

POLITICAL LOGIC AT LISA'S BAR

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POLITICAL LOGIC AT LISA'S BAR
(First Edition)

FreeMathTexts.org

Version 1.0 — December 16, 2018

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To my parents, born Austrian Catholic and Russian Jew, who raised me French Atheist.

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Political Logic???

—That some kind of math?

—No.

—Jokes about politicians?

—No.

—Then what?

—Suppose you saw me lying on the floor with a broken nose and blood all over my face. What would you think?

—Someone just punched you on the nose?

—Exactly. Nose-punching logic.

Shoot The Breeze

We were just shooting the breeze in Lisa's small bar. Mike and I after the end of our day, Joe before the start of his night. For Lisa, it was getting to be the end of her day. She was resting, her elbows on the counter, listening and occasionally putting a word in edgewise because "*that's the only way men will let a woman shoot the breeze*". But that's another story.

Anyway, we were just shooting the breeze when this guy who had been sitting at the next table, having a beer all by himself, leaned towards us and said

—Excuse me people, I couldn't help hearing what you were talking about.

Mike mumbled

—Nothing wrong with that.

Joe said

—We were just shooting the breeze.

The guy said

—My name is Ted. I thought what you all were saying was real interesting but how about guns?

Mike is thickset, maybe five six, and acts the way he looks, solid and stolid. Mike doesn't talk much but it was he who asked

—What about them?

Ted said

—As I said, what you were talking about, rights and all, is real interesting but, excuse me, it's not about the real world, it's just talk.

Lisa looked as if she felt she might have to lighten things up a bit:

—Well, Ted, it's like Joe said. They were just shooting the breeze. So you may be right.

—Ok, but aren't guns real enough to talk about?

Mike said

—Yes, killing machines are real enough.

Ted didn't seem to pay attention. He went on.

—But you were all leaving guns out. So, what’s wrong with people owning guns?

Mike said

—As long as the owners remember they are killing machines, nothing.

This time, Ted noticed.

—Ok, they are. Still, why all the fuss about people owning guns?

Mike said

—Two questions. One. Why do people want killing machines? Two. Who profits from killing machines?

I was stunned. As I said, Mike almost never says anything. He mostly keeps looking back and forth while Joe and I are arguing. Like watching a ping-pong game. Or he just looks at his hands. I figure that’s when he thinks we are just babbling. But he almost never says anything. He explained once that while he likes listening to arguments, he is no lawyer and doesn’t know himself how to argue a case. And he also said he enjoys Lisa making fun of us.

I wondered what it was that had just bit him. *Killing machines.*

Ted said

—That’s got nothing to do with my right to bear arms.

Mike looked like he had nothing more to say. Joe sighed and stared in the distance. It wasn’t that, being black, he has to be careful about getting into arguments with white strangers. He *has* to of course. Very much so. But, here, what it was was that we all knew that arguing about exactly what it is that the Second Amendment is saying is a total waste of time.

But somebody *had* to say something and Lisa didn’t look like she was going to either. In fact, she was looking at me with that faint smile she has when she thinks I may be about to make a total ass of myself.

It was beginning to look like I was really stuck. Mike was looking at his hands and Joe kept staring in the distance. Lisa’s smile was getting broader.

Then, suddenly, it hit me:

—Ted, how about if, somehow, there had never been a Second Amendment? Then what?

Lisa raised her eyebrows. Joe looked back at us. Mike kept looking at his hands. But, obviously, Ted hadn’t thought about it before any more than I had and he had to paddle around a bit.

—Still, he finally said, the Second Amendment *is* a fact.

He sounded as if he had said it just to get himself some breathing space so I didn’t say anything. And he was honest so, after some more silence, he finally said

—Well, this is different. I think I got to think some about it.

—But Ted, what the whole thing is really about is Mike’s two questions: why do people want guns and who makes money out of them?

Mike got annoyed

—Al, you really shouldn’t be using that word. It’s a distraction, a diversionary move, an avoidance maneuver, a cover up, a cope-out. Killing machines is what they are. Killing machines is what you got to call them.

I wondered again about why he was so intense about it. I told Ted:

—Sorry. Force of habit. Mike is right. The issue about killing machines is who wants them and why.

Lisa said

—By the way, Al, what do you know about guns? Sorry. About killing machines?

—I know nothing about them. All I can say is I got one.

Lisa acted completely flabbergasted. As if the roof had just caved in. She was overdoing it of course but I could see she was a bit surprised.

—You got a gun? A real one? As in killing machine? Since when? What for?

—Since when it occurred to me a Saturday Night Special is a lot cheaper than a wheelchair.

There was a silence. Then Lisa said

—I see.

Mike didn’t say anything. Joe asked

—You ever used it?

—Not yet. Obviously.

He laughed.

Then, after another silence, Ted said

—Speaking of which. It’s true there is a big number of “gun deaths”. But killing oneself and killing someone else are two entirely different things. They shouldn’t be counted all together.

Lisa said

—You are entirely correct. I hadn’t thought of it. Hard not to get bamboozled. Go ahead.

For whatever reason, he seemed a bit embarrassed.

—I mean, both are a problem because, in a way, suicides can be forced. Like veterans. Like people who can’t get pain killers. So, in way, you can look upon at least a lot of suicides as murders too. But they shouldn’t be counted with murders by individuals: They are murders by the society. Still, that doesn’t really change Mike’s two questions.

He seemed to think about it. Then he said

—It just complicates the answers. Well, people, I really have to get going. But as I said, I see I have to do some serious thinking about all this. Never did before. But I will. Can I drop by some day and try it out on you?

—Sure, Joe said with a grin, we love shooting the breeze.

Cost Of Life

When I got in, there was just this big guy I had never seen before, sitting at the counter, talking to Lisa who stood behind as usual. His back was to the door and he hadn't paid any attention to me. So I waved at Lisa not to bother and went to sit at a table. She was laughing.

—Rick! You did not!

—I sure did.

—You really did? Voted for him?

—I really did. They had done away with the one guy I *would* have voted for and there was no way I could bring myself to vote for a mindless machine. I just couldn't. So I had no choice but vote for him. At least he is a human being.

She made a face

—Yeah, but even knowing he is a big liar, a big lecher and a big thief?

—Even knowing he is a big liar, a big lecher and a big thief. And he is not even good at it. In fact, you know, that's what makes him *human*. And then what you got to remember is that myself I never minded lying a bit here and there, dreaming some about your body and cheating a little on my taxes.

She laughed

—Don't we all. My body aside. So what you mean is that you somehow relate to him?

—I sure don't relate to all those holier-than-thou liberals so-called who haven't got a clue about what my life is, don't even think of trying to find out because they know everything. And then they want to tell me all about what I should think? So then. How about you?

—Like you, I had a terrible time voting for a cog in a machine but what could I do? Him? No way. I had to draw the line.

—And how about the time before?

—What do you think?

—Time to get a woman in the White House?

She laughed.

—Don't you think it is? After all half the electorate is female.

—I have nothing against women.

She laughed again

—I don't know if you *have* anything against women but I sure know you want to *be* against women. As close as possible.

—Very funny. I meant women in office. Even in the oval office. So, you voted for her in the primary?

—No. There was no way I was going to vote for the Big Money Machine whose tool she was going to be. So, I voted for Obama even though I had my doubts. And, the second time, what choice was there?

—But the only difference is that he didn't pay cash for his stay in the White House. The machine had ready cash but he had to buy it on the installment plan. Look at the people he had been playing with from the very beginning. All Real Big Money people. And look at the people he appointed. All Wall Street. And today, how come the liberals so-called never stop and wonder where all that money he's got *now* is payment for? He sure didn't save it from his salary.

—I am with you. All the way. Money is the name of the game in the whole election process. Even *we* judge candidates mostly by the money they can raise. It's like an auction. The Democratic machine and the Republican machines are both just competing to sell their services to Real Big Money and that service is mainly to see to it that we don't grumble too much at how small the crumbs are that Real Big Money lets trickle down.

I thought she was right on the dime but he kept on

— And he immediately betrayed the very people who had voted for him. Especially the blacks. And look at the way all the holier-than-thou liberals so-called are now going on about him. All but calling him Saint Obama.

Then, a bit sheepish, he added

—But of course I voted for him too. Both times.

She laughed. He said

—Anyway, the only President I ever had respect for is Truman.

—Truman? All I know is he came after Roosevelt and nuked Japan when they were about to sue for peace, just to make a point.

—Actually, he was not just another cold warrior. But, politics aside, what I meant is that when he left the White House his only income was his army pension from WWI. We are talking 112 Dollars and 56 Cents a *month*. He refused to take money from anybody. He said it wouldn't be right. So, Congress finally had to pass a law to give retired presidents a pension.

—I am sure they themselves had long had a pension when they retired. So maybe they felt embarrassed. But I didn't know about Truman. Neat.

—I don't think these guys can possibly be embarrassed. By anything. But I guess Truman on the dole *would* have looked pretty bad. Of course, now, none of these guys could even *imagine* living on just their pension. Even after getting voted out. Even after being forced to resign.

—I am sure they can't. But, to go back to the big lying, thieving lecher, you don't think his politics are a bit extreme?

—The man doesn't have an idea of his own. It's just Real Big Money using the fact that they were able to buy both Congress and the White House all at the same time. That he is hare-brained gives them a nice cover by getting the people all excited about him. One way or the other. While the Real Big Money people are robbing us blind.

And then, think about Bush senior who was in a business meeting with one of Osama bin Laden's brothers at the very moment the towers were hit.

—Yes. And the other thing is that, while all planes were grounded right after the attacks, all the Saudis, including the bin Laden family, were picked up and flown back home by the Air Force. Not a single one of them was even interrogated.

—That's true! I had forgotten. Or think of Clinton who sold the American workers down the drain with NAFTA and created the prison industry special for the blacks and now for the hispanics.

She laughed again.

—Just hearing you I could swear you are a black union worker. But, seriously, Clinton wasn't of course the first to sell the blacks down the drain either. People forget that Roosevelt got the New Deal by letting the Southern Senators keep things down South the way they were.

—And the more you look, the more stuff like that you find.

—Still, the big lying, thieving lecher tried to get rid of Obamacare and, for what it's worth, that's the only health coverage I can afford for me and my mother.

I remembered the old lady who had served me breakfast one morning.

—Yes, Obamacare is helping a lot of people but, all the same, who is paying for it? Us, not them. And it's bringing a huge amount of money to the insurance companies.

—No kidding. But that's because it's the insurance companies themselves that designed Obamacare in the first place. And, in fact, that's why the Republicans haven't been able to get rid of it yet. It has to be done in a way that gets the insurance companies even more money. Doable but tricky.

—So, again, what’s the difference between the Republican machine and the Democratic machine?

—There is one. Say the big thieving, lying lecher’s son, I mean his latest one, what’s his name, needed some seriously expensive medical care. *He* could pay for it but if either your kids, Emmy or Andy, needed something like that, *you* couldn’t pay for it.

He remained silent for a while. Then he said.

—I know. I pay for their medical insurance but, no, I could never pay enough for what would cover real serious care.

—Well, here is your difference: the Democratic machine is a bit more likely to allow for some version of Medicare For All.

—How so? With Medicare For All, there would be a lot less money for the insurance companies and the drug companies wouldn’t be able to steal as much as they do..

—Yes, Medicare For All would be able to stop them because they would have the clout.

—And then they would yell Big Gov, Big Gov.

—It would be a matter of who yells loudest. I mean I don’t see why the big drug companies and the insurance companies would have to be the ones to scream loudest.

—You mean, like unions could start a network tv of our own?

—Hey, *that’s* a thought. But, to come back to why the Democratic machine is a bit more likely to support Medicare For All, they still depend for some of their money on the unions.

—Well, no matter what, we sure would have to squeeze their balls something real awfully fierce before they would.

—But I think it could be done.

—Maybe. I hope. And who would pay for it?

—Did you know that we let American companies sell us their drugs for four time as much as what they can sell them in Europe?

—I didn’t know.

—So, if they can do it in Europe, maybe we should be able to do it here. He looked at his watch

—Ok, sorry but I have to get going. Night shift.

—Well, at least, now you know two more things about me.

—Like?

—Why I never wanted to have kids. And why I think we should really change the United States of America into the United People of America.

—So the united people can tax Real Big Money guys out of their billions?

—And throw them in jail for having inflicted extreme pain and suffering.
At least. Maybe hang them somewhere by one of their feet?

He laughed

—Or by their balls?

—They don't really have any.

—Ok, by their feet.

After he was gone, I said to Lisa

—I like your United People of America. Ought to be a future for that.
And I like his network tv. Could call it People TV.

—Right now, it's just a dream. First we would have to get the unions
to shape up.

—Anyway. And I like your friend. Sharp cookie. Union man? Divorced?

—Yes. No, just separated. Yes, sharp cookie. And he *does* lie a bit here
and there.

For a few seconds she seemed to think back. Then she added.

—A bit too much sometimes. Want a cup?

And she made me one. She has a small espresso machine.

Might Be Right

Lisa had been saying

—These people drive me crazy! Whining all day long about their rights being trampled!

Joe said

—Well, not everybody is like you.

Lisa is over six foot tall and probably over two hundred pounds with not an ounce of fat anybody can see. So, of course, people don't tend to mess with her. But Lisa was annoyed. She pounded on the counter.

—Joe, don't play at being stupid. You know perfectly well what I am talking about.

—But you know perfectly well that the two are related. From my height, I can't see the world quite the way you do.

Joe is five foot seven and probably not even one hundred and fifty pounds. He hadn't mentioned his being black because, of course, she would have countered with her being female.

For some reason Lisa was really annoyed.

But she respects Joe and, in fact, likes him a lot so she eased up.

—That's *not* the point Joe and you know it's not the point because you *know* you and I do see the world pretty much the same way.

—But what's wrong about talking about people's rights?

—Because there is no such thing as rights.

—No?

—No.

There was a silence. Then Joe who, as far as I know, is not exactly a believer, said

—How about God-given rights?

. She said

—Too many Gods around and they sure don't agree on men's rights. Let alone on women's rights. Or black people's rights. So, forget about *given* rights. By *anybody*.

Joe said

—How about natural rights?

—*Natural* rights? What's *nature* got to do with rights?

Lisa didn't look like she was going to continue. Eventually, though, she insisted

—No such thing as women's rights. No such thing as black people's rights. No such thing as *anybody's* rights.

Joe smiled but didn't say anything. She added

— And, anyway, what does the word right mean?

To lighten things up a bit, I said

—The opposite of wrong?

That was exactly the wrong time to joke. She said

—Al, Al ...

Her voice was rising again.

—Ok, Ok, just joking. Sorry about that.

Joe said

—Ok, I don't really know what a right is.

To try and make amend, I said

—Me neither. Let me look it up.

I pulled my cell.

