

LEAP OF FAITH

(unfinished)

by

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“You’re out!”

Stewart’s voice rose above the swelling clamor from the bleachers.

The young Allison Mott was up and walking towards the dugout before the dust had even settled. She smacked the dirt off her uniform in agitation. She knew better than to contest the call. Arguing with Stewart Wright was a practice in futility. Kelly, at first base, threw the ball to the pitcher, but not everyone was content to accept the umpire’s call.

“Out? Out? You gotta be kidding me! She was safe by a mile!”

Allison’s mother, Loretta Mott, heaved against the chain link fence.

“Hey ump, you know she was safe, everyone saw it!”

Among the personality traits Stewart liked about himself was his knack for managing conflict. He neither sought nor endeavored to create conflict; he simply didn’t *avoid* conflict. He *dealt* with conflicts as they arose and, he was quite confident, he dealt with them deftly. He saw it as one of his virtues. He remained balanced. He didn’t let his feathers get ruffled.

Mrs. Mott was awash in maternal indignation as Stewart addressed her. *Be gentle*, he reminded himself. He approached the chain link. *Be gentle with the mental midget*.

The day bordered on hot. It was one of those summer days that would be filmed in soft focus, slightly over exposed with gently drifting pollen and lense flares. For one brief moment the bucolic tranquility caressed his consciousness as he came face to face with the irate mother accosting him.

“Besides, it’s the last game before the finals! C’mon Stew, if we don’t win this one, it’s another year gone. It’s not fair! Its ... just ... not ... fair ...”

Mrs. Mott’s words trailed off as Stewart stood there impassively. It wasn’t that he was menacing. There was nothing menacing about Stewart Wright in any way, yet his resolve was singularly disquieting.

He wasn’t like the other umpires. He didn’t love soft ball for one thing. And, he gave one the impression of having a life, elsewhere, perhaps even a marginally glamorous life, or at least a respectable life. Furthermore, Stewart wasn’t very social with the parents or the girls so no one knew exactly what that other life of his might entail. Stewart was proud of that fact, actually. He rigorously practiced what he called *compartmentalization*. To Stewart *compartmentalization* meant maintaining an impermeable membrane between the disparate aspects of his life, mentally, emotionally and logistically. No one knew that he played violin in the philharmonic orchestra and that was fine with him. Unlike the other umpires he didn’t project a desperate need to fill some void. He didn’t come off as trying to compensate for a lack of character or self esteem. He wasn’t looking for surrogate children. By contrast, he projected a completeness. In short, he wasn’t like the other umpires in that he wasn’t a big loser.

This made him far less endearing than his fellow officiators.

Stewart smiled a politic smile, “Mrs. Mott, do you believe that Allison deserves a special dispensation? That the same rules that apply to everyone else on this field or any other field

just like it, all over the United States of America don't apply to her?"

Mrs. Mott stammered, "... no ... but ..."

"I call them as I see them. You know that Mrs Mott."

A strange shift occurred in Mrs. Mott, such a subtle transformation that Stewart, at first, missed it completely. He was surprised when her eyes narrowed and she leveled her gaze at him. The voice that issued from her mouth was not Mrs. Mott's.

"One day, Mr. Wright, some day, you may find yourself in a situation when you'll need someone to maybe 'bend the rules' a little. I hope, for your sake, on that day, that you learn the difference between the 'spirit' of the law and 'letter' of the law."

Stewart collected himself and shook off her admonition. He patted her on the shoulder and tried not to dwell on the sweat beading on her upper lip or the pugnacious set of her jaw.

"I don't put myself in situations like that."

There was nothing more to be said. With a self secure smile, he returned to the game and she returned to the bleacher. A neighbor lady tried to console her.

"I don't even know why he refs these games!"

"They don't even pay him! He volunteers!"

"Pshew! Probably one of those independently wealthy kooks."

Stewart tuned out the buzz.

