the desplazados

a novel

martin zehr

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A Day's Work

Habit and inertia are the first principles of thought and action for ninety-nine percent of humanity. — Gustav Fleisshauer

Driving at the speed of the interstate herd, in the monotonous pattern governing these trips and those of the faceless commuters surrounding him, Gregory Barth's thoughts drifted back to the conversation with his friend. In his rolling metal and plastic cocoon, music ordinarily inducing singing, Otis Redding's "The Dock of the Bay," had become background, his present thoughts intruding, assuming centerstage. He'd lost awareness of driving and surroundings, preoccupied with a gnawing upset forcing his focus on important, if not eagerly confronted issues. His unease demanded attention, and got it.

The monthly Nelson Gallery lunches with Dave Maxwell were reliable respites from the pressures of their respective life routines. Their friendship, forged years ago in the crucible of graduate school, was the foundation for these meetings, surviving as habit through upheavals in their professional and personal lives, including Dave's divorce. In the wake of his split, Dave had weathered fits of depression, but, with much still unresolved, he exhibited a calm that Barth found disconcerting.

After a hiatus of twenty years, Dave had taken up motorcycling, an attempt, Barth assumed, to fill a void during this turbulent period. Mostly a social thing, Dave dubbed the riders he hung out with the "Latte Loiterers," after the hangout where these "wild and crazy guys" gathered, an upscale coffee shop in the Plaza, the swank, Spanish-motifed shopping area south of downtown Kansas City.

He'd mentioned the woman before, Barth recalled, not the prototypical biker babe. The riders called her the Duchess—not for her demeanor, but as a tribute to her bike, a bright red Ducati. The kind of ride, according to Dave, that looked fast and sensuous, even parked curbside.

Today, he had shocked Barth into his reflective mode.

"We started dating two weeks ago. She's one of the regular riders, works in the downtown public library and has two teenage daughters."

"Are you sure it's smart getting into something like this? I mean, it seems like a lot to handle so soon..."

Barth's voice trailed off. It wasn't necessary to complete the thought, but he continued, attempting a brotherly, cautionary exhortation.

"Dave, I just hope you know what you're doing."

"Hell no, I don't know what I'm doing, you old fool, and I couldn't care less. If I waited until I knew what I was doing, I'd never get moving. I'd just rot. I'm not going to be another geezer rocking my life away in a nursing home, wishing I'd tried things. No way! Time to move on, even if it's in the wrong direction... I'm feeling alive again, for the first time in months, and I don't give a damn. I'm going with this, whatever it is. No offense, old man, but you could use a taste of living for a change."

Barth smiled at the reference—he was two years younger than his friend. Dave's decisive tone was a foreign commodity to him, but a quality he nevertheless admired. The last jibe contained no hint of malice, but it stung. He decided not to respond. Dave's energy was real, and he knew better than to put a damper on it.

"Yeah, you might be right about that, maybe your ignorance is bliss, kid."

They laughed.

"Hey, our lives aren't getting any longer. Better to burn out than rust out and all that crap."

His friend's optimism was astonishing, considering his situation. Barth realized that his reaction to Dave's newfound dynamism was based on envy—plain, unadorned envy. Dave's aliveness in the midst of the chaos and uncertainty in his life was the mirror image of the dull repetition in his own. His friend's turmoil and adaptation underscored a nagging dissatisfaction in his own life, a notion

that his middle-aged automaton existence had provided a degree of comfort, the value of which he was starting to question.

Whether this was the ordinary musing of someone in his settled life pattern or not was, to Gregory Barth, irrelevant. If this was his "mid-life crisis," the sense of alarm he felt was undeniably real, and, just as undeniably, demanded his attention.

If not for this gut feeling, he might have been satisfied with a detached, perfunctory analysis of the "problem," but that was no longer possible. The stirring within that had emerged during lunch was now the entire foreground of his being, absorbing him like nothing in recent memory. The conversation was only the immediate cause, the "tipping point," forcing awareness of a constellation of thoughts needing only the push of Dave's remarks. What had been a dormant, vague malaise was now a nagging irritation, prodding Gregory Barth into recognition, gnawing at him, grabbing his attention, with a clenched-fist grasp that wouldn't let go.