—Let's see. First there is "*morally good, justified, or acceptable*". That's not it. Second there is "*true or correct as a fact*". That's not it either. Ah, I see, I am looking at adjectives. I should be looking at nouns. First there is "*That which is morally correct*". Still not what we want. Ah, second there is "*a moral or legal entitlement to have or to obtain something or to act in a certain way*". Is that it? An entitlement?

—Yeah, all right, but the question then is how do you *get* a moral or legal entitlement.

—I guess you get a law.

—That sets a legal entitlement. How about a moral entitlement?

By that time I had finally figured out what she was getting at. So, I said

—I got it: *who* says what's legal and *who* says what's moral?

She turned to Joe

—You know what?

—What?

—It always come as a surprise to me when he does, but, you know, once in a while, Al *can* think.

Back at Community College, a long time ago, she had been one of my students. So, I was used to her ways. Turning back to me, she said

—Right!

I knew better than to ask if that was a joke. I said

—You already said, not gods. And surely not people.

She nodded. Then Joe said:

—And, by the way, rights can be bought and sold, like mineral rights, copyrights, property rights, ownership rights, you name it rights.

—That’s for sure. But how does it *start*? Before you can buy and sell rights? How do you get them in the first place?

Joe smiled

—You grab them. So, it amounts to having the power to do that.

—Exactly. You don’t whine, you go and grab it and then you can say you have the right. And I am sure AI will tell you that, in fact, rights *are* power.

I said

—As in having voting rights means you have the *power* to vote, as in having parental rights means you have the *power* to brainwash your kids, as in having mineral rights means you have the *power* to excavate your neighbor’s yard, as in ...

Lisa said.

—In other words it’s being able to impose your will on others.

—I know what you mean. Sounds a bit brutal though.

—What do you mean *sounds* a bit brutal? It *is* brutal And not just a bit! A lot brutal is the way it has always been, as in the right to own slaves the right to burn witches. Remember?

She was really annoyed. She stopped for a minute then she said

—But the sooner people realize that grabbing doesn’t work in a *society*, the better we will *all* be.

Ah! *That* was where she had wanted us to go! I had forgotten how devious she could be when she wanted something real bad. But Joe had got it before me. He said

—What you are really saying then is that for these people to go for *these* rights and for those other people to go for *those* other rights cannot possibly work if only because “*divide and conquer*” has always been the way for the few to maintain *their* rights over the rest of us.

Joe reflected a bit and then added

—In other words, rights is not the way to think about the problems.

Lisa said

—Finally you are talking

Joe said, a bit defensively,

—You know this sort of things is not my thing.

Joe's thing is to follow the money. And he is a lot more than real good at it. He is truly a genius.

You Believe It?

—Glad you're here tonight, Lisa said, because there is a guy might come to discuss religion with you.

—Religion? Me? How come?

Lisa looked slightly embarrassed.

—Well, here is the way it went. This morning I was downtown going about my business when someone grabs my arm from behind, real hard, and yells “Woman, don't you have any shame?” But of course I had reacted even before he yelled so by the time I turned around I saw this skinny boy, a bible in his left hand, with his right arm looking like it was hurting. He was saying “But what made you do that? I just wanted to know why you would offend Our Lord”.

Well, you know me, that didn't help any and *I* yelled something along the lines of “I don't care one bit about *your* lord, whoever *he* is, because there isn't a religion on earth that doesn't treat women like shit. And mostly a lot worse.”

So now he just looked like a frightened kid, hanging on to his book, on the verge of tears.

Which made me begin to feel a bit sorry for him so I told him there shouldn't really be much wrong with his arm but that he should have it checked anyhow and that he should then come here let me know how it went and I gave him the address.

But then, sort of to make up some, I added that here he might meet someone a lot better than me to discuss religion with.

I thought it sure hadn't been the kid's lucky day to pick on her. Or maybe it had. Maybe he would have learned something? Anyway, I told Lisa

—I see. Ok. No problem. If he shows up I will talk with him.

And, just at that point, someone entered the bar, a kid with his right arm in a sling. Lisa said

—Hey, speaking of the devil. How is the arm?

He looked a bit sheepish,

—They laughed at me. The doctor said there was not a bit of damage and I should just give it some rest and I will have completely forgotten about it in a week or so.

—How much did they charge you?

—They haven't. I don't think they will.

—Let me know if they do. And, by the way, this is Al, the guy I told you about.

And she left us, going back behind the counter. I told the kid

—Why don't we go sit over there? You want something to drink? Soft? Beer? Coffee?

—I drink only water

I called to Lisa

—Could we have a cup of coffee and a glass of water?

—Right on

I went to get our drinks and joined the kid at the table. I asked him

—How old are you?

—Twenty three.

Lisa was right. He looked nowhere near that. And he sure looked a bit pathetic. But I said

—Then you are old enough to have enough sense not to go grab someone's arm from behind. Not to say someone her size. And especially not an ex-Marine.

Lisa called from behind the counter

—You mean it would have been ok for *me* to grab *his* arm from behind?

—I just meant to say he ought to have been thinking. But you are right.

The kid said

—I didn't know. I mean, I know. I mean I just wanted to ask her why she would want to offend Our Lord.

He must have been real nervous to grab her that hard. Some rite of passage? I said

—Yes, she told me. And I agree with what she told you.

—But that's not true.

—Depends on what you mean by true. And how do you know your Lord was offended? Not to mention that she normally does not like to offend people.

—But look at her. A woman has no right to look like a man.

—Here again, depends on what you mean by right. *I* see nothing wrong about wearing battledress.

—But don't you see? She *wants* to look like a man! Why the buzz cut?
He lowered his voice. She a butch?

I frowned

—What could it possibly be to you?

—It says in the Bible ...

He stopped as I put up a hand. I sighed. This was not going to be much fun. In fact, it looked like it was going to be downright painful. I said

—Ok, just for a minute, try to look at it my way. There is a lot of people on this earth and for all these people to know how to deal with each other, there has to be some rules for them to know where they are at. Like in any game. But there are many sets of rules like there are many games. I don't know about you but, for me Rule Zero, Rule absolutely rockbottom fucking Ground Zero, is that nobody impose anything on anybody.

—I wasn't imposing anything on her.

—You were. Look. You are wearing a green shirt. Maybe, *if* we knew each other better, I *might* ask you why you are wearing a green shirt.

He thought about it. Then he said

—You mean because that would be intrusive? Like you were trying to find out if I belong to the Green Party?

—Yes. Because, not knowing you, asking for your political affiliation is intrusive, might even be an aggression. At this point of our acquaintance, I cannot engage you in a discussion about the pro and con of the Green Party.

—Why not?

—Because you have not indicated that you would be willing to do so.

—Why shouldn't I?

—I don't know. There could be any number of reasons. Like you may not have the time right now. You may not feel up to doing justice to the Green Party. You may just not feel like arguing with me. Etc. But that's all beside the point. Whatever it is, before I engage you in a discussion, I should make sure you are willing to discuss the issue.

—You mean a formal agreement?

—Of course not. But since it's always possible that I misunderstood you, I should be ready to pull out as soon as I realize I misunderstood you.

—You really do that?

—I try. But occasionally, I am slow at detecting the misunderstanding.

—Then what?

—Then I apologize.

—So you mean it's just like when you are with a woman you find attractive?

Lisa laughed but didn't say anything.

—Yes.

—And it's the same with religion?

—Why should it be different?

—Because there is something absolute about religion. It's about truth.

—You really want to discuss religion?

—Yes

—Then the second rule if we are to have a fruitful discussion is that we should discuss only one thing at a time.

—Ok

—There is a third rule which is that we should be very careful about keeping entirely separate what we *believe* to be true from what we can *prove* to be true.

—Why? As long as we know they are true?

—Because if I say I *believe* something is true and you say you *believe* this thing is false, what's left to say?

—We could explain why we believe so. And that's what converting people is about.

I laughed

—Historically, most conversions happened on the basis of coercion and/or which side the bread was buttered on. But in our case it would likely be just a waste of time. What would it change? I mean, what are the chances that either one of us would change his mind on the basis of a belief, suddenly believe the opposite of what he believed just before?

—Could happen. And it could make for better understanding between us.

—It could. But if I changed my *belief* for no *reason* once, there is nothing to prevent me from changing my *belief* back to the original one or to yet a third one and you would have wasted your time.

—So, what *can* be discussed? Whether something *is* true or false? Don't we just know it is? The way I *know* it's true I am sitting at this table in front of you.

—Sometimes. But how about something you cannot see?

—I wouldn't know.

I knew the kid was putting me on, at least to some extent, but he also seemed sincere so I went on

—But many times, we *do* know without seeing. Suppose I told you that yesterday at noon I had twenty dollars in my pocket. Could you decide if I am telling the truth?

—Well, I suppose I would have to look for evidence, like witnesses.

—Exactly. Suppose you had a witness who saw me just before noon withdrawing \$60 from an ATM and then paying \$37.38 for gas.

—It would look like you were telling the truth.

—It would but there would still remain some room for doubt.

—Wouldn't there always be room for some doubt?

—Of course and so the question now is whether the amount of doubt is small enough to ignore it. Like the error in the measurement of any quantity.

—You mean like I cannot pour exactly one cup of milk in my glass? I would always pour a bit more or a bit less?

—Exactly. And the error you can allow yourself depends on what you are dealing with and, more generally, on the circumstances.

—You mean depending on what is at stakes?

—Yes

He thought about it for a moment.

—But if I believe that if I don't believe in God I will go to hell after death, what can I do?

—Believe in God.

—But you don't?

—As long as neither one of us impose his belief on the other, what does it matter what we believe?

—I guess.

He thought some. Then he said

—How about preaching, I mean pushing for things you believe in but cannot prove?

—As long as you keep it clear that it's a belief and that you cannot prove it, I suppose it's ok. But I got to say I have a problem with it.

—You mean there are people that are too easy to convince?

—Yes, and the question is why would you want to convince them of something that may be false after all?

—I might think it's for their own good. If they don't believe in God, they will be damned.

—Just for that? Not nice, your God.

—Never mind how nice God is. It's known as Pascal's bet you know

—I know. Even if the odds are very small, if the reward is huge, you got to bet.

—Yes.

—I don't really know what to say. I don't bet, and I don't like to think in terms of being bought. Besides, it's hard to believe God is a nasty devil. But if he is, then there is nothing I can do. So, I can ignore God and think of more interesting things.

He laughed

—That’s a neat way to get out of it. Ok, but can you impose something you *know* is true?

—*That* is a lot more complicated. Depends on what it is of course. Depends on what is at stake. Depends on how big or how small the doubt is likely to be. Action is always iffy because you cannot reverse an action. But before anything else, it depends on *how* you know it’s true.

—What do you mean?

—This is where we need to know what proving *logically* that something is true is all about.

—You mean, like in accounting?

—For instance.

—But accounting is based on arithmetic.

—And on the belief that nothing gets created, nothing gets lost. *So*, at the end of the accounting period, what changed your net worth, that is your assets minus your liabilities, can only be your income minus your expenses during that period.

—I know, that’s what they call the Accounting Equation. I do know a few things.

—You certainly know a lot more than a few things. But what you may not have realized is that the Accounting Equation is just one of what physicists call Laws of Conservation.

—You mean like what a police stake-out is about: what got in but didn’t come out is still inside?

—Yes. And of course, mathematicians being the obnoxious people they are would tell you that the Laws of Conservation are just instances of Stokes’ Theorem.

—Am I supposed to be impressed? You wouldn’t happen to be a mathematician by any chance?

—I will take the Fifth on that one.

He laughed.

—I can’t prove it but I believe you are one: arguing with you is too much of a pain.

Lisa laughed too

—You noticed?

He laughed again

—And on top of that, so far, he has managed never to let us talk about religion.

I continued

— Actually, there is a lot more to logic than accounting and Stokes' Theorem. And the problem with logic is that the ramifications can be terribly complicated.

—You mean, beyond what the rest of us can follow? So, we are back to the question of belief? Of who we can trust?

—We are.

—So, what does this all boil down to? That it's all a big gamble?

—Come on. It's true that you and I and most people could not cross-examine someone claiming to be a brain surgeon if our life depended on it. But to be accepted in any field, a person has to survive cross-examinations by others in that field, by people who are as good or better. Like a surgeon has to pass boards every few years. Doesn't mean there are no hacks but that's what skepticism is all about. You look around. You look for what people are saying. You look at as much as you can. So, trusting a well known surgeon on operating on your brain may still be a gamble but surely nowhere as big as if you were to trust *me* to do it.

He laughed. He had lost his pathetic look. He had become quite alive. He said

—So, why can't I trust my pastor? She graduated from Harvard Divinity School.

—She did? And she sent you on this idiotic mission of telling women how they ought to look?

—Well, no, she didn't. Not at all. It's more complicated than that.

He paused. Then he said

—Of course, it does not depend on what she says? It depends on whether I am acting on it?

—I am not entirely clear on what *you* are saying. But I would say so. Do your homework and stick with Rule Zero, nobody should *impose* anything on anybody.

—Well, anyway, in my church, we don't impose our beliefs on others.

—Really? No sending children to Sunday school?

He didn't say anything. So I said

—Ok. The other thing you may want to keep in mind is that, a lot of times, the intermediaries between the people and their god, the so-called clerics, ministers, imams, priests, rabbis, what have you, have vested interests in what you believe in: money, fame, power, what have you. Once you start *looking* for examples, you won't have any trouble finding lots of them. In particular, I think you should keep in mind what Lisa told you about, what one half of humanity did and still does to the other half of humanity in the name of this or that god. Like, say, the Salem witches. But plenty

more too. Like men making more money than women. Like promotions. Like rape.

Always on the basis of some *belief*.

Including today. Including in this town. Including in your church. All around you.

Look. You have eyes and you can *see*.

—Getting a bit carried away aren't you?

—Well ...

—You mean we are done? But we haven't really talked about religion.

—*We* are not done. *I* am done. *You* on the other hand are *not* done.

You are going to have to take all your questions about religion to yourself. It will take you a while to deal with them. And it's not going to be easy to remain honest with yourself. I *believe* you will. But I can't *prove* you will.

—How about *you*? How do *you* answer all these questions we haven't asked?

—There is this guy, by the name of John Fowles, who used to write novels I haven't read. But he once said "*Being an atheist is a matter not of moral choice but of human obligation.*" I *believe* he is right but I can't *prove* it. And, anyway, as far as *you* are concerned it doesn't matter what *I* believe.

After a moment of silence, the kid got up, nodded at me, went to the counter to pay for the "drinks" and then told Lisa

—I am really sorry.

She smiled and said

—Don't forget, if they send you a bill, bring it to me. And you are welcome back whenever you want.

After he had left, Lisa laughed

—I heard it all. He had it coming but he took it well. Not a bad kid after all. Glad I didn't break his arm.

Too Much Of A Good Thing

—Hey, the do-gooders' are still at it!

That was Rob coming into the bar. I have known him since when he was at Community College. Same class as Lisa. He is a bit loud and doesn't like to think too much about certain things. But, basically, he is ok.

—Hey Rob, what a surprise. Long time no see. What brings you here?