Few people could tune out extraneous noise like Stewart.

He signaled for the game to continue as he removed his cap and ran his hand over his short cropped hair. He was conscious of his premature balding. He kept it short, what else could he do? He never was prone to wear it long anyway, but as it thinned, he was left with no recourse. Simply brown in the winter, it faded to a strawberry blond in the summer. He pulled the cap back down tight and focused on matters at hand.

Allison's team rallied and won, enabling them to play for the league championship, but their victory did little to mollify her mother's acrimony for the inflexible umpire.

As the players and spectators filed out, Allison and her mother found themselves directly behind Stewart at the venturi of the gate between the field and the parking lot.

She fixed him with an icy stare but, much to her disappointment, her glaring contempt didn't even raise a single hair on the back of his neck.

She squeezed her daughter's shoulders, pulling her closer as they slipped out of the ballpark together.

"You were great tonight honey, even if that umpire ..." she trailed off then added in a theatrical whisper as their path diverted from his " ... is an anal retentive asshole."

Stewart heard what she said but he remained indifferent.

By his account she was a pathetic, self indulgent, undisciplined, narrow minded creature. More like an animal than a person. Like a pet. Like a child.

Stewart tossed his bag to the passenger's side and slid into the smooth leather upholstered bucket seat of the Saab. He smelled bad. A moment of anticipating a comforting shower was eclipsed by a mental inventory of the time, space and events between turning the ignition and a steamy cascade of hot water over his body: *Let's see, he mused, swing by the post office before they close the lobby. That score had better be here by now. Maybe I'll stop by Barnes and Noble and see if they have a copy of the (OVERTURE? BLAH BLAH BLAH?) and I have to call (THE MUSIC DIRECTOR) and see if rehearsals are going to start xxnd or the xxth (CALL HUGH AND ASK FOR VERIFICATION) Nan will've already eaten dinner by the time I get home. I'll have to pick something up, hmm, I wonder if Katie is working today?*

He started the car.

The car had recently acquired a strange habit. When he reached down between the seats and turned the ignition, the C.D. player ejected any disc inside.

Stewart held strong convictions regarding products and services. If one were to pay for some product and/or service, one has the right to expect that service to be provided completely, entirely and functioning properly. Therefore, if one is not provided with the product or service for which one has paid, one has the right to redress his grievances. Stuart took this right as an obligation. It was his *duty* to level his complaint against the responsible parties. But his fiancé, Nan, had, at the time, been complaining about his complaining.

Of course she didn't really complain outright. That is, not until she was wound or unwound. Between the range of awareness of, or regard for, her opinion and the absence of either there was plenty of room for winding or, as the case may be, unwinding. Last Sunday, in the parking lot in front of the Home Depot over on Eastern Avenue, Stuart

wound Nan. They had not found a fixture that either liked sufficiently. They got in the car. They shut the door. He put his key in the slot. She put her purse on the floor. He turned the key and the C.D. popped out of the slot even before the little digital message scrolled across the l.c.d.: “HELLO.”

He pushed the C.D. back in, the volume was down, it was very quiet.

All he said was, “I’m gonna have to schedule an appointment with those stereo guys.”

That’s all he’d said.

He could see her posture and he could feel her half looking at him. He gripped the steering wheel for a moment. *Embrace conflict*, he thought to himself, *a well placed query, in a well crafted tone, should curtail much discomfort.*

Being a man willfully disinclined to allow any interaction to escalate beyond a certain crescendo, least of all with someone he shared his bed with, Stewart didn’t hesitate to ask, with the slightest hint of a non-patronizing smile, in a perfectly crafted tone, as he shifted into reverse, “Did I say something to rub you the wrong way?”

Here is a woman who’s trust he’d earned. A woman who respects him. Had he miscalculated? Had he abused that trust? It seemed unlikely, yet her response surprised him. From her throat she uttered a quiet, yet barbed “hiss.”

