

QI HEALS

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ANGER AND THE BODY

Anger has a corrosive effect on the body. If anger persists, it can be fatal by causing a breakdown in the healthy functioning of the organism. Below are two case histories of the effects of anger.

Alma

Alma was 78 when I met her. She was a large woman who spoke English well with a strong Polish accent. She had a number tattooed on her forearm, so I knew she was a Holocaust survivor. Her complaint was that she had lost five of her six sensations of taste; the only thing she could taste was bitter. She was paying for her granddaughter's wedding at the Beverly Hills Four Seasons Hotel, and she wanted to be able to taste the food.

Her loss of taste coincided with the death of her husband three years before. The various doctors and psychologists she had consulted assumed that she was sad and despairing from the loss of her husband, and so had given her a variety of anti-depressants and mood elevators. These had only made her condition worse.

When I treated her, the first thing I felt was anger. Her qi was not flowing smoothly, and there was considerable heat coming from one part of her head, a sign that she had a negative repetitive thought. I felt her spleen, which was tender to the touch, another sign of anger. The qi in her spleen was not flowing smoothly, but was sharp, sort of like static electricity. I assumed that her anger had something to do with Hitler and the concentration camp.

I told her she was angry, and that her anger had contributed to her loss of taste. She gave a thin, sad smile, and said, yes, she was angry, but had not

dared tell anyone about her anger. She was afraid the person would reproach her. She told me the following story.

She had been put into the concentration camp in 1942 when she was fourteen. There was a sixteen year old Polish boy already in the camp, and somehow, the two of them met, spent time together, and survived the war together. They were liberated in January 1945 by the American Army, and sent as displaced persons to Galveston, Texas. They did not speak any English, and found Galveston an unpleasant place to live, and an impossible place to make a living.

They hitchhiked to Los Angeles, got married, set up house in a small apartment, and went to work. She stayed up all night making sandwiches and other edibles, and her husband drove around to the movie studios and construction sites selling them. He was the inventor of the Roach Coach. They prospered.

She wanted to forget the Holocaust. He was a Holocaust witness. She would not talk about it at home, even to her children. He traveled the country bearing witness to the atrocities lest people forget or worse, dismiss it as irrelevant. They celebrated no holidays ("Not even Jewish holidays. I know we're the Chosen People. I got chosen once, and it was enough."). The only event they celebrated was the anniversary of the liberation of the camp in January. Alma would cook late into the night, join her sleeping husband, and the two of them would eat and enjoy themselves all the next day.

On the morning of the anniversary three years before, Alma awoke to find her husband dead in the bed beside her. He had died in his sleep of congestive heart failure.

"And this is why I am so angry. He left without saying goodbye. We survived Hitler, we survived the camp, we survived life as refugees, we created a new life and family. We did it together, always together. How could he leave me without so much as a goodbye?! I am furious at him. He left me without a word."

I gave her the big red plastic baseball bat we keep for just such occasions, and told her to let loose on the pillow on the massage table. I discretely left the room. She bashed the pillow, yelling and hollering all the while in Polish. I got the gist without understanding a word. About ten minutes later, she was finished and highly energized. Her qi was flowing well, and her spleen was no longer tender to the touch.

She phoned me the next day to say that her taste had returned.

Caroline

Caroline hailed from the middle of nowhere somewhere in Iowa. Her nearest neighbor was three miles away. She slaughtered her own cows and pigs for meat. She raised her own vegetables. She worked in the office of a research lab. She was a devout Christian. She was thirty, thin, tall, had long lank pale hair, a pale complexion, and seemingly more teeth than could fit comfortably in her mouth. She was always smiling, turning the other cheek whenever she could, giving thanks for everything that came her way, and wishing everyone she met a beautiful day.

Her mother brought her out to Los Angeles to see me because the Mayo Clinic had told her she had only six months to live. She had taken out a second mortgage on her house to pay their bill. Her symptoms were scary. Her strength had steadily declined to the point where she could no longer hold her job, and could not do any gardening or farm work. She could not keep food down and was losing weight. Her stomach always pained her. She suffered from insomnia. Her vision was deteriorating. She had lost strength in her legs, and had gone from a cane to a walker. Next was a wheelchair.

