. He learned that his eyes, like those of a newborn kitten, had been closed. He learned that deep inside there is a rich teeming world which, if confronted, brings terrible fear but also offers redemption through illumination.

The surface appearance of things no longer compelled him: he was less captivated by his collections of stamps and the *Reader's Digest*. His eyes open now to the existential facts of life, he was grappling with the inevitability of death and with his powerlessness to save himself.

Marvin awakened more quickly than I had expected; perhaps he listened, after all, to the voice of his own dreamer. At first he was eager to see, but soon enthusiasm gave way to a powerful sense of regret. He grieved for his past and his impending losses. Most of all, he grieved for the vast empty spaces of his life: the unused potential within him, the children he had never had, the father he had never known, the house that had never brimmed with family and friends, a life work that might have contained more significance than the accumulation of too much money. Finally, he grieved for himself, for the imprisoned dreamer, for the little boy crying for help in the darkness.

He knew he had not lived the life he really wanted. Perhaps it could still be done. Perhaps there was still time to paint his life anew on a large blank canvas. He began to twist the knobs of secret doors, to whisper to an unknown daughter, to wonder where vanished fathers go.

But he had overstepped himself. He ventured farther than his supply lines could reach, and now was assailed from all sides: the past was dusky and irretrievable; the future, blocked. It was too late: his house had been

## LOVE'S EXECUTIONER

built, his final examination turned in. He had flung open the sluice gates of awareness, only to be inundated with death anxiety.

Sometimes death anxiety is dismissed as trivial in its universality. Who, after all, does not know and fear death? Yet it is one thing to know about death in general, to grit one's teeth and stoke up a shudder or two; it is quite another to apprehend one's own death and to experience it in the bones and sockets of one's being. Such death awareness is a terror that comes rarely, sometimes only once or twice in a lifetime—a terror that Marvin now experienced night after night.

Against this dread, he lacked even the most common defenses: childless, he could not be comforted by the illusion of immortal germ cells; he had no sustaining religious belief—neither of a consciousness-preserving afterlife nor of an omnipresent, protective personal deity; nor did he have the satisfaction of knowing that he had realized himself in life. (As a general rule, the less one's sense of life fulfillment, the greater one's death anxiety.) Worst of all, Marvin could foresee no end to his anxiety. The dream image was graphic: the demons had escaped the room of his mind and were in full, menacing view. He could neither escape nor reincarcerate them by closing the jammed door.

So Marvin and I had reached a crucial point, a juncture to which full awareness inevitably leads. It is the time when one stands before the abyss and decides how to face the pitiless existential facts of life: death, isolation, groundlessness, and meaninglessness. Of course, there are no solutions. One has a choice only of certain stances: to be "resolute," or "engaged," or courageously defiant, or stoically accepting, or to relinquish rationality and, in awe and mystery, place one's trust in the providence of the Divine.

I didn't know what Marvin would do, nor did I know how else to help. I remember looking forward to each session with more than a little curiosity about the choices that he would make. What would it be? Would he flee his own discovery? Would he find a way, once more, to pull the comforter of self-deception over his head? Would he ultimately embrace a religious solution? Or would he find strength and shelter in one of the *Lebens*-philosophical solutions? Never have I felt so keenly the dual role of the therapist as participant-observer. Although I was now emotionally engaged and cared deeply about what would happen to

Marvin, at the same time, I remained aware that I was in a privileged position to study the embryology of belief.

Though Marvin continued to feel anxious and depressed, he gamely continued to work in therapy. My respect for him grew. I had thought that he would have terminated therapy long before. What kept him coming?

Several things, he said. First, he was still migraine-free. Second, he remembered my warning to him, the first time we met, that there were going to be times in therapy when he would feel worse; he trusted my word that his current anxiety was a stage in therapy and would ultimately pass. Furthermore, he was persuaded that something significant must be happening in therapy: he'd learned more about himself in the past five months than in his previous sixty-four years!

And something else totally unexpected had happened. His relationship to Phyllis had begun to undergo a perceptible shift.