That was Lisa from behind the counter, ever so polite because, as I remembered, she had never liked Rob that much.

—Hi, Lisa. That's because I don't want to be seen with your firebrand pals. How is the love of my life doing with her little bar?

This last was typical of Rob. He doesn't *mean* to be unpleasant but, sometimes ... He laughed and went to the counter and she poured him a beer. She said

—Don't worry, I will swear you never set foot in this den of iniquity.

He laughed again. She said

—You remember Al of course. I think you have met Joe. I don't think you know Mike.

—Hi Al. Hi Joe. Pleased to meet you, Mike. I am Rob, self-made man. Started out in a car-wash, wiping the cars dry. Then got to be a used-car salesman.

He laughed. Mike said

—Pleased to meet you, Rob.

Lisa said

—Actually, Rob is a lot smarter than he makes out. These days he owns both the used-car lot and the car-wash.

Mike mumbled

—Nothing wrong with that.

Rob said

—Well, I really am not that smart. I just work hard. Always have.

And, it's true, he has always worked hard. Already when he was in school. Both in and out. It had even cost him his marriage and, from what

one heard, at least a couple of relationships because he could never be much at home or even go out. Working hard to make another buck. He said

—So, have the firebrands finally remade the world?

—Not yet. We were waiting for your help, what with your business sense.

Rob laughed

—Not me. I really don't see much needs to be changed with the world.

As I said, I am not too smart and anything I did, anybody could do.

I joked

—I know, I know. *Any* body could. Of course, it's a good thing not *every* body wants to. Wouldn't be enough room for that many used-car lots.

He laughed. As I said, Rob really isn't a bad guy. But then he said

— I just work hard. Not like some lazy bums I know, scratch their butt and cry about how they are being exploited.

I wondered what that was about but I said

—What do you want me to say? You got yourself a big new house and I got me a small old one and Joe here rents an apartment on the wrong side of the tracks. Maybe, as far as *that* goes, just maybe, that may be fair enough. In any case, nobody here is bitching. So what is it?

He relaxed a bit.

—I am just curious about what you think is wrong with the world.

Joe kept his blank look and Mike remained stone-faced. Lisa got that faint smile she sometimes gets. Then she said

—Well, suppose *you* had a child who needed some real expensive medical care. *You* could pay for it. But if *I* did, *I* couldn't pay for it. Now, how fair to the *kid* does that strike you?

—You shouldn't have kids if you can't pay for their care.

She said

—I am with you all the way on that. Still. Tough shit for the kid?

I could see he was getting tense again. But he made an obvious effort to relax and said

—Ok, but why should *I* pay for the care of *your* kid?

Suddenly it must have come to him that she had no kid because he corrected himself

—For *their* kid.

She smiled.

—No way you should.

But she didn't say anything more and I didn't want to let Joe entangle himself with Rob. So, after a while, I said

—And that's precisely the heart of the whole matter.

—The heart of what matter? You lost me sir.

I hadn't lost him. No way. Rob is no fool and he knew exactly what I was driving at. Medicare for *all*. So I skipped that.

— Why are you calling me sir? You must be joking. Anyway, *you* aren't part of the problem with the world. Because *you* aren't big enough. How much are *you* worth? A few millions? So *you* are nowhere near big enough to cause much damage. You are *not* what we are talking about here.

—Thank you so very much for your high opinion of me. I am much relieved. What are you talking about *here*?

And he did look relieved. So I felt I could keep on pushing

—The point *here* is that *we* are *all* small potatoes. Lisa, Joe, Mike, me, even *you*. What do you think? The difference between you and I is zero compared to the difference between even you and the Real Big Money people. So, nobody here wants to take away your car-lot or your car-wash.

—So, who are you talking about?

—Not even the one per thousand because that would be 350 000 people. How many billionaires are there in this country by now? You know?

—Around 600

—Ok, so let's say I am talking about 60 000 people. And the question is, where does *their* money come from? One way or the other?

—I don't know. From their profits?

Lisa said

—Rob, don't play dumb. You *know* where their money is coming from. He sighed.

—Yes, I know. From the rest of us. They are just skimming but it adds up.

—They sure do and it sure does. But. actually, some of them are doing a lot worse than just skimming.

—Yes, I know. Tearing things apart. For a few dollars more.

Now he looked almost miserable and I was beginning to feel bad. We had forced him to think about things he didn't want to think about.

—Well, it's no more your fault than mine. But the question is, how long can *we* keep looking the other way.

—I don't know. What can we do? What can I possibly do about the Real Big Money people? Anyway, I am sorry but I don't want to think about them. I just want to go about my business.

—Well, you *should* think about them because, you never know, tomorrow morning you could very well find out that *they* thought about you and that there is now a real *big* used-car lot right across the street from yours. Along

with a super-automated car wash. The kind you can' afford. Happened before.

—So what are you talking about?

—You *know* what I am talking about and you don't want a lecture. And I know what you are going to say. That a society where everybody is the same can't work. But do-gooders, since that's the way you put it, never said we should all be the same. And that's simply because there *can't* be a world without differences. It's totally *impossible*. Mike here likes building with wood, I don't. I like building with stones which he doesn't. You, Lisa and Mike like running a business, Joe doesn't. I don't. No big deal. Everybody can keep on doing his or her thing.

I paused again for effect

—*But only as long as nobody gets hurt*. The differences shouldn't be so big that one kid will live while another will die because the money is in the hands of the Real Big Money people.

—So, it's not *my* fault. Why don't *you* go and talk to the Real Big Money people?

Now *I* was getting annoyed

—What makes you think *you* should be spared having to talk to the Real Big Money people? Afraid they are going to retaliate? Afraid they are going to grab your car lot and your car-wash?

He didn't answer right away. Then, after a while, he said

—I hear you all want a minimum income for *everybody*. So that's going to be one more thing us working men will have to pay for the lazy bums?

—No. Just the Real Big Money people.

—You are crazy.

—If the Real Big Money people did not rob us blind, there would be plenty enough money for us to pay taxes.

—Did you ever do the computations?

—No, I don't have to do the computations the same way I don't have to do the computations to know I could never win a fistfight against you.

He laughed

—You got that right sir. You better believe it.

—I do and I know you believe you have a score to settle with me.

He laughed again, but not quite as heartily. I shouldn't have said that. I said

—And here is another thing that ought to come out of *our* taxes: schools. The schooling of kids. *All* kids.

—Hey, what about parental rights? The freedom of parents to get their kids the education they think is good for them?

Lisa got her faint smile again but this time I didn't think it was because she thought I was going to make an ass of myself. *She* said

—So you think kids have no right to medical insurance but their parents have the right to brainwash them?

Joe was losing his blank look and even Mike seemed to have come alive. Rob said

—Aren't you overdoing it?

—Tell me how

He looked round at each one of us, just a bit longer at Lisa, and then said

—Well, folks, it was nice talking to you but I got work to do.

As I said, Rob never liked having to think too much about certain things. After he had paid for his beer and gone, Lisa said

—I can't believe you all let him get away with it. I know he isn't a Real Big Money boy but what is he talking about? The guys down in the coal mines lazy bums?

She had once mentioned her father having been a miner in West Virginia. She continued

—Well, at least he didn't say "*If you can't provide for a child, then don't have sex.*" like this kid in Texas said. That was a relief. But why did he bother coming here in the first place?

Joe laughed

—It sure wasn't to chat with *us boys*. But I am still totally amazed at the way you restrained yourself.

All That Glitters

I had asked Joe if he knew how much gold is left in Fort Knox. He said it didn't matter.

—It doesn't? But I sure would like to know how much gold I would get for the bills I have in my pocket. I know it wouldn't be much but still.

—The last time you would have gotten *any* gold for your greenbacks was a long time ago, before the French came up with a lot of greenbacks and asked for gold. After that, Nixon put an end to this nonsense.

—Ah the French! I didn't know. So, how do I know what these green pieces of paper are going to be worth next year?

—You don't. It's going to depend on how many they will print in the meantime. In God we trust.

—So, it doesn't matter how much gold is left in Fort Knox but how much money do you think there is in this country?

—What do you really want to know? How many greenbacks or how much *money*?

I said

—Ok, what I really want to understand is all this money swimming around the world. I know money started as a means of exchanging perishable goods by storing their value in gold, silver and copper. Which, by the way, allowed the powerful to become rich by skimming, that is by levying systematically a part of what was being produced. But I must confess I don't even know how paper money came about.

—Come on. You can read. Why are you asking *me*? Trying to butter me up? Why can't you look it up for yourself?

—Come on yourself. Because I know *you* know a lot about money. A lot more than I could ever find out by myself.

Being a janitor at the bank and since nobody pays any attention to janitors, he learns a lot from bankers speaking freely in front of him. But the real thing is that he *thinks* about what he has overheard. A lot. He said

—Yeah. But knowing and telling aren't the same. And you know telling isn't my thing.

—Joe, you are getting on my nerves.

He hesitated some more

—You got to accept me telling you the way it comes to me.

I almost yelled

—I do, I do. I swear on the head of your children

He laughed. He doesn't have children. Never wanted any. In fact, never got even married. He said

—You know Jenny, the one who grows tomatoes?

—Yes, what about her?

—Last summer, I wanted to buy some of her tomatoes to can but I didn't have the cash. So, I asked her if she would take what they call at the bank a promissory note and that I would redeem it in the Fall, after I had sold my own crop of apples.

She said she didn't trust bankers. I said she knew I was just a janitor anyway the bank was closed when I worked there. She laughed and said that as long as I worked *in* a bank that made me a banker.

Then she said she had too many tomatoes, which I don't think was true, and that since they would go bad she had nothing to lose by taking my note.

—And then what happened?

—Nothing

—What do you mean nothing? You didn't pay her back?

—No.

—Come on. What's the trick?

—No trick. I haven't seen that promissory note ever since.

—How come?

—When the apple season came and I went to pay her, Jenny said she had needed I don't remember what for the orchard and had gone to Jim's hardware store and since she had been short on cash she had asked Jim if he would take my note and he had said, sure, we all know Joe, why not?

He beamed at me. I ignored him and said

—So you think Jim used your note too?

—He must have. And the note must still be making the rounds. Of course, I have the cash waiting, just in case, but I don't expect the note to come back anytime soon. Why would anyone bother to make the trip?

—But would a *bank* take your note?

—Not on your life. Neither would they take yours by the way. Unless of course you secured it with your house.

—My house isn't worth much

—You would be surprised. Location, location, man. They would just pull it down and sell the land. You know?

We laughed. My house is not exactly in a prime location. Of course, the one he rents is on the wrong side of the tracks. Joe never believed in wasting money. Then I made the connection

—That's why greenbacks are called banknotes.

—Yes and that's why the Fed used to keep gold in Fort Knox. Just like me. Just in case someone wanted them to redeem their note.

—That why it's called the Federal Reserve?

—Don't know. But, in any case, greenbacks are not where the money is anymore.

—Where is it?

—Nowhere really. That's where it gets hard to explain.

But Joe got lucky. A loud clear voice said

—And the lady behind the counter is the formidable Lisa. Striking in both senses of the word.

—Hey, the kid is back! With a woman no less. Did do you grab her arm too?

The woman was absolutely stunning. He laughed

—I didn't grab her arm. But, since I can't attend most of my classes because I work, I thought I could grab her attention and then get her to lend me her notes.

Then, he added

—Her name is Rima which means White Gazelle in Syrian. I found out on the web. But we are not a item.

We dutifully introduced ourselves:

—Joe

—Al

—Mike

She nodded at each one of us. The kid pointed at me:

—That's the one I told you about, the guy who sent me back to school with his logic.

He grinned at me and added

—Really. And not in comparative religions either.

—What are you in?

—A long time ago, before comparative religions, I was somewhere between logic and linguistics.

—Happens to the best of us.

—Well, now it's even worse. I am somewhere between business and mathematics. Rima is in mathematics with an interest in finances. Or maybe the other way around. I forget.

She just stood there, smiling, as if humoring him while he was getting back to old friends. So, I asked her

—And how did you get there?

—I don't know. But not because the Accounting Equation is just an instance of Stokes' Theorem.

The kid laughed

—That's what I tried to grab her attention with. Made me look like a complete idiot. I don't think she knows the first word about accounting but as soon as I said "Accounting" and before I even said "Equation", she knew what I was getting at.

I asked her

—So what's your interest?

—These days finance is not a matter of accounting. As far as anybody can tell, money is not really subject to conservation laws anymore.

Joe said

—But it never was. As the amount of things produced increased, you couldn't just let their price go up.

She looked at him.

—Yes, sooner or later you had to increase the money supply. But that's still taken care of by Stokes' Theorem.

—I suppose. But what I didn't know how to explain to Al is that it does not make sense anymore to talk about the supply of money.

—Yes, that would be like counting molecules when pouring a glass of water. Perhaps more a matter of probability. Something like kinetic gas theory.

Joe said

—Well, I don't know about that.

—It doesn't matter because it was just a way to speak.

—What I was going to try to explain to Al is that the largest part of the world's money exists only as numbers entered as transactions between computers. But then what?

She smiled at him

—I think that's actually the key because what is the difference between money and money being recorded? But that's easy to say and a lot harder to pin down. So, yes, then what?

—It's not even the fact that one minute the money is here and the next minute it is gone because it has been balanced out.

—No, because that's not essentially different from what happened before which used to be taken care of by accounting procedures.

—Yes, just faster. Where I get really stuck is with borrowing power. In a way, it's like what I used to call virtual money. But now the word means things like bitcoins.

—I don't know that there is a word for it. But looking at borrowing power as money is interesting. But what you are saying is that you can't do any accounting with borrowing power because you can't pin down a rule for getting the borrowing power of a company.

—Exactly. Too many variables. And even though I am in fact pretty good at *guessing* that amount. Often better than the bankers whose building I am cleaning at night. But I can't figure out what it is that I am taking into account.

—I don't think that, so far, anyone has really done it. Not to the point that you could compute with it.

—I though somebody surely had.

—Not as far as I know.

—Even though what borrowing power is is fairly clear?

—You know it isn't.

—Yes, I know. How do you take into account things like the human qualities of the people working there?

—I don't know but it does of course matter very much. And not just for the borrowing power of a company but the borrowing power of a country. As a measure of something else. But what?

They were like two musicians riffing. They had entirely forgotten about us. After a while, she turned to the kid

—Kid, you know I have to go.

She was not being condescending. For her too he was just "the kid". She turned to us

—I have a paper that is due tomorrow which I want to read one last time which will take me at least half the night.

Lisa said

—You are very different. May I ask how you came to be in these parts?

Rima laughed

—My parents were born in Syria. But after they were married, they got jobs abroad and I was born in Germany. Went to elementary school there. Secondary school in one of the Napoleonian schools in Paris. And the London School of Economics after that. Now here.

She wasn't; showing off. Just telling it as it was. I asked

—But why not, say, Harvard?