Asbestos had been found in the walls of the office where she worked, but tests, albeit inconclusive, ruled out asbestos poisoning. In fact, the tests ruled out everything, except the fact that she was going downhill fast. She had been told to go back home, and get as much out of what little life was left her as she could.

As in the case of Alma, Caroline's body was full of anger. But this was anger of a completely different scale. She was literally consumed by anger.

Her spleen was painful to the touch, and emitted a great deal of concentrated heat. Her head had an unusually dense concentration of qi at one location. Her upper vertebrae (T1-4) were locked together and protruding. Her T5-6 were buried somewhere in her back.

I told her she was very angry, and that that anger was the source of her problems. That unless she dealt swiftly and effectively with that anger, she probably would die as predicted.

She smiled at me and told me that she was not angry, that it was impossible for her to be angry, and that anger on the scale that I proposed was un-Christian. She was a very forgiving person, and to forgive was to rid oneself of anger.

I asked her to tell me about her family. She waxed rhapsodic about her young son and daughter. She said nothing about her husband. I asked if the marriage was a good one. She actually scowled. Well...it turned out he was an unsavory character. He ran a methamphetamine lab in the barn. He drank alot, and she was sure that he was trying to molest their daughter. He frequently beat the boy. One night he got drunk. stuck the boy on the handlebars of his motorcycle, and took off at high speed down the road. They ended up in a ditch in order to avoid a collision with a truck, and the boy spent three weeks in hospital with lacerations and contusions. She was not going to tell anybody that anything was wrong, not even her mother. She was trying to forgive him and prayed constantly that he would change for the better. She thought that separation and divorce would create a scandal, and be un-Christian. And then, he ran off with her first cousin, who just happened to be her next-door neighbor, even if next door was three miles away. The entire town knew about it, and she was sure she was the laughingstock of the church congregation. She was so embarrassed that she hadn't attended church in months. She wasn't just angry, she was volcanically angry.

After three treatments that got her stomach and legs working again, I told her to go back to Iowa, have her spleen checked, divorce her husband, and get a restraining order on him to stay away from the children.

She reported to me that her spleen had to be removed. The surgeon told her it looked as if half of it had been burned. She had informed the police of her husband's drug activities, he had been arrested, and divorce proceedings were going forward. She was happy again, and all of her symptoms had vanished. She could now fulfill her lifelong dream of going to Paradise Cove in Malibu to eat fish tacos. Which Therese and I did with her and her mother three months later.

USEFUL HEALTH HINT

I recently treated a Zen priest, a very learned and witty man. He came in to be treated to undo the pernicious effects of his treatments at Kaiser Permanente. He said, "I am a Buddhist priest. I know that we live in a state of mayoi, illusion. I used to think that everything was illusory, but now I have revised my thinking. Kaiser is real." This month's health hint: don't go to Kaiser if you can possibly help it.

UNCLE ARNIE (VIII)

Mort arrived early the following morning, Sunday, and we drove directly from the airport to Silver Birches. The plane was fifteen minutes early and traffic was light, so we arrived at Reception before Arthur Pillars. As he had the day before, Benny Balsom loitered by the desk.

"Dr. Mort Balsom to see Arthur Pillars," my father announced to the secretary.

"Another Balsom? What is this, a convention?" Benny could hardly believe his good luck. He hadn't seen this much action at Reception since he joined the Silver Birches' client roster.

My father did not know him on sight. "It's your cousin, Benny," I told him, and his eyes grew large with wonder. His response surprised me. "How can he afford this place?" he muttered, and seeing Arthur Pillars striding into the waiting area, walked towards him without a word to his cousin.

Arthur began with apologies to my father for putting the cleanliness of his nice clothes in jeopardy. In a roundabout way, he took me to task for not advising my father to come in overalls or work clothes. Having concluded his caveats and criticisms, he guided us through the rumbling wasteland to Uncle Arnie's room.

En route --the metal staircase, the pipes, the catwalk, the noise and heat-- my father retained his customary composure. It was when Arthur removed the padlock and swung the wire mesh door open for Mort to enter that the hard fact that he had entered Uncle Arnie's world finally penetrated to his heart. At which, he did the only decent thing he could have done, he cried. He asked no questions and made no attempt at inspecting the room. He simply wept.