Stewart regrouped. He scanned her face as he turned to look through the back window. Her eyes followed his till he wasn’t looking at her anymore. Gripping her head rest, arm pressing on her shoulder, he navigated the Saab out of the space. Happily the unexpected sharp edge of her scorn was already dulling. Some kind of chuckle that was little more than a series of subtle chest heaves gave him pause. Was it her own adamancy, or his reaction to

it, which she had found funny? It seemed more likely that her level of emotional investment simply didn't match the tamber of her expression. Stewart wouldn't hazard a guess but wasn't, himself, yet aggravated.

"You complain too much."

She said it in a really off handed kind of way.

He shifted into drive and made his way out of the parking lot.

"Maybe your right."

But she didn't respond. She just drifted off as she often does.

So he didn't get it fixed.

That was three days earlier.

The radio went on.

Elvis Costello crooning, "I can't forgive you for things you haven't done yet."

It made him think of his fiancé and their fight. He smiled faintly and pulled out from his space in the softball field lot.

"I don't complain too much," he spoke out loud in the privacy of his own car.

Stewart was among the first out of the parking area; partially because he was obliged to show up to the games early, enabling him to seize a choice parking spot, and partially

because he is an incisive driver who competently, never recklessly, evaluates opportunities and capitalizes on them. He could never make Nan understand that torque and power, in his hands, were as much a safety feature of his car as the A.B.S. breaks or air bags.

“Besides,” he would often add, “I’ve never been in an accident.

Nan was prone towards being uptight but these facts did provide some solace because she knew it was true. From the first day his mother sat him behind the wheel of her metallic gray, 1982 Chevy Chevette to his first time taking it to the grocery store alone to the current moment, he’d never bumped, nor scratched, nor even dinged, let alone crashed into anything. The only accident he’d ever even been involved in was a minor fender bender in his mother’s orange Vega on a snowy day when he was eight years old.

* * *

Stewart wore the plastic bag containing his CDs like a bracelet. It dangled from his left wrist as he stood at the Starbucks in the Barnes and Nobles bookstore. The handle holes were a bit too tight and stretched, binding his skin slightly.

Behind the counter, Katie hadn’t noticed the white paperback novel under his arm as she efficiently took his order. He knew she played cool for him, she let him be. It was her way of subtly acknowledging him as a regular. He didn’t take her warmth for granted.

The barista was busy washing dishes so she shifted over to make his drink while he fished his wallet from his pocket, set it upright on the table unfolded to ninety degrees and removed a crisp five dollar bill. He slapped the stiff leather closed again and slipped it back in his pocket then took the book from under his arm and placed it on the counter just as Katie was securing the lid on his cup. It lay face up, “White Oleander” by Janet Fitch. She started slightly seeing it returned so soon.

“Oh,” she said, deliberating momentarily, *was it yesterday or the day before when I’d finished reading it ... during my break?* she thought. “Did you read it?”

Stewart pushed his lips up and nodded. He tended to over accentuate his facial expressions around her, like talking to a deaf person. He wasn’t aware he did it. “Yeah, I read it last night.”

“You read fast,” she took up the five.

“I tend to devour books.”

He knew exactly how much his drink was, she didn’t need to tell him. She rang him up, handed him his change, he stuffed a dollar into the tip jar with his index finger. She slid the book towards her, her shoulders relaxed slightly then she smiled a little.

“You didn’t like it huh?”

“I don’t usually read that kind of book.”

“Too chicky?”

“Mmmm, I don’t know about that.”

He canted forward slightly and waved his hand as if he had advanced Parkinson’s.

“First person singular always seems so convenient.” He took up his cup, eyed her appraisingly, *did she want to get into it?* he tried to gauge her level of interest in his opinion. He preferred to share his opinions exclusively with people he held in regard. The

only other customers in the café were all seated

“After we watch a play, my theater professor never asks us what we *thought*, he always asks us what we *remembered*. So what did you remember Stew?”