"We've been talking more frequently and more honestly than ever before. I'm not sure when it started. When you and I first began to meet, we had a brief flurry of talking. But that was a false alarm. I think Phyllis was only trying to persuade me that we could talk without having to see a therapist.

"But over the last few weeks, it's been different. We are *really* talking now. I've been telling Phyllis what you and I talk about every hour. In fact, she waits at the door for me to return home from the sessions and gets annoyed if I delay—for example, if I suggest we wait until dinner because it gives us such interesting table conversation."

"What types of things seem most important to her?"

"Almost everything. I told you Phyllis doesn't like to spend money—she loves sales. We've been joking that we've gotten a two-for-the-price-of-one therapy bargain."

"That's the kind of bargain I'm glad to give."

"I think the thing that meant the most to Phyllis was when I told her about our discussions about my work, about how disappointed I am with myself for not having done more with my abilities, for having devoted myself only to money, for never having considered what I might have given to the world. That hit her very hard. She said that, if it were true



## LOVE'S EXECUTIONER

for me, it was true in spades for her—that she had led a totally self-centered life, that she's never given anything of herself."

"She's given you a great deal."

"I reminded her of that. At first she thanked me for saying it, but later, after thinking about it more, she said she's not so sure—maybe she's helped me, but she said that in some ways she may have stood in my way."

"How so?"

"She mentioned all the things I talked to you about: the way she's barred others from our home; the way she's discouraged me from making friends who might have wanted to visit our home; the way she's refused to travel and discourages me from traveling—did I ever tell you about that? Most of all, she regrets her childlessness and her refusal many years ago to see a fertility doctor."

"Marvin, I'm amazed. This openness, this honesty! How are you two doing it? These are tough things to talk about, really tough."

He went on to say that Phyllis had paid a price for her insights—she had become very agitated. One night he couldn't sleep and heard some whispering from her room. (They slept in separate bedrooms because of his snoring.) He tiptoed in and saw Phyllis kneeling by her bed, praying, chanting the same phrase over and over: "The mother of God will protect me. The mother of God will protect me. The mother of God will protect me. The mother of God will protect me."

Marvin was very affected by this scene though it was hard for him to put it into words. I think he was overcome with pity—pity for Phyllis, for himself, for all small, helpless people. I think he realized that her chanting that phrase was a magical incantation, a wafer-thin protection against the terrible things we all have to face.

He finally got back to sleep and later that night had a dream:

*There was a statue of a female god on a pedestal in a large crowded room. It looked like Christ but was wearing a flowing orange pastel dress. On the other side of the room there was an actress with a long white dress. The actress and the statue traded places. Somehow they traded dresses, and the statue got down and the actress climbed up on the pedestal.*

Marvin said he finally understood a dream: the dream meant that he had turned women into goddesses and then believed he would be safe if he could appease them. That was why he had always dreaded Phyllis's anger, and that was why, when he was anxious, she could offer such relief by soothing him sexually.

"Especially oral sex—I think I told you that when I'm in panic, she takes my penis in her mouth and my bad feelings just melt away. It's not sex—you've been saying that all along, and now I know you're right—my penis can be completely soft. It's just that she accepts me totally and takes me into her. It's like I've become a part of her."

"You *do* grant her magical powers—like a goddess. She can heal you with just a smile, an embrace, or by taking you inside her. No wonder you take great pains not to displease her. But the problem is that sex is turned into something medicinal—no, that's not strong enough—sex becomes a life or death proposition, and your survival depends on merging with this woman. No wonder sex has been difficult. It should be a loving, joyful act, not protection from danger. With that view of sex, anyone—certainly including me—would have problems with potency."

Marvin took out his notepad and wrote down a few lines. I had been irritated weeks ago when he first started taking notes, but he made such good use of therapy that I had learned to respect any of his mnemonic aids.

"Let's see if I have this right. Your theory is that what I call sex is often not sex—at least not good sex—but instead is a way of protecting myself against fear, especially fear of aging and death. And when I'm impotent, it is not because I fail sexually as a man but because I'm asking sex to do things that sex can't do."