—Because I happened to find out that here there is someone at the university with an uncanny ability to shoot holes in your theory. Even though he hasn't published anything. And, to be honest, I want to make it on my own rather than being a Harvard product.

After they were gone, Lisa said

—What a woman. What am I next to her? A stupid cow?

Both Joe and I were flabbergasted. Then Joe started laughing

—Lisa, Lisa. I can't believe it. You finally made it.

—What?

Joe was now laughing so hard he could barely speak

—Look at Al. Will you look at him? He is not even gibbering at the incredible idiocy of what you just said. You left him completely speechless. That's what. Speechless. Never seen it. Speechless. Never thought I would ever see him speechless.

He was rolling with laughter. Vastly overdoing it. But overdoing it very well. Trying to pull her out of her funk.

But I really was speechless. How could Lisa even think such a thing? How could she not see Rima for what she was? Sure Rima was brilliant. She would go very far in academia or in high administration. Harvard? The World Bank? And she was very beautiful. And very refined. And she seemed really a good person.

But she lived in a very different world from ours. A very rarefied one. Where the rules were very different. I wondered to what extent the kid was aware of that. But of course he knew. He was no idiot.

Mike, for whom only the concrete world existed, said

—I don't see how she could even be anywhere near a match for Lisa.

And Lisa would get over it.

And Joe had had something we rarely get in our life. Somebody who had really understood what he was about. Something he would never forget.

Killing Machines

It was quite late when I got there. Ted was sitting with Joe and Mike at a table near the end of the counter and Lisa was watching from behind as usual. We hadn't seen him since that first day when he had been asking about guns.

Ted was saying

—Remember when you asked me who would want guns and who would profit from that? Well I have been thinking about it a lot and I can see two reasons why people would want guns. Fear and self-image.

Nobody said anything. Not even Mike. So he went on

—People are afraid. Afraid to be robbed. Afraid to be raped. Afraid to be killed. Afraid of everything. Rightly or wrongly.

Joe said

—But then the question is what *makes* them afraid.

And, surprisingly, Mike asked

—And what makes them think that killing machines will help them?

Ted seemed happy to have gotten their attention. He said to Joe

—Well look at all these killings, all these rapes, all that.

Joe said

—I don't really know the numbers but I have a feeling that most of the guns aren't where most of the deads are.

He was saying it very delicately. But Ted caught on right away

—You mean a lot more blacks being killed by whites than whites killed by blacks?

—You could put it that way.

—It's true of course. But whites are deadly afraid of blacks just the same.

There was a silence. Nobody was saying the obvious thing, that whites couldn't really believe that blacks would not seek revenge for the whites were treating them. Then Joe said

—Well, blacks *are* afraid of whites.

—Yes but it is not the same kind of fear.

—I think you are right. Not at all the same kind of fear.

—And the difference is that black fear is driven by *facts*. The white fear is not driven by facts but by something *cultural*. I am not sure what.

I said

—Something to do with not being able to read the signs?

—What do you mean?

—I am no psychologist but aren't we all afraid of what we don't *know*?

—You mean that since I am not really that close to black culture, under some circumstances, I won't be able to tell what a black's next move is going to be?

—Something like that but I think that it is generally difficult to be close enough to another culture really to understand it.

—That's for sure

—Look, Joe and I have known each other for a very long time. I even think that we are friends.

Joe laughed

—Depends of course on how much you want to borrow.

—Precisely my point.

Ted said

—This has nothing to do with what we were talking about. I couldn't predict my twin brother beyond a certain point.

—You are right. You got a twin brother?

—No

We laughed. I said

—Ok, how about there being many different things that define a person?

—Yeah?

—Well, the closer our cultures, the more I will have to look for what makes us different. So, the longer I will have to look at you. But the further apart the cultures we belong to, the less time I will be looking at you because I will jump at the first thing that distinguishes us.

—Well, yes, but could you be a bit more precise, like giving us an example?

—Sure. Look, when they see me, what's the first thing a woman will think? "Man"

Lisa laughed

—Well, well

I ignored her pointedly.

—The first thing a black man will think is “white”. When a teenager sees me, it’s “old” but the first thing the kids at CC used to think was “teacher”. And so on. And so on.

—So you are saying that we stop there and that the problem is that we then *act* on that one first thing.

—But I am *all* of those things plus a lot more besides. And so is every one in this room. We each of us are a very large number of things. So, any two of us have a lot in common.

—And nobody ever realizes that the chances are they have a lot more in common with us than they have differences. If only they would *ask*.

Lisa said

—How so?

Ted said

—Well, I know nothing about you, the same as I know nothing about any one of you all. But. You like to bike?

—No

—Well, that’s already *one* thing we have in common. Do you like cooking?

—No

—Well, I do. That keeps it at one.

They laughed. She asked

—You like to read?

—Thrillers

—Science Fiction

—I thought you would say Romance

—Of course you would, I am a woman. But I don’t.

—Anyway, myself, I would be more Fantasy. So, we are still at one.

Joe said

—Depends on how you count. You both like to read. That makes it two.

We all remained silent for a while. Then Ted said

—But it’s also a matter of time. Say you have a gun on me, it’s going to be hard for me to find out that we both like, I don’t know, canoeing?

Mike said

—Killing machines. They make it easy to pass the point of no return.

—Here I got to agree.

Joe said

—Could it be the white fear is mostly fueled by a certain kind of talk?

Ted said

—Well, yes, but you can’t stop talk. First Amendment you know.

I laughed.

—Ted, he knows. But how about if, somehow, there never had been a First Amendment? Then what?

He laughed too.

—Anyway, you can't stop people from talking. No, seriously, how do you stop that kind of talk?

Then, to Joe

—Sorry I said that. Really.

Joe said

—I didn't take it that way. It's called inflammatory speech. But you are right. You can't really stop it. At least not with laws. But then I don't believe in solving problems with laws to begin with. I think that we rely too much on laws. All it does is inciting lawyers to find loopholes and bankers to make even more money..

Lisa asked

—But wouldn't you say people don't *have* to listen to inflammatory speech?

I said

—I think it's mostly a case of inflammatory speech offering a short explanation for a very real problem and therefore a quick remedy with nobody offering anything else. And people not being used to *search* for answers.

Joe said

—Then it's the fault of educators who did not educate people into asking questions!

—I totally agree. These days, when you ask: "How do you know 2+2 is 4?" You get "Because that's what I was taught".

Lisa said

—I totally vouch for that.

I didn't really know what she was vouching for. I said

—What's for sure is that the reason we don't *know* other people is because we are taught *not* to want to know them.

—But we are all different enough to make life interesting but the same enough to get along with each other without fear?

—That's a nice way to put it. Yes, I would say so. Once we realize we have so many things in common, each difference loses its importance.

Lisa said

—Come to think of it, I notice nobody here talked about self-image.

Joe said

—That's because we men don't have self-image problems. Not like some women I know.

—Yeah, right.

She pretended to throw a bottle at him. But it was getting late so we all got up, paid for our drinks and left. On the way out, I asked Mike

—I have been meaning to ask you. How did you come by that name, killing machine? Some stopper!

—I know. Jack Vance. Great writer. Name of one of his novels.

You Killing Me

Ted had just come in, looking eager to tell us all about his latest thinking. But a bunch of people had walked-in right behind him. Four white guys, one white woman, one black man. All in orange coveralls with silver reflector stripes, each carrying a helmet and a lunchbox. One of these crews you see on the roadside doing whatever needs to be done. Like working on power lines, or changing guard rails, or repairing a water or a gas main. Whatever needs to be done. With traffic roaring right next to them.

The four white guys looked in their early to mid thirties. The woman younger, maybe in her late twenties. The black man certainly not much more than twenty. The white guys hailed Lisa as if they were regulars but she didn't look as if she had seen them before. The woman and the black guy just nodded. Lisa said hello.

The helmets and the lunch-boxes got stowed in a corner. The crew settled at the far end of the counter: the four white guys, the woman, the black guy. The white guys were now joking among themselves. The woman and the black man were listening. Certainly a well-balanced crew according to management. Just as certainly, not quite so in reality.

After they had settled, Ted finally got to tell Mike

—You know, aside from the two questions you raised the other day, I have been wondering about how you would go about convincing people to let go of their guns. Obviously, just confiscating them would be the worst possible way. But, whatever the way, I just don't see how to get people let go of their gun without increasing their fears.

Before Mike could say anything, though, the white guy who seemed to be the foreman called

—I wouldn't let go of my guns no matter what. Why should I? I like my guns.

Mike said

—Killing machines

The guy said

—Huh?

—You said you liked your killing machines.

—What are you talking about? I *never* said that.

—That's what you said.

The guy looked bewildered. This was truly amazing. Mike was absolutely right. The guy had no trouble saying he liked *guns* but found it impossible even to think he liked *killing machines*. Then he recovered.

—Ok, ok. But, aside from that, guns are also incredibly sophisticated machines. With some of them you can hit a target a mile away.

—With some of them you can kill someone a mile away.

—But you don't have to.

—But they will let you do it.

—What about knives? They can kill too.

—Sure. Same as a lot of things. Even hands can kill. But all these other things can do all sorts of other things besides. Guns are the only things that can do nothing but kill. No matter what, they are just killing machines. Nothing more, nothing less. That's a fact and nobody should ever forget it.

I don't think Mike had ever said that much at once. He had spoken in a dead voice. Zero emotion. As if he were just reciting something he had zero interest in.

The guy started looking as if he was going to lose his temper. But, just like a lot of guys somehow think twice about losing their temper with Lisa, he seemed to start thinking twice about losing his temper with Mike. This was different, though, Mike was just sitting there, looking totally unconcerned. Maybe that's what was throwing the guy off. Anyway, finally he said

—I am sorry, we should have introduced ourselves. I am Josh, this is Ian, this is Brad and this is Mike.

Lisa turned to this second Mike

—I am sorry Mike, but here you can only be Mike Two. Mike is who Josh was just talking with.

—No problem as long as you spell it with two Os. That ok?

She laughed

—Ok! Neat!

He looked pleased. Then she said

—And Josh, my fault really, I shouldn't have interrupted, but how about the lady and the gentleman?

—Sorry about that. Her name is June and his name is Bill.

—Ok. Joe is the guy over there trying to look bored to death. And Al is the guy looks happy as a clam, except he hardly ever clams up. But it's

not his fault. He just can't help it. And the one who was talking about convincing people is Ted.

We all said Hi. Then Josh said

—So what's this you all were saying about guns?

Mike said

—Killing machines.

I said

—He is right you know. There is no going around it. Calling them killing machines forces you to see them in a completely different way. Forces you to think of what they really are about. Death.

Josh said

—Ok, Ok. So what were you saying about them?

The guy still couldn't say the words. Joe said.

—We were just talking. You know. Wondering about things.

—Like what?

Lisa said

—Ted wonders about why people are so afraid of each other. I wonder about how a few thousand people manage to milk three hundred and fifty million other people. Joe wonders about where the money goes. Mike, we don't actually know what he wonders about. But we are sure he does. Al wonders about everything.

Joe laughed.

—But, really, we will wonder about whatever you want. We like to talk.

Mike Too asked

—So, how about the ... killing machines?

I asked

—What about them? There really isn't much to say. It's important but it's not as if it was a basic issue.

—Come on.

Ted said

—Ok, Most people get killing machines out of fear. If the fear were gone, how many people would be left to buy them? Collectors? Hunters? Nowhere near enough to prevent the people who make killing machines from going bankrupt. What do you think?

—And?

—So, you need to lower the people's fear of each other.

—Yeah, right, And then?

—I don't know. But you can't leave that many killing machines lying around.

—I agree

That was unexpected. He added

—But where I disagree with you, is that it is a big problem. And you are not going to solve it.

—No. I think it's the fear people have of each other that is at the heart of the matter.

—I am not afraid of anybody.

Ted was in a bind. Obviously he didn't want to go back to what we had been talking about last time. It would have looked like a lecture. And I think he knew too that lectures don't work. He said

—It boils down to this. You either like the current situation or you don't. If you don't like it, *you* have to think about it, *you* have to make your own mind. You can't let other people do your thinking. Because, if you do, why not the people who make money selling killing machines?

—Is that a cop out?

—If you want. But, by the way, these people will tell you I did my own thinking.

He laughed

—Ok, ok. I will think about it.

Joe said

—Then what you got to keep asking is "Why?" As Mike put it when Ted raised the issue, why do people want killing machines?

—That all?

—It is. I am sorry to say but the other question Mike asked, who makes money on the sales, was completely trivial.

Mike mumbled

—Never said makes money. Said profit. Not the same thing.

Joe said

—Guilty as charged. Lots of people profiting from the fear. Not just the people who sell the killing machines.

Mike Too said he would think about it. Nobody said anything.

Lisa said

—Well, it's been nice listening to you all talking but I have had a long day, I am tired, and tomorrow is another day. And tonight the drinks were on the house.

The truth of the matter of course was that the conversation had gone nowhere and, somehow, couldn't have. I thought I would have to think why.

They all got their gear and prepared to go. Then Josh said

—By the way, it was Rob told us about you all. And he was right.

We all laughed. He added

—So, with your permission, we will be back.

Lisa laughed

—But I don't want to hear what he said.

He said

—You won't. We just want to shoot the breeze with you.

And then they left and we all left shortly after them.

Sometimes, I think we are both faking it and arguing only for ... the sake of the argument

Trust Me

Four guys walked into the bar. Almost in formation. All of a sudden, I recognized them. They were the four white guys from the road crew that had dropped by a while ago but this time they were not wearing their safety outfits. They looked both determined and unsure. Josh said

—Hi Lisa

She said

—Hi Josh and, pointing at each one of the other three, Hi Ian, hi Brad, hi Mike Too

They seemed pleased and relaxed some. Josh said

—We got a problem

—Not with me you don't.

—Well, it's like this. We been talking about it again and again and we agree on it.

—On what?

—We been dissed.

—You have?

—We been told we were criminals. Like we were about to go and shoot kids in a school.

—Whoa, Hold your horses, man, hold your horses. Nobody here said that. Nobody here would say anything like that. Nobody here would say anything anywhere *near* that. And, anyway, *I* wouldn't let anyone say that.

He said

—What about all this talk as to how guns are killing machines and all that?

Mike said

—That's what they are. Killing machines. Nothing anybody can do about that. It's a fact. All I said is people ought to keep it in mind.

Brad said

—But why pick on guns? Lots of people killed by drunk drivers. You going to ban liquor? It's been tried you know. Lots of people dying from

sickness because they didn't have the money to buy the medications. You going to do anything about that? Lots of people ...

—And school killings make the day for the news. They are convenient for all those that are responsible for those other deaths. The car manufacturers who didn't recall the cars, the tobacco companies who advertised tobacco as good for your health. Yes, at a time they even did that.

That was Ian.

—Hold your horses again, gentlemen, hold your horses. Nobody here is going to disagree with you on that. Nobody.

