

(Name of Project)

(Genre)

by
(Name of Writer)

Name

Address

Phone Number

Agency Information

CHARACTER NAME	BRIEF DESCRIPTION	AGE	GENDER
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ATOMS

BY

JOE BECK

CHARACTERS


PATIENT/JOE: a 50-55 year old MIT Physics professor and Nobel Prize winner.

THERAPIST: A 60 year old female clinical social worker.

ACT 1




SCENE 1

The action of the play occurs during a therapy session in May, 2015.

Lights come up on a man sitting in a leather chair in a therapist's office. A woman sits in a wooden rocking chair, opposite him. Above her on the wall are photographs of Sigmund Freud and his students and her academic credentials in frames. 

SUNDAY, MAY 3, 2015.

THERAPIST

(she reads from a letter) ......the court-ordered 
session...today...this police report says you stopped your
car in traffic on the Longfellow Bridge...you got out, walked
to the railing and looked down at the water, catatonic. You
told Boston Police you were on your way out to Logan Airport.


They impounded the car and brought you in...this is not a psych evaluation per se...you're here for me to make a preliminary determination...everything said here is confidential...Our previous phone conversations gave me a chance to prepare for our session today, Sunday.




PATIENT

...did you know this month has five Sundays? Won't happen again for another 11 years.

THERAPIST

No, I didn't...any significance? 


PATIENT

The original Gregorian calendar was closer to the actual length of the year, 52 weeks...but centuries later it shifted off track...ironically, by the time the Catholic Church  buckled under the weight of the science, it had lost its power to fix it...five Sundays...man-made errors in calculations...but the church wins in the end...it got more Sundays...

THERAPIST

...well...let's pray that doesn't happen again...you know...I've worked with scientists before...what's on your mind?


PATIENT

(*He looks at her for some time*) ...It's hard to hear myself say it. I've become this soft, middle-aged man. People don't notice...another species to my students. The cruelty is that I'm finally more certain of my work than ever...then the equator swells...your ass leaks...my once-in-a-Jupiter-moon erections are on no timetable...your tits bounce when you're late to class...and you're a physics professor...objects in motion...stay...and you're a man. 

THERAPIST

Newton and Galileo had personal struggles...and you must make your students laugh.


PATIENT

They were giants. What they gave the world... 

THERAPIST

They had private lives...Newton was a miserable recluse...


PATIENT

Feynman loved to dance. I thought of Samuel Beckett's line  today. "I don't want my youth back; not with the fire in me now."

THERAPIST

If you're finished with the pity party, will you answer the question?

PATIENT

I l  ed science.

THERAPIST

Why?


PATIENT

It served a purpose.

THERAPIST

What's that?

PATIENT

The truth. I've always been curious. 

THERAPIST

On the phone earlier...you ask more questions than any patient I've ever had.



PATIENT

Maybe I channeled Socrates. My parents used to ask me to stop asking questions...tuned me out...now my students do.


THERAPIST

The Socratic Seminar is for Freshman. Kids think there's a logical answer for everything...and they need more attention than an adult, award -winning scientist.

PATIENT

Thanks for seeing me, Dr. Mengele.

THERAPIST

...Are you going to talk to me? 

PATIENT

...Kids want answers.


THERAPIST

Kids want the truth. You're in a very important business...

PATIENT

I know. And they can smell a lie a mile away.

THERAPIST

And so can MIT Physics Professors...Nobel Prize winners. 

PATIENT


Blood in the water.

THERAPIST


That's your take.

PATIENT


You asked me on the phone to recall any recent dreams. I had a flashback to being in church when I was 11 or so.

(The patient rises from the chair, takes a step forward, out of the light and into a dimly lit area and kneels on the floor...he is now a child of 11) 

JOEY 

Forgive me, father, for I have sinned. It's been two weeks since my last confession. My friend Becky thinks I climbed a tree in her yard to look in her window, but I didn't. 

THERAPIST

(The female therapist is now the voice of the priest on the other side of the confessional) 

THERAPIST (CONT'D)

Why would she think this?

JOEY

...I climbed the one in my yard and some branches go over her fence. There's a big one at the top. That's where I was sitting when she screamed. I was facing the water!

*(The patient stands up and steps back,
into the light and sits in the chair
and he is the adult patient again)*

PATIENT

The nuns in my school taught us to tell the truth, but my truth was, I couldn't afford it. I had to stay alive. The system was set up to atone for your sins, not create new ones.

THERAPIST

I thought you were Jewish?

PATIENT

I am.


THERAPIST

What were you doing in a church?


PATIENT

I went to a Catholic school and church. But my mom was Jewish...converted when she married my father. Didn't get around to telling me and my brothers and sisters...then she died.


THERAPIST

So, you equated staying alive with avoiding the  truth? And you're Jewish?


PATIENT

...yes, I suppose. When the priest told me in no uncertain terms I was destined for eternal damnation for lying or masturbating or stealing and I was a pro at all three, yes, I lied...and denied doing all of them...to stay alive...and  Rabbis question...always question, debate...consider...science provided certainty...answers I desperately needed.

THERAPIST

I still haven't gotten any. 


PATIENT

I got truthful, consistent, reliable answers in science...hell, they were laws...without the threat of retribution...maybe Socrates was a Greek Jew. He answered questions with questions...a riddle of the mind...broccoli of the brain. A Law in science  the truth.


THERAPIST

Name one.


PATIENT

A covalent bond. 

THERAPIST

Refresh my memory. 

PATIENT


It's the chemical bond that involves the sharing of pairs of electrons between atoms. The definition was in my textbook. 

It's what made me want to become a scientist.

THERAPIST

Is this a law of science? A truth you sought?

PATIENT


It's the deepest truth from the primary building blocks of matter. Not debatable. 

THERAPIST

Why was this truth so important to you?

PATIENT

(He stares into the distance)...because until very recently, it sufficed. I designed my professional career around this


truth.

THERAPIST

Help me, here...


PATIENT

It's the second part of the definition that I learned...in high school, but hasn't become clear to me until now. Right now...

PATIENT (CONT'D) 

...The covalent bond is the stable balance of attractive and repulsive forces between atoms when they share electrons...I knew the first time I heard the definition the teacher was talking about my parents.

THERAPIST

...that makes sense. Joe, can I call you Joe? 

JOE

Sure.

THERAPIST

This truth served you well...until it didn't...do you want to talk about the bridge? Staring at the water? Were you going to jump?



