

# *QI HEALS*

**NEWS FROM THE SIKE HEALTH QI COMMUNITY**  
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## **TREATING LOWER BACK PAIN**

**A first-time visitor to the Baptist Spine Center is greeted by the sight of a large exercise room, full of men and women of all ages engaged in just the sorts of activities that most people who suffer from back pain have been warned against: running on treadmills, lifting weights with their knees, stacking milk crates filled with steel bricks. In addition to the machines that one finds in an ordinary gym, there are specially designed “multihip” machines, back-strengthening machines, and a Roman chair, which braces your lower legs, knee-down, at a forty-degree angle from the floor as you attempt to hold up the rest of your body. Each patient’s level of strength and degree of flexibility are carefully monitored. Records are also kept of the patient’s capacity to execute ordinary activities: pick up a child, sit at a desk, have sexual intercourse. Each patient’s regimen is designed to make the muscles strong again, the ligaments elastic, and the vertebrae well supported.**

**Dr. James Rainville, who is the head of the Spine Center, explains to his patients that although their pain is debilitating, it is not a sign that they are doing themselves any harm. Like many rehabilitative physicians, he believes that chronic pain originally has a physical cause but that it may become magnified and imprinted along the sensory pathways of the central nervous system. The solution, Rainville thinks, is to try to change the sensitivity of the neurofibres by “reëducating them” through strenuous exercise. In fact, the more the patient exercises correctly, the higher his pain**

**threshold becomes. The hope is that his sensory circuits will be rewired to transmit signals of the healthy aches of exercise rather than the terrifying pain of debility.**

**Rainville's program of aggressive rehabilitation exercise has been supported during the past decade by prospective studies. A recent analysis of sixty-seven patients with long-standing back pain, nearly all of whom had had prior surgery or other forms of treatment, showed that the regimen improved physical capacity and reduced pain. Between twenty-five and forty per cent of the patients for whom performing flexion and extension maneuvers was painful when they entered the program were free from pain by the time they were discharged; the others experienced a marked reduction in the intensity of their pain. Still, Rainville argues, it will be impossible to properly compare the results of such nonsurgical interventions with surgery until both options are included in a well-designed randomized study.**

**Doctors often describe the treatment of lower-back pain as "an industry," and as long as patients are confronted with an array of conflicting advice, that's unlikely to change: the desperate patient sitting in the doctor's office is especially vulnerable to the persuasive recommendations of whatever professional he happens to be consulting. Many patients report a worsening of their condition following surgery. It is not uncommon to experience a brief period of blessed relief from pain, only to have the pain return later, usually six months to a year following spinal fusion surgery. The returning sciatic pain can be more intense and intractable than pre-surgery pain.**

**Dr. James Weinstein, the head of orthopedic surgery at Dartmouth and a leading expert in back pain, believes that there needs to be a radical improvement in the way doctors approach treatment: patients must be given**

unbiased information on what is known and not known about back pain and the various ways of treating it. Instead of informed consent, Weinstein advocates what he calls “informed choice” -- a comprehensive understanding of all the options and their possible risks and benefits.

Weinstein is now leading the first prospective, randomized investigation of discectomy for ruptured lumbar disks to be conducted in nearly thirty years. This trial, which is sponsored by the National Institutes of Health, will cost more than thirteen million dollars. Even so, it will not address fusion surgery for chronic back pain; the participating physicians couldn’t agree on diagnostic criteria and forms of treatment. For the tens of thousands of patients facing lower-lumbar fusion each year, no rigorous, government-sponsored study is forthcoming.

In the meantime, Dr. Seth Waldman, who sees the consequences of failed fusions at the Hospital for Special Surgery every week, wishes that the medical profession could be persuaded to show a little restraint. “If you have a screwdriver, everything looks like a screw,” he said. “There will be a lot of people doing the wrong thing for back pain for a long time, until we finally figure it out. I just hope that we don’t hurt too many people in the process.”

Jerome Groopman, M.D.

Professor, Harvard Medical School

**MF adds:** As many of you know, I came to practice this modality through a debilitating bout of sciatica. X-rays showed two herniated lumbar discs, and the physicians assumed and assured me that this was the cause of my sciatica. I was recommended by four different orthopedic surgeons to have spinal fusion as the only way out of my problem. Fortunately, I met Mrs. Matsuura who healed me in an hour using her hands and qi. I took away many lessons from my experience, one of which is that many, if not most, people are walking around with herniated lumbar discs and never even know

it. In other words, they feel no discomfort much less pain. I also learned that sciatica and sciatic symptoms frequently have nothing to do with herniated discs, but arise from a misalignment of pelvis or sacrum or coccyx or any combination of the three. One other epiphany was that no one has the faintest idea how nerves work, and that the “logic” of a linear progression of pain from the source down a distinct neural pathway, while elegant in its simplicity, is completely erroneous.