She spun something, this young woman, it wasn't a web, it wasn't a net, but it drew him in or lured him out.

“The part where she wakes up and discovers that Claire is dead.”

It was impressed upon his memory. A compelling passage of a world weary girl's transrational response to the suicide of her foster mother, the only person who, up till then, had really reached out to her, really looked at her.

Stewart made the quintessential contemplative expression, his face turned slightly up and away, nodding almost imperceptibly, his latte gripped tightly.

“Yeah, I found that extremely evocative: Astrid wrecking the room and all of her other activities throughout the course of the day before she finally paged her foster father. It was almost nerve wracking. I wanted her to call 911 or Ron or run and get help from a passing stranger and, for that spell – hardly a page and a half – I was compelled to be in her place right there in that shattered bedroom.”

“And how did that make you feel?” Katie asked. She figured she sounded a bit too much like a therapist but she wanted to know.

“It made me think of Nan. How it would feel to lose her. In fact, I kind of pictured her laying there withered. It made me want to go to her even though she was just lying right next to me, asleep.”

Nan had made a suicide attempt less than a year before she and Stewart got involved. He never forgot the fact, though he'd long since learned not to mention it anymore. Nan was a bit too dramatic or a little too thin skinned, just like Claire.

Katie's smile expanded but her eyes looked more intently. "Sounds like Fitch got under you skin."

Stewart didn't answer right away. Fitch's description of the overdose victim was vivid. The images and even the scents and feeling of that scene were profound, but what really struck him in the book were the descriptions of the sex. He couldn't help but wonder *when was the last time I made love like that? Have I ever made love like that?* But he certainly wasn't going to mention that to a coffee shop girl.

Stewart took a small sip of his coffee, *still too hot*.

"She takes a lot of poetic license, obviously, it's the style, it's thematically relevant, but sometimes it was over the top. She's extremely indulgent: too much metaphor and simile – too much drama. I don't like to get jerked around."

Stewart measured his words.

"You mean played with?" Katie was listening.

"Unnecessarily emotional. I don't see the appeal. But I guess, for some people, getting your emotions all stirred up like that could be addictive, but it just felt artificial. I don't see the point in it."

"But that scene, in the end, when she's in bed with Paul, in Munich or Berlin or

wherever, and they get naked just enough to do it under the blankets.” Her voice trailed off a little, she was there, in bed, in a frigid apartment with her imaginary, too-skinny, bohemian artist boyfriend.

The girl’s subtle sensuality triggered a series of instantaneous chemical reactions in Stewart which, against his instincts, spurned his rant, almost as an unconscious exhibition of masculinity.

“You know, I actually had real issues with the denouement.”

In spite of his need to get it all out, he paused momentarily to see if she knew the word.

“She cashes in profound trauma for euro-trash art school cache. It just made her whole history seem like adolescent melodrama.”

Katie held the counter; her arms stiff but without tension. Stewart leaned in a fraction. It had been a long time since he’d found himself attracted to anyone besides his fiancé and an even longer time since he acknowledge it. He didn’t even recognize the impulse in himself, he only knew that, on some level, he had to curtail it.

“And you know she’s going to sleep with Oskar ... you know, the art dealer?”

Katie nodded both in recognition and agreement. Stewart’s eyes lighted on the various objects behind her as he processed the consequences of the fictional characters actions then shook it off.

Katie smile had waned. “Endings are difficult.”

Stewart nodded and came back but didn’t respond.

“So what do you usually read?” she asked.

“Mostly mythology.”

Katie wondered how people actually read mythology, *It's not like the bible*, she thought, *there's no canonical text or anything*. Another customer appeared behind him.

“I should probably let you get back to work.” His pitch was just a bit too high to sound nonchalant.

“Probably.”

Stewart turned self consciously.

“Hey Stew,” Katie said wryly, “I’m reading Tony Morrison next, want to borrow it when I’m done?”