JOE

The water triggered a memory of..me and my brothers...I was 5 or 6...in our pajamas...sitting on the bed. My dad's there and he's telling us a bedtime story...I was so happy because we had his full attention...it was so rare that he was home...he went to sea for months at a time...The night before he was scheduled to leave for Vietnam...he started telling us the story of piloting his helicopter 200 miles out to sea...to save a dying boy on a Navy ship. And a storm was coming in, night was falling...he and his co-pilot weren't sure where they were so when he got close enough he got on the radio and asked the ship's captain to fire a flare..they saw it and he hovered over the bow of this rolling mine sweeper in wind and rain with no place to land and they got the kid in the basket and started pulling him up...and he's twisting in violent winds now...wet, scared...alone.

In the middle of the story, before he told us whether the kid survived the ordeal...my dad was called away by my mom so he never got a chance to finish the story. I was so scared that my dad had to do this again...and I was certain him and his helicopter would be swallowed by the sea and we'd never see him again...I wondered why he left...when he knew he had us all at home...waiting...sometimes for weeks and months...for him to come home...I couldn't bear to think he might be choosing to leave us for such dangerous work...


THERAPIST

And that memory..tapped you on the shoulder...on that bridge...and reminded you of that terrible question...would your father ever return alive? So you intellectualized your fear...

JOE

I don't know about that...but I did what I was taught...I became interested in tides, waves, wind and the clouds...I studied them carefully. And I smiled when dad said the boy in the basket looked somewhat like me...


THERAPIST

You displaced your fear with a productive enterprise...asking questions and looking for answers... but before you can make a hypothesis, you need to do background research...which took your mind off the pain...and... 


JOE

Part of that is testing accepted theories...mess with a scientist's truth...a law...and it's an earthquake for some of them...


THERAPIST


And what if your "accepted truth" is flawed?  child comes to erroneous conclusions...often...you couldn't really vocalize it...you were certain your father would crash in a storm and die. Two witnesses to the same event see it differently. Now, a lawyer attacks the credibility of witnesses...I'll be that lawyer...your therapist...and cross examine you...for real vs manufactured memories...but I don't want you to feel like a badgered witness...

JOE

...what did the church do during the Spanish inquisition?  An intellectual quartering of heathens? Forced witnesses?



THERAPIST

 Your terror your father might die was real...at the time...emotions are not right or wrong..like sins..I studied science also...it's uncanny how similar some of our undergraduate work is...if you're referring to Galileo

 defending Copernicus' heliocentric theory of the universe...



JOE

...and the ensuing Inquisition formally declaring heliocentrism heretical?...



(long pause)  go therapist girl! And 400 years later...science wins! ...Einstein was researching as a virtually mute boy of three, as a schoolboy daydreaming, as a young man performing the dull tasks of a clerk...constantly doing background research-living it-thinking it...the imaginative mind constantly, automatically constructs hypothesis after hypothesis...it's a pattern among great minds...they appear out to lunch to outsiders...and they are...there is a special kind of ecstasy  in mental work to solve a problem, especially a new way to arrive at a way to solve one...a mental jigsaw puzzle...

THERAPIST

Ha! Ha!

All great minds are forever students......and imagination is more important than knowledge...the terror you imagined for your father's fate was far worse than the reality...you said he was a skilled pilot...and flew Generals...you're funny...

JOE

 It's been a long time...since I talked like this...freely.

THERAPIST

With a woman?

JOE

Excuse me?


THERAPIST

A female therapist?

JOE

A therapist.

THERAPIST

So you have been to therapy?

JOE

Years ago, when I was a kid, I went to a few sessions...

THERAPIST


Why? Did you get anything out of it?

JOE


My mother had just died and I was up for tenure...I wasn't sleeping...always working...I just went a few times...not much to speak of...




THERAPIST

Tell me about the covalent bond your teacher was talking about...when it made you think of your parents... 

JOE

...I was getting ready for school...I must have been in 8th grade...and I heard crying coming from my parent's bedroom. "I don't want to go to work I don't want to go!" Then I heard my mother say "Vic, stop it. Stop this, you have to go." I had never heard my father cry before...I just took my shower...when I got out...He was still sobbing...a pitiful, childish...  I just froze up...I don't remember anything about school that day...except my science teacher talking about my mother and father...disguised as atoms.


THERAPIST

That must have been really scary for you. I'm sorry... 

JOE

Navy pilots don't cry...I knew then I was on my own. And
burning questions needed answers...




THERAPIST

Aren't questions the beginning of the scientific method...the
first of five steps?

JOE 

Sure...lemme guess...we start at the beginning...the
triangle...mommy, daddy and me...the dinner bell...for
cowboys...Frueidian food for thought...

THERAPIST

 Let me be the therapist...give me some family
background... your birth order...an overview...and let's try
not to make this a verbal MMA match. 

JOE

...it's a defense mechanism...the goofball role...I scored points for being funny...five brothers and sisters and a lot of competition for mom and dad's attention...negative attention is better than none...where do I begin?

THERAPIST

...All great tragedies start in the middle of the action...in medias res...start there...the middle of that bridge

JOE

...laughs were ancillary...my first goal was peacemaker... I didn't know how else to make the arguing stop...and during meals...the kitchen should have been marked off with crime scene tape...I was Sherlock Holmes without a CSI team...and a good fart joke was the equalizer...

THERAPIST

That's a big role for a kid to take on...

JOE



I knew when my dad got sober...starting with that awful crying...that being a good father would be the crowning achievement of my life...at 14 I knew what he didn't at 41...and a way to show him...everything was going to be ok...and before you completely dry those tears. don't forget to go fuck himself for not being a stronger father, and a better example...

THERAPIST



...very good and I want to get back to that...but first, please... *(she puts up a finger)* Bear with me here...*(she reads)* "The scientific method is the process by which scientists, collectively and over time, endeavor to construct an accurate (that is, reliable, consistent and non-arbitrary) representation of the world." *(She looks up and folds the paper)* ...is that about right?

JOE

Yeah...that's it.

THERAPIST

But this is for the natural world. People are a whole different kettle of fish.



JOE

Not if you view humans as just another opportunistic species
occupying a habitat and competing for resources in its niche.

THERAPIST

Forever the scientist. You used the words reliable and
consistent...

JOE

Yeah, science gave me those kinds of answers...ones I
couldn't get at home...about life and my purpose.

THERAPIST

Is this about the five Sundays in May? Are they each a step
in the scientific method?

JOE

That's how I see the world. I told you I respond to
structure.

THERAPIST

I want you to consider another theory...the Chaos Theory.



That's what these are going to be...our therapy sessions.