Josh said

—Still, you made us look bad. Listen. I don't think Ian ever touched a gun. Now Mike, Brad and I have always had guns but we never shot at anything live. Never. Well, Brad does hunt. But all he kills is one deer a year. To eat. I mean, you don't eat meat? You vegans? So, why all this talk about killing?

Lisa said

—Ok, Al and the others, they are just men so maybe they are not too smart and maybe they didn't make the point. Let *me* try. Say we are lovers

He jumped up, alarmed. She laughed and said

—Don't worry, just suppose. Ok, so we are lovers and we get into an argument. Suppose the argument gets worse and worse and it comes to blows. Now, the way we are, say naked,—he flinched—you can do some serious damage to me and, as it happens, I can do some serious damage to you. But, once we are oomphed-out that would probably be it. Right?

He was obviously nervous about the whole idea but he agreed

—Right.

—Now suppose we both carry.

He had been so upset about the whole scenario that he hadn't seen it coming, But of course he got it immediately. He remained silent. But she was pitiless

—Ok, now suppose we just met and we think we kind of could like each other. But of course we both know that there is always room for misunderstanding. Like we just said. But *now* the question for each one of us is: concealed weapon?

Mike Too grinned

—Sure is going to make the courtship kind of interesting.

—Worse than that. A lot worse than that. It's going to distort the whole thing. From beginning to end. It's going to change everything. You are never going to stop worrying. *That* what you want? Never stop worrying?

About killing? About getting killed? If anything goes wrong? The tiniest little bit wrong?

Josh now seemed a bit overwhelmed.

—That’s what they meant?

—Don’t really know what they meant but that’s what *I* mean. As Brad said, lots of ways to get killed. But none of them changes the way people relate to each other the way having killing machines ready, at the drop of a hat, does. Nowhere near. No matter what you are doing. You go back to the store because the bread they just sold you was stale. May or may not be true. May or may not be an accident. The one sure thing is that someone might get killed if there is an argument and it goes bad.

Guns change the whole social game. That’s why Mike says we should always keep in mind that they are killing machines.

And if we don’t want that kind of social relations, then we should get rid of guns. Period. But that’s another story.

Josh now looked completely deflated. Lisa grinned

—Ok, you guys all have a drink on the house. No hard feeling.

Ted said

—In fact, I am the one who brought up this issue when I first came here. As far as I know, they just went along with me just to be nice and they don’t seem to think it is a primary issue.

Joe said

—We just like to shoot the breeze

Mike Too said

—I will say. Some breeze too.

Joe grinned

—You shoot what you can

I said

—But what Brad and Ian brought up is nowhere a side-issue. Look. Your kid is in a school-bus on a two-lane road. Bus skids on an ice patch and hits a tractor trailer going the other way. Kid gets killed. It’s terrible. It’s absolutely terrible. For the family, for the friends. But it’s terrible the same way as if s/he had died in any other accident. Bitten by a copper head, fallen off a cliff, ... And it’s local news only. Because it’s, let’s just say fate.

In the case of a shooting, it’s a lot worse because, somehow, it is the result of evil. Somebody did it. And even if you fight it, you want vengeance. Still, why the national news?

Brad said

—So you would agree that there is a lot of bad faith going on?

—I would. And you could even say that without all the publicity provided by the networks, some of the killings might not even have happened.

—That's what I have often thought

—But Mike's two questions stay: why do people want killing machines and who really benefits? That's what matters. That's *all* that matters at this point.

—Why?

—Because they point to symptoms and you don't ignore symptoms. Not on your life.

—I guess

Jake And Kill

Lisa said

—Gentlemen, this is Kill and this is Jake. They are nice people I just met this morning. They are fed up with their life here and dream of going to Montana. Ladies, this is Joe, this is Mike, this is Ted, and this is just Al.

—Hi guys

—Hi Jake And Kill

Kill made a face and said

—It just happened. I have always hated Jill as a name and she has always wanted to be Jake, no middle name. In any case, sure sounds better than Jane and Jill.

They were maybe in their early twenties. Or perhaps still in their late teens. Hard to tell because they were obviously veterans of neighborhood wars. Hispanic. Tattooed to the gills. Kill with a long thin scar across her face. Jake with a broken nose. There had been many rings on both but now only the scars remained. Kill tall and sinewy. Jake stocky, a bit like Mike. Both had their hair fairly short but still showing traces of successive disastrous updates.

Obviously sharp. Very sharp. Even Jake with her sleepy look. You wouldn't pull a fast one on either one of these two that easily.

Ted said

—Who doesn't want to be like Jack Reacher? But how about Montana? Never been there but, from reading Lee Child, I'm not sure I would like it.

Mike mumbled

—Nothing wrong with Montana

Kill said

—Do we have to explain?

Ted said

—Everyone here has paid the price for being different. As for me, I think I can imagine.

She erupted

—No you can't white man. As a matter of fact, I don't think you can even *begin* to imagine. No way a white man could possibly imagine. You guys are all the same. You always know. You can always imagine. You can always tell a woman what to do. Like laying on her back. And don't think.

She was absolutely out of her mind. Lisa said

—Easy

Kill fell back on her heels. She had been about to jump Ted.

—I wan't going to hurt him

—I know. And if you had even tried, you would now find yourself outside, wondering how you got there, knife and all.

—I know— a bit meekly now

I wondered how Lisa had “just met” them. Probably bailed them out of some pretty bad situation. No point asking her, she wouldn't say.

Then Kill said

—I just don't like men talking down to me.

—Maybe he was, maybe he wasn't. But there is just no jumping here. None. We just talk it out.

Pounding on this last. After a while, Ted told Kill

—I sure didn't want sounding like I was talking down to you but if I did I apologize. And I sure couldn't possibly have an idea how it is where I think you are coming from.

But I had a feeling this last may not be quite true. Kill was remaining silent. So I told her

—You have nothing to explain. You don't need to say anything. As Joe would say, we just like to shoot the breeze. But you don't have to. And Mike rarely says anything anyhow.

Joe laughed

—But watch out when he does. It can kill you. Anyway, you are welcome to shoot the breeze.

She hesitated some then said

—We want to go to Montana or somewhere like that because we hope we can get jobs that would allow us to rent a house with a yard where we could grow vegetables. We want to be vegans.

Ted said

—As I said, I know nothing about Montana except it gets cold out there. Why vegan? Your health or the lives of animals?

—To be honest, I don't really know. You vegan?

—No, but I don't eat hamburgers and that sort of things.

—Why not?

—Back in the days, to eat meat you first either had to raise it or to hunt it. Which made for a certain automatic restraint. Either way, it kept you from eating meat casually, just out of habit, just because it is at the fast food. Well, I am not a farmer and I am not a hunter so I have to think to restrain myself, to eat no more meat than what they used to back in the days.

She thought about it.

—But what's wrong with hamburgers?

—Nothing. Just that they allow you completely to forget it's meat. It's just some ground stuff in a bun that comes with the french fries and the ketchup. So you don't think it's meat. You don't think it's animals. Same with fried chicken and all that. You don't see the animals. You don't think of them.

Mile mumbled

—True.

She thought about it some more. She was frowning.

—So, it's not for *your* health but because you want to stop too many animals from being killed.

She was stating it as if she were approving a conclusion someone had just arrived at. Ted said

—It sure isn't for *my* health and I actually *like* eating meat and I know if I want to eat meat, some animal has to be killed. The fact that someone else kills it for me shouldn't allow me to *forget* that some animal has been killed for me to eat. You've got to keep being aware of it.

She said

—But why eat meat at all?

—Back then, there was a balance. Now, that balance has been completely lost. That is what is bad. And for no reason.

Joe said

—There is also the *way* animals are raised and killed. Neither of which is nice. There is also what do you do with all the shit that's being produced. And the gasses being farted.

She looked up, surprised. I said

—No, he is not joking. As it happens, that's a lot of shit and a lot of gas and it does have an effect.

Joe continued

—There is also the sicknesses that get propagated that way. All of which because mass-producing all that meat brings in a lot of money from all those hamburgers, those fried chicken and those fried eggs and all that.

Lisa said

—But they will tell you that the human population is exploding, that we've got to feed them.

—Yeah. The truth is that it's a wet dream come true for them: an ever expanding way of making money.

—It's going to be a nightmare for the rest of us.

Jake hadn't said a word so far. She said

—But it's really the same with vegetarians. Well, almost. The animals don't die but their life is no fun. I mean, making milk and laying eggs all the time. And you should see the conditions they live in.

Kill said

—She used to work there. Couldn't take it.

Ted said

—Been there too. Couldn't take it either.

Ah. Shade of the true story? I said

—But another thing is that it's just a bit more difficult to see what the destruction caused by the production of the food vegans eat. What is all that vegan food made of? Basically corn, soy beans, coco nuts, and almonds. But mass-growing anything kills everything in the soil. Everything. Earthworms. Rodents. Insects. Nothing can survive that kind of agriculture. And any animal that need them to feed on dies with them. But who sees it? Plus, a lot of it is produced elsewhere, like in Thailand.

Mike said

—I read we ship a lot of dead chickens to Thailand just for them to return them cut up.

Joe laughed. Jake said

—We know it's probably a dream but we want to try anyway.

I said

—It may even work you know. But is that what really matters in the long run?

—What do you mean?

—I don't really know. We too are just sitting here. Doing nothing about the problems that really matter in the long run. But . . .

Lisa said

—No, we don't do anything about them. We can't. But at least we try to become aware of them. We think about them. It's already something. So, as long as these two try to become aware of them, as long as they think about them, they may as well go try Montana.

Copper Songs

—Told you the do-gooders would be at it!

That was Rob coming into the bar. This time, though, he was not alone. The woman was about his age. Maybe a bit older, A much shorter version of Lisa in a way. You knew exactly where you stood with her. Black. Mahogany rather.

He announced

—This is Martha. She is a cop.

It was as if he were showing off a trophy. Martha grinned but didn't seem embarrassed.

—Hi everybody

Lisa said

—Welcome to the bar, Martha. But how did you ever get to know this awful guy?

—He called the cops. I happened to be nearest.

We laughed. Rob said

—But I waited until I saw her driving by again before I called.

We laughed again. That was interesting. Not at all like Rob.

—So, *that's* why you told me all that nonsense about you being worried because of this guy you thought was prowling around the car lot? You made it all up?

But she looked neither surprised nor annoyed. *He* looked a bit smug. But he also looked different from the last time we had seen him.

Martha asked

—So, what were you all talking about tonight?

Joe joked

—We didn't do nothing, officer

She didn't look amused. She said

—Please drop it. I am off duty. I have got enough of that kind of stuff as it is. I am really curious as to what you are talking about. Rob wouldn't say much. Just that you had a good time of it.

Rob explained

—I thought it would be, like, a surprise.

Lisa now had her faint smile. Joe was obviously annoyed at himself so he wasn't going to say anything for a while. Mike was bland as ever. Ted looked like he was chomping at the bit. I told Rob

—So now the show must go on?

Martha said

—No, really, he did mention the kind of things you were talking about and, as I said, I am curious. You know, cops are kind of isolated. Especially these days. Of course, I am curious about what your take on cops might be.

Ted said

—Actually, we have never talked about cops. But one thing we did talk about is killing machines.

She didn't miss a beat

—As in guns?

Mike suddenly came alive. Ted said

—Yes, as in guns. But Mike here won't let us use the word.

—Well, I think he is right. That's what they are and we shouldn't forget it. I have often wondered how it would be to be an English cop, you know without a gun, never being in a situation where you *can* kill.

Mike was now watching her closely.

Ted asked her

—If I may ask, did that ever happen to you?

—I was lucky. He didn't die.

—But was he guilty?

—Of course. Guilty as hell. But what difference does it make? I am only supposed to catch them. Not to execute them. I didn't sigh up for *that*.

Lisa asked

—How about drinks everybody?

Rob said

—Yes, after all that's what her business is.

For the life of him, Rob couldn't make a joke without an unpleasant side to it. And yet, deep down, he was a good man. I wondered what it was.

—I meant, on the house

—Nah. on me.

I didn't think he wanted to impress Martha. Rob *had* changed. After the dust had settled, Ted said

—At least that way your guy was found guilty and you were vindicated

—It does not work that way. I don't know how to explain. Anyway, aside from that, what I don't like about the gun is that it *forces* you into a very special frame of mind. Whether you like it or not.

I said

—Another thing it does is to set cops apart from the rest of us.

Ted joked

—Less and less

Joe said

—More and more. And it is not going to do any good to anybody. And it is dangerous for everybody.

Martha remained silent. Ted said

—Sorry about that. No matter what, it can't be easy to be a cop.

She looked around and then at Lisa. I had been wrong. Physically, they had nothing in common. What they did have in common was something else. Something in the way they held themselves? I don't know. But whatever it was, they had recognized it in each other. Lisa said

—Feel free. These are all good people.

Martha sighed. Took a sip and then said.

—No, it's not that. The job is the job. What makes it hard is dealing with people you don't know. I don't mean personally. I mean, for the people in your neighborhood, you are something they are familiar with, someone whose moves they can predict, something like an in. Not to fix their tickets. Just an in to understanding.

She seemed to reflect for a few seconds and then went on.

—Outside your neighborhood, things are totally different. Either you are dealing with the haves and you are just part of the help. Or you are dealing with the have nots and you are the enforcer. Like when workers are being locked out. In both cases, you have to deal with people suspicious of your motives. On top of that, in one case you have to deal with contempt, in the other case you have to deal with resentment. Resentment is a lot harder to deal with.

She took another sip and then said

—But even that is part of the job. Not pleasant but, I guess, not much can be done about it at this point. The real problem is dealing with people whose culture you have no idea of. So, people you can't predict. I mean, is the guy going to scratch his butt or pull a gun? You don't know because you don't know how to read him. Or her.

She took another sip, thought some, then said

—A colleague of mine once told me he was terrified one day he would kill someone unarmed. Because of just a reflex, just from misreading the

situation. Or maybe in the excitement of the instant. It's easy you know because you have no time to think.

—Did he?

—No, he was shot before that. Because he misread the situation and shot too late.

After the ensuing silence, she added.

—He still lives. But not that well.

There was another silence. There was nothing to say. Finally, Joe, who seemed to have finally recovered from his self-annoyance, asked

—Isn't there some kind of training, something to help cops read the situation? Even what they call defuse it?

—I have heard of it. Even seems to work.

Lisa said

—But?

—Does not seem to be much interest higher up. They seem to be mostly happy with things the way they are. Because, like, when somebody gets killed, it's a diversion from things they would rather people didn't think about? Because that way they have someone to blame when people get angry? I don't know.

There was another silence while we were going over that last one. Then the door opened and this guy I had once seen talking with Lisa about presidents and political machines, got in. Lisa said

—Hi Rick. Long time no see. Come on in. These are all good people.

He hesitated. Obviously, he had not come to meet Lisa's good people. But then he said

—Hi everybody

She poured him a beer and said

—There is even a cop.

To Martha she explained

—Rick used to be a cop.