Qi will stimulate lower back muscles to separate the vertebrae enough for herniated discs to slip back into place. However, I have found in 80% of cases that the discs are irrelevant to the condition. The sacrum and pelvis need to be realigned using a lot of qi and a hint of muscle. Following this, the musculature of the lower back and legs needs to be realigned and re-educated as it were, in order to maintain the healthy configuration.

Apart from cases in which the back problem was induced by a fall or an attempt to lift a heavy weight without proper support, the onset of pain, though seemingly abrupt, has been a long time in coming. The body has done everything possible to keep the pain from coming. That means shifting weight distribution, and reconfiguring the musculature for months, possibly years. By this time, “muscle memory” has set it, and the body must exercise within the new configuration in order to maintain it. This accounts for the success of the Baptist Spine Center’s program, although the process is lengthy and depends on guidance and machinery.

Once we have realigned the muscles and bones of the lower back and pelvis, we present the person with a series of simple, effective exercises to be done at home daily. None of our exercises requires equipment. All exercises are based on strengthening the muscles using techniques from tai chi, aikido, physio-synthesis, and traditional Japanese chiropractic (*honetsugi*) that was developed to treat jujitsu injuries. The process is short and simple and requires almost no guidance. (to be continued)

**HELPFUL HEALTH HINT**

**Icthyologists have recently discovered that the skin of the tuna is comprised of micro-scales, and now tuna is no longer a taboo food (trayf) in many rabbinical circles. For those who keep kosher over the holidays, tuna is a healthy meal.**

### **UNCLE ARNIE (IX)**

**Helen McElroy was Director of Personnel at the Silver Birches Home for the Elderly. We sat in her shabby office drinking insipid tea, saying almost nothing. She was tall and stringy, constructed from the Arthur Pillars mold. She looked as if she had either been crying copiously or was about to launch into a lengthy cry. I was incurious and kept my expression suitably bland. She talked in a monotone; platitudes about Uncle Arnie, pitiful wishes for the final disposal of his soul, the likelihood of the existence of elevators in the hereafter. I asked after Arthur Pillars. He had to be sedated, she told me, and was resting quietly in his room. I would see him at the funeral.**

**I stood up to go. Helen began fidgeting as a cue for me to sit down and enter into serious conversation.**

**"The staff is wondering what sort of funeral the family has planned," she asked nervously. Her bony forefingers were beating a paradiddle on the desktop.**

**"Nothing in particular," I admitted. "In fact, I was thinking of asking what sort of service the staff would like."**

**She looked at me with such expressive relief that I had the feeling the staff had expected the surviving Balsoms to sell Uncle Arnie's corpse to science.**

**"We've taken up a small collection. We're going to put a plaque on the elevator door as a memorial to Arnold: 'To The Memory Of Arnold Balsom For A Lifetime Of Service'. We'd also like to place a perpetual memorial over his grave. We thought some ivy would be nice."**

**"I am touched and grateful. Exactly what kind of funeral did you have in mind?"**

**Unknown to herself she traced a cross on the desk before she spoke. Her English became elaborate. "Arnold was not a Christian, and I know that people of your faith do not conduct funeral services around an open casket." She looked cautiously at me to see whether she had it right or would be corrected. I said nothing, and she carried on with confidence. "You see, Arnold's death was so sudden, he was taken from us so abruptly, that it would be a blessing to us all to see his face one last time."**

**"Fine." I was unreasonably angry and my tone was curt. Why don't you go down to Toots's cold storage vault and see the real man who lived under your feet for forty years?, I thought. My anger was directed as much at myself as at them; I had looked under their feet only once. My anger was directed at Mort for evading his family duty yet again. And finally, my anger was directed at the irresponsible or irreverent fate that had placed the disposal of Uncle Arnie's remains in my hands. Surely, Helen McElroy should**

not have to wheedle a Christian burial for Arnold out of me. Fate. I softened and relented.

"I'm going to be busy cleaning out my uncle's room. Would you please make the necessary phone call to Mr. Nunzio?"

She bowed her head as if unworthy of the honor. "I'll tell Mr. Nunzio to proceed as planned. The service and funeral will be on Friday afternoon. It's the one time the entire staff will be free to attend. Do you approve?"

Uncle Arnie's apartment was on the third floor next to the elevator. The last ride of each day brought him home, and he could sit in his comfortable living room each night listening to the machinery automatically raising and lowering the metal box that had enclosed him most of his life. A familiar, perhaps reassuring, sound.

The last thing Helen McElroy had said startled me. "Will you be staying in your uncle's room while you're in Pittsburgh? You're welcome to, you know." An inconceivable thought suddenly conceived.

"That depends on how it's furnished," I replied, laughing.

"Oh," she said primly, a rebuke for a slight to the home, "you will find his apartment very comfortable and tasteful."

The former was indisputable, the latter eminently arguable. Uncle Arnie had put no imprimatur on the apartment. He left it as he had found it, just as he had done with his former room. He had disturbed nothing, made no decorative waves, not so much as a ripple to show that he had been. An expert burglar could not have done better.