JOE

I spoke with the judge...I picked this date...the judge
agreed...

THERAPIST

The content of our session...not the structure. We're only
scheduled to meet once. Some of my patients go their whole
lives without talking...half of talking is actively,
empathetically...listening. Treating the mind like an
experiment will not provide you any insight...or answer any
of your questions.



JOE

It did at concerts in college...flying without boarding
passes...SPAC, Saratoga Performing Arts Center. Pot is even
stronger now.



THERAPIST

Stop it Mr. Snarky. (*she reads from a paper*) Traditional science deals with predictable, measurable phenomena like gravity, electricity or chemical reactions...chaos is the science of surprises...nothing you're used to...non-linear...unpredictable...insights come this way in therapy...that's the way the unconscious memory works...


JOE

...The butterfly effect...grants the power to cause a hurricane in China to a butterfly flapping its wings in New Mexico. It may take a lifetime, but the connection is real...
I get it.

THERAPIST

Instead...I want you to feel it...It's natural for a scientific mind to...intellectualize it...in the abstract...the scientific method doesn't fly here...now...having said that...if a "scientific method" structure of our meeting will make you feel comfortable enough to share, so be it...

JOE

...the head and the heart are connected...I get it...my first year Physics students know it...the cranial pressure from a migraine is no different from water pressing on the Hoover Dam...the same as political pressure to oust a politician...pressure is pressure...Rodney Dangerfield built a career on it... 

THERAPIST

Let me give you another example...How is it that Iago so easily duped Othello into believing Desdemona was having an affair? He told us he would lead Othello by the nose as asses are...


JOE

I haven't read Othello since I was a kid... 

THERAPIST

..his allegiance to one idea...The military...demands obedience...to your fellow soldier, your superior...your mission...without questioning...he naturally assumed Iago was the same way...so he never questioned him...in the area of his relationship with Iago, he was blind...what would you guys at MIT call them, black holes? Even the best drivers have blind spots. We all have these Joe, even the smartest of us...

JOE

...You know, me being in that tree, looking...at Becky... I know where it's from. Dad and mom were married...but dad...was sometimes...pre-occupied with...a neighbor.  So I guess I learned...like a student...to see tits and ass on women first...then he put them on a pedestal...to assuage his guilt... and the only black hole I grew up with was my house...the black hole of Calcutta...we always had enough government cheese but the emotional poverty sucked the wind out of you...

THERAPIST

And it's still in your passenger seat...it was with you when you stopped on the Longfellow Bridge...another example...Irish writer James Joyce could only identify with women as virgins or whores. His twisted Catholic upbringing stayed with him throughout his life...and informed all his work...as does your silence regarding your words...the truthful ones...not the witty ones you use as a shield...while my bedside manner might not be as cold or indifferent as the cosmos, neither will I be the tits and ass on mommy some Freudian therapists choose to be. You'll get somewhere between a mental hug and a slap on the face from me...(haha). I'm allowed a little fun too...

JOE


Jesus...

THERAPIST

Leave him out of this!

JOE

Aristotle assembled a chart...a taxonomy...he grouped and classified emotions...The Poetic...Have you read The Poetic during your training?

...his work on aesthetics...is not unlike work you do...in science my teacher dropped a feather and a bowling ball...he told us they fall at the same rate of speed...but their respective densities and mass made one appear to fall faster than the other...that experiment was an earthquake for me...I'm told to think about an abstract idea...and my eyes tell me something different...not everything is as it seems...it made me think of instrument controls my dad explained when he flew...in zero visibility weather...the pilot had to trust their instrument controls...and not what  their senses told them. If they could master this mind control, it would and has saved their lives...

THERAPIST

You see the difference? Aristotle tried to "scientize" human thoughts and feelings. We're emotional creatures...layers of emotional sediment...compacted...from our first thoughts...

JOE

Some people are porous-loose sediment and others are clay...I get it. And you're the big drill bit...mining for meaning...the sous chef peeling back the layers of the onion...

THERAPIST

Any different than a telescope searching the cosmos? Or using mind control as a helicopter pilot to defy gravity and stay flying?

JOE

I only needed to look at Debbie Mostner's chest in 10th grade to understand the law of gravity...and in times of stress, everyone flips on automatic pilot...to stay alive...

THERAPIST

This sexual aggression in you...you have these triggers...You don't have to be in survival mode here...here you're safe...I understand the impulse to joke when something hits too close to home...but with you there's a layer of sadism in there...and deflection...sexual aggression is a way to avoid intimacy...

JOE

I know...a hooker will fuck three ways from Sunday...but not kiss on the mouth...


THERAPIST

You got it...

JOE

...just like her perky tits, I was taught to defy gravity...it was all around me...on every Navy base I lived on...a dangerous, exciting world of adventure...but I somehow kept my feet on the ground...with my head in the clouds...and I'm barely 5' 6" tall...how does that work?

THERAPIST

The little Jewish/Catholic boy traveled a lot...saw the world...remembered every little detail, but identified with little. 

JOE

A lonely scientist full of wonder...in a house of strangers.

THERAPIST

Another Newton...400 years later...If we can go back to Aristotle...his teacher...Plato...represented the foundation of natural philosophy (science) with his mathematical ideas.

JOE

Good...one of our first scientists...but it was Aristotle who applied science to solve everyday problems around him.

THERAPIST

But Aristotle, the Bill Nye of his time...was among the first scientists...a bunch of brains in togas and sandals...what attracted you to them?

JOE

A very gay question...they based their answers on reason...logic...it made sense to me...remember, my house was the anti-logic house...on the Naval base with the anti-aircraft guns.

JOE (CONT)

...look at the law of gravity...terrestrial objects fall to the center of the earth...fuck that..it was the other part of the definition...the law of attraction...that was one of very few I obeyed...chasing girls, drinking and smoking...who wouldn't want to become a scientist? There's a method to my madness...when I get Mr. Snarky out of the way...the truth is I craved answers...and couldn't get any at home...

THERAPIST

I'm not your audience...or a lecture hall of freshmen...and the method to your madness is the scientific method. And freshmen should know Hamlet. Who modeled problem solving for you?

JOE

Dad was an amateur scientist, I guess.

THERAPIST

Oh?

JOE

A mechanical engineer, by trade...

THERAPIST

Interesting

JOE

Not really. Nobody cares how the motor and drive belt of a washing machine works, but the tensil strength of those giant cables that hold up the roadway of the Verrazanno Bridge...that people notice...

THERAPIST

You and other physics professors from MIT notice those things...others don't...I can assure you.