Rick sighed and said

—Is this where I am supposed to start on the sad story of my life?

Martha grinned and said

—Why not?

—Well, at least it's short. I got out of high school. No idea what to do. No trade. No nothing. This counsellor says why don't I try being a cop? I thought better than the military. So I was a cop for a few years. Then, one morning, after a hard night cruising, I was home at my mother's and she was making me breakfast and something happened. I don't know what. Maybe something she said? Something she spilled on me? I don't know.

Anyway I raised my hand and was about to strike her. Then froze. Just in time. Left the force a couple of weeks later. Found a job, got married, got a couple of kids, got separated. Story of my life.

After a while, Martha said

—Well, I guess I was lucky. Never knew my mother, never married, never had kids.

Fighting Words?

The evening had been quiet. As Joe would have said, we had just been shooting the breeze. But I can't even remember what the breeze was about. Probably drifting from one thing to another.

Then this guy from that road crew who had been here some time ago, Mike Too, walked in followed by the lesser crew members, June and Bill. After we had all said hi, Ted asked them what was up. Mike Too turned to Lisa

—Man, oh man, I don't know how that story of yours did it, but, man, is Josh changed!

—Really? How so?

—To begin with, right after that he started calling me Mike Too.

We laughed. Mike mumbled something nobody got. Mike Too said

—But the real thing is a couple of days later, Josh, he comes to me and says "Mike Too, you know me, right?" - "Right, Chief"

He winked at us. Everybody but me calls him Josh. I don't know if he just got used to my calling him Chief or if he actually got the joke. See, I got some native in me. Don't quite know how much, but enough.

Anyway.

Then he tells me "Mike Too, you know I am a straight union man. Right? I follow the rules. Right?" Course, we don't have a union but the company, they do have rules. So I say "Yes Chief. You sure follow the rules." He says "Well, I thought we should have a new rule." I ask "What new rule, Chief?" He says "I think we are all working men. Right?" I point out to him "Well, one of us is a woman, Chief" He didn't pay attention and said "So, work is work and work is hard. I want all of us to take turn at the easy work" I couldn't quite believe it but I could see what he was getting at. "You mean, Chief, like we should all take turn at holding the Stop and Go signs and at doing the real work and that sort of things?" He looked embarrassed. "Problem is, I can't change their pay rate. You think you could talk to them some and ask if it would be ok with them?"

So, I asked them and they both said it would be ok.

June laughed

—Of course I said it would be ok. How could I not? And, anyway, you know, less pay for equal work, what else is new for a woman?

And Bill said

—Me too. Win some, lose some, I thought. Good jobs are hard to find. And this one isn't too bad. And, that way, I could learn something. And, you know, Josh has been absolutely straight about it. We all take turns at everything. Well, almost. Some, see, you can't do without training. But he is teaching us. Somehow, I had suspected some trick. But I was wrong.

He was smiling. June said

—Of course, if there was an accident, it would be all over for Josh. And I am pretty sure he knows it because he watches us pretty closely when we do anything not in our official job description. And, you know, the atmosphere is now completely different, almost pleasant. Wouldn't you say Bill?

—Yes Mam.

She laughed

—That's their standard joke. But they keep it rare enough.

Mike Too said triumphantly

—Didn't I tell you he changed?

Lisa said

—Well, I am glad.

Mike Too said

—I had meant for a time to come tell you about it, but you know . . . And then June said she wanted to go ask you a question and Bill, he said he would just like to come along to see you all give her a hard time. So, I thought I would come protect her.

As Lisa was obviously a bit puzzled about what to say, he winked at her and June laughed

—Don't worry. He just has a crush on me and wants to cover up.

He rolled his eyes. Bill grinned and Ted told Mike Too

—Not a chance we would make fun of her. Lisa would get our hide for that kind of thing.

Lisa grinned

—I sure would.

June said

—Ok, here is the thing I wanted to talk with you about. I am taking night classes. Yeah, I know. But my parents are Irish and never did much more than make a living. I am their only child and they think I am getting ideas above my station.

Mike Too said

—You mean like wanting to marry me?

She smiled briefly and went on

—Ok, here is how it started. Back when I was a kid, I kept wondering why my parents would use words like darned and heck.

I said

—Did you ever find out? I always wondered why people would do that but I never dared to ask.

She laughed

—Sure you wouldn't. Anyway. So I started to think about the ways we *used* words. Then I came to thinking that a lot of problems come from people not paying attention to words and other people taking advantage of it.

She stopped but nobody said anything. So she went on

—Ok, it really started when I came across something some nun had said in an interview. Can I quote it? It's a bit long but I memorized it.

Lisa said

—Go ahead

—Well, here it is. *"I do not believe that just because you're opposed to abortion, that that makes you pro-life. In fact, I think in many cases, your morality is deeply lacking if all you want is a child born but not a child fed, not a child educated, not a child housed. And why would I think that you don't? Because you don't want any tax money to go there. That's not pro-life. That's pro-birth."*

After a silence, Lisa said

—I think I see what you are getting at and I agree, it's tricky.

Nobody was saying anything. It was indeed a tricky thing. I said

—We need another example but, right now, I can't think of one.

Joe laughed.

—You are slipping, my friend. How about *austerity*? Sounds good? Yes?

I laughed

—But Joe, that's not fair, that's *your* turf, not mine.

Mike Too asked

—What are you talking about?

Joe said,

—Al, *you* tell him.

I said

—No way

He made a big production of sighing theatrically and said

—If I must. Austerity is something the rich are trying to sell as something dictated by financial soundness. Say you know the government is going to have a huge deficit. I mean that the government is going to spend a lot more than what it will get in taxes. What do you do?

Mike Too said

—Grab the money and run.

Ted laughed

—No. We ask Joe

—Well, if you ask me, the first thing you should do is follow the money. Look *where* the money goes and *where* the money comes from. Then, the second thing you do is you act *accordingly*.

Lisa said

—Come on Joe, can't you be a bit more clear?

—Come on yourself Lisa, I can't take people for idiots because, in the first place, I am nowhere near as smart as you are.

We laughed but the crew looked a bit shook up. They weren't used to this kind of volleys. Eventually, Bill said

—I am looking at where the money is going. Things like defense, agriculture? Right?

—Sure.

—Now I am looking where the money comes from. Taxes? Right?

—Yes

—Now what? I can't spend more than I have. So, since I can't get a raise, I am going to have to spend less.

—That's exactly what the austerity people will tell you.

—But what's the choice? Borrowing?

—Actually, that's what they usually do. They borrow to solve *their* problem and so pass on the deficit to the next government.

—Ok, if they don't want to borrow, what can they do other than austerity?

—You are not looking deep enough into the problem and that's exactly where your answer is.

—I don't see it. As I said, I have only that much money.

June said

—I got it. What Joe is trying to make you see is that the money goes out to the *rich* and comes in from the *poor*.

Joe said

—Right on the dime. Who makes money off defense contracts? Off agriculture? Big companies. Real Big Money people. So they are not going to touch that. So what do they want to slash? Things like Social Security.

—Even though it is funded separately? By payroll taxes?

—Even though. And who gets their taxes cut? Big companies. Same Real Big Money people.

—I see

—Now, all you have to do is act *accordingly*.

After a while, June said

—And you are right about the word because when they use the word *austerity*, they make you think of frugal Puritans. Not fun, but if you have to do it, you have to do it. And nobody thinks of following the money the way you do.

She thought some more and then, excitedly,

—This is exactly as in the Chittister quote. They use a word that is so evocative that it forces you in the wrong direction.

And then Mike said

—Same as with killing machines

Tax Drivers

There were more people than usual. It was a small bar of course but, for this time of the day, evening, that was many people. The usual suspects of course but also people who had rarely been here before. People were talking.

Then, suddenly, somebody said

—I have a question

Everybody stopped talking and turned. It was Brad. He was looking at me. I said

—Shoot

—Ok, suppose we both of us have a hundred thousand dollars.

—I wish I had. Ok, let's suppose. Can't hurt

—Neither of us pays taxes on it. Yes? I mean the money is sitting in some account. Like a savings account. Yes?

—No but the interests we get will be taxed. Of course, the rates being what they are, we aren't going to pay much taxes.

—I know. I didn't mean the interests. I meant the principal. We don't pay taxes on the principal do we?

—No

—Ok, here is what I am getting at. Suppose with your savings you buy stocks. Do you pay taxes on the stocks? I mean I don't know. I have never owned stocks.

—Neither have I but same as with the savings. You only pay taxes on the dividends the stocks bring in. Same as with the interests.

—So ok, you buy stocks with your savings and you don't pay taxes but I buy a *house* with my savings and now I have to pay real estate taxes? How come?

He wasn't exactly picking a fight with me but not too far. I said

—To tell the truth, I have my suspicions but I don't really *know*.

—In other words, you believe something but you can't prove it. So you are not talking.

That was the kid who had a way to get in without being noticed. I laughed

—The kid got me.

Brad said

—I think it's just Big Government treating people differently. You don't have to pay taxes, I have to. It's not fair.

June laughed

—Welcome to the club

—What do you mean?

—You can control your body, I can't. Not fair either.

—Why do you always have to bring that in? I's got nothing to do with taxes. Can't you think of anything beside your body?

Kill erupted

—You pendejo, I be cutting your cojones, you be thinking about your body.

She had started towards him but Jake, without ceasing to look at Brad, had put her hand on Kill's shoulder,. Josh said

—June, you better apologize for that.

Lisa said

—Josh, Josh, she doesn't have to apologize for a quip. And anyway I am with June and Kill on that one. But, yes, it was Brad's question and our bodies can wait till next time. First of all, Big Government has nothing to do with it since real estate taxes are local taxes. Right?

—I guess.

—Ok now as to why you have to pay taxes on a house but not on capital or stocks, the short answer is that real estate taxes are just another way the rich get money out of the poor.

Mike Too said

—Yes, the rich they have stocks, they don't pay taxes. The rest of us we have a house, we pay taxes.

Ian said

—So, do like me. Rent.

Brad laughed

—Man, you think your landlord doesn't pass his real estate tax on to you?

Ian got a bid red.

But Brad seemed to be a bit at a loss. He said

—But then why is it local?

Joe said

—Look at High River. They just about don't pay taxes on their real nice homes. Why?

—How should I know?

—Because you are the one paying their real estate taxes.

—What are you talking about?

—Where do you do most of your shopping?

—Well, you know, yes, in the High River Mall. Why?

Ian jumped

—Hey, its like my landlord. They pay a lot of real estate taxes to High River but then they pass it on to you and me.

—So the High River people, they don't pay nothing and here in Low River, we got nobody to pay for us? That's not fair.

June laughed but didn't say anything. Brad glared at her. Joe said

—You got it. That's the way it is. Al once told me there was this French guy who said "*You got to take the money where it is, that is from the poor. Granted, they don't have much money, but there is lots of poor.*" Not bad eh? Stayed with me.

Rob, who till then hadn't said anything, asked

—What about the other taxes? Like the federal income tax? Like the State tax?

—What about them?

—Why are they so complicated? Why can't we just have a flat rate tax?

—You mean like everybody pays 5% of their gross income?

—Yeah

—The rich would love you. With a flat rate tax, *you* pay *their* taxes

—How so? Nobody ever talks about why this kind of taxes or that kind of taxes.

—That's because nobody wants you to think about it. You are supposed just to take if for granted and pay. As usual, too many vested interests.

Ted laughed.

—Ok, Joe, tell us all about it.

—It's not that complicated but first you do have to think a bit about the *questions*. That ok?

He looked over the people in the bar. They were all looking at him. Everybody seemed to assent.

—The first thing you got to ask is why *income* tax?

Brad asked

—You mean over *real estate* tax?

—For instance. But in fact, a long time ago, some guy proposed that tax be on energy. And every now and then, somebody proposes taxes on

energy but never as a replacement for income tax. Still, I think it would be worth considering some more. I mean we are really spending our capital. I just wanted to bring up the fact that taxing income is already a *choice*. But right now, if we want to get to answering Rob's question, we better take income tax as a given. But before we can look at the question Rob asked, flat or progressive, we got to ask what the *purpose* of the income tax is.

Brad said

—Pay for the Government's expenses.

—Sure but there is something else. And that's where you are going to get your answer.

—Like what?

—Lets go back a bit. I know, I know. Get to the point.

People laughed but didn't seem impatient. Joe frowned and seemed to collect his thoughts.

—Ok, here is the thing. Some people are better than others at making money. Right?

Everybody laughed again.

—Yeah but that's the point. If I am better at building dry-stone walls than Al, maybe it's fair that I should earn more money than he does

I said

—Joe couldn't tell a dry-stone wall if it fell on him.

Joe laughed

—He is right of course. By the way, *he* can. But what I was getting at is that being better at *making money* is an entirely different thing.

June said

—You mean because *making* money is just a cover-up word for *stealing* money?

Everybody laughed. Joe said

—Yes. So, the other thing about income tax is that it attempts to get some of that money back from the rich, that is from those who *make* money

I was expecting Brad to jump but it turned out that Jake beat him to it.

—Wait a minute. Suppose I find a better way to make dry-stone walls. So I get a lot of business and so I make a lot of money.

Kill laughed

—I mean. Wouldn't you say I earned that money?

Kill said

—I don't see why. What *I* would say is that either you overcharged your customers or you underpaid your workers.

He laughed

—I should have known

—No, I mean an hour of your life is not worth any more than an hour of your workers' life. So why should you pay yourself more than you pay them?

—Remind me to split from you when I start my dry-stone wall business
She laughed. But Ian said

—Wait a minute. Wouldn't you say that a doctor has a right to earn more than a mason?

Lisa who had remained silent until then said

—Why?

He looked completely taken by surprise

—But isn't it obvious? I mean the man studied a lot, he paid a lot of money to the college, to the medical school, For his office. He knows a lot.

—What you are saying is that he should make his patients pay for the hours of his life he spent studying?

—Something like that. Those were expenses he has to take into account.
Joe said

—I would agree but, again, this is really something that ought to be looked at carefully. But, right now, let's put it aside and say the doctor earns four times what you earn to cover his expenses. That ought to cover it. Right? Ok, let's make it six time. Eight times. Ok?

—Ok

Martha said

—Wait a minute. You went a bit fast on the expenses. Does he deduct them and still, er, make that kind of money after expenses?

—Never mind. Let's not quibble. Let him pay at the same rate you do. But how about the people who make Real Big Money? People who make a hundred times what you do? Think that is just to cover their expenses?

Rob said

—No, they *made* that money.

June said

—They *stole* that money

Mike mumbled

—Right

Joe said

—So, short of being prosecuted for theft, Real Big Money people should pay income tax at a higher rate.

People applauded. And, indeed, Joe's had been a really good performance. And it had been the closest he had ever come to giving a talk.

Cry Baby, Cry

—All that every man for himself stuff is real depressing.

—And fuck women?

—Never thought you be able to say something like that.

—Getting old but still learning.