"Exactly. And there's a lot of evidence for this. There's the dream of the two gaunt undertakers and the white-tipped cane. There's the dream of the liquefying ground under your house which you try to cure by drilling with your giant auger. There's the feeling you just described of being soothed by a physical connection with Phyllis which masquerades as sex but isn't, as you noted, sex at all."

"So there are two issues. First, I'm asking sex to do something beyond its power. Second, I'm giving almost supernatural power to Phyllis to heal me or protect me."

## LOVE'S EXECUTIONER

"And then everything fell apart when you overheard her plaintive, repetitive chant."

"That was when I realized how frail she is—not Phyllis in particular, but *all* women. No, not just women, but everybody. What I've been doing was exactly what Phyllis was doing—depending on magic."

"So you depend on her power for protection, and she, in turn, pleads for protection by a magical chant—look where that leaves you."

"There's something else that's important. Consider things now from Phyllis's side: if she, in her love for you, accepts the role of goddess that you assign her, think of what that role does to her own possibilities for growth. In order to stay on her pedestal, she was never able to talk to you about *her* pain and *her* fears—or not until very recently."

"Slow down! Let me get this down. I'm going to have to explain all this to Phyllis." Marvin was scribbling away furiously now.

"So in a sense she was following your unspoken wishes by not openly expressing her uncertainties, by pretending to be stronger than she felt. I have a hunch that's one of the reasons she wouldn't come into therapy when we started—in other words, she picked up your wish that she *not* change. I also have a hunch that if you ask her now, she might come."

"God, we are really on the same wavelength now. Phyllis and I have already discussed it, and she is ready to talk to you."

And that was how Phyllis entered therapy. She arrived with Marvin for the next hour—a handsome, graceful woman who, by sheer will, overcame her timidity and in our three-way session became boldly self-revealing.

Our conjectures about Phyllis had been close to the mark: she often had to swallow her own feelings of inadequacy in order not to agitate Marvin. And, of course, she had to be particularly solicitous when he was in distress—which meant, recently, that she had to be solicitous almost all the time.

But her behavior was not entirely reactive to Marvin's problems. She was also struggling with many personal issues, particularly her painful sensitivity about her lack of education and her belief that she was intellectually inferior to most people, especially Marvin. One of the reasons she dreaded, and avoided, social events was that someone might ask her, "What do you do?" She avoided lengthy conversations because it might

become evident that she had never attended college. Whenever she compared herself with others, she invariably concluded that they were better informed and more clever, socially adept, self-confident, and interesting.

"Perhaps," I suggested, "the only area where you can maintain power is sex. That's one place where Marvin needs you and can wield no control over you."

Phyllis responded hesitantly at first, and then the words began to pour out of her. "I guess I had to have *something* that Marvin wanted. In most other ways he is very self-sufficient. Often I feel I don't have much else to offer. I wasn't able to have children, I'm afraid of people, I've never worked outside the home, I have no talents or skills." She paused, wiped her eyes and said to Marvin, "See, I *can* cry if I put my mind to it."

She turned back to me. "Marvin's told you that he tells me about the things the two of you have been discussing. I've been in therapy once removed. Some of the topics shook me up, they apply more to me than to him."

"For example?"

"For example, regret. That idea really hit home. I have a lot of regret about what I've done with my life or, better, what I haven't done."

My heart went out to Phyllis at that moment, and I desperately wanted to say something helpful. "If we stare too hard into the past, it's easy to be overcome with regret. But now the important thing is to turn toward the future. We've got to think about change. What must *not* occur is that five years from now you look back with regret over the way you've lived these coming five years."

Phyllis responded after a short pause, "I started to say that I'm too old to do things differently. I felt that way for thirty years. Thirty years! My whole life's gone by feeling it was too late. But watching Marvin change over the last several weeks has been impressive. You may not realize it, but the mere fact that I'm here today, in a psychiatrist's office, talking about myself is in itself a big, big, step."