JOE

The bridge-the suspension bridge-out over from Brooklyn to Staten Island...it spans time and space-technically...Greenwich Mean Time...(GMT) ...two land masses and a minute degree of time...

THERAPIST

A man-made artificial measure of time...humans messing around with the natural revolution of planets and stars...trying to impose our...

JOE

No, not manipulating...simply agreeing...GMT...an internationally agreed measure of time...a language everyone agrees on...and shares....like the scientific method...

THERAPIST

As a way to what? to... efficiently...communicate! What's the good of having a brilliant mind if you can't communicate your results? What was it you were saying earlier about the value of words?

JOE

Well, I have a different opinion of those bridges...the entrance and exits of bridges are easy-plenty of support, but the long span-in the middle...of a life...carrying children and my parents, working two jobs...that's the hardest part, everyone relying on you and you're out there, all alone...between the two spans...with nothing underneath you but swinging roadway...deadly and scary. And fearful drivers race across that part...

THERAPIST

Yeah. The threat of losing a parent is very scary. You told me mom was gone. How is dad?

JOE

He looks old...

THERAPIST

Can I ask you a personal question? Will you feel like an orphan when he passes?

JOE

I never thought of it that way. I don't know. I panicked on that bridge when I saw the water...the same water that was going to drown my father...

THERAPIST

Childhood curiosity, which serves you so well as a scientist can also make life pretty scary and painful. And that bridge and you might be about the same age...maybe you're both tired...

JOE

Dad taught me to look inside things and see how they work...like what you do...only with radios and TV's.

THERAPIST

People still have hard, protective shells...and I use tools...


JOE

You don't dissect...


THERAPIST

Peel away...the onion.

JOE

I was also heavily influenced...scientifically...by my dad's Uncle Bernie...who grew up with vacuum tubes in radios.  In the 1950's he told his kids the transistor was the future of the world...he lived to be 94...through vacuum tubes, transistors and to the digital age...science is in the family...

THERAPIST

...It sounds like Dad and your uncle influenced you a lot. What have you contributed to the scientific world? What I mean...is a Nobel Prize?  This is the 64,000 dollar question...

JOE

I'm just another guy at the end of 400 years of a very effective method of finding out things about the world.

THERAPIST

The Nobel Prize...

JOE

Will you stop obsessing, focusing on the prize...it undermines the journey!! The journey is the joy...solving problems is my business...if you focus on the prize...you'll be stuck in a tourist trap forever...you musn't...

THERAPIST

I apologize, please continue...

JOE

I'm one of many workers sewing a quilt...trying to knit together our scattered knowledge of the smallest pieces of matter to see whether they fit a pattern. The mechanics are pretty simple. Everyone who has dropped something on their foot, or been drawn to someone...understands gravity...the big questions in quantum physics are about the tiniest particles...the smallest common denominator. It's a chess game and when you're backed into a corner...you could work out exactly what should happen, but in the real game there are so many pieces you can't figure it out...what's going to happen. There's a hierarchy of problems to look at, but the distance between the fundamental rules of the universe and the final product...is almost unbelievable...an endless variety of phenomena comes from such simple rules.

THERAPIST

The chimpanzee shares 99% of its DNA with us-the our
genotypes-and look at the physical and mental difference
between us-the phenotype...

JOE

...now extrapolate that to all matter and time...begs a few
more questions...

THERAPIST

How? Where do you begin?...

JOE

With examples and anecdotes...that's how I teach. Real estate
agents will tell you one buyer can't see anything beyond what
their eyes see and they run out of the house and the agent
loses the sale. Another buyer could sign a contract that day
because they see nothing but potential...creating a picture
in their mind's eye of what will be the perfect house for
them.

THERAPIST

Seeing what's not in front of us.

JOE

That's how you start...imagination and curiosity...make for a sometimes lonely childhood...

THERAPIST

If you don't share your vision...connect with people.

JOE

I publish results in scientific journals and share with my colleagues around the world.


THERAPIST

Not the same. Having a beer and a good eye to eye conversation is healthier.

JOE

My work requires a lot of focused, mental work...one needs solitude...long walks help.

THERAPIST

Newton and all the greats had the same problem...how to create quality work and have a life among people. I call it balance  you might call it equilibrium. What else do you do?

JOE

...I've tried to develop a series of experiments in quantum mechanics that will clarify something we suspect...

I spoke with an astronomer recently...the study of galaxies and nebulae billions of miles in diameter and millions of light years old and my game, nuclear physics, are the same...where particles exist only a millionth of a second...but the formation of stars and galaxies is determined on a massive scale by the behavior of the very nuclear particles I study...and many of them act in predictable ways governed by a few simple rules...and it's up to us to experiment and hypothesize.

THERAPIST



OK. I don't know whether I'm sorry I asked or not...

JOE

Hahaha!!

I look for the highest common denominator in all of matter. The quantum mechanics of the atoms and sub-atomic particles-quarks and such...are calculatable...to a degree...no pun intended. A commonality of atoms...with a sheer, minute difference made a table, a metal lamp..a human brain, a frog...or the atomic sun...the difference between the modern human and the chimpanzee.

The genotype is far more similar than the phenotype...like you said before...but with no imagination one would believe the world is made up of different things...plants and animals and elements...when we are discovering all the time is that matter is matter with minute distinctions...and the math...the details of math...the nuts and bolts of my work...the truth is...I'm beginning to enjoy talking...and taking a break from my work...

THERAPIST

Doesn't this feel good? Imagine talking like this with your father? You will.

JOE

But still...it's more exciting to discover and remember...we're on a globe, half of it sticking upside down, that's spinning around in space, a mysterious force holds us up and going around a great big glob of gas that's burning a fuel...a fire that's completely different than any we could make...well now we can make that fire-nuclear fire-what's revealed by physics is that the truth is so remarkable...and nothing different than what Joyce, your favorite Irish writer did in Dublin...he studied the small details of Dubliners to make grand statements of humanity...I read the Odyssey also.

I told you we were nerds...but this nerd is enjoying talking...

THERAPIST

...let's do some more...what are some of your earliest memories of childhood?

JOE

(Neal Young's Heart Of Gold begins playing softly)

A song I suddenly heard one morning when I was riding a horse- at the local stables in San Diego. The singer had a country twang to his voice and it was high pitched...like a girl and haunting and full of longing and sadness and it was beautiful. I felt what he was singing about-with this rusty sounded harmonica-between the chorus parts...it was Neil Young singing Heart of Gold. It started *(he sings)* "I want to live, I want to give, I've been a miner for a heart of gold...It's these expressions I never give...*(suddenly crying)* that keep me searching for a heart of gold...And I'm getting old...that song was released in February, 1972...I was eight years old...no eight year old has any business feeling old...