Then he fulminated against Paul. But the futility of his curses to rectify Uncle Arnie's situation was apparent to the three of us. Arthur looked a little bored. Mort broke down in tears again, and, sitting on the edge of his brother's cot, began a poignant and perceptive mea culpa.

"You must think I'm despicable," he sobbed to me. "I couldn't even make him feel welcome in my own home."

I sat beside him and put an arm around him. He shook it off as if my consoling him diminished his well-deserved humiliation, and looked about the room in stupefaction, impotent to do anything but gape in the face of such an immense injustice.

"I am despicable. I feel small and mean."

Arthur Pillars stood apart from us in the apex of the triangular room. He watched our family crisis with the respectful deference of an outsider. He seemed pleased by Mort's guilt.

"Momma was the only one who ever paid Arnie attention. Why don't I remember anything about Arnie from childhood? When I think back, he was always with Momma. Momma was the only one of us who would have him. I could've taken care of him. He's easy to get along with. The only Balsom he sees anymore is that disgusting Benny. Benny did terrible things to him

when we were kids, and I never did anything to help Arnie. I've never done anything to help Arnie. None of us has."

"It ain't so bad, Doc." Arthur had moved into the family circle to console Mort and hear his confession more clearly. "Arnie's doin' okay. He don't need no help. He helps hisself, and he's got me."

"It would have been bad enough to lock him away in a place that was livable. To leave him in this for thirty years..." Mort spat and the spittle stuck to his dry lips, "this is shameful. And what's worse, we all of us felt so damn virtuous because we had given Arnie his independence. All that meant was he was out of our houses and no longer underfoot."

"Last night on the phone," he said with wild vigor, "you talked about ecstasy. I don't know anything about ecstasy. Ecstasy is an extremity of some sort, just as this," he indicated the room, "is an extremity of some sort. But they are definitely not the same sort."

"Lilah's family say that Arnie's a happy man. He's lucky to be who he is. Bullshit? I don't know anymore. I know he not lucky to be where he is."

"Is Arnie happy? Let's call what we see here Happiness, with a capital H. I say Arnie is Happy. Arnie is one of the Happiest men in the world. How could Arnie not be Happy and survive here? A man who was not in a state of profound Happiness would lose his mind here. I see his Happiness in the shabby carpet, in the decrepit furniture, in the heat and noise and darkness and I thank God that I was allowed to be one of the benefactors responsible for his Happiness. You should be proud to be my son."

He turned to Arthur who had understood nothing but the violence of Mort's declamation, and had been moved to tears by it. Mort put a hand on Arthur's shoulder, and they cried like drowning men gulping for air.

"What will you do," I asked after several minutes.

"I will erase every trace of Happiness from Arnie's life," Mort declared. "Let's go see the Director. I'll have Arnie out of here and in a new apartment within a week."

"Ain't that easy," Arthur Pillars said thoughtfully. "Arnie's got lotsa memories here. Maybe he don't wanna move."

His extreme self-denunciation had made him self-righteous. Mort would not be defied. His anger glowed in the dullness of the room.

"He'll take his memories with him! I'll get him new memories. What kind of pleasant memories can come from living here?"

Arthur stuck up for his best friend. "Arnie's doin' okay, Doc. Me an' him's had good times here. I just meant you gotta be careful how you put it to him, that's all."

Mort deflated. "I still bully him. It's become habitual with me."

It was time for me to go to the airport. Mort was sitting bleakly on Uncle Arnie's cot, as stolid and passive as his twin. Arthur Pillars was twiddling with TV knobs, trying to locate the Pirates game. I showed myself out. Uncle Arnie did not return for another five hours, during which time Mort negotiated with the Manager of Silver Birches and napped on the cot. Arthur kept vigil at the wooden table long after the game had run its course.

Uncle Arnie returned at evening, tired but jovial. He began to cry seeing Mort there.

"I didn't do nothing, honest," he blubbered again and again until he noticed that Mort, too, was crying and asking his forgiveness. Arthur Pillars had grown fond of Mort during their long wait, and as the most coherent person in the room, explained the situation to Uncle Arnie. Uncle Arnie demurred with alarm.

"But why not?" Mort asked in confusion.