His friend's calm, in the midst of the state of flux defining his life, struck Barth with the force of a hammer blow, awakening him to the fact of his own growing dissatisfaction. How could it be that his own existence, with its routine, control and predictability, was acquiring a frame of existential angst, while Dave, who couldn't see the end of his struggles, seemed at perfect peace? The contrast was disconcerting, and this feeling must surely, he thought, push him, pull him, or point the direction to somewhere, an as yet unknown but suddenly desired destination of the soul …his soul.

Some neuronal connection urged to consciousness an image that seemed relevant to these musings. The patient he'd seen this morning, Mabel Cavanaugh, very different from what Barth expected. He'd received a routine referral from a local nursing home to see a new resident with a common malady—probable depression following her admission, which was voluntary. Or at least nominally voluntary. Her daughter, concerned about her mother's increasingly frail health, had urged her to move into what was designated as an "assisted living apartment," for reasons of safety. Mrs. Cavanaugh, the dutiful mother, reluctantly agreed to a three-month trial stay, on the condition that she have her own room, with a window, at the end of a hall, and that she be left alone.

Reviewing her medical chart at the nursing station, Barth noted little out of the ordinary. She was eighty-eight years old, twice widowed, and had been living with her daughter, whose concerns regarding her mother's osteoporosis had prompted the admission. It was a bit odd that, aside from calcium supplements, there was no medication regimen, and she smoked, requiring staff time to wheel her out to the patio after dinner, apart from the other residents, to indulge her habit. She had isolated herself from staff and residents, according to her chart notes, and the staff was appropriately concerned about the new resident's "withdrawal," precipitating the call to Dr. Barth.

Barth knocked on the open door, waiting a few seconds before the invitation to enter, a curt, irritated "What do you want now?"

"I'm Dr. Barth, I'd like to talk with you a few minutes."

"You're the shrink. They said I had to see you, so I can't tell you to go to hell."

Barth entered the room, surveying the space. His first surprise was the sight of its occupant, sitting at a desk abutting the window, staring intently at a computer screen. In his experience, it was still atypical for octogenarians to be computer literate. She didn't turn immediately toward him, but began furiously tapping on the keyboard. Her hands, moving with the speed and vitality of youth, were betrayed by their bony appearance and a smattering of brown age spots. She paused, and turned, facing the intruder.

"What do you want from me? I'm busy and don't have time to waste, so let's get this over with."

This was the type of response Barth expected in conjunction with a court-ordered evaluation, not with a nursing home resident. In these cases, it was common for the conversation-starved individuals to welcome him.

"The staff thought it would be a good idea for me to check and see how you're doing after your first week here."

"So they think I'm crazy, do they? You want a little privacy, some peace and quiet so you can work, and all they can think is that you must be nuts because you don't want to abide by their rules and play happy."

"No, I don't think you're crazy. Listen, if you'll just talk to me, answer some questions, I'll be able to learn something about you and leave you in peace. A few minutes, that's all I'm asking."

Responding in something other than a rude, impatient manner, the woman shifted in her chair, fixing her gaze in Barth's direction, meeting his eyes, examining her examiner.

"What are you working on?"

"If I tell you anything private you can't tell anyone or write about it so the staff can read it for their amusement, isn't that right?"

"Basically that's correct, unless it's directly related to your health."

Barth wasn't used to being the first to answer probing questions in a professional encounter, but he had to acknowledge that her concerns were legitimate and that, indeed, she was within her rights to question him.

"Well, Doc, I guess it's okay, I just need to know where I stand. If you must know, I'm writing an e-mail to my agent. He's always in a rush and doesn't understand that it's not as easy for me to do research here as it was when I could get out."

"Research?"

"Yeah, didn't they tell you? I write romance novels. It keeps me going, it's different from the writing and reading I could do when I was working."

"What kind of work did you do?"

"I taught English for forty-two years at Southeast High School. Then I had to make sure we read the classics, you know, no junk, although I had my share of complaints from parents who thought *Huckleberry Finn* was 'the *veriest* trash.'"

The significance of the latter allusion eluded Barth, but already he knew this lady was a character, someone who would obviously appear, at first glance, to be eccentric, or worse.

"So why do you write romance novels?"

Barth thought the question might help break the ice.

"Because it's fun. I try to entertain and do good, solid writing."

"Have you ever published anything?"