“Is it in first person singular?” He managed to not look back.

He left the store with a smile. His mind drifted while waiting for the light out of the parking lot to turn. *She really cared about that book*, he realized. He shook his head as his ears burned slightly. *I must've sounded like an ass; so much for compartmentalization*.

Nan hated when he talked about compartmentalization.

The last time he brought it up was this time last year. The sun was still shining into the kitchen at 8:00PM.

“Compartmentalization?” she groaned, brandishing a large knife which she gesticulated with between cutting carrots for the salad. “Compartmentalization is what enables a man to fuck his secretary, stop by the gym to shower off his mistress’ sex scent, then come home and kiss his wife and tuck the kids in like nothing ever happened.”

He just couldn’t make her see that it was exactly the opposite. By not letting stress from work bleed into his time with her was how he showed he really cared about her.

As the light turned green it occurred to him that his inability to compartmentalize with Katie was a little disconcerting. The cars in the lanes on either side began to pull out but his foot was still on the break. It struck him that this young woman moved him.

Then the car lurched from the impact of a rear collision. The sound of crunching metal was accompanied by a bright star that appeared between his eyes.

* * *

ABSTRACT/NOTES/SKETCHES:

A professional violinist loses his ability to play his instrument due to a relatively minor whip lash caused by a car accident with a hapless loser. Whilst recovering he catches his fiancé in flagrante delicto

He and Nan have been engaged for six years, and she’s sleeping with the guy upstairs. She has an art studio in the attic of the building where she paints self portrait after self portrait with her middle two fingers in her mouth. The sexual connotations are inescapable. The studio is sweltering in the summer and cold in the winter though the landlord put a wood stove in there for her.

One night after the accident before breaking up:

“Since when do we argue? We never argue?” But he didn’t say it like Woody Allan; he said it like a sleepy Stewart Wright.

“We always argue.”

Nan wasn’t tired.

“Until you agree with me!”

A sleepy smile got the better of him.

In the past, or so it seemed, such a tactic was a sure fire way to disarm her and deescalate the conflict.

Gossip: an attempt to analyze, to reconstruct, while feeling superior, seamless transition into fiancée not cooking/eating much, hitting micki dees, with intention to watch TV just to watch TV.

If anything she’s been cheating on him for some time, was about to tell him but then he got in the accident, she wanted to care for him, but finally the strain was too much for her to take.

The break up and accident are coincidental but not related (unless you believe the demon is crafting events). Nan’s last words to him: “Too much dissatisfaction and not enough dissatisfaction, let alone sans prefix satisfaction.”

After he catches her cheating on him, at one point, maybe while he’s coming to get his stuff, I don’t know, he asks her if she still loves him and she says yes. He asks her why and she explains that every one else she knows is so lonely and they’re always striving to fill that void, that feeling of loneliness; even her, no mater how close she felt to Stew, still felt like there was something missing, late at night, when he was asleep, or as she was falling asleep or waking up, she felt it, very alone, isolated, alienated. She hoped that, maybe, if she stuck around long enough, his sense of completeness would rub off, or maybe her feeling of aloneness would go away, it just never did.

After the accident he suddenly finds “friends” coming out of the woodwork to offer their

condolences, but he never had much need for friends and doesn't believe in their connection now any more than before when he was well. This rant goes on with the physical therapist. How many physical therapists hook up with their patients? FIND OUT.

Wanting to make sure he doesn't do anything drastic they try to entertain him and console him but when he's out that night he realizes he knows the bartender who is a joke telling, magic trick doing umpire from the girl's soft ball league. The night in question, his brother Richard comes down from RI to check in on him. Richard is your classic contractor type with sinewy arms, two kids, a wife who's a secretary at the elementary school, greasy hair which is prematurely graying and balding like Stewart's but kept longer in front. He's a simple man. You might say he's the "salt of the earth" type though he's not quite colorful enough to qualify. His hearts in the right place though. Because the events of his life are being orchestrated by the demon this final trial from which he flees ultimately leads him to meet the demon among his host. The demon had been watching him, he went to the first bar earlier that night, then, after he left his friends at the second bar where the bartender was, he went back to the first bar, closed it down, the two (he and the demon) being the only ones in the place.