**The apartment consisted of a small, but vividly colored kitchen (with his beloved refrigerator stocked with pies, cakes, cookies, and cream rolls; the freezer had enough ice cream in enough flavors to satisfy the most demanding appetite and palate, and enough hamburgers to satisfy the most voracious cub scout troop), a large living room with dining area, and a small bedroom with a bathroom just off it. Four decayed socks hung on the towel rack, mementos. At last I could weep.**

**The bedroom closet held a surprising number and variety of clothes. The one-suited Uncle Arnie who visited Miami had, with the disappearance of Ruth and Paul, turned into quite the fashion- plate; he was partial to sports coats and cardigans, and checked woolen trousers were another sartorial favorite. He wore a uniform around the home. Apart from his walks with Arthur Pillars, he went nowhere. I supposed the clothes represented the thrill of ownership. Or, perhaps he dressed up for Arthur. In any case, the clothes signified many hours of shopping and decidedly middle-class taste.**

**Under the hanging clothes and towards the back of the closet were stacked two large boxes and a crate, Uncle Arnie's treasury.**

**The first box contained the largest ball of aluminum foil in the world. The man must have collected assiduously for fifty years to create a globe of that dimension and density. In the Twenties, a ball like that would have given a poverty-stricken Chinese village a week's reprieve from starvation. Had Uncle Arnie, as Toots suggested, continued collecting foil because no one had told him to stop, and the key activating him had not wound down? Or had he**



**stopped collecting and hidden the ball feeling that, as with everything else about his life, it was inferior to the foil balls of others?**

**The second box answered the question. It had nothing but string, a mountain of string. I was beginning to feel that I had stumbled across a man whose goal in life had been to appear in the Guinness Book of Records: 'Pittsburgh Man Collects Pieces of String Which Laid End to End Would Encircle the Earth Six Times!!!'**

**Uncle Arnie had been a secret magpie. That was why he had refused to let anyone help him move. As they were unsympathetic to his 'normal' behavior, he feared his brothers' reactions to his pathological hoarding. Even Arthur Pillars might find it hard to understand.**

**Or so I thought, smiling to myself, until I opened the crate, which, I am ashamed to say, astounded me. It was crammed full of every sort of lurid sex magazine. If he had been catholic in his taste for ice cream, his sexual proclivities knew no bounds. Men, women, children, and animals, all were grist for his lusty mill. Women overwhelmingly predominated, and I wondered if, unable to read the titles, Uncle Arnie had not bought into pederasty, bestiality, homosexuality and bondage by mistake.**

**Uncle Arnie's ball of foil was breathtaking, his pieces of string were inspirational, but he had outdone himself with his pornography collection. It was monumental. It could be a respectable Bequest To The Nation, and placed in the Smithsonian Institution in a position of honor alongside dinosaur bones and space capsules.**

Uncle Arnie had been a very randy magpie. He had liked sex. More than that, sex had been good for him; it had probably kept him sane during those years of living underground. What better way for an illiterate to pass the time in a dark, hot coop than looking at quantities of young flesh so luscious he could close his eyes and dream of it for days? For that matter, what better way for me to pass the time? I reddened. The fact that I had failed to attribute to that grown man the most basic human drive and passion was what shamed me before myself. Whereas Toots had looked at him carefully before deciding, no, he was not the type to take sex junkets to Steubenville, neither I nor anyone else in the family had so much as wondered if he had a sexual impulse. It was taken for granted that he had none. I had written off his fascination with the bus masturbator as mere moronic curiosity; at best, he was interested in penis size. In fact, Uncle Arnie was probably checking to see if he, Uncle Arnie, had been doing it correctly.

I called my father on Uncle Arnie's telephone and told him of my discovery. My elation at my discovery banished my resentment of Mort, and I could talk busily and cheerfully.

"Good for him," my father cried, as if Uncle Arnie had labored in darkness and solitude to create an achievement worthy of public thanks. "Wait till I tell Paul," he chuckled nastily, and then changed the subject.

Mort would not be coming to the funeral. Louis had been severely injured in an auto accident and was in the Queen of Angels Hospital, Los Angeles. Arnie was dead and beyond helping, but Louis was without family and

needed Mort at his side. Mort had asked Paul to attend the funeral as representative of the surviving brothers, to which Paul had, at first, agreed. Paul had subsequently begged off attending the funeral, saying he was too emotional at the moment. Mort had not been able to get in touch with Ernest. His office said he was camping in Yellowstone. Mort only half believed them. The long and the short of it was that I would have to go it alone. We left it that Mort would phone me at Uncle Arnie's on Saturday afternoon to find out how the funeral had gone, and to report on Louis's condition.