But Lisa wasn't amused. She was shaking her head in disbelief. It wasn't her kind of humor. She said

—You know what Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the judge at the Supreme Court, said? "*I ask no favor for my sex. All I ask of our brethren is that they take their feet off our necks.*"

After a while, Jenny said

—I am just an old woman growing tomatoes. But I don't like the tomatoes I am growing anymore. A long time ago, Jersey tomatoes, they were all over the place. My mother used to sell a lot of them. Then, they completely disappeared. People would make jokes about the new tomatoes, like "Hey, is that an MH4 or an MH6?" But soon enough we couldn't even get seeds for anything else.

—What's MH?

—Machine Harvest. But people used to like Jersey beefsteaks a lot. So, how did they get people to like the tomatoes they sell in supermarkets now? Why?

Mike Too said

—I know. They got no taste. They aren't sweet, They aren't acid. But boy are they crunchy. Hell, these days they even have wood in them. Did you notice?

—Yes, I know. Even those I grow have some. Can't avoid it. They breed them so they can ship them without bruising them and the supermarkets they can keep them for ever. But what I would like to know is why? I mean, they didn't have to do that. There were plenty enough people next to where they were growing them.

Joe said

—It’s what they call “economy of scale”. The idea is that with real big farms you drive the price down a bit, you advertise a lot and you drive the small farmers out of business. Then you can hike the price back up. Even higher. And then you make a lot of money.

June corrected him

—*Steal* a lot of money.

Somehow, she had taken to Mike’s way. Brad looked at her but didn’t say anything. Joe added

—So, first they had to drive the old tomatoes out of the market.

Jenny said

—I guess I am going to have to go out of business. What am I going to do? Tomatoes is all I know.

Nobody said anything. What could we say? After a moment of silence, Martha asked Lisa

—Don’t know if you know but did you know there are parents that, for religious reasons, won’t take their child to a doctor?

—I had vaguely heard about it but didn’t really quite believe it.

—In fact, quite a few of these children die of it.

—You serious? Wouldn’t that be manslaughter?

—Yes but. Children do have Constitutional rights. Like “*notice and counsel in court*”, have the right to question witnesses and have protection against self-incrimination. Death penalty for crimes committed before the age of 18 is considered “*cruel and unusual punishment*” so in violation of the Eighth Amendment. That sort of things.

—But?

—But, just like there is nothing about children being entitled to refuse the education or the religion their parents force on them, in most states, there is nothing to force parents to seek medical treatment for their children as long as their religion forbids them to. They call it a parental right. And so they have exemptions even in the case of manslaughter.

For once, Lisa was naive

—But how is this possible? How can *legislators* do that?

—The way they are putting it is “*We have to respect our communities*”

—In other words, “*We need their vote*”? I have nothing against suicide. Quite to the contrary in fact. I have nothing against people refusing medical treatment for *themselves*, whatever the reason. But it’s a crime to prevent *anybody else* from being medically treated. Period.

Martha said

—By the way, you realize suicide is still a “*common law crime*” in some states?

June said

—It's like the nun said. The fetus has the right to live but loses it as soon as it's a child.

Martha said

—You know what? First time I ever heard it put that way. In fact, nobody ever puts the two together. At least, I have never seen it.

Nobody had either.

Then Josh asked

—What about vaccination?

June asked

—What about it?

—There are risks with them, side effects you know.

Rick said

—When you get in your car, there are risks too you know

Josh didn't seem quite to know what to do with that. Finally he said

—Still, who is to decide if not the parents?

Jake said

—There is another side to it.

She looked like she was ready to enter the discussion. It was the first time.

—What do you know about it? Got kids? Already?

—No. You know the way vaccination works?

—The theory is you inject a weak version of the bug so that the body can learn how to recognize it and fight it if and when. But as I said there can be side effects. So, what's that other side?

—The *other* people. When *everybody* is vaccinated, the bug has nowhere to go and either dies or just remains hidden in a corner. When it dies, you can stop vaccinations. If not, it can just be hiding in a corner.

Jane said

—And then, when it finds enough people that aren't vaccinated, it will come out again. And then, if someone like this little girl whose immune system wasn't working so she *couldn't* be vaccinated catches it, then she died.

—Surely, if only a few people don't get vaccinated the bug shouldn't be able to find them.

Rick said

—But then it means *you* are riding on *other people's* horse. The only reason *you* can avoid taking the risk is because *other people* are taking it for *you*. Not very nice.

Josh didn't say anything. Then I said

—In fact, severe side effects are extremely rare. As Rick said, you are a lot more likely to have a bad accident on the road.

—How do you know?

—Lots of people are studying that.

—Wouldn't you say the companies that make those vaccines have a vested interest there?

I laughed

—Sure. But you got lawyers constantly looking for cases to make money on. No, seriously, there are lots of scientists with no vested interests either way. *They* want to know.

—So you believe them?

—So I do. Not everybody is after money you know, Einstein never made money.

Lisa asked Josh

—Do you know if children whose parents didn't let them be vaccinated, say against polio, and who then got it later, ever sued their parents?

Josh suddenly looked very uneasy

—No, I don't know

Jake said

—Back when I was a kid, I got fascinated by vaccines. I don't remember why. But I started looking for information. Of course, I didn't understand most of what I found but I remember being overwhelmed by the incredible amount of stuff dealing with vaccines.

Kill said

—You never told me about it

—You never told me about many things

She laughed

—Course not.

Jake looked at Josh

—Maybe you could take a look, same as I did.

Some time later, Jenny said

—You know, my grandson, the other day, he had gone out of the building where he works. You know, to eat his lunch. And he sees that woman, she is one of his coworkers, she is sitting all by herself on a bench, crying. He didn't know what to do, but finally he walked up to her and asked if he could do anything. She looked up at him and said. "I need injections in the left eye. Otherwise I will go blind. But \$2,000 an injection? Where can I find that kind of money?" He asked her "Don't you have insurance?" She said, "I know you all do but some of us, we work for an outside contractor

and the insurance they give us doesn't cover anything like that. I will go blind."

This time the silence that followed was quite long. Nobody asked what the boy had said. What could he have said? What could anyone say?

But I knew the picture of that woman I had never met, sitting on that bench, crying, was going to stay with me for a long time to come. Fueling my rage at the Real Big Money people.

Rob said, glumly,

—Maybe you guys are right after all. Maybe the world needs to be remade.

That Is The Question

Ted was asking Joe

—Why do you always say we are just shooting the breeze?

Joe hesitated. He hates being put on the spot. But he liked Ted and would find it hard to put him off. Finally, he said

—Because that's what we do.

—You mean it's not important, it's just hot air?

—Of course not. It *is* important stuff. But it's not what's *most* important.

—What do you mean?

—What we talk about are issues that directly affect us. But they are only *consequences* of other things, things that are at the *root*.

Lisa suddenly looked their way. As if something she had long been waiting for might be about to happen. She said

—You mean if these basic things could be solved, the things we have been talking about would just go away?

—You might say that.

Rick asked Joe

—So what would you say these things you think come first are?

Joe hesitated again. He looked at me as if hoping I would answer for him. I shook my head. After some more time, he finally said

—Of course, first of all, I would say that there should be the idea that nothing ought to be forced on anybody.

I said

—As in, if you believe the moon is made of green cheese, be my guest but don't force it on me.

And Lisa added

—And don't teach it to your children either.

Josh said

—That's morals, that's not politics. How would you put that in the Constitution?

Joe said

—I don't know. But no law should let *me* impose things on *you*. *That* should be at the very basis of the law. There has to be a way to put it in legalese but I am no lawyer.

Then he added, a bit uncertain,

—But of course the government *has* to impose things on you and me.

Rick said

—Of course. We are *all* forced to drive on the right hand side of the road. We *all* have to have car insurance.

Joe looked relieved.

—Just so. As long as the emphasis is on *all*.

He seemed to have recovered and added

—But *that* is a big problem. As usual, where do you draw the line? Do you send *all* men to war? *All* people to war, men *and* women? Do you allow for conscientious objectors?

Lisa laughed.

—Not a good example, Joe. Because, here, the answer is obvious. Don't make war.

Coming from an ex-Marine, that was interesting. Then she added

—And, anyway, even in the case of being forced to drive on the right-hand side of the road, there is going to be exceptions.

I said

—Like cops and ambulances. But should the local VIP be allowed to go on the left hand side? Just because he is late for an important appointment with the mayor about this new business he claims will give jobs to a number of unemployed?

But Ted was asking Joe

—Are you saying that we should be ruled by general laws rather than by detailed dos and don'ts, like now?

—Well, detailed dos and don'ts lead to a search for loopholes and make us lose sight of the principles behind the dos and don'ts. And the other thing is that do's and don'ts are so specific that they quickly end up being behind the times. So now you have to interpret them in the light of some general principle anyway.

I couldn't resist

—It would be hard on lawyers and I read somewhere that over half of the lawyers in the world are in this country. So that would put a lot of people out of work.

Ted laughed

—It wouldn't be that bad for them. Because administering justice with general laws leaves a lot to the court and uniformity is hard to enforce because the circumstances will always be different.

At that point, the kid whom I had not seen coming in said

—But, Joe, how do you reconcile all this with the Constitution? Seems to me that you are almost advocating socialism which sure isn't in the Constitution.

Lisa said

—That would depend on what you call socialism. But, leaving socialism aside, and in any case, *this* Constitution does not really work.

—What makes you say that? And, anyway, when it doesn't work you can always fix it with an Amendment.

—How about you can be elected President of the country while failing to win the popular vote?

—Can be fixed with an amendment. But in fact that would not even be necessary. All it would take is for enough states to agree to have their delegates go by the popular vote.

Martha said

—How about a majority in the Supreme Court being able to make *laws*? Like making laws against the unions? Against abortion? Like giving corporations some of the rights of citizens? Like helping rich people prevent poor people from voting by gerrymandering?

June said

—By the way, I think that abortion is one of these fighting words they use. I think that something like allowing you the freedom of your body would be much more to the point.

Ian said

—But you don't have to get rid of the Supreme Court for that sort of things. Maybe it could just be fixed.

Martha said

—What can be fixed can always be unfixed. No, the problem is exactly what you said. The Supreme Court should not be used to make laws. Not to mention that these days, the Supreme Court has become a political football which doesn't do much for stability. I mean, us cops we like to know which way is up.

The kid said

—But no reason to get rid of the Supreme Court for that. I agree with Ian. All of that can be easily fixed with an amendment that would split the Supreme Court into *two* courts. One court just to look at specific cases and decide if they have been judged according to the law and to send them

back to the lower courts if they haven't. The other court would not really be a court as its purpose would be to examine the laws enacted by Congress in view of the Constitution and only if and when they passed it could the President sign them into law.

Rick asked

—How about differences in law from state to state? What's legal there is illegal here? Like Marijuana? Or the so-called right to work which is really the right to be exploited?

—That's a bit harder. But I think that it too could be fixed with an Amendment.

Joe said

—I don't see how

Unexpectedly, the kid laughed,

—In fact, neither do I. In fact, I don't think this division of the country into States is very democratic. To go to an extreme, suppose some catastrophe left only two people in each of twenty-six states. Then these fifty-two people would be senators and would rule the whole country.

—Yeah, but that's a bit extreme all right.

—Still, it's telling us something

—That's like saying that the whites could make a law making the blacks slaves again.

—Aren't the blacks still a minority? Seriously, there *has* to be limits to majority rule. How are you going to do that other than with dos and don'ts? On the basis of your principles?

—Why not?

Ted thought for a moment.

—But, it seems to me that someone once said that revolutions cannot work, that you cannot change everything all of a sudden. So, you might say that making the change in one state, then two, etc may provide a good way to making the change for the whole country.

—I don't see it. What I do see is the chaos *that* would introduce among the states in the meantime. And it could take forever.

—I guess

—I think the question is how to get gradually the changes we want and to prevent the gradual changes we do not want. Maybe start by having the States unify their laws with each other?

Ted said

—I know. I haven't been able to figure that one out.

Joe said

—Neither have I.

I said

—As I once heard Lisa say, what we should aim for is to replace the United States of America by the United People of America.

There was a stunned silence.

Then Ted said

—I can't argue against that. And what that means is that we can't leave it to committees.

There followed a lot of talking but it didn't sound as if anybody could argue against that either.

After the rumor died out, the kid said

—So, right now we have three things that are wrong with the Constitutions because I am adding the obvious third one: i. The country being divided into states ii. The Supreme Court iii. The President not being elected by popular vote

Kill jumped to her feet in fury but Jake caught her arm and said, quiet as ever,

—There is also who *can* be citizen. In other words, immigration

Lisa said

—I think the Constitution would have to be for the people who *are* here. Who *gets* to be here is another matter. I don't think it's just a matter of law.

Rick said

—One thing I do know for sure is that there would be a lot less people wanting to live here if this country didn't make it totally impossible for people to live where they have always lived, where they *want* to live. What choice does this country leave them?

—Well, there is also the fact that this country is rich

—What makes you think money is all that matters for everybody? To us, maybe. At least that's what *they* want us to believe. But to people elsewhere? Not necessarily. I mean once a minimum is secured. And don't forget that much of our wealth is based on the exploitation of these people. Have you ever seen the inside of some of those factories where they make what we use? So, if we paid *them* the way *we* would want to be paid, they would have no reason for wanting to come here.

Lisa said

—And there is another thing. Would *you* want to stay in this country if your home was being bombed nonstop? If your children were starving because the land was ruined by a war that some other country was waging?

Of course she knew first-hand what she was talking about. She had seen it. Then she added

—And then, you know, there is a lot more money in selling arms than in selling drugs. A huge lot more. And I am not just talking about assault weapons. How much do you think a fighter plane goes for? And how about just ammunitions? But nobody is talking about that. But the Real Big Money people, they *have* a vested interest in wars.

Martha said

—In other words, what would be most important is for the Constitution to be totally clear about how wars are to be waged? Not to mention who is going to be sent to fight them. To keep money out of it.

There was a long silence. Then, someone I couldn't see said

—So you are saying that if these issues were settled, there would be no immigration?

—I don't know but did you ever notice how many immigrants go back? Or, at least, *want* to go back?

—I guess not.

Rob said

—So, you want to rewrite the Constitution? How many people do you think would agree with you? Plus, the new constitution could be worse.

Joe said

—Exactly. It would have to be prepared for a long time. And as Ted said, not by committees. Maybe by starting to talk about it. Like we do about issues. I don't mean that we should stop talking about the issues we have been talking about but maybe we should also talk about these issues in the context of what a new constitution might be.

—You mean to show how the issues would disappear with a more democratic constitution?

—Why not?

—Do you really think that not forcing anything onto anybody would do it?

—I can't see why not. As Al would put it, maybe not *sufficient*, but surely *necessary*.

Rick said

—One of the first things to do would probably be to unify the unions. Not only should we have only one organization but all contracts should be reframed in non-specific terms. That way, when Real Big Money attacks one thing, there would be a lot more people feeling attacked. After all, divide and conquer is their main tactic.