"You've probably never heard of Ellen Foster Hoolihan, or you don't look at the paperbacks in airports and grocery stores. Yeah, I've had a few printed, enough to pay bills and keep me busy answering readers' mail."

Barth sized up this lady—feisty, independent, energetic, somewhat of a workaholic, direct and to the point in her social interactions, and, of course, eccentric. No wonder the staff was concerned. Depressed, however, she was not, at

least not on the basis of her desire for privacy. He decided to take the biographical approach, if she'd allow it.

"I don't want to take more of your time than I have to, Mrs. Cavanaugh. I just want to get some idea about what you need here besides being left alone. I get that."

"You can call me Mabel."

She smiled, for the first time, sensing that Barth was empathetic. At least he didn't count her odd behavior as a source of particular concern. She had no idea whether his interest in her was genuine, but accepted his commitment to keep her private life private and trusted his respectful attitude, so far at least.

From that point the conversation became just that. Barth was intrigued and entertained by Mrs. Cavanaugh's story. A well-educated woman, she was twice widowed and had two children, a son in California and her daughter, a widow herself, living in a small house in Grandview, just south of Kansas City. Life with her daughter had worked out well until her osteoporosis progressed to a point that precluded driving, reinforcing her daughter's concerns regarding her safety. Mrs. Cavanaugh reluctantly agreed to the trial stay here in the city, where public transportation made access to the university library reasonably reliable. The combined income from her pension and royalties from her hobby could have financed a comfortable living in a Plaza condo, with available assistance, but Mabel's lifelong frugality and an ingrown disdain for those who relied on servants rendered such a choice impossible. Never mind that the staff could have been regarded similarly. Mabel rationalized her presence here as vital for her health, while simultaneously encouraging as little interaction as possible.

Had he limited his observation to her thin, stooped frame and wrinkled, pale visage, Barth would have been able to guess this woman's age, certainly within five years, he thought, especially seeing her in these surroundings. By this point in their meeting, however, he noted other aspects of her appearance suggesting an unorthodox approach to living. The long, thin cotton dress, plain in its cut and faded blue color, certainly did nothing to contradict the picture he had formed prior to this meeting, but other outward anomalies hinted at the woman he had observed since then. The digital watch, the small, elegant silver and turquoise ring on the little finger of her right hand, and the stockingless feet,

comfortably encased in a pair of worn handcrafted leather sandals, all raised questions about this remarkable woman.

By far the most compelling aspects of this encounter, of course, had nothing to do with her visual presence. This woman's energy, her enthusiasm, her "impertinent" questioning of and lack of automatic deference to his professional role—these facets of her behavior, with which he had been taken aback, were the source of intense interest. Mabel, the "recluse" who was, within a few minutes' time, more open in her personal dialogue than many of Barth's regular patients, was alive and engaged in the world she had constructed for herself, one she didn't feel obligated to share with the nursing home staff.

I should be so depressed, thought Barth, feeling somewhat inadequate at the realization that this lady had more to offer him than any "insight" he could hope to provide within the context of "therapy".

Scanning the room, his view was filled with awkwardly stacked books and papers, arranged in an order he could not divine. Two cartons of unfiltered Pall Malls lay in wait next to the keyboard. No plants or knick-knacks adorned the windowsill, giving the room a more utilitarian, spartan look than he'd come to expect in nursing home settings. There was a conspicuous absence of personal photos, no clues suggesting that Mrs. Cavanaugh was part of a family network. More surprising, in Barth's experience, was the missing television, the universal pacifier for young and old alike, including himself. He couldn't recall entering a resident's room in a nursing facility that wasn't furnished with this appliance.

"Not much of an interior decorator," he suggested, as much an inquiry as a comment.

"No time," she replied, as if that was explanation enough for her visitor. Then, sensing the deeper implications of Barth's remark, she elaborated.

"I don't want to get the feeling that this is home, like I'm here for the duration or anything like that. As far as I'm concerned, this is a place to get some work done in peace until I decide what comes next. Just passing through."

"I noticed you don't have any photographs."

"Not true. I just want to stay private. The staff thinks it's their God-given right to come in any time they damn well please, poking around and talking when I'm not interested in chit-chat. I'm not giving them a chance to start one of their 'Oh, that's so nice, she looks so beautiful, who's that, where was that taken

talks, especially since not one of them is really interested. They just need to fill their time until the shift's over."