In the ensuing discussion many questions are asked

Why me?

Why not a thug?

First of all, you have high good credit rating.

You know my credit score?

He was quickly beginning to feel more sober, at least more lucid.

It's the first thing we check.

And, you never follow your gut.

And you're antisocial

And you're anti sensationalist

And your non histrionic

But what about God? I don't go to church or anything.

Demons rarely answer questions straight, usually asks questions in response, like a therapist, that's how Stewart guesses he's a demon. There is a roundabout explanation of purpose or use of soul IN TECHNICAL TERMS. The soul is like a vehicle or portal or vessel, it doesn't inhabit you, you inhabit it. Emphasize perspective, demonic: non linear time frame, been in the future and the past but couldn't say what time where. Demons don't have the same valuation system or categorize the same way human's do. As they occupy this mortal coil there is a degree of disorientation.

Does this mean there's a god? The demon's never seen him, but supposes it's possible if not outright likely though he conjectures that he's neither a discrete entity, nor masculine nor feminine and very likely *not* omnipotent and (as David Foster Wallace says on p.205 of Infinite Jest) "That God might regard the issue of whether you believe there's a God or not as fairly low on his/her/its list of things s/he/it's interested in re you."

"That sounds familiar"

"I read it in a book the other day."

"You read books?"

"What else am I supposed to do while I'm waiting for you."

The demon's name is Bernie. The demon advises Stewart to get some council, get a second opinion, talk to an angel, surely Stewart knows one, or knows someone who does.

"So there're angels too?!"

“I guess that’s the best way to put it, yeah ... angels.”

Stewart asks the girl at the coffee shop if she’s an angel. When he finally convinces her that he’s serious she smiles and says no, but her boyfriend swears he knows an angel. (The coffee shop girl’s boyfriend is based on Daniel Kornguth.)

Stewart meets Josh in the coffee shop and Josh tells him about the angel in question whose name is Chance. Chance is in jail. Then there’s the woman he realizes he could be in love with. She is his physical therapist. I mean, to be more specific, while he’s receiving physical therapy, he ends up having a drink with her after the break with Nan but *before* he rents his soul. Because he’s a bitter wretch but smart, though not really funny, they end up getting drunk (really drunk) and screwing but he ends up being a total, unmitigated asshole and she informs him of such. He says all the things you simply DO NOT say to a woman. “No wonder Nan left you!” The guy vows to forsake love for ever. Then he rents his soul at which point he no longer needs physical therapy (one of his many motivations to go through with it, in fact, he should have one more appointment after he sleeps with Sharon – I think that’s what I’ll call her – and after he meets with Chance but before he goes back to the demon. Somehow they end up encountering each other again after he’s divested of his soul. Perhaps she’s obliged to call him to see why he hasn’t come to any more appointments or to figure out some reimbursement he’s due ‘cuz he paid for a whole bunch of therapy up front or what have you, plus she’s maybe making some sort of conciliatory gesture along the lines of “look, just ‘cuz I think you’re a raging a-hole doesn’t mean I don’t think you deserve proper health care and I really think you can get through this, so ... if you’re not coming here, I hope you’re going to someone else, though I hope it’s not Dr. Berman ... Etc.” At which point he decides to pursue her, perhaps ‘cuz he actually enjoyed fucking her and that memory is unmuddled and once he somehow persuades/seduces her he agrees to get together with her again and they basically start dating and then and only then does he realize with his post soul objectivity that this woman is exactly the woman he needs and that he never would’ve seen that if he had a soul because she’s completely not

his type.