Cleaning out Uncle Arnie's room took less than ninety minutes. The boxes of foil and string were light. Those I took down to the basement and left on the floor of Uncle Arnie's old room. No doubt they would provide future paleontologists a clue for reconstructing the habits of Homo Pittsburghensis. I boxed Uncle Arnie's clothes and left them at Reception to be donated to a charitable institution. Helen McElroy sent her assistant to remove the gloppy debris from the refrigerator and freezer. The staff and residents of Silver Birches would feast on ice cream that night, compliments of Arnold Balsom. Sentiment moved me to keep Uncle Arnie's socks. I still have them, though I would have to ransack my garage to find them.

I ate out that evening, and was on the point of taking in a film when I remembered Uncle Arnie's magazines. It had been years since I'd looked at one, and never before had there been the selection offered me by my late

uncle's library. Besides, I'd save the price of a film ticket. I went back to the apartment.

I dragged the crate of magazines into the bedroom and perused them. Some were over twenty-five years old, and I was amused at the coyness of the models, seemingly surprised in the act of disrobing. No doubt many took the bathing Bathsheba as their model of embarrassed femininity as they clumsily attempted to hide what they had been paid to reveal. I passed through mild socio-historical interest to avid curiosity to seething lust, finally, in the most recent section of the collection, ending up thoroughly offended by the sexual act. Satiation had given way to saturation and then to revulsion. I suspect that most if not all anti-pornography crusaders overdosed on the object of their wrath at an early age.

Having vowed to abstain in perpetuity from the sexual act, and wondering how I was going to break the news to my wife, the problem still remained of disposing of that glossy bundle. It should be worth something, I thought, but how to find a buyer? Are there such things as pornographic collector's items? Do the Uncle Arnies of the world have publications for the dissemination of information as philatelists and numismatists do? Did I really want to inquire about that at my public library?

I went to bed at about eleven with the problem still unresolved. Sleep came willingly, but lightly. It seemed only seconds, but was actually forty minutes, later that I was awakened by the metallic clack of the front door

lock being turned. Then silence. I lay still for perhaps a minute to hear movement. A short sharp rasp made me sit up.

"Who's there?" I called into the darkness. My voice was clotted with sleep.

"Arnie, that you?" Arthur Pillars, standing in the living room, was touched by fear and jubilation.

Disoriented and cranky at having my sleep disturbed, I stumbled about the strange bedroom, muttering and breathing heavily. I at last found the door to the living room after having walked into the bathroom by mistake. Arthur was standing in the middle of the room in front of a low coffee table. A votive candle was burning on it, the only light in the apartment.

"Jesus, Arthur, you scared me."

"I didn't really think it was Arnie," he said nervously, betraying the truth.

It might have been the after-effects of the sedative or the lingering shock of his best friend's death; I scarcely recognized him. He looked as if he had been eviscerated and nothing remained within to support the superstructure without. He seemed on the verge of deflating into a handful of skin. His eyes were large and stuporous, his jaw was slack, his head lolled to one side and threatened to topple off. The sickly glow of the single candle made his face eerily wan, and I hastened to turn on the lights. He stopped me with a plaintive groan and a feeble gesture. I led him to the sofa and pushed him onto it. He hardly made an impression. He stared at the candle as if trying to decipher something from its steady flame. I stood by the side of the sofa,

listening to us breathe. We had by some strange sympathy fallen into the same rhythm.

After a while he said, "I thought Arn might come back to his room."

"Arnie's dead, Arthur."

"Sure, I know, I'm the guy that found him," he said proudly, patting his chest, always the first to share an experience with Arnie. "I thought, you know, maybe his soul'd come back. We talked about it, how he'd wait for me and I'd wait for him. An' he said to me, 'Arthur, whatcha gimme if I come back?', an' I said, 'All the burgers you can eat, Arn'. An' he said, 'I ain't got nothing t'give you when you come back, an' I feel real bad', an' I says 'I don't need nothing, Arn, just you. Youse all I want'." Arthur began to cry softly.

I touched his arm. "There's still a chance. It's still early. Do you mind if I wait with you?" He shook his head. I sat on the floor, a few feet from the sofa.

An hour passed. The candle guttered and went out. We were enclosed in darkness.

"I'll try again tomorrow night," Arthur said, ending his vigil. He made no effort to rise.

"Don't go. Stay a while and talk to me."

"What about?" Arthur's voice was uninterested.

"Arnie Balsom."

Arthur pondered, breathing heavily. I turned on the bedroom light and closed the door halfway. The beam angled out of the bedroom away from us,

casting light enough to see, but not enough to break the hazy spell Arthur was under. His face was moving as if thoughts were jostling each other to get out. He rubbed his hands the way Grandma Edna always rubbed her hands when she spoke about Uncle Arnie.