"That seems kind of harsh, Mabel, I'm sure you're exaggerating."

He wasn't actually sure, but felt an obligation to mute her criticism, keeping in mind the fact that this facility wasn't designed to meet this woman's particular needs.

"Here, Doc, if you're really interested, I'll show you some memories. Pull out the box over there by the bed."

Barth complied without comment, accepting what he interpreted as an invitation to her inner sanctum. He hadn't noticed the crudely-fashioned wooden crate resting against the bed. Mabel pulled back the lid and began sorting through bunches of photos, letters and postcards tied together with colored ribbons. She produced photos depicting travels with her daughter, Veronica, from birth to middle age, photos of family scenes with her daughter and both husbands, laughing as she extracted selections for their story value. Barth couldn't help noting the compliment in her willingness to share her stories.

Mabel picked up a manila envelope with a reverence that piqued Barth's interest, carefully removing an oversize black-and-white image and smiling as she fondled the paper memory in her hands. After pausing for her own reflections she offered it for Barth's study.

"Take a look at every woman's fantasy."

Barth took the photo he'd been handed with an appropriate degree of respect, careful not to let his fingers come in contact with the glossy surface. Mabel did not exaggerate—the photo was that of a young Elvis, circa 1960, at the controls of a well-chromed Harley-Davidson, with an older, prim-looking woman wearing a long, pale, cotton summer dress, sitting behind, her arms around the King's waist and a wide, white-toothed smile aimed directly at the camera. Presley was dressed in black slacks and shoes, with an inch of white sock showing, a dark casual shirt with rolled up sleeves and open collar, and a slightly cocked captain's hat, *a la* Brando, adorned with a gold braid band above the visor.

"After he took Veronica for a ride, he asked me to get on." She laughed, recalling the incident.

"You must have been excited."

"Not really, not at first anyway. Veronica made me promise to stop at Graceland, and, you know, I wasn't really a fan. Knew who he was, of course, you couldn't help that.

I have to say, he really had a magic about him. I couldn't help myself, when he asked me to get on, I was thrilled. I didn't think it showed and, honestly, I was worried about what Veronica might think, her mother going ga-ga like a teenager, but something told me I couldn't refuse an invitation like that, even though I probably should have been scared. I'd never been on a motorcycle in my life. You know, he was so polite, so nice. He made me feel I was doing him a favor by riding with him, not the other way around. I can still remember thinking, my arms are holding Elvis, this is something else!"

Mabel was blushing, lost for the moment in vivid recollection. Barth guessed there was a hint of an erotic aspect in her experience, then and now, but decided not to intrude on her privacy any more than he had thus far.

"That's a great memory" was the only comment he could muster.

"Hey, I'm not dead yet, Doc," she replied, grinning directly at Barth, seeming to acknowledge the implicit sexual feelings in her recollection.

"I felt like a kid when it happened, like a giddy teenager, but I didn't care. Veronica was embarrassed, her mother behaving like some floozy, even though it was nothing but an innocent ride, but I think she started realizing that her mother was a person too, with desires just like hers—submerged, of course, but not so different. After that, the trip to New Orleans was just two girls having fun, and things between us changed."

Barth felt a twinge of regret at this last observation. As a boy, he'd never shared such an experience with his father, and his relationship with his mother was formal and distant. This woman, in the confines of her room at the end of the hall, was more alive than many lonely beings "outside in the world."

By this time Barth had seen and heard enough to establish, to his satisfaction, this woman's status as an interesting character, to be sure, but not someone requiring psychiatric attention. His first impulse was to remain seated and entertained by Mabel's stories, but he knew he'd observed enough to fulfill his professional obligations. Any longer and he could justly be accused of voyeurism, no matter that she was obviously comfortable with him.

"I have to say you're one interesting lady, Mabel, although I suppose you know that already, but I've got to get going, and you've got to get back to your agent." He rose and turned to the door, looking back, meeting her unflinching gaze and sly grin.

"You aren't going to rat on me now, are ya Doc?" Her playful smile betrayed her confidence that the question was unnecessary.

"Mabel, consider it our dirty little secret. I'll stop by sometime next month. Good-bye."

Barth left the room and its busy occupant, re-entering the hallway with its antiseptic smell. He stopped at the nursing station, taking possession of Mrs. Cavanaugh's chart. In the section labeled "Progress Notes," he scribbled "No observed evidence of depression."