THERAPIST

You're right...I'm sorry.

JOE

Here this singer had expressions he couldn't give words
to...just like me and my questions...and we both searched for
a pure heart...of gold...unfulfilled longing...

THERAPIST

So if you don't get answers from mom and dad...and the
questions never stop...the questions change...

JOE

*(America's I've Been Through The Desert ON A Horse With No
Name begins playing)*

And here's another...earlier one- I was at the same ranch on
a horse..the ranch hands had an old transistor radio tied to
a fence post and the announcer said "here's a new song from a
group called America." It was A Horse With No Name.

It went "I've been through the desert on a horse with no name...It felt good to be out of the rain...In the desert you can remember your name Cause there ain't no one for to give you no pain...ahaahaha..." And this ranch was in a valley in the middle of a desert...It just spoke to me...this was 1971...I was seven! And I've relived these moments my whole life since...


THERAPIST

Music seems to have played a significant role in your life. Formative years..at least. These are very sweet memories of childhood...but a child comes to a truth differently than an adult...scientist...

JOE

Like the big truths? God? Country? Family? (*Standing and saluting*) Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country!!

THERAPIST

Don't be a snob...Mr. Snarky...You're not the only authority on science... 

JOE

...no...other people have authority over me...and never missed a chance to remind me of it...to this day...I see red when power is abused...like during my father's alcoholic rages...But science was always there for me...even way back when...when I had to answer to a higher authority...when I lived at home...

THERAPIST

...authority like the leaders of the Catholic church at the time? Galileo and Copernicus and all great minds...all had to answer to them...and so do you...in some way...today....you're at the end of a 400 year period of discovery.

JOE

...Like a Navy father drunk with grandiosity who had his kids say "sir." ...Other kids loved Captain America, Superman...my heroes were these geniuses who stood up to stupid snobs with God behind them...Aristotle, Plato, Copernicus, Newton, Galileo, daVinci, Pascal, Watson and Crick, Curie, Einstein, Feynman, Darwin...

THERAPIST

...ok...I get it! And I loved Arthur Miller for giving the finger to Senator McCarthy during the red scare.


JOE

Rooting out communists, the same way the Catholic church
rooted out heretics...lesser minds at the helm of a crazy
ghost ship of the past...ancient traditions will surely sink
ships and hinder scientific progress...

THERAPIST

Now's who's the poet?

JOE

A mathematical formula is poetry...it's music...to drown out
a sadistic alcoholic father, drunk with his own sense of
grandiosity...as are the tides and waves and their connection
to the moon...we're one of millions in an intergallactical
dance and we only know a few steps... 

THERAPIST

*(She gets up and walks to him, gesturing with her hand to
take his and stand with her)*

Show me... 

JOE

What?

THERAPIST

Show me how this dance...the steps you know...



(He reluctantly stands and they embrace and music starts as they begin to dance a tango and it lasts for 3 to 4 minutes and as quickly as they started, they stop and sit down in their respective chairs).

JOE

What the hell was that? Dancing?

THERAPIST

Dancing?

JOE

Are you serious? What are you pulling?

THERAPIST

I don't recall any dancing



JOE

The Dancing! Are you playing with me?


THERAPIST

Those were just dance steps...and it was therapy...

JOE

You call that therapy?

THERAPIST

Talking wasn't getting us anywhere. 

JOE

I didn't come here, expecting to dance with a woman.

THERAPIST

It was an adaptive strategy.

JOE

It was...I enjoyed it...but...

THERAPIST

Listen, don't read any more into it then an adaptive strategy for you.


JOE

Why wouldn't I? The American Social Workers Association did.

THERAPIST

What are you talking about?

JOE

Why did they suspend your license for six months a few years ago? 

THERAPIST

Where'd you hear that?

JOE

Are you denying it?

THERAPIST

No, just curious.

JOE

So am I, believe me.


THERAPIST

I had a patient...unbeknownst to me at the time...was very ill...and was off his meds..he grew enamored with me and when I rebuked his advances, he reported me, saying I seduced him...the association is required to act...they held my license and when the investigation was over...they found no such evidence and I was back in business.

JOE

I'm not the first guy you've danced with here.


THERAPIST

You're not the first patient I've helped using non-traditional strategies. 

JOE

Now you're the social scientist 

THERAPIST

 I wasn't coming on to you—I was giving action to adaptive strategies I've spoken to you about.

JOE

It worked...you certainly inspired me...to question this bullshit strategy...talking gets you nowhere...Words are...primitive...tools...

THERAPIST

...wanna go back to smoke signals? Pigeons?

JOE



Cells communicate by binding with receptor proteins...Sap in plants, radio waves, hell...whales and dolphins use sonar. Words...by comparison...we're apes in the digital age.

THERAPIST

...you want to start over...and sign in outside? You can paw your name in the dirt with a stick...

JOE

Well, your talk therapy business must be down, with cell phones, tablets, computers.

THERAPIST

People need to talk...face to face...now more than ever...wise guy...stack a NASA super computer against a heart's loneliness...the heart always wins. And nobody wins in here...it's not a battle.

JOE

I'm sorry. I get snarky when I'm tired...I'm also competitive...an occupational hazard I suppose..

THERAPIST

Hazard? You just won a Nobel Prize in physics...I'm also competitive...books and music...

JOE

Music communicates.

Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries" evokes every military charge in history...the terror and passion...he was a provocateur...

THERAPIST

What's the scientists' word for provoke? Catalyst? During this session and the next, communication will feel different from what you might be used to. In here it's intentional and intimate...as much as you're comfortable sharing.

JOE

...My parents always told me and my brothers and sisters that kids should be seen and not heard...so...this...me...waiting to be heard...feels alien...and scientists observe...



THERAPIST

You're not a kid anymore...and you weren't born a scientist.

JOE

I know, and I think I was.


THERAPIST

Interesting.

JOE

I certainly wasn't taught to question everything around me...but I burned with questions since I could remember...and couldn't vocalize them. Can you imagine how lonely I was? I have to say, it made me stronger.


THERAPIST

Sure...and our culture glorifies the strong, silent type...but John Wayne  as lonely.

JOE

I was more of a Woody Allen...nuerotic...squirrel.

THERAPIST

...You understand how this works...we think the past is all in our rear view mirrors, but it's really a passenger that won't get out of the car...even on that bridge. 