"It ain't fair. It don't make no sense. He was okay down there, but he comes up here and dies. Y'know why? I dunno why. The guy never got no breaks. But lotsa people liked him. He was a real popular guy. Y'know why? I know. He was cheerful, that's why. He always made ya feel good when you was with him. We'se gonna give him a fine funeral. Helen told me. He's gonna be in a nice suit and clean and smilin'. They'se gonna make him look like a movie star, and all of us is gonna be happy to see him. He's gonna look like he coulda looked all the time if he'd a had a chance. Everybody's gonna see the Arnie I always saw. A real gennalman. And we'se gonna plant ivy on his grave, cause ivy grows real fast and lasts forever. And I'm gonna water it every week and not take no money for it. An' I got somethin' t'give Arnie before we put him in his grave. I'm gonna slip the key to his old room in his coffin, cause where he's goin' ya don't need no keys, y'can live anywhere. He's gonna keep that key and remember how bad he had it here and how good he's got it there, and that's gonna make him real happy. Don'tcha think so?"

"I know so. Don't you want to give him anything of yours to remember you by?"

**"It's my key," Arthur explained patiently. "He knows that. He's gonna remember me by my key."**

**Somewhere in the building, an old woman moaned, and then moaned again, a low, extended noise. It sounded like a longing for death. It was ghastly. I turned back to Arthur for protection from the sound.**

**"Do you want anything to remember him by? Anything at all, just name it and it's yours."**

**Arthur did not hesitate. "You got his watch?"**

**I nodded. He held out his hand greedily. "Gimme that. Arnie thought alot of that watch."**

**I brought it from the other room. Arthur took it from me solemnly and slid it over his fist. For the first time that night, his movements became animated. He raised his arm in a graceful arc, and admired the watch in the halflight.**

**"It's a swell watch. Your dad's a pretty good guy, y'know that? Him an' me got on real good that time. Arn always said what a swell guy Mort was an' how he was gonna innerduce us someday. You was the one to innerduce us, but, anyhow, I got to meet him. I'm lookin' forward to seein' him again. I'll thank him for the watch when I see him at Arnie's funeral."**

**I hadn't the heart to tell him Mort would not be attending. His estimation of Mort would increase whenever he told the time.**



**Arthur had revived. He was at once the seeker and the medium. The seance had been brought to a successful conclusion, the spell had dissipated insensibly, and Arthur seemed prepared to stay and reminisce until dawn.**

**The woman moaned again. I felt like moving around, and so walked back into the bedroom, saying to Arthur, "Isn't that a spooky moan?"**

**"Naw," he answered casually, "that's just Rose. She's a moaner. Moans all the time."**

**Relieved, I found the two bus tickets to Steubenville, and brought them out to show to Arthur, asking if he had any idea of what they meant.**

**"It's a mystery," I said, "Uncle Arnie hated buses. I almost had to kill him to get on one in Miami, and here he is with a couple of bus tickets in his pocket. I don't suppose you know anything about them?"**

**Seeing the tickets, the stuffing went back into Arthur, and stiff stuffing it was. Whereas he had a moment before given the impression of slowly dissolving into jelly, he now sat wide-eyed and rigid.**

**"Gimme," he yelled.**

**"Why?" I asked, "Are they yours?"**

**The fingers of his hand jumped and twitched. "Yeah, they're mine," he said, staring at the tickets as if trying to suck them out of my grip with his eyes.**

**"Why did Arnie have them if they're yours?" I persisted. I did not mean to taunt Arthur, but I did not believe he was telling the truth.**

**"He was holdin'em for me. Gimme, I tell ya!"**

**"What do you do in Steubenville, and who do you go with?"**

**"Please gimme," he whined.**

**I handed him the tickets. He shoved them deep into his trouser pocket and kept his hand inside lest the tickets attempted a breakout.**

**"I got friends in Steubenville, okay?" Arthur was a terrible liar, and what was worse, the more obvious the lie the more vehemently he protested its truth. "I do!" he insisted angrily. "Me an' a friend's goin' there. We go there all the time."**

**I teased him. "If you go you'll miss the funeral."**

**"No I won't." He seemed unsure. I decided to ask one more question and then drop the subject as unprofitable.**

**"Where do you stay in Steubenville?"**

**His pinched expression broadened to encompass the truth. "126 Lantern Street, okay? What for you gotta know all this?"**

**I shrugged as if it didn't really matter, and it didn't.**

**"I was curious, that's all. What with Uncle Arnie hating buses the way he did. And having two tickets... I mean, two tickets for an hour's bus ride didn't seem like the sort of thing he'd have on him."**

**Arthur flashed bellicose. "They'se mine I tell ya. Arnie picked 'em up for me, that's all. I was gonna meet him and get 'em off him, but he died, okay?"**

**I held up my hands in contrition. "Okay, Arthur, no need to get mad."**

**"I ain't mad," he said angrily, "I just wantcha t'believe me." There was pleading in his tone; if he couldn't force me to believe, he could beg me to. I was growing bored with the subject and with him.**