"Don't wanna," said Uncle Arnie, and set his jaw against Mort's rejoinder.

"You don't like it here, do you?" Mort asked, and Uncle Arnie's jaw jutted out another notch.

"Arnie, he got you a beautiful apartment upstairs." Arthur was exuberant. "Ain't that great news? Ya gotta move there!"

Even with his brother standing beside him, Uncle Arnie could not hide the truth from his best friend.

"Paul'll get mad," he said simply.

"Fuck Paul," Mort said. Uncle Arnie grinned broadly, but shook his head.

"You ain't always gonna be around. Paul'll come back from Florida some day and gimme hell."

"I said fuck Paul. Listen, Arnie. I phoned Louis and he's flying here now from the West Coast. He'll be in around midnight. The two of us are going to be responsible for you from now on. We've bought you an apartment here in the home."

Arnie whimpered, "Paul an' Ruth'll kill me." His eye secretion dripped onto his lips.

"Goddamit, Arnie, it's not his money or your money. It's our money, mine and Louis's. It's the least we can do."

"The least you can do for what?" Uncle Arnie asked.

"Now, Arn," Arthur explained, "y'know, the least they can do."

"The least we can do to give you a better place to live than this," Mort said, and felt humiliated at having to say it.

Uncle Arnie thought it over calmly. "Can I have a telephone?" he asked.

"Yes, of course," Mort said, wondering who on earth Arnie would phone.

"Can I have a fridge in my room? I could keep cake in it."

Mort nodded.

"And a microwave?" The prospect of food excited Uncle Arnie. "I could fix hamburgers in it."

"Arnie, you're sixty years old. You can have anything you like."

Uncle Arnie's head jerked up. "What's my age gotta do with it? I always been the same age as you, and that didn't get me a cuppa coffee. I been doin' alright, and suddenly I'm sixty and can have a fridge. What the hell you talkin' about, Mort?"

Uncle Arnie's hands were trembling. His face was leaking, perhaps out of fear of his unwonted vehemence. Mort pulled a handkerchief out of Uncle Arnie's back pocket to wipe him off. A large, grimy wallet tumbled out with the handkerchief. A piece of cardboard stuck out from the wallet. Mort

pulled it out and saw the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of the four brothers written on it. At the top in bold magic marker was written 'In Case of Emergency'. Arnie snatched the wallet from Mort's hands.

"You going out these days, Arnie?" Mort asked conspiratorially.

"What if I am? I'm sixty," Uncle Arnie shouted.

"Arnie don't go nowhere," Arthur said with finality, and stepped between the two brothers as if Mort might read something incriminating in Arnie's expression.

"Yeah I do," Uncle Arnie shouted again. "I go out plenty. I'm sixty and I go out alot."

"Well, you've certainly been out somewhere for the past two days," Mort said, smiling.

"No he ain't," said Arthur.

"Okay, okay." Mort put up his hands in surrender. He was sorry his unwarranted familiarity had riled his brother. "Arnie, I don't want to fight with you. Louis and I have decided you should move into a nice apartment here at the home. I've seen the apartment, and we've decided to buy it for you. You want to go into it or no?"

Uncle Arnie had enjoyed throwing the weight of his age around briefly, but a decision by the brothers had the force of edict to which he could only submit meekly. He sat on a chair, looking vacantly at his thick fingers. It was impossible to read his mind from his expression.

"You want to go into it?" Mort prodded again.

"I'm sixty an' I wanna go inta't," he said, defiantly raking up the embers of the last argument.

"Well, then, you can be getting your things together to move out. Louis and I will go over the papers with the Manager tomorrow, and then give you a hand moving. We'll have you out of here and in your new apartment in a matter of days."

Uncle Arnie waved his arms in sweeping arcs. "No!" It was a bellow. "I don't want no help movin'. You 'n Louis don't need t'help me move. I'll move by myself."

"Yeah, me an' Arnie'll do it oursels," Arthur said, proud that friendship took precedence over brotherhood.

"No! I do it by myself," Uncle Arnie repeated harshly, dousing the radiance of Arthur's smile.

"We could get a company to move you," Mort offered. "Louis and Arthur and I would go somewhere while they move you. We wouldn't have to be here at all. You're not so young anymore, Arnie. Let us get a company to move you." Mort was now imploring.