JOE

I just thought of something...John Wayne...James Bond...macho guys...always got the girl. Science nerds don't.

THERAPIST

Some women think the sexiest organ in the body is the brain. Have you seen Revenge of the Nerds?


JOE

Knowledge is power...and power is attractive...to some women.

THERAPIST

Do you think Monica Lewinsky was attracted to Bill Clinton for his looks? I've read some of your work. You come alive when you lecture or debate or write. I'll learn a lot from listening...whenever you're ready...

...do you know who else looked elsewhere for inspiration? James Joyce. That guy turned his back on God, country, family, church and looked to Homer's Odyssey-the classics.

What a set of balls. 

JOE

I always adored the brains that could crush someone in a debate...did you ever watch Firing Line with William F.

Buckley, Jr?


THERAPIST

Yes! He used those eyes as weapons of mass destruction...he would lob a brilliant comment that said "I dare you to return this commentary with equal verissimilitude and pedantic sanctimony"...he would cripple or scare the life out of his opponents...

JOE

I knew really early a rapier wit won friends and earned admiration. I wielded it early and confounded the enemy. Charmed the adults and bullied the kids. It makes you an outsider, but it was worth it.

THERAPIST

Let's get back to the boring stuff of therapy.  Where were you born?

JOE

Pensacola, across the river from dreamy Mobile-sugar white beaches, Gulf Coast warm water, shrimping boats and fragrant Magnolia breezes-a tropical dream, really-but still, on the edge of a military installation-that tensely surveilled Cuba, during the Bay of Pigs escalation...still I gravitated to my tropical dream...until I heard and felt the pounding of engines and blades and the frantic military dance-and men defying gravity, in jets and helicopters-openly risking everything and climbing higher-thrill seekers-and behaving recklessly-then childishly in church...and later...monstrously inside the family home...it was exciting-they were thrill seekers...I was a hide and seeker...and felt the hypocrisy of it all very early...

THERAPIST

What else?

JOE

Moments are more apt to illicit—help me remember details...My little league games weren't all sunshine and puppies and ice cream. I was out in left field...my position on the team...in more ways than one. I was a dreamy kid in hand me down uniform and glove, but the scientist never stopped working...and noticing...a Holden Caulfield with poems and science equations.

Busy looking at the grass and bees and flies and crickets.

The drowsy sun baking me—until a ball sailed over my head. The best kids can hope for is I guess is predictability and reliability from parents. But when your father leaves for months at a time...into dangerous missions...kids are confused and scared.

THERAPIST

If you're reliable, you're predictable. Even in confusing times in adolescence when kids desperately grasp for reliability and consistency from their parents. You didn't get that consistency.

JOE

So I leaned toward science when dad checked out early-when he was home...and drinking...At a picnic during my summer off from college I told him about Aristotle's Taxonomy of emotions and thought. A scientific grid over feelings-great mask, eh? Like most guys, he launched right into the fixing mode...some project or another around the house...to avoid talking. It felt lonely. Reminded me how lonely I was as a child. Lonely in a big family.

THERAPIST

Nobody's ever really alone, from Caesar's army to splitting atoms, collaboration makes the world go round, even if it is to destroy it-you might feel alone but you have all the thoughts and memories of everything you've ever heard, smelled, thought , etc. Whitman tells us this-in Leaves of Grass...every atom of you belongs to me-I knew that when I looked at the periodic table of elements. This table is the same material as your liver.

JOE

Dad, the commander...doled out punishment for transgressions for losing a sock to throwing rocks at passing cars, inside my room I shared with my brother there was only one thing I longed for: to grow up, and out of that house...and have total control over my own life. We all fled at 18. I hated, loved and feared dad, but I was in his hands, I couldn't escape his power, it was impossible to exact my revenge on him except in the much acclaimed mind and imagination. Somebody broke a lamp. All of us were summoned to the living room. We stood shoulder to shoulder and Dad faced us, inspecting the troops. One by one, each of us were asked if we had done it and when we responded no, we were spanked

JOE (CONT)

But it was because of this pain and fear that my thoughts were driven inward. I could see this now. All discoveries and great ideas start with curious, quiet minds that pay attention. To details and patterns. Patient, kind minds. I don't know how I found peace in that house.

THERAPIST

The mind can be incredibly resourceful when it needs to be. Self protective.

A filing cabinet with endless folders for terror and joy...and usually everything in between.

JOE

But it was questions that were at the heart of everything. I had so many-a river coming out of me-and there was no room for them in that house-no time for each of us-me-individuals...so many questions

THERAPIST

Was it questions your parents didn't answer?

JOE

No, it was answers they didn't question.

THERAPIST

Example?

JOE

I asked my mother and father if they thought they would see each other in heaven when they died.

THERAPIST

Great . You're a poet and scientist...you still think nerds don't get girls?

JOE

Dad casually said he hoped so and my mom just smiled at the question. I loved her smile and approval of my question...until I was told to sit back in my seat. There were three rows of seats in our station wagon and I leaned in between mom and dad and put my head between them on the front seat-and I had them to myself for about 15 minutes while we drove. It was one of the best times of my life. My mother and father, smiling and talking about heaven-an idea I brought to them and they did something every child adores...they rewarded my idea with their serious attention to it. Two magnetic ATOMS ...bound to me...

THERAPIST

That's intimacy, Joe. The healthiest kind.

JOE

Maybe it was then-at my brief moment of happiness-that we were driving over the Verrazanno Bridge-back to New York from Virginia that I saw my future-felt it..the suspension bridge-the long span-the middle...of a life...carrying children and my parents, the elders when I'm working two jobs...that's the hardest part and most satisfying part...everyone relying on you and you're out there, all alone...with nothing underneath you but swinging roadway ...deadly and scary. That's when I began to think ...to feel...my parents...when I felt their pain and I felt the promise I made...when ...I was going to accept A Nobel Prize...an award the world wanted to give me but the personal question I had asked had to be answered...

THERAPIST

A Nobel Prize in Physics is nothing to sneeze at.

JOE

I couldn't go get on a plane and accept a prize without finding out what happened to me...that scared boy twisting in the wind...The Socratic and Scientific Method asks for the best questions-not necessarily the best answers-to understand the world...or that ghost of the mind...a memory...in the passenger seat of my car...

THERAPIST

Shakespeare asks us to know ourselves first. To thine own self be true...

JOE

To leave an unattended question—such an important one on the table is a sin of science...it must be attempted—and it's never too late in the process...how was my mother going to survive without me helping to fill my father's shoes?