**"Why shouldn't I believe you?" I said, terminating the conversation.**

**"Okay."**

**He had my belief in his pocket with the tickets, and we could pass on to other topics. He crossed his legs and sat back in the sofa. He was completely awake and aware. The sedation was wearing off at the same time I was rousing him to anger with my questions. He scanned the room, as if something had been altered. Nothing had. Satisfied that all was well, he looked at me fetchingly.**

**"You gotta drink?" he asked. "I could sure use one."**

**I had put my bottle of scotch in the refrigerator after Uncle Arnie's pastries were removed. I didn't want the fridge to feel abandoned. I poured us each a drink. Arthur enjoyed his. He held the liquor in his mouth until his eyes misted, then gulped it down.**

**"More," he said, and held out his glass to be filled.**

**By his third gulp his natural friendliness returned, and he talked a jumpy, zig-zag chronology of his good times with Arnie. Timidly, not wishing to anger him, I mentioned Benny Balsom, and asked if Uncle Arnie had given him money. Arthur was too far gone with jolly sentimentality to let Benny shake him.**

**"I dunno. All I know's that Benny was bad to Arnie when they was kids, but then somethin' bad happened to Benny and he didn't have nowhere to go, so Arn got him into the home. I just guess he was givin' him money. I don't know nothin' for sure. Money's somethin' Arn didn't like to talk about. But, y'know," here Arthur chuckled broadly, "Benny's brain's so bad he don't know where he is mosta the time, and he sure don't know what Arn did for him. He could be in the home or he could be on the moon; he don't know. The guy's a jerk." The very notion that Benny Balsom could think he was on the moon tickled Arthur, and he laughed loudly.**

**After an hour of desultory memories and laughter, he had forfeited enough of his inhibitions to the drink to depart from hagiography, and tell me an 'indecent' story about Uncle Arnie. This was the tale of the mannequin Indian woman in the Carnegie Museum, and Arthur's subsequent cross town trip, suitcase in hand, to procure a 'nudie mag' for Arnie.**

**"Come and have a look at what that first magazine led to," I cried, guiding him into the bedroom. I had left the floor strewn with the vibrant, two dimensional bodies of ten thousand men, women, children, and animals. "He kept them in this crate," I said, pointing.**

**The effect on Arthur was stupendous. He looked like a nun who, coming into chapel for private meditation, finds an orgy in progress at the altar.**

**"No," he gasped, and staggered back theatrically, "not Arnie. They'se ain't Arnie's."**

**I thought I would give him a gentle teasing. "Maybe he was just holding them for you, like the tickets."**

**"Goddam you!" he shouted. He had begun to cry. "What the hell you come up here for anyway? What you doin' here?"**

**"I'm sorry, Arthur. I just came to bury Arnie." I sounded sickeningly contrite.**

**"Go home. Leave us alone," he yelled. "I'll bury Arnie."**

**And he was gone.**

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**Saturday afternoon at three o'clock I was sitting on Uncle Arnie's sofa with a crate of pornography at my feet, waiting for Mort's phone call or a five o'clock departure to the airport, whichever came first. It was my first trip back to the room since Thursday afternoon when I had re-packed the crate, left Uncle Arnie's apartment to the desperate vigils of Arthur Pillars, and gone to a hotel.**

**Uncle Arnie had been buried the day before, Friday. The day was mild with a settled sky and a rippling breeze that called the living to come outdoors. No major sporting event was televised that afternoon, and there was a good turnout for the memorial service, held at Toots's Chapel of Eternal Peace, and subsequent funeral.**

**The memorial service began in confusion before the appointed time. Benny Balsom arrived early, unsure of where he was or why he was there. He was resplendent in a red-checked blazer worn over light green pajamas.**

**The blazer was his last possession from his salad days, and billowed over his now shriveled frame. His one concession to the funeral was a piece of black crepe tied to his walker like a streamer. His pace down the aisle to the coffin hardly stirred the streamer, and it was midway when he realized where he was.**

**"Who's the stiff?" he asked loudly.**

**His attendant stage-whispered, "Your cousin, Arnold Balsom."**

**"Again? I thought he croaked already," Benny said, and hurried forward to ascertain for himself the deceased's identity. He gazed solemnly over the casket, his mouth and jaw working hard as if chewing on the fact of his cousin Arnie's death. I stepped forward, and placed a familial hand on Benny's wizened shoulder.**

**Benny turned to look at me, and smiled sadly. "Ugly bastard," he muttered.**

**"Who?" I asked.**

**"Him," he indicated his dead relation with a nod.**

**The small crowd was growing restless and annoyed with Benny Balsom. His attendant, who had been hovering discreetly to one side like a duenna, gripped his arm and spoke firmly, "Time to go, Benny."**

**"Yeah?" The little man was defiant.**

**"Yeah!" The attendant was adamant, and steered his charge up the aisle. I followed at a snail's pace.**

**"This old geezer's a handful," the attendant confessed as we breasted the door and emerged into tranquil daylight.**

**"What do you know about him and Arnold?" I asked. "I mean, I heard rumors that Arnold got Benny into the home and maybe took care of him."**