In the next instant, Gregory Barth reasserted control over this train of thought and the flood of vaguely disturbing feelings. His workaday reality forcefully displaced these meanderings as he made the turn into the office lot. He could put these feelings aside, he assured himself, shelve them for the time being, while assuming his professional persona. Surely he could muster them out for inspection and further analysis at a time of his choosing. In the meantime, he managed to submerge them, by sheer force of will, as he began the process of reintegration necessary to impart an air of competency for at least another hour.

While walking through the lot to the south entrance and up the stairs to the office suite, Dr. Barth reviewed last week's session with Karen Leffler, his one o'clock. She was his only appointment this Friday afternoon, the prelude to a transition to another weekend. This one was the beginning of his annual two weeks of summer vacation, for which, as usual, he'd made no plans.

Mrs. Leffler was a client without a crisis, without an acute trauma. In their long, joint history, she'd presented (or was it concocted?) an unending catalog of obstacles to her well-being for which Barth served, at best, as a sounding board. It had become obvious that there was no solution. Hell, there wasn't even a distinct problem forming the basis for their sessions. Rather, series of successively-displaced subjects became the targets of their discourse, each "crisis" disappearing with hardly a mention and no evidence of relief. Try as he might, he'd been unsuccessful in his exhausting campaigns with Mrs. Leffler. Attempts to

shift the focus to her overriding need for attention were quickly acknowledged while in transit to other forms of self-absorption.

Gregory Barth alternately viewed this situation with exasperation and a desire to meet the challenge to his stamina and clinical abilities. He occasionally broached the subject of therapy termination, based on feelings of guilt for maintaining the relationship absent evidence of a real need or noticeable impact of his efforts. Each time he did, however, she flatly rejected the idea of even a temporary hiatus, asserting that their explorations were vital to her sense of competence and well-being. Barth would retreat in the face of her insistence, choosing to indulge himself in the unconvincing self-delusion of the importance of his role as catalyst in her eventual self-realization.

Standing by his desk, staring out the window, Barth heard a low, throaty rumbling originating in the parking lot, growing louder. Seconds later a motorcycle and its rider came into view, rolling toward the boulevard exit. He wasn't an outlaw biker, but one of the brokers who worked in the investment firm occupying the first floor. He'd seen this rider before, attaching and undoing the bungee cords securing his leather briefcase to the seat, dressed in an outfit advertising no club affiliation, his face partly hidden in the shell of a plain, unadorned silver helmet. The red tie peeking out above the collar of his leather riding jacket was an incongruity, at least for Barth, watching the rider turn into the stream of traffic, accelerating and disappearing as he headed west.

Barth wondered if the lone rider's feeling of freedom compensated for his day-to-day grind in the world of finance.

Is this his fix, his minute of escape?

He was aware of his own literal and figurative immobility, underscored by the knowledge that the biker could, if he chose, head off in limitless directions. The idea of the freedom of the road, the untethered nomadic existence of the mythical biker outlaw, was trite, but no less compelling or attractive for this realization. He recalled celluloid images of Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper cruising through adventure-laden landscapes, blissfully, perhaps deliberately, with few set destinations. But, after all, he was projecting a sense of well-being and personal satisfaction in his perception of the anonymous rider, just as he had with Dave an hour earlier.

The contrast between these imaginings and his stationary existence was beginning to induce in Barth a building tension that was abruptly ripped away by a disembodied wailing from the phone intercom.

"Mrs. Leffler is here for her appointment."

The brief excursion outside his present existence ended, requiring a change in focus and a transition to his professional role. The bout of self-created anxiety quickly abated as he resumed life as he knew it, responding with his automatic, reflexive, "Send her back."

In the next few seconds he directed his attention to his internalized file summary of the client whose presence necessitated the switch from his reflective interlude—Karen Leffler, middle-aged, well-educated suburban housewife, who he'd been seeing on a weekly basis for a year—*or was it two?* Barth wasn't aware of conspicuous temporal signposts that would serve to answer this question but, just as he was dismissing it, he realized, not for the first time, a significance that couldn't be denied. Mrs. Leffler had been meeting with him for an unquestionably long period now, and he couldn't immediately conjure up any landmarks of the relationship that could be remotely characterized as "progress" or breakthrough "insights." Only after a few milliseconds in this train of thought did his client's initial presenting complaints, expressed so long ago, come to consciousness. Barth recalled that, during their first sessions, she laid out for him her deepest, alarming concerns regarding her then-existential crisis. The source of her distress, as she expressed it, was her determination to "find herself," to excavate the core of her being that lay beneath the alluvial layers of misguided, dysfunctional parentage and unrelenting societal demands and strictures which certainly bound her primal self, to her continuing detriment. That is, the search for her "hangups."