THERAPIST

Joe, what were you thinking on the Longfellow Bridge when they picked you up?

JOE

(Joe opens his mouth to answer and cannot speak)

THERAPIST

...I have some questions...Questions are the beginning of the scientific method...the first of five steps...how you see the world...are those the five Sundays?

JOE

You got it. But somewhere along the line I learned to test authority of instead of a hypothesis. You know the song?

I fought the law and the law won.

THERAPIST

Every kid tests authority.

JOE

I was the Princeton Review of testing. Make that Pearson. How about dad stopping me from jumping off the roof with an umbrella? Not enough lab hours in a day for experiments...sometimes you want a result so badly...you inadvertently rig one of the variables...the control of the group...How about pouring a trail of gasoline down two flights of concrete steps and lighting it just for curiosity? A natural-born scientist-curious enough about the world to focus on questions that burn in your head...and a quantum physicist and molecular biologist do the same thing-study the science of the very small-to explain the behavior of matter.

THERAPIST

So, your lab was the environment you were in?

JOE

My trouble began when my experiments took a personal twist-before I knew what a lab coat or a lab, for that matter, was.

Instead of talking to my older brothers, I didn't know how to tell them I wanted to spend time with them. Instead, I ran up to them from behind and bonked their heads together. Now, my morbid curiosity wasn't an issue-I knew what the outcome would be from my actions...they would chase me until they caught me, but I was thin and wiley-and could scoot...but my hypothesis was that I could find another way to get away from them when the chase began. But all my background research told me what to expect but it didn't stop me from an erroneous hypothesis...which I knew would lead me to a faulty conclusion...but I tested...and tested...an immature scientist who couldn't be dispassionate. And we all did the same with each other-in that crazy household-but that's how I was taught...

THERAPIST

There's a Rush song...New World Man...with a line ..." he's old enough to know what's right, but young enough not to choose it."

JOE

You got it. Before I knew better..Sometime later I heard about this guy named Isaac Newton in school.

My teacher told me he invented a new branch of math called Calculus, figured out the composition of light and gave us the laws of gravity and motion which governed the universe—the founder of modern science. Governed the universe? My dad couldn't do that...even though he was my universe when I was very young. This Newton was a guy to follow and listen to...I knew enough to listen to this guy and read everything I could get my hands on about him. A genius who uncovered the laws of physics that governed the entire cosmos.

THERAPIST

So, let me get this straight. I have some notes. I printed out material on Newton after our session last week. I want to make something clear. (*she looks at some papers*) Isaac Newton was born in 1642 in rural England. That same year the astronomer Galileo died—and his work was still sending shock waves through Europe. Galileo had risked his freedom—his life—by challenging the ancient belief held by the Catholic church that the sun moved around the earth. Based not on faith, but observation, he confirmed the earth was just one of several planets orbiting the sun. It was the dawn of the scientific revolution—when science and reason would re-define the world. As a boy Newton was gripped by this new outlook—he poured over a book called *The Mysteries of Nature and Art*—a manual for building mechanical contraptions and investigating the natural world.

He was preoccupied by things that occupy physicists—time and motion. He tied lit candles to kites and flew them at night—people thought they were comets...he made windmills, built boats...

JOE

There's nothing to know and everything to imagine. Newton knew that...he...

THERAPIST

...Listen to this about Newton...his father died before he was born and when he was three years old, his mother remarried and moved away, leaving him behind with his grandparents. Essentially...abandoned by his mother...Newton later confessed to such rage that he wanted to burn his mother and stepfather in their house. And by the time he left for Cambridge, he had lived through two decades of violent social and political turmoil. At university...he said "truth is the offspring of silence and unbroken meditation." To resist temptation of drinking and whoring, like a lot of his other classmates...Newton drew up a plan that he would stick to the rest of his life. "The way to chastity is not struggle directly with incontinent thought, but to avert your thoughts by some employment.

By reading or meditating on other things." He was a quiet, thoughtful man and maybe appeared to be a tedious guy, on the outside...but a river of questions were in him as well...and he acted on them...everyday...he read everything he could get his hands on...books...papers from other scientists...but over time he became convinced that the only types of acceptable statements are ones you could test in a laboratory. The apple story-which everyone associates with him...was an invisible force called gravity. The same thing pulled the apple to the earth that kept the moon in orbit around it and he gave it the name gravity. He invented calculus-that we use today to analyze the stock market to predicting climate change. Terrestrial and/or celestial-the same law of gravity...applies to both...

JOE

You have done your homework...The Universal Law of Gravitation. The rise and fall of tides, the orbits of the planets and their positions. Gravity by itself could account for virtually all the motions we know of in our planetary system.

THERAPIST

Listen to what I'm telling you...during his time...Gravity was an occult force-in the political environment he was in-you can't see it? You believe it-like the existence of God?

The last thing you told me last week was that it was a **SIN** to leave important questions on the table...and not pursue their answer with scientific inquiry. You are obligated to ask those questions-the same ones that poured out of you as a young boy. Newton used his pain and loss constructively. His pain fueled his mind for inquiry. You must do the same-and accept recognition from your peers and the rest of the scientific community. Newton did...he went to London and joined the establishment and had to learn, working through pain and fear, to accept the criticism of his peers and hide or try and distinguish it from the pain of being abandoned by his mother. The criticism his ideas were given was not personal...the attack on his work was on his work...not on him. He didn't have the luxury, as far as we know, of having a therapist tell him that...you do. He worked in solitude...you don't. Now, think very clearly before you answer me...What is the question that is a sin to leave on the table...unanswered?

JOE

All intellectual inquiry starts with a question.

THERAPIST

And throughout this session, I've modeled trying to get out of your head and listen instead to your heart for a while.

The sin of a scientist leaving an important question on the table is a great start. But the most important questions for everyone, must come from their heart...the writer Bernard Malamud said it...the real mystery to crack is you...

JOE

I told you some of the best questions have no answers...are not meant to be answered...it's the search...the journey...we can't know it all...

THERAPIST

I want to tell you a story and maybe it will leave you with some thoughts...about the impact of childhood on our adult lives...I watched a movie that troubled and fascinated me when I was a kid and I've only watched it once since then...and knowing what I know about my business as a therapist, it was particularly poignant this time.

One of the most perceptive moving endings I have ever seen on film occurred in "Citizen Kane," Orson Welles 1941 movie masterpiece.

Following the death of the title character, a reporter searches to find the meaning of the word "Rosebud," which Kane has whispered a few times as he lay dying. But try as he might, the reporter can't figure it out.