**The attendant shook his head and looked sadly at Benny. The frail old man stood stock still, craning his neck towards the warmth; he looked like a basking turtle. "I don't know nothing about Benny's gettin' into the home. I know that some people didn't want him in, cause of his reputation. All I know's that Arnie made sure he had whatever he needed in the way of food and things, you know things to make him comfortable.**

**"Benny once told me he almost killed Arnie with his fists. It's one of the few things he remembers. Arnie didn't seem to remember 'cause he sure treated Benny good. Maybe he forgave Benny. Anyway, Mr. Benny Balsom don't want for nothin', no sir."**

**"Benny, Benny," I called softly, and the battered head turned towards me as if from a great distance.**

**"Thanks for coming today. It meant a lot."**

**"Yeah?" He was puzzled. "Why?"**

**"For saying good-bye to your cousin Arnie."**

**"I did? That ugly bastard?"**

**The attendant chuckled. "If I ever hear him say a pleasant word, I'll quit my job and become a missionary for Christ."**

**Benny squinted at us in a way that might have terrified me thirty years before. Now he was only a comical tough guy. "You lookin' for trouble, pal?"**

**"Not me, pal," I answered, and left my kinsman to return to my other kinsman.**

**Now that the jarring note had been removed, the piped music could commence. Toots, a congenial and convivial host, announced the service. He wore an elegant three-piece black suit with shiny brass buttons and a scarlet handkerchief flaring out of his breast pocket, representing, no doubt, the Eternal Flame of his livelihood. His was a presence of amused equanimity at a dolorous occasion. He bantered with the sixteen staff members from Silver Birches who attended, Arthur Pillars at their head. They surrounded the casket and gazed admiringly at Uncle Arnie.**

**Toots's morticians had done an amazing job. Uncle Arnie could have stepped out of the casket and gone to audition for the role of avuncular neighborhood pharmacist in a television commercial. Not that I could easily see him. I was kept well out of the admiring circle, and found myself on tiptoe to get a glimpse of my uncle. Even as a child, when a serious chest illness had kept me from my sports team and I was a feeble rooter on the sideline, I never felt as isolated from an event as I did that afternoon.**

**Whatever Uncle Arnie had thought of his family, we were plainly regarded as superfluous personages by those who had known him best. Nobody offered me his place to view the body; and I did not feel I had a right to demand a spot at Uncle Arnie's side. Nor did Toots, for all of his leading, escorting,**



chaffing and handholding, prevail upon the assemblage to admit me to the inner circle. The word was out: the Balsom family had no claim on its least member. I was the second rank of mourners. It was not until the staff, ringing the open casket, had completed their silent pieties that I could get an unobstructed view of my uncle.

Religion had been excluded from the service out of deference to Uncle Arnie's Judaism, though having lived in a gentile environment most of his life, he probably would have found the unexpressed sentiments touching. Religious themes being barred, no one could find anything to say except Arthur Pillars, the staff spokesman. He spoke warmly and firmly, yet with a touch of wistfulness that convinced me he had not yet been successful in reaching Uncle Arnie's soul.

"Arnie sure looks swell, don't he? Here he is lookin' like the true gennalman he was, wearin' that smile of his. All of us know he didn't have it so good down here, but we also know he never complained, not once. He was a strong guy. His brains wasn't so good, but he had a great spirit, full of love. And all of us loved him. And other people loved him, too. I hope he's here right now, I mean I hope his soul is here seein' us cryin' and tellin' him what a great guy he was, 'cause that'd sure give him a boost. But I know for sure that he's goin' to a beautiful world. He didn't ever do nothin' t'be ashamed of. He was a decent guy. So, Arn, g'bye and good luck. I'm sure gonna miss ya."

Arthur's dignity and poise were admirable. He had spoken, for him, eloquently. His voice was bright with optimism. He wore his sadness with unconscious grace as he might a cloak; his posture and gestures showed him to be sad, but proud. At the end of his short eulogy, he reached unhurriedly into his jacket pocket, drew out something small and glittering, and dropped it into the coffin at Uncle Arnie's feet. He turned, erect, and looking straight ahead, returned to his place as the chief mourner.

Each person in turn gave a short farewell to Uncle Arnie. The last mourner, Enid LaRosa, a cook at the home, sang him a song of her own composition.

"You've left us, Arnold,  
Gone so far,  
Beyond the sky,  
Beyond the star.  
To be with God is  
Now your fate.  
We wish you well  
At Heaven's gate."

She sang the dirge as if she had been practicing it her whole life.

We left the Chapel of Peace to the sound of taped organ music and syncopated sniffles. For an instant I felt a panic of uncertainty. It had never been made clear to me how I was to get to the cemetery. Arthur Pillars, asserting his right to pride of place, rode up front in the hearse. The other mourners returned to the cars they had come in. I had come by taxi, and was without transport. I was on the verge of phoning for a taxi from the

funeral home, when Toots drove up and beckoned me into his car for the ride to the burial.