As she entered his office they exchanged introductory niceties, while assuming their seats, an automatic repetition of ritual behavior. Karen Leffler was a woman whose lack of distinguishing characteristics would have presented a challenge for someone attempting to provide a description to a veteran police artist. Attractive, her short, dirty-blond hair contrasted with her dark gray coarse wool business suit and modest, unadorned black pumps. She could have been a ten-year associate at a business law firm, a clerk in an upscale clothing store, or the mistress of the manor in a gated community, which she was, without looking

out of place. Her dress and demeanor conveyed a sense of deliberate cultivation of understated success and confidence. She displayed all the outward trappings of the well-tended upper middle-class madam—not ostentatiously, but in a manner which readily and unequivocally obviated the need to communicate her status in any other medium. Indeed, her therapy sessions, sandwiched between weekly yoga workouts and exploratory outings in the mall, constituted one of the more prominent prerequisites, an insignia of subsidized indulgence. There was no stigma attached—on the contrary, for the segment of the community in which she lived, her deliberate attempts at self-disclosure and psychological exploration were regarded as something akin to an admission requirement, post-graduate studies in class maintenance.

Today's crisis, today's worry, was Karen Leffler's chronic inability to attain visible progress in her chosen aspiration, becoming an interior decorator. She had yet to produce her first designs; not even a draft had appeared in all this time. As she put it, "I just can't get started, nothing comes to me, the well's all dried up." Hardly a new complaint—she'd mentioned this problem numerous times during recent sessions, but had quickly been diverted, with no discernible resistance, to other pressing concerns in her litany of crises. Today, however, she brought up the subject with an insistence that wouldn't be denied. Barth quickly sensed the emphasis, if not its source, and decided this was the time to make a frontal assault.

"All right, Karen, today this is important to you. When you've talked about this problem before, we discussed possibilities for dealing with it. The way I see it, you've never followed up on suggestions you yourself thought worth trying, so why is this bothering you *now*?"

Karen Leffler paused, folding her hands over her knees, then, leaning forward, parried the opening gambit.

"I think that might be it, I just didn't think it was so important, now I do, now I'm starting to think I'll never get started. I really did try the things we talked about, copying drawings and sketches, just to get going, but nothing worth anything comes to me."

She paused briefly, then, realizing that Dr. Barth was not going to take a turn, resumed talking, thinking aloud.

"Now I'm thinking the problems I've been having with Ted aren't really so bad… I kept going over them because I thought you wanted to hear them. I think maybe they're just normal problems, you know, not so bad, really, but the designs don't come, no ideas come into my head, and Ted's as good an excuse as any to talk about something else."

Barth reflected on this spontaneous bit of self-analysis that, uncharacteristically for his client, sounded right on the mark. For weeks they'd been hashing out the couple's recurring sources of friction until it became apparent that these were "ordinary" grievances, none of them particularly aggravating, none of them new or surprising. He had held back, hoping against hope that Karen, who spoke of these difficulties with no evident frustration, in a matter-of-fact tone underscoring their unimportance, would gradually lose interest. Now that it had actually happened, however, she was redirecting her energies to the problem of her "drawing block."

Barth was at his wit's end, trying to achieve some balance between an outright rejection of the supposed importance of this problem and a gentle push toward the recognition, if not acceptance, of other possibilities.

"What if you couldn't become a designer, what would you do then?"

"What do you mean, if I couldn't design?"

"I mean, you're the one who keeps insisting this is so important, yet you don't make much of an attempt to get yourself going, you drop the subject without missing a beat and decide it's your relationship with Ted that's keeping you from making progress… Now you think that wasn't really such a major problem after all, and you're back to this. Karen, can you tell me what it means for you to think of yourself as an interior designer, or what you'd think of yourself if you ever concluded that you *weren't*, or didn't *want* to be one?"