As he stands there, surrounded by a king's ransom in artwork, which Kane has collected over his lifetime, someone says to him that maybe if he finds out what "Rosebud" means it may give him a better understanding of Kane, even explain his life. But the reporter disagrees. "One word can't explain a person's life."

Then everyone leaves and the camera pans across Kane's treasures, until it reaches some workers tossing junk into a furnace. One of them picks up an old sled, just another piece of junk, and tosses it onto the fire, and then the camera comes in close on the sled as the flames consume it. The music rises to a heartbreaking crescendo and we see the sled's name: "Rosebud." Then we flash back to a scene outside "Mrs. Kane's Boarding House" where the child Kane, is being given up for adoption by his mother and father, because doing so is financially advantageous to them. There beside him is the same sled that was just tossed onto the fire... and we realize that Rosebud does explain his life. Kane spent his entire life accumulating wealth and power to fill the chasm, the chasm of missing lost love of this mother and father, the chasm that can't be filled.

To me, the movie's ending demonstrates something that many people don't grasp: The profound effect childhood has on how we turn out as adults. Our hair thins, our muscles weaken, we get flabby, but childhood stays with us always. The past is always present.

JOE

I know that movie. I had forgotten about it.

THERAPIST

Remember the sheer joy of having your mother and father to yourself in the station wagon that evening? Kane over compensated by conquering the world and accumulating wealth and you followed a path of scientific proof you needed to protect yourself with. You should forgive yourself and allow yourself to not have all the answers.

JOE

So, I'm one of six electrons my parents shared, as atoms?

THERAPIST

Stop acting obtuse. You were given so much more than that and you know it. It just didn't feel that way, as a kid, being herded from Navy base to Navy base. You saw and absorbed everything, but identified with little. By identified I mean connected to. You said it yourself...a lonely, smart boy with questions...if people weren't dependable...scientific inquiry was.

THERAPIST

You remind me a little bit of my brother. When he was in his self righteous, moody late teens and early twenties he refused to compliment the cook at thanksgiving for dinner...instead, he made a special point to thank the relative who stepped up and did the dishes.

He held us all to task of thanking the dishwasher...saying that this was the person who should be thanked...the one who did what they didn't want to do...the unglamorous job. He was begging for recognition, asking people to thank him for a doing a job nobody else wanted to do...A hero's journey...in his own mind...but it was still his pain...Joe, I'm giving you permission to thank the cook. Even if the turkey was dry...art is everywhere...music comes to people who listen. Science to those who question...

JOE

When my science obsession took over, I let other interests fall away...Even as an undergraduate...I was an art lover...I later had an important piece displayed in the graduate lab building lobby at MIT. Raphael has a famous painting called the "School of Athens." Aristotle and Plato are standing side by side.

To the left Plato, Aristotle's teacher, points his hand and finger towards the heaven, symbolizing the mystical nature to his view of the universe. Aristotle's hand is level to the earth, symbolizing his realism view of nature. This image signals the sharp change in the meaning of how natural philosophy, or physics, will be done for the next 2200 years. After all, Plato presented the foundation of natural philosophy (science) with his mathematical ideas, but Aristotle pioneered the implementation of science to everyday events.

THERAPIST

How is this any different than Joe and his dad...the naval aviator? Your dad, the military pilot looking for answers in the sky and you, hoping to be grounded?

JOE

In order to formulate such a hypothesis...it has to take the form of a causal mechanism or a mathematical relation. I hardly think...

THERAPIST

Hey pinhead, you want proof? Empirical proof? Don't you remember the story about Charles Foster Kane? The past is always present. You never escape childhood.

JOE

That's a great hypothesis...I know great scientists have to hold onto their childish curiosity. They must test and retest and question all the time...an endless cycle of question, research, hypothesis, experiment, and draw conclusions.

THERAPIST

I want you to hear something. Isaac Newton's mother gave him up and that betrayal stayed with him his whole life. He was a recluse, hated people, and himself, was jealous of anyone else's success, constantly tested the loyalty of his family and friends...tested people mercilessly...but he also tested his hypothesis...he worked and made his pain work for him....he was a force to be reckoned with and insatiably curious with a work ethic that would kill a horse...some laws are made to be broken...the law of gravity...you told me yourself...is about attraction...you wanted your mother and father...but mom was so busy with five other kids she was always just a little out of reach and dad...was on another planet...or away-fighting his own wars.

JOE

Come on..laws are laws...they've been tested over and over...irrefutable...conclusions have been drawn...during all five Sundays...the church got today...

THERAPIST

What's the sinful question that can't be ignored, Joe?

JOE

The one I've asked my whole life, the one I've hypothesized about, the one I've searched with background information, the one I've tested and re-tested and drawn conclusions about...what happened to that scared, wet boy swinging in a storm under that helicopter, me?

THERAPIST

Did you get an answer?

JOE

I have a hypothesis....but for the first time in my life...I'm scared to test it....I'm too frightened...to face...see...what I know is the answer...the law of...and I knew it was coming but swept it out of my thoughts...I just visited dad...he looked so...thin and frail...and all that time and effort I spent keeping him and my mother young by acting funny...being the goofball so we could all replace our sadness with laughs...the fear I hid...knowing dad was never coming home and mom would need protection herself because she would be alone...the "scientizing" of my thoughts...a way of acting like a grownup...scientist...was all about to end...

THERAPIST

Tell me what happened on the Longfellow Bridge, Joe.

JOE

I was stopped in traffic in the middle of the span...on my way to the airport.

Just daydreaming...watching the water lap around the bridge pilings like it had in the Chesapeake Bay when I was a boy...and it occurred to me...it looked so familiar...this was the water I imagined threatened my father when he went on that dangerous mission...I flashed back to us in our pajamas...and I clearly heard him say the boy in the basket looked like me...but I didn't remember that remark...until I was home with dad...a few weeks ago...and he looked frail...our parents age...it happens gradually...you know...until...wow...one visit and you notice it...the caretaker in me was worried sick about my father when he was in Vietnam then it happened all at once...I understood what I had chosen to forget for all those years...telling myself to look after my father...even after mom was gone...and he was flying the helicopter...winching me closer to him...defying gravity...even in the wind and rain...through the worst storms you could imagine...and knowing I would do the opposite...I would embrace gravity...for now...and bring him with me to receive my Nobel Prize...and I finally recalled the most important question of all...one that took a life time to utter...and one no scientist could test with an experiment...what am I going to do when he dies...and the hope of my questions being heard dies with him?

THE END