"Cheer up," he said, "that wasn't too bad. We were lucky there weren't any small children or grieving widows to make a racket. Listen, you know the one about the Irish funeral? Paddy O'Grady dies, and his three friends stand by the open grave as the coffin's lowered in. The first friend, Seamus, takes out a \$10 bill and flings it into the grave. 'Have a bottle of the best on me,' he says. The second friend, Brian, takes out a \$20 bill and flings it into the grave saying, 'Have two bottles of the best on me'. The third friend, a Scotsman named Angus, writes out a check for \$120, tosses it into the grave, then jumps in after it and comes out with the other two's \$30. 'Never mind them cheapskates,' he says, 'have a case of the best on me.' How about that one?"

Toots smacked the dashboard with his beringed fingers and practically laughed a hole in the roof. He was a blithe funeral director. He kept up his banter until we were practically at graveside, when his jokes stopped and his expression became respectfully somber. I felt that with a drink or two I could have been more receptive to his humor. As it was, I was glad to leave his side, and stand slightly apart from the crowd.

Uncle Arnie was laid to rest atop his mother, once again committed to her care. Grandpa Eddie in the adjoining grave would have been gladdened by Uncle Arnie's appearance; he was a very pleasing corpse. Grandma Edna's

tombstone had been washed and freshly inscribed with Uncle Arnie's name and dates.

When the coffin was lowered into the grave, an elderly woman, perhaps an inhabitant of the home, approached with a bunch of flowers. Arthur Pillars, always on the alert on behalf of his friend, stopped her and inspected the bouquet.

"What kinda flowers?" he asked, "I ain't never seen nothin' like 'em."

The woman, though plain-featured, had lively, charming blue eyes that flashed as she spoke.

"Why, they're balsom," she said, and smiled simply. "You see, the red and white flowers grow under the broad leaves. They're very pretty, but you have to look carefully to see them. I wanted Arnold to have them."

Arthur escorted her to the graveside. She brushed the bouquet with her lips, and dropped it lightly into the grave. It made no sound as it hit the coffin. It rolled slightly, and then was still.

The earth covering Uncle Arnie was dark and moist, providing a pleasant change for one who had known only heat. Nothing was said, nothing was read. Arthur Pillars planted a sprig of ivy whose single, large lustrous leaf lay on the gravehead like the visor of a cap, shielding the slumbering from unwanted sunlight. The small crowd of mourners wept silently, then departed like ungainly shadows, leaving Uncle Arnie 'untroubling and untroubled' where he lay.

Now I sat in leaden light in Uncle Arnie's new living room, as numb as the dreary day of which I felt like a living extension. I had been rightfully excluded from a ritual of leavetaking that I had come to execute, but had been allowed only to attend and pay for. My visit had not been necessary. Mort could have sent a card and a check, and Uncle Arnie's memorial service and funeral would have been no different. I would not have known about Uncle Arnie's furious hoarding of foil, string and pornography, but, once the excitement of discovering the latter had cooled, nothing I had learned in Pittsburgh gave me added insight into the scope of the man I had come to bury. I was relieved that he had been cared about and cared for; his life had not, after all, been unremittingly pathetic. He had found a family in lieu of his dead parents and absentee brothers, and had inspired a song at the last.

The apartment was growing dusky, the light was dimming. I was uneasy, and knew that I was wasting my time waiting for a call from Mort. It was time to leave for the airport. Anytime was a good time to leave the darkness of inertia for the light of movement. I would phone my father from home. He would probably get a laugh out of Toots's joke, and be pleased to learn that balsom was a demure flower.

The phone rang as I was stepping out the door, and I hesitated. Filial piety prevailed to the extent that I answered the phone, but not to the extent that I was prepared to converse with Mort for over a minute.

Before I could speak, a woman's voice, possessive and anxious, cried, "Arnie, what happened? Are you okay?"

The breath went out of me. I could hear the line crackle with momentary interference, then become clear. I struggled to say, "This is Arnie's nephew."

"His nephew? What nephew?" She was weary, probably sleepless, but anxiety was energizing her.

"Mort Balsom's son."

Her voice dropped. Her tone was colder than a block of ice. "What are you doing in Arnie's apartment? Where's Arnie?"

I held the receiver with both hands. "Who is this?"

"Never mind who I am! I asked, where's Arnie?" It was a command.

"Arnie died on Tuesday. The funeral was yesterday afternoon."

A pause. I held the receiver like a lifeline.

"No, no, oh no, no. I knew it. Good-bye."

I yelled, "Wait! Who is this?"

She laughed the smallest, saddest laugh I will ever hear.

"This is Arnold Balsom's wife. I mean Arnold Balsom's widow," she said bitterly, and hung up.

*HAPPY HOLIDAYS FROM OUR HOUSE TO YOURS*