I remember thinking how fortunate it was that Marvin's change had spurred Phyllis to change. Often therapy doesn't work that way. In fact, not uncommonly therapy places strain on a marriage: if a patient changes and the spouse stays locked in the same position, then the dynamic

## LOVE'S EXECUTIONER

equilibrium of the marriage often disintegrates. The patient has either to forego growth or to grow and jeopardize the union. I was very grateful that Phyllis demonstrated so much flexibility.

The last thing we discussed was the timing of Marvin's symptoms. I had satisfied myself that the symbolic meaning of retirement—the existential anxiety underlying this important life marker—was sufficient explanation for the onset of his symptoms. But Phyllis supplied additional explanations for "Why now?"

"I'm sure you know what you're talking about and that Marvin must be more upset than he knows at the idea of retiring. But, frankly, *I'm* disturbed at the idea of his retirement—and when I get upset, upset about anything, Marvin gets upset. That's the way our relationship works. If I worry, even if I keep it completely silent, he senses it and gets upset. Sometimes he gets so upset, he takes my upsetness away from me."

Phyllis said all this with such facility that I forgot for a moment the great strain she was under. Earlier she had been glancing at Marvin every couple of sentences. I wasn't certain whether it was to obtain his support or to reassure herself that he could tolerate what she had to say. But now she was engrossed in her own words, holding her body and her head absolutely still as she talked.

"What about Marvin's retirement disturbs you?"

"Well, for one thing, he feels retirement means travel. I don't know how much he has told you about me and traveling. I'm not proud of it, but I'm having a lot of trouble leaving the house, let alone traveling halfway around the world. Also, I'm not looking forward to Marvin's 'taking over' the house. For the last forty years he's run the office and I've run the house. Now, I know that it's his house, too. It's his house mainly, you could say—his money bought it. But it's very upsetting to hear him talk about remodeling rooms so he can display his various collections. For example, right now he's trying to get someone to build a new glass dining-room table which will display his political campaign buttons. I don't want to eat on top of political buttons. I just fear we're heading toward trouble. And——" She stopped.

"You were going to say something else, Phyllis?"

"Well, this is the hardest thing to say. I feel ashamed. I'm afraid that

when Marvin begins staying home, he will see how little I do each day and lose respect for me."

Marvin simply took her hand. It seemed the right thing to do. In fact, throughout the session he remained deeply empathic. No distracting questions, no jocular clichés, no struggling to stay on the surface. He reassured Phyllis that travel was important to him, but not so important that he couldn't wait until she was ready. He told her explicitly that the most important thing in the world to him was their relationship, and that he had never felt closer to her.

I met with Phyllis and Marvin as a couple for several more sessions. I reinforced their new, more open mode of communication and instructed them in some fundamentals of sexual functioning: how Phyllis could help Marvin sustain his erection; how she could help him avoid premature ejaculation; how Marvin could approach sex less mechanically; and how he could, if he lost his erection, bring Phyllis to orgasm manually or orally.

She had been housebound for years and now rarely ventured forth alone. It seemed to me that the time was ripe to interrupt that pattern. I believed that the meaning, or at least one meaning, of her agoraphobia was now obsolete and could be influenced by paradox. I first obtained Marvin's agreement to help Phyllis overcome her phobia by promising to follow any suggestions I gave him. I then instructed him to say to her, punctually every two hours, phoning her if he were at work, these words precisely: "Phyllis, please don't leave the house. I need to know you are there at all times to take care of me and prevent me from being frightened."

Phyllis's eyes widened. Marvin looked at me incredulously. Could I possibly be serious?

I told him that I knew it sounded crazy, but persuaded him to follow my instructions faithfully.

They both twittered the first few times Marvin told Phyllis not to leave the house: it seemed ridiculous and artificial; she had not left the house in months. But soon irritation replaced the twitter. Marvin was irritated with me for making him promise to keep repeating the same stupid statement. Phyllis, even though she knew Marvin was following my instructions, grew irritated with him for ordering her to stay at home.

## LOVE'S EXECUTIONER

After a few days she went to the library alone, then shopping, and in the next few weeks ventured farther than she had for years.