"Don't want no company. Don't want no problems. If I can't move by myself, I stay here." Surprised again at his own vehemence, Uncle Arnie's sixty-year old head cowered between his shoulders as he waited for his brother to thump him. To his surprise and confusion, Mort began to cry again.

"Whatever you like, Arnie. I'm sorry for what I've done to you. I'll make it up, I promise."

"He'll make it up, Arn." Arthur stressed the point.

"That's what he keeps sayin'." Arnie was matter-of-fact.

Louis arrived that night from Los Angeles. The next morning, while Mort wrangled with the staff of Silver Birches and phoned his broker to sell \$20,000 worth of common stock, Louis took Uncle Arnie shopping. They bought vivid clothes of glistening polyester, soft Swiss shoes that Uncle Arnie declared made him feel like he was dancing, and two large sacks of rich, greasy cakes and sweets that Arnie was eager to stuff into his refrigerator. Louis and Mort took Arthur Pillars to a Pirates game the day Uncle Arnie moved. By the time they returned in the late afternoon, whatever Uncle Arnie had wanted to keep secret had been moved, and he cheerfully asked the three to help him finish the job. Mort and Arthur cried out of gratitude.

Mort stayed a full week overseeing Uncle Arnie's elevation in lifestyle. If it cost him a pretty penny in lost revenue, he kept the loss to himself. Nor did Louis breathe a word about money or inconvenience.

So each brother, while cursing Paul and his own negligence, sought to compensate Uncle Arnie for the misery their combined neglect had created. Each did all he could to 'make it up' to Uncle Arnie. Each went home --Louis to California, Mort to Florida-- and talked of having had his soul purged by remorse. Mort, for a short time, adopted a penitent attitude at parties, where he would bare his soul and then flog it mercilessly. He seemed bent on cleansing himself until the skin wore away and blood flowed.

Louis and Mort now spoke to each other weekly by phone. Ernest had been lumped in Paul's class as a pariah brother for his lack of interest in Uncle Arnie's well-being. It was Louis and Mort who took responsibility for family history. Whatever their public displays of head-hanging and self-recrimination, neither felt that he was anywhere near expiating his sin. Each confirmed the other in his guilt; each consoled the other with the thought that, for the first time in his life, Uncle Arnie was, thanks to them, living like an adult in ease and comfort.

Each spoke to Uncle Arnie on his new telephone once or twice a week, half expecting to hear that his change of environment had changed him: would he take up painting by number or origami, would he take an interest in televised ballet or Jacobean drama? They were dismayed that there was no apparent change in Uncle Arnie, who remained as cretinous and reticent as ever. Indeed, he occasionally expressed annoyance at being taken away from a particularly interesting television program or an exciting bit of 'reading'. He expressed no gratitude for their calls. They twice got Arthur Pillars on the line when they phoned on weekends.

"Tell Arnie I'm thinking of him. I'm doing everything I can to make it up to him," Mort informed the stammering Arthur who, he was sure, would forget or garble the message.

Each looked forward to years of acts of kindness. Uncle Arnie now had standing invitations to visit either of them whenever he liked for as long as he liked. He never mentioned the invitations, and Mort and Louis were loath to repeat their invitations when they phoned him; that would be bullying. Mort went so far as to envisage living with his brother in a large house in Miami when Uncle Arnie officially retired from his job in five years. Mort's wife, looking less far into the future, was already planning a list of the people she would invite to Uncle Arnie's Welcome Party. She told her closest friends that Mort had a twin brother who was the Salt of the Earth.

But Uncle Arnie died four months after moving into his new apartment. Battered by a relentless sense of guilt, and frightened by the nearness of Death's reach, Mort phoned me in an extremity of distress and asked me to proceed at once to Pittsburgh to bury Uncle Arnie.