Without soul he can't do many things: no rhythm, no taste, no smell, dull feeling, dull colors, etc. Without a soul you can't "manifest" project and shape your world, minimal projections, protect yourself from harm, accidents. Without a soul you cannot give or receive love. The soul is the only extraphysical link between two people.

But here's the question, how does she realize she could be in love with him? I think it should have something to do with her needing to move up to horse country where her parents own/bought some land. What's appealing about him to her? I can imagine many things: including security, predictability, consistency ... wait, she doesn't fall in love with the guy who had a soul, she falls in love with the guy divested of his soul. Isn't that funny? We know who she is too, three kids, each from a different dad, how can I make her lovable for my story? Be true to her idiosyncrasies?

The love interest by force of necessity must go on the adventure with him, the leap of faith is the very ability to love itself, and that is how we succeed at the end, to love (or try to love) in spite of the odds.

And after he gets his soul back, does he feel obliged to love her? "Oh yes, and what a burden, the only reason I love you Sharon is because of the onerous debt I owe you." "That's not funny! Are you sure you got your soul back?"

POINTS:

- Show me don't tell me.
- His passions or lack thereof
- His self confidence
- His obtuseness
- His independence

- His scorn and judgment or seeming lack of compassion
- His escape
- His relationship to conflict (example of his lack of compassion?)

In one continuous gesture he scooped up a handful of peanuts, held his hand as though he were holding an invisible shot glass, and slammed them into his mouth. Then he repeated the gesture.

Stewart hadn't noticed that autumn had advanced. That day, however, it registered.

His memory was only slowly being reorganized. He took pause. It occurred to him that it was odd he should only now be aware of this splendid, nigh miraculous transformation. But *splendorous*, *dramatic*, *miraculous*, these were not words that seemed applicable anymore. He could not be moved. His heart did not soar. Now that his faculties were impaired there was no swell. No longing linked to olfactory remembrance. Leaves were decaying, trees were going dormant, the air smelled slightly moldy, period.

As he drove on this bright, sunny day something rippled under his consciousness. A notion needled him. The colors were muted perhaps. The breeze whipping through the window was a contrast to the hot air blowing from the dash but this registered only on his nerve endings. Furthermore, he was getting used to the absence of significance to those things. It was only through deeply habituated patterns and conditioned responses that he noticed the absence of significance. Soon, he realized, he wouldn't notice at all. That realization didn't make him sad.

It hardly seemed as though he had any thing to compare the value or significance of colors and sensations to anymore.

As he observed the trees he drew an analogy to art, particularly the diametric ways he and his brother Richard related to art.

His friends and family often commented on how much Stewart fancied art. *Fancied*. That was his mother's turn of phrase. His more artistically inclined associates would praise him for his discerning eye, and breadth of artistic knowledge, both contemporary and historic.

The color field painters were his particular area of expertise, Mark Rothko in particular. He would expostulate his theories about Rothko's and his ilk's oeuvre in glowing, albeit academic, certainly cerebral, but nonetheless heartfelt terms.

SHOW ME DON'T TELL ME: non wistful, non melodramatic, non affected.

In an endeavor to impart his love of the arts on his younger brother, Stewart took him on the train down to D.C. for a large Rothko showing at the Corcoran. Richard was obliging, given that it was an argument which instigated the trip. Richard's mood, throughout the tour, wavered between apathetic and incredulous. The younger sibling couldn't fathom how to value the blotches of runny paint on a cloth stretched over a sizable, rectangular wooden frame and mounted on the wall of a publicly funded institution. The name didn't help any: "No. 10, 1950," nor did the caption: "By 1950 Rothko had reduced the number of floating rectangles to two, three, or four and aligned them vertically against a colored ground, arriving at his signature style." Stewart gave himself credit for not using the word *numinous* once even though it had been going through his head all day.