"Didn't want to be one, WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT? I'm just stuck for awhile and need your help, and you try to tell me I should give up."

"Whoa, who said anything about giving up? Unless my hearing is messed up, those words came from your mouth. I'm asking for your thoughts about yourself if YOU decided you didn't want to, or if YOU could see yourself in a life that doesn't include it."

Karen Leffler sat there, struggling with the question, sensing she wasn't getting off the hook, not just yet. She felt cornered, experiencing a rush of anxiety at

the realization that the question, one she hadn't bothered to ask herself, couldn't be avoided. She resisted an initial impulse to lash out at her tormentor, to protect herself with an accusation of his insensitivity.

Against his usual instincts, Barth did not immediately insist on a response, taking the opportunity to expand on what he thought was his point.

"Look, Karen, in all the time we've spent on this subject, one fact is crystal clear. You haven't actually been drawing, or taking courses, no matter what the reason. You haven't demonstrated enough interest to even sit down and put a few sketches together, and now, suddenly, it's the most important thing you can think about to *talk* about. Just go along with me for a second, if you will, indulge me and tell me who you are without this goal in your life."

He would have to be appeased, after all.

"Well," she started, tentatively, "I'm Karen Leffler, adult woman, mother, housewife, community volunteer, running the house, trying to take care of myself too, enjoying my friends, things like that."

"Okay, let's stop right there. Is your description so bad?"

"No, of course not. That's really a lot, you know, these days, it's a lot of energy, but you know, if you're not into something else, everyone thinks you're bland, stupid, uninteresting."

"Everyone?"

"I don't know. I want to be fulfilled, that's all."

"Fulfilled, what's that?"

Despite the trace of sarcasm, Barth knew he was onto something, a raw nerve, and he would not be distracted.

"Well, you know, hell, you're the psychologist."

"Yes, I know who I am, but the question is, who is the 'fulfilled' Karen Leffler? Is she sitting in front of me now?"

She'd been shifting her internal compass during these minutes, cautiously attempting to see herself through a new, untried frame of reference. It was like deliberately trying on an outfit in a color or style completely outside her acquired tastes, an action occasionally resulting in the alteration or expansion of her horizons. Her choice had perhaps itself been the rut, developing its own inertia because she had assumed that, to be 'fulfilled,' she had to reach out beyond her perceived boundaries of a traditional woman's role in the household. Perhaps,

however, she longed to assume wholeheartedly the roles of family matriarch, mother and housewife, but had felt guilty, and been unable to acknowledge this feeling. She was beginning to recognize this possibility, seeing that her assumptions had precluded any attempt to throw off the shackles of her constructed confinement. The possibility of revolt became real. Now, armed with the realization that this was a choice, made with no force other than pressure she had felt, at some subliminal level, a surge of accompanying energy surprised both occupants of the quiet office.

"Damn, … excuse me, Dr. Barth, but dammit! It's so stupid … I feel so angry at myself, wasting all this time, I really don't have to. I can't blame it on Ted, I mean, he just went along, you know, he thought he was helping me to self-actualize or something, and I thought I wanted it…"

She paused for a second, assuming a focused, determined expression while looking away, staring out the window.

Barth knew enough to keep his mouth shut and let her go.

"All this time, maybe I can't do this design crap because I DON'T WANT TO. It's just drudgery, so damn boring, what I thought I wanted and…"

Here she stopped again, but Barth steadfastly refused to intercede, sensing, in quiet excitement, that his client was on the verge of a revelation which, expressed in her own words, would have an authenticity and credibility he could never impart with his detached interpretation, no matter how accurate.

Catching her breath, Karen Leffler continued.

"Now, maybe I'm wrong, I don't know, but you know, Doc, I feel excited about this, I really do."

The force of her words, more than their content, informed him, as obviously as it did her. She'd struck a vein, rich with questions arising naturally from openness to a new perspective.

"Yes, I can tell, you've never been this excited before. I don't have to tell you that your energy right now should tell you a lot."

Then, as if to punctuate the catharsis, Karen Leffler exhaled, slumping in her chair, letting her arms dangle loosely over the padded sides, her outstretched fingers inches above the carpet. A smile took shape on her face as she looked directly at Barth for the first time since completion of her self-revelatory monologue.

"I feel exhausted."