I rarely employ such manipulative approaches in therapy; usually the price is too high—one must sacrifice the genuineness of the therapeutic encounter. But paradox can be effective in those instances where the therapeutic foundation is solid and the prescribed behavior explodes the meaning of the symptom. In this case, Phyllis's agoraphobia was not *her* symptom but *their* symptom, and it served to maintain the marital equilibrium: Phyllis was eternally there for Marvin; he could venture forth into the world, provide for their security, yet feel secure in the knowledge that she was always there waiting for him.

There was a certain irony in my use of this intervention: an existential approach and a manipulative paradox ordinarily make bizarre bedfellows. Yet here the sequence seemed natural. Marvin had applied to his relationship with Phyllis the insights he had obtained from a confrontation with the deep sources of his despair. Despite the discouragement (depicted in his dreams by such symbols as being unable to rebuild a house at night), he had nonetheless proceeded upon a radical reconstruction of his relationship to his wife. Both Marvin and Phyllis now cared so much for the other's growth and being that they could genuinely collaborate in the process of wrenching a symptom from its socket.

Marvin's change initiated an adaptive spiral: liberated from a restricting role, Phyllis underwent enormous change in the space of a few weeks and continued and solidified that improvement in individual therapy with another therapist over the next year.

Marvin and I met only a few more times. Pleased with his progress, he had realized, as he put it, a good yield on his investment. The migraines, his reason for seeking therapy, had never returned. Though his mood swings still occurred (and were still dependent on sex), their intensity had diminished considerably. Marvin estimated that the mood swings were now approximately the same as they had been for the previous twenty years.

I, too, felt satisfied with our work. There is always more that can be done, but overall we had accomplished far more than I could have anticipated at our initial session. The fact that Marvin's anguished dreams had stopped was also reassuring. Though I had received no

messages from the dreamer for the last several weeks, I had not missed them. Marvin and the dreamer had fused, and I spoke to them now as to a single person.

I next saw Marvin one year later: I always schedule patients for a one-year follow-up session—both for their benefit and for my own edification. I also make it a practice to play for the patient a tape recording of part of our initial session. Marvin listened to ten minutes of our initial interview with great interest, smiled at me, and said, "Who is that jerk, anyway?"

Marvin's quip has a serious side. Having heard the same reaction from many patients, I have come to regard it as a valid marker of change. Marvin, in effect, was saying, "I'm a different person now. I hardly recognize that Marvin of a year ago. Those things I used to do—refusing to look at my life; trying to control or intimidate others; trying to impress others with my intelligence, my charts, my thoroughness—they're gone. I don't do that any more."

These are no minor adjustments: they represent basic modifications in personhood. Yet they are so subtle in character that they generally elude most research-outcome questionnaires.

With his usual care, Marvin had come prepared with one-year follow-up notes which reviewed and assessed the tasks we had addressed in therapy. The verdict was mixed: in some areas he had maintained his changes; in others he had done some backsliding. First, he informed me that Phyllis was doing well: her phobia about leaving the house remained much improved. She had joined a women's therapy group and was working on her fear of attending social functions. Perhaps most impressive was her decision to address adaptively her concern about her lack of education—by enrolling in several college extension courses.

As for Marvin? He had had no further migraines. His mood swings persisted but were not disabling. He was still periodically impotent but brooded about it less. He had changed his mind about retirement and was now working part-time, but had switched fields and was doing more real estate development and management—work that he found more interesting. He and Phyllis still related very well, but at times he found himself aggrieved at her newfound activities and felt ignored by her.

And my old friend, the dreamer? What of him? Did he have a



## LOVE'S EXECUTIONER

message for me? Although Marvin had had no nightmares or powerful dreams, he knew there were nocturnal rumblings. The night before our meeting, he had had a short dream which was full of mystery. It seemed to be trying to tell him something. Perhaps, he suggested, I could understand it.

*My wife is in front of me. She is naked and standing with her legs spread apart. I am looking through the triangle of her legs off into the distance. But all I can see, far, far away on the horizon, is my mother's face.*

My final message from the dreamer:

“My vision is bounded by the women of my life and imagination. Nonetheless, I can still see far into the distance. Perhaps that is sufficient.”