Watching the foliage roll past, Stewart now understood his brother's seemingly insurmountable disconnect. No extended diatribe on "context" would enable Richard to penetrate Rothko. Similarly, associating an emotional state to the panorama which

surrounded him would be akin to learning a new language without the benefit of any sensory input organs.

Contrary to his expectations, the awareness of some absence was lingering, in fact, nearly chronic. He didn't realize the awareness was fading though, and he couldn't decide whether or not he'd be better off without it.

I can look back at my brother, he thought to himself, standing there in front of "Earth and Green," shaking his head and I can say, "Finally Richard we truly share the same sentiment. I can empathize."

The Saab clung to the new blacktop, weaving through the hills as he approached the Pennsylvania line, horse farms on either side.

Of course, I can neither empathize, nor sympathize.

The sun burst from behind a massive oak as the road cut back west.

But then, Richard might argue that I never did. It just gets harder and harder to compare. They say you don't miss your water till your well runs dry. I'm not sure I could recognize what I'm missing even before I'd been relieved of that certain essential part of me.

I know one thing for damn sure, I'm not going anywhere near an art museum anytime soon!

The light but persistent snow fall mesmerizingly transformed the landscape; shifting all

the hues of the forested hills and obscure sky to copper, silver and radiant white. Distances were compressed and lost in haze. The horizon faded into the homogeneously luminous, etiolated sky.

Town streets were snotty, but the northbound and southbound lanes on the highway each had one clear, bone dry path. Like a dark, never ending, high-speed version of a grocery store check-out conveyor belt hedged by pure white, windswept drifts. The dusty snow that swirled over the bare asphalt resembled pale snakes slithering swiftly through inky water or a hackneyed dry-ice special effect from a fantasy film.

The passing lane, though plowed, was treacherous yet. That notwithstanding, the occasional intrepid mini-van or S.U.V. in a hurry, braved the lane less traveled.

With the absence of beauty in his life the coffee colored snow skipped metaphor and moved directly to desire. He pulled into the Dunkin Doughnuts for a frappaccino

His thought pacing had become so much more arbitrary, or, rather, deliberate. Through force of will, reason could be accelerated or retarded. Even the ever-present external mitigating factors could be seen in isolation and (somewhat) accounted for. Libido, hunger, chill, lassitude and the like became chemical indices or mathematic quantities. Read the gages, throw the levers, heed the dummy lights, press the button, turn the ignition. His body was a vehicle and his consciousness the driver. Since the *divestment*, the performance of the machine, he was sure, had not slackened. If anything, perhaps, it had improved – efficiency-wise, at least. He never ate to compensate for an emotional loss or felt a craving motivated from nostalgia. How does getting drunk feel? The consequences are more pronounced because you can't say "well, at least I had a good time" A qualitative assessment of the experience, however, was not just impossible, but unimaginable. He was

a passenger. A passenger with volition; volition but no discrimination.

Separated

Evacuated

Removed

Purged

Divested

Lost

So, if someone loses their soul, what are they? An empty shell. What is it then, that goes to hell. AHHHH SEE!? There is no hell. You're there the second you lose your soul. Period, forget about what happens after you die. That is inconsequential. Where does this "soul" concept come from? What's the difference between soul and essence and the spark of life? So what, exactly is the soul used for? In the original dream, it was like a portal for entities from other planes to inhabit, but, in other ways, it's represented as a type of commodity. I mean, even from a traditional sense, the devil wanted your soul, but what it meant was simply a contract. You can't be parted with your soul, can you? Not in the devil-went-down-to-Georgia sense. All he was getting was a guarantee, like, if you shake my hand, your soul goes to hell when you die.

The guy sinks into a depression

While out on the town with his brother who visits to help drown his sorrows he meets a demon

The demon explains the recent deregulation on the trade and transfer of souls

Demons are allowed to broker them, lease, rent, sell, etc.

Guy is approached by demon who wants to rent his soul

Souls are conduits or thresholds for entities from other dimensions to enter ours

Guy agrees to rent his soul to get his hand back