"You feel like you've just experienced some great relief, maybe even an insight," he responded. Barth felt a twinge of remorse at the sound of his own voice delivering this cliche, a completely unnecessary interruption.

Karen Leffler had relinquished her presumed attachment to her "problem" with a stunning suddenness, after avoiding questioning of her assumptions for so long. Barth hid his astonishment only with some difficulty. Astonishment at the sudden infusion of energy she now displayed, along with her evident acceptance of the decision to abandon a goal she had set for herself without desire. *Desire was the key*.

"Karen, this is the perfect time to end this session. I think you know what's happened here, we don't need to over-analyze this. Let's call it a day and pick it up when I get back from vacation."

"Yeah, this is something… Thanks, Doc, for sticking with me through this. So, where are you going?"

"No plans. Just stick around and take it easy, catch up on some reading, maybe a few days canoeing in the Ozarks."

"Doctor Barth, you know, I think you could use a change of scenery."

"I'll take that under advisement," Barth replied in a mock serious tone.

"Anyway, this has been a great afternoon." Karen Leffler smiled at Barth as she stood up, grabbed her purse and walked out, in a jaunty manner, in marked contrast to her entrance.

He sat at his desk, trying to assimilate the impact of the session, writing a few summary sentences in the chart to jog his memory before their next encounter. The unexpected turn that the course of therapy had taken had an effect, not only on Karen Leffler, leaving with an air of confidence and energy she had not heretofore exhibited, but also on Barth.

In the scope of a few hours he'd been exposed to successive encounters, with Dave, Mabel Cavanaugh, and now, Karen Leffler, shedding light on the sources of inertia, frustration, and lack of contentment in his own life. The irony that he had derived an awareness of his own personal demons in the course of these meetings did not escape him. Barth had been aware of the malaise he felt in his routine existence, but the day's experiences jolted him into a more conscious

confrontation, not providing answers, but certainly bringing questions into sharper focus.

How is it that Dave, in the shadow of what has to be one of the darkest periods of his life, has an optimistic frame of mind, and he's not denying the rough times that still lie ahead?

Barth had fully expected he'd assume the obligatory supportive role for his friend, but was struck with the observation that Dave had moved, emotionally at least, well ahead of his expectations under the circumstances. During the period of his own separation and divorce, many years behind him, he was a virtual recluse, to the extent that his social life had been reduced to work-related contacts. He was hardly able to find the energy to get out of bed at the time, in contrast to what appeared to him as self-generated optimism and a refusal to surrender on the part of his friend.

Mabel Cavanaugh had, similarly, exhibited evidence of the resiliency of human beings in rough circumstances. Alone, but not really alone, she had constructed for herself a serviceable alternative world that didn't conform to expectations typical in her living situation. She, too, had given Barth something to think about, based on her refusal to acquiesce and accept the expectations others had for her.

And, finally, no less emphatically, Karen Leffler, the obstinate client with whom he'd been engaged in an interminable, frustrating wrestling match through countless sessions. Suddenly, without prior hint of insight, she had pulled and pushed herself to a point of recognition and acceptance he hadn't thought possible. He was, momentarily, elated that she'd experienced what he hoped was more than a passing lucid moment. It dawned on him, however, that he had been a witness, but not much more. Perhaps he was not even a catalyst for the transformation, merely an observer, a bystander who happened to be in the right place at the right time. Barth couldn't elude the nagging feeling that his efforts did not warrant plaudits in this case. Karen Leffler's "breakthrough" was something she likely could have, would have, achieved on her own, just as Dave had somehow achieved his present equilibrium, just as Mabel Cavanaugh, the frail octogenarian, had constructed her own private, stimulating world in the confines of an antiseptic nursing home.

It's possible I won't ever see her again.

He was being left behind, jilted, by his client, an inevitable occurrence, indeed, a goal of therapy, but under these circumstances, a bit of a shock, the feeling exacerbated by the underlying conclusion he drew from the day's experiences.

I'm the one in a rut, I'm walking dissatisfaction, I'm the one who needs to do something.

Even as he was saying this to himself, he had no plan, no method available to him. Experience, moreover, was on the side of the inertia that kept him on the daily route from his apartment to his office, and back. He was envious of Karen Leffler, and Mabel Cavanaugh, and Dave.

Something will come to me.