The Eternal Flame Funeral Home was, though small, the most conspicuous building on the block; a stately dowager surrounded by flashy, rowdy youngsters. It had been built at a time when the funeral director was as important to the neighborhood as the priest and the physician. The heavy stonework suggested enduring prestige. The four fluted columns were the only expression of classical elegance and a link with a glorious past in the vicinity. The vaulted, double entrance doors intimated an entry to opulence. It was not the sort of structure that one entered with the intention to haggle. The only concession to the competitive spirit of free enterprise was the modernized interior; chains of sleek, brash funeral homes had sprung up since the war, and their slick and superficial approach to bereavement had to be answered in kind. However, the chrome and the mirrors and the silk flowers could not violate the claustral peacefulness in which anything louder than a whisper jarred. I was hushed and demure as I was shown into the director's office.

The funeral director was a large elderly man with a pale face and an amused expression. He seemed pleased just to meet a fellow living creature. The name plaque on his desk read Salvatore Nunzio. His personality proved as spacious as his sporty checked suit, his floral pattern tie, and his four chunky gold rings.

"Your uncle's out back. We haven't touched him. We've been waiting for someone from the family to come and remove his personal effects. We were hoping one of his brothers would come, but you'll do." He winked theatrically. "It's not that he has so many personal effects on him, but you never know what to save and what to discard."

He spoke easily, blithely, with no attempt to ingratiate or to insinuate himself into my wallet.

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Nunzio."

"Call me Toots," he said, and lit a large panatela. He had the breezy eagerness to please of a cruise ship's social director.

"Who arranged for Uncle Arnie to be brought here?" I asked.

Toots looked genuinely surprised. "You don't know? Your Uncle Louis. I thought everybody knew. It wasn't no secret."

About fifteen years before, Toots explained, he had taken his annual gambling expedition to Las Vegas and found himself sitting next to Louis at the craps table. Louis was winning big, and liking big winners, Toots struck up a conversation with him. Learning that both were from Pittsburgh, they formed a friendship that had solidified over the years, the dice and the cards. Louis had asked Toots to oversee Uncle Arnie's remains in the event of sudden death, and Silver Birches had been informed to that effect.

"Y'unnerstand, nothing's been paid for yet. I don't do lay-away plans like some firms. They call them pre-need, which sounds scary to me, but I guess it sounds better to younger customers. Whatever you call it, I can't afford it. So far, all I've done is remove the body from the morgue and store it here. Your uncle's got a grave, though. Louis told me that it had always been planned for him to be buried with his mother. We just open her grave up and

drop him in. I know that Jews don't like to be buried bunk-bed style, but I understand that the Balsoms have never been big on churchgoing, and they do like cost-cutting. That way, it won't cost much. By the way, you authorized to pay? I haven't heard anything from Louis yet."

"I'll settle your bill," I reassured him. "It seems to me that a cheap wooden casket and a fast cremation are all we need."

Toots closed his eyes lugubriously and shook his large head.

"Why not?" I asked, annoyed.

Toots was kind and spoke softly. "I never met your uncle in the flesh and I never saw him until yesterday, but I heard about him from time to time from your Uncle Louis. Seems like the Balsom family didn't take such good care of him, that they pretty much left it to the people at Silver Birches to look after him. When I went over there yesterday to arrange for his transfer here from the city morgue, there were a lot of people broken up about his death. I thought you might want to check with them and find out their wishes for his funeral before you did anything hasty. They were already talking about collecting money for a memorial plaque for him. I'd say they're gonna want a real funeral."

Having nothing to say to this, I fidgeted in silence.

"Think it over. You're going to have to go over there to clean out his room. While you're there maybe you'll talk to some of the staff. Look up Mrs. McElroy."

I nodded, and Toots brightened up. The sermon was finished. The fun part could begin.

"Let's go to the back and have a look at him. I gotta warn you. He's a disgusting blue color and his eyeballs are sticking out, but let me tell you, he was no beauty anyway."

My memory of Uncle Arnie's appearance, which I had carried since childhood, was remarkably accurate. He was ugly and looked vapidly tranquil. Traces of drool spotted his heavy chin characteristically. He had become comically obese and, laid out on his back, I had the feeling that

someone had mischievously inflated him. He was not repulsive; I could look at him with nostalgic affection.

Toots clucked his tongue. "He looks better now than when we brought him in almost fresh. You shoulda seen his jowls, they were something. His eyes don't look so bad either. So, you wanna start with his pockets?"

His pockets contained a set of keys, and a tiny ball of aluminum foil collected from chewing gum wrappers. Toots smiled nostalgically.

"Back in the late Twenties all the local kids were told to collect foil off of gum wrappers to turn in for money to be sent to feed starving children in foreign countries, y'know, China, Japan, places like that. I guess no one told your uncle he could stop collecting."

I opened Uncle Arnie's trousers to see if he had anything in his waistband. His underwear was stained a dull yellow.

Uncle Arnie was heavy. Toots and I strained and grimaced to turn him over. From his back trouser pocket I removed his handkerchief --remarkably unused for someone who had so much need of it-- and his thick wallet. It contained about \$60 in small denominations and a piece of cardboard reading 'In Case of Emergency' with the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of his four brothers written below. Why had he not listed Silver Birches as an emergency number? There wasn't a brother within a thousand miles of him. Did emergency to him mean death? Or did he really think -- pathetic thought-- that one or more of his brothers might reach him in time to set the emergency to rights? Did he think a stranger would go to the trouble and cost of making a long distance phone call on his behalf? I took it that, for whatever reason, he wanted his brothers with him at a time of trouble, and was touched by the sentiment.

We heaved him over again. I removed his watch, read the inscription, and shuddered at the deep gouge the strap had left on his wrist. I went through his inside jacket pockets. Nothing. There was a bulge in the breast pocket. I pulled out the handkerchief-wrapped dentures and with them two pieces of paper. They were round-trip tickets on a Greyhound Bus going from

Pittsburgh to Steubenville, Ohio, departing that Friday at 5:30 in the afternoon and returning at the same time on Sunday. He keeps his important tickets in his breast pocket, I thought, and wondered if my mother had started a tradition with those wrestling tickets many years before.

"Why would Uncle Arnie go to Steubenville and who would he go with?" I asked Toots, mystified. "Uncle Arnie feared buses more than anything."

Toots shrugged. "I never met the man until yesterday. Steubenville, huh?" He looked carefully at Uncle Arnie and shook his head as if something was wrong, all wrong. "No, it couldn't be that. Probably, he was keeping the tickets for some friends of his."

"What couldn't it be?"

"Steubenville used to be the place where all the local boys would go to get prostitutes. It's just over the state line, about thirty-five miles from here. But that hasn't been going on for years. But maybe it's like his collecting them gum wrappers, he just didn't know it was time to stop. Naw, just looking at the guy...no, it don't figure. He's not the type."

"What's in Steubenville besides prostitutes?"

Toots laughed and spread his glistening hands. "Nothing. As far as I know, there ain't even prostitutes there anymore. Haven't been for years. I'm telling you, he's just holding those tickets for someone else. You just hold on to them and someone will be around to claim them. Probably a friend of his from the home."

I pocketed the tickets, watch, wallet, and Uncle Arnie's set of keys. Toots asked for the dentures.

"Take one last look at your uncle as he really was. By the time we get his teeth back in his head and pretty him up you probably won't know him."

I felt queasy. "Pretty him up for what?"

Toots was apologetic. "Some folks might want an open casket ceremony, that's all." He touched my shoulder, whether to console me or out of habit I couldn't tell, and left me alone with Uncle Arnie. Through the swinging doors, I heard the reverberations of him whistling "Sunny Side of the Street".

I had one long last look. I scrutinized his expression to find a trace of something I could remember him by; my eyes were like crowbars seeking to pry off a lid. I wanted a moving moment, elation or grief, it didn't matter. I was hoping for something, even something pathetic, that would linger within me as a reminder of the deprivation he had endured. Or better, a sign of victory of the human will to survive deprivation. There was nothing: two heavy-lidded eyes, a hairy, snot-filled nose, thick lips, a lantern jaw. He looked placid. Except for his color, death had done nothing to change him. He was an essence; what you saw was what you got. And now he would be buffed, manicured, cut and combed, rouged and put on display smiling stiffly, not his true sweet smile of delight.

Not even death exempted him from the role of buffoon. Well, the afterlife would find him as he really was. He was Uncle Arnie who, if asked his name roughly at the Pearly Gates, would start blubbering and oozing to St. Peter's dismay. I left my uncle hoping that St. Peter would wipe Uncle Arnie's face with the gossamer hem of his robe, and not send him elsewhere in disgust as his flesh and blood had done.