—Like instead of this union fighting for two weeks paid vacation and that union fighting for fewer hours a week, the whole of us should demand

a yearly bound on hours and then the workers in each company could say which way they want to slice it.

—Neat!

—All that would do is to bankrupt the companies

I said

—That's what they have in Europe. And, last I heard, they haven't gone bankrupt yet.

Rick added

—And there surely should be something in the Constitution about *working*. I mean, most of us need to work. But, right now, it's those who don't really work who call the shots.

—And none of it would be socialism. Just recognizing that we are *all* in it. So, we should be in it *together*.

Polit Science

—Ladies and Gentlemen of Lisa’s Bar, your fame has reached the University which has expressed the desire to know more about citizens actually *talking* about politics. Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you Dr. Paul Merenberg, Professor of Political Sciences.

That was of course the kid. He looked like a kid who had just pulled a fast one. Dr. Merenberg didn’t look quite so happy. He said

—Good evening everyone. First let me correct the kid. I am only an Associate Professor. And I should perhaps say right away that my colleagues in Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry and now even Biology would tell you that Political Science is no more a science than Economics and Sociology which are of course the crutches Political Science rests on. Why? He chuckled. Because none of the very few predictions we ever made came about..

That sounded like the way he would start any class. But our Professor was competent enough to have been tenured as Associate Professor but with enough spine left never to be promoted to Full Professor. Interesting.

He continued

—Yes, I heard about you and yes I am very much intrigued. You would hardly expect talk in a bar to be about anything but sports.

Looking at Lisa, he added

—But of course this bar must obviously be different as it has to be the only one in the country without a television.

Lisa hesitated and then said

—Well, I just find it spooky having something hanging from the wall, over my head, with like a life of its own.

He chuckled

—I know what you mean. I don’t have a tv either. He chuckled. I mean other than the little one in my office to keep up with the news. But I do not want to interrupt whatever discussion was in progress.

The Professor was middle-aged, dressed in jeans. Obviously. Back in my days, he would have been dressed in corduroys and smoking a pipe. I was

used to the type but Lisa didn't seem quite to know what to make of him. Nobody was saying anything. I said

—As a matter of fact, not too long ago, we happened to talk about the Constitution.

—Really?

—How it was not working and what should be done about it.

The Professor looked a little bit surprised. As if he had just realized one of his students was not entirely stupid.

—How so? How is it wanting?

—Come on, Professor, you must know better than we do. By the way, I am Al.

—Please call me Paul.

He wasn't going to say anything until he knew exactly where we stood. So, I said

—Ok, here is a short list of what we found in the Constitution that makes this country anything but a democracy: i. The Electoral College ii. The Supreme Court iii. Congress. That enough?

There was general laughter and the Professor smiled indulgently

—Ok, I concede the Electoral College and I would prefer to table the question of the Supreme Court for now. But Congress is pretty much what you would expect in any representative democracy, wouldn't you think?

Joe said

—I wouldn't know what to expect but I don't see how you could deny that the Representatives are anything but.

—How so?

—They are under no obligation actually to represent their constituents. So, when you vote, it's like firing a shot with your eyes closed. You have no idea what will happen, what they will do, how *they* will vote. And with the party as a whole, it's a huge joke. What sense does it make that the platform should be decided at the convention, when all primary voting is over.

—I think you are exaggerating. What they are to do is obviously what they said in their campaign they would do and which is what got them elected.

I said

—Paul, you can't possibly believe that. But first, let me introduce Joe. We are good friends and we argue a lot and he wins more than half the time. He knows a lot about money. You would be surprised how much he knows.

The Professor said

—Glad to meet you, Joe. From what Al just said, you must be something else.

Joe laughed

—Al says I am a libertarian but I don't think so. For my part, I tell him he is just an anarchist which he agrees to but he says that what saves him is that he is of the syndicalist variety—whatever that is. We both think that the other one is a total political idiot but, as he said, we are old friends and we love to argue. So we argue a lot about political theory. That's all.

The professor asked

—But what does what you said before have to do with the Constitution?

Joe said

—There is absolutely nothing in the Constitution to ensure that Representatives be *accountable* to their electorate, that what they will do will be what their electorate would want them to do. They are not even under any obligation to even *report* back to their constituents. Not too long ago, Rick told me about this Democrat incumbent who was re-elected because the voters didn't know that he had voted against a \$15 minimum wages and against Obamacare. This was in a district where the average wages were well below \$15. The least should be that their voting record be sent electronically to anyone who voted in that election.

The Professor was clearly taken aback but of course he recovered almost instantly. That's what teachers are good at. He tried again.

—That's an interesting point.

—And there is nothing in the Constitution to prevent a Representative from slipping in a totally unrelated bill an amendment that heavily favors some business at the expense of the rest of his constituents.

—But that might just be the result of a judgement call. Could you give me an example?

The Professor was running this as an oral examination.

Josh said

—How about getting a new road that will only benefit a particular developer? At the expense of a lot of people?

That had in fact happened a couple of years ago.

—Yes of course. How about the fear of not getting reelected? Wouldn't you say that would be a deterrent?

—It sure wasn't in that case. Are you kidding? Just look around. Doesn't seem to deter many of them. It's more like an incentive to hide things away.

—When they are not doing a lot worse.

—And they keep getting reelected.

—And getting money from special interests

The people in the bar didn't sound too happy. Joe said

—People would have to know what he did, out there. Which they don't. And, if and when they did find out, it would be long after the fact. When it's all over.

—And if he didn't get reelected, it wouldn't be the end of the world for him, he would still get his pension and probably a cushy job at the developer who owes him his road.

The Professor was beginning to look a bit overwhelmed.

—That is often true of course, but that's really the responsibility of the electorate. And it is in the representative's interest to behave. Anyway, you can't put this kind of things in the Constitution.

—Why not? I don't see why the Constitution could not include the idea of *accountability*.

—But if the Representative did not do anything illegal, there is nothing that can be done. He has to be free to act to the best of his knowledge.

—Does he? How come his constituents don't have the freedom to throw him under the bus when he doesn't act in their best interest?

—As ascertained by the people, not by him

—But that's what they can do by not reelecting him.

—But how do we know what he did?

And then June said

—Plus there is a very fundamental hypocrisy, in calling them "representatives".

—You mean the Representatives in Congress do not *represent* their constituents, they just delegate power to them?

—It sure makes it very hard to take them to account when they betray us, even when they do so obviously, they have zero interest in *our* interests. So what we should do is give them a *mandate* and call them *envoys*.

Lisa said

—Even worse, when we delegate the power, we also delegate the thinking. It absolves us from thinking for ourselves. So we get taken to the cleaners without even realizing it. By deciding on a mandate as June says, people would first have to think about what they want. Then they would be more likely to follow up.

The Professor gave up

—So you are saying the Constitution does not work because it does not provide for any feedback mechanism to and from the people?

There was applause. I had of course been following the exchange closely and hadn't noticed that there was now quite a few people in the bar.

Joe said

—And then of course that is only *one* way the Constitution is by the rich for the rich.

—Blaming the rich is easy.

Joe said

—Who else has the money to hire lobbyists to let the Representative see the light? Lawyers to write the bill he will submit? Communication experts to sell it to the media? Etc. You do? I sure don't.

—Still, I think you are asking too much of the Constitution.

The Professor had just given Joe an *A*. An *A⁻* to be sure, very reluctantly of course, but an *A* nevertheless. He had had to because he had not been able to counter Joe.

The Professor was still a bit put off and I thought I ought to take advantage of it and drive the nail a bit further in.

—And then there is the Senate

—What about it?

—Senators are even more removed from the people than Representatives

—That's on purpose

—Yes, I know, I know. To slow down the legislative process, to stop demagogues. We all learned that in school but it isn't really true. At least not anymore. Senators are even more prisoners of the Big Money People who pay for their campaign than Representatives. they have to campaign statewide, not just district-wide. So, Citizens United, you know.

Somebody yelled

—And it sure didn't stop Senator McCarthy

The Professor sighed but didn't say anything.

Rick said

—And don't you think that people like the Senate Majority Leader have way too much power?

—Like on who is on the Supreme Court?

—And that the Senate is having a moderating influence is now a complete joke?

Rick said

—Actually, there is something considerably worse with the Senate. The fact that each State has two. Back in the days of the Founding Fathers, maybe that made sense. I mean people in say Vermont had a lot different interests from people say in Virginia. The conditions in which they lived were different. Almost everything was different. And, for the most part, they stayed where they were. But with today's mobility, with today's communications, it does not make sense anymore. The fact, say that you are

this or that is more important than the fact that you live in Montana or in Florida. The power in all states is now with the Real Big Money people. What difference does it make where they live? Look at the way they can blackmail states into paying them a lot of money to relocate there.

The Professor looked like he was getting dizzy

—Yes, I agree. So, what would you put in place of the Senate? How would you pick them?

—For sure they should not be elected *satewid* because campaigning is expensive which makes which puts the canddicates in the hands of Real Big Money.

The Professor said

—You could have the Government pay for the campaigning. You could obligate the media to give some space to the candidates. You could put a low limit to what anyone could give. You could do away with the PACs. You could rescind Citizens United.

—You could elect them nationwide instead of state wide. The parties would have to present a slate as well as a platform.

Kill said

—I once read this science fiction where they were picked at random by a computer.

The Professor seemed to have given up. He said

—Of course you would have to restrict the computer to a certain group of people. You wouldn't want it to pick say somebody who can't read/

Jenny who hadn't said a word until then said

—Just because all I do is to grow tomatoes doesn't mean I am an idiot.

—Sorry You are right. Still. Suppose the computer were to pick someone you and I both agreed is a complete idiot. Or somebody who is a compulsive liar. Or somebody who will agree with anybody.

—Ok, I see your point. But you wouldn't want to restrict the computer to people who have, say, a college degree would you?

—No, no. Nothing like that. Seems to me it should be possible to make up an exam that you would have to pass before you could be in the group from which the computer would pick the representatives.

June asked

—You mean like with calculus and that sort of things?

—No. What I had in mind was more like something psychologists would design, something that would select people that don't take things at face value, as granted. People who question things. In other words, people like the people in this bar.

Everybody laughed. And the Professor seemed sincere. He almost looked as if he had discovered something. Somebody said

—I would rather have people electing them. Leaving things to computers is dangerous. They can always be hacked.

—You are right, we wouldn't even need a computer. For instance, by and large, nobody argues with who is at the Academy of Sciences. So, it ought to be possible to find ways to reduce the initial group of, call them electables, to the assembly that would replace the Senate.

Somebody said

—Why couldn't the judges in the Supreme Court be picked the same way from among all the federal judges?

—But not for life.

—And for the Representatives, I mean the envoys, why can't we have *ranked voting*?

—And why do we have to rely on rules that can easily be overturned? Like executive orders and Supreme Court decisions?

—Doesn't do much for stability

People were beginning to talk.

But the Professor had looked at his watch and, after hesitating a few seconds, turned towards the people and called

—Ladies and Gentlemen of Lisa's Bar

There was a sudden silence. He continued in a normal voice.

—I would first apologize for leaving you in the middle of this discussion but it's getting late for me. Then, I would like to express my gratitude for an experience which, I must say, was totally unexpected and, he chuckled, not without bruises to my ego. I really learned a lot and I really hope we will meet again for me to learn even more.

Everybody applauded. He bowed, went to the counter and paid. She asked him something we couldn't get. He laughed, said No, and left.

Lisa told us he had paid for everybody and that she has asked him if he was running for office.

a, b, c, . . . 1, 2, 3, . . .

The kid asked

—And how about schools?

Nobody answered and he started looking at me. I said

—Don't look at me. I know what you have in mind but I don't have the faintest idea what to do about it.

Kill said

—I do

I said

—Good for you!

Jake said

—You tryin' to chump her, cabron?

She said

—Shut up Jake. I don't need you. I can take care of him.

Then to me, fiercely,

—Old man, the reason you got no idea is cause you got no idea how it is in the schools.

I didn't think I should say anything. She repeated, more calmly,

—You got no idea. How you think a six- or seven-year old can learn how to read, count, do anything when she just got in the middle of a thousand kids she has never seen before. All she can do is learn how to survive, man. That's all she can do. You got no idea.

I said

—You are right, never thought of that.

—Course not. You just an old white man.

Ted said

—So, what would you do?

She looked at him, had a quick smile of recognition, and said

—I would have small neighborhood schools. That the kids could walk to. And no more than one class per grade. And just the first four or five grades. Anything to keep them small. And you shouldn't throw the kids

out at 3. They should be able to stay in school until 5 or 6. Like maybe do their homework. Play some sport. Learn the guitar. I don't know.

Mike mumbled

—Nothing wrong with any of that.

She looked at him, surprised.

Jenny said

—That would be nice. With that kind of school I wouldn't have had to leave my kids with the neighbors, worry, and just hope for the best.

Ted asked Kill

—How would it work out? Who would pay the teachers and who would decide what they must teach?

—I don't know.

I said

—*I* do.

She looked at me with a suspicious frown

—What do *you* know?

—Because what you described is pretty much what the French system was up until about 50 years ago.

—How would you know?

—Because that's the system I grew up through.

—You French?

—Yes

She seemed mollified.

Rob said

—Yeah, but the thing is, how did that French system come about?

—Well, it's a long and complicated story.

—Go ahead

—You see, at first, it was about power, about some people wanting to break the grip the church had on voters out in the country. I mean the Catholic church.

Jake looked interested

—Them guys break it?

—How they did it was make elementary education free as in free beer as well as free as in free speech, by which they really meant non-religious, and mandatory for both boys and girls until the age of 13. In separate schools of course.

June laughed

—Good for them.

Lisa said

—Yeah, I still remember the boys ganging up on me

Joe laughed

—How else would they have been able to beat you down?

She made a face at him. June said

—It isn't just that. The boys, they have to know everything. A girl just has to keep quiet. A girl just can't argue with a boy.

Kill giggled

—Yeah, it's just like you be cutting their cojones.

Ian laughed as if remembering something. Then he said

—Some people would tell you making education non-religious is the opposite of freedom.

—Actually, it wasn't because there was no school on Thursdays so those who wanted could get the religious education of their choice.

Lisa said

—You mean those whose *parents* wanted to impose the religious education of *their* choice on their kids? Not exactly freedom for the kids.

Rick said

—Yeah, but Ted's question still stands because it takes more than just a law for that kind of things. How did they do it on the ground?

—As I said, the story is long and complicated. Each township had to provide the buildings for two elementary schools, one for boys, one for girls. Then, each one of the 80 French "departments" had to have two schools to train elementary school teachers, one for men, one for women. They too were free. In fact, the future teachers were paid while there. And the whole thing was run by an office in the Government which paid the teachers, decided what was to be taught, inspected the teachers to make sure they did, etc.

Brad said

—Big Gov, eh?

—Well, how else could they have avoided *local powers* forcing the teachers to preach what *they* wanted? For *their* own good?

—Hey, that's the price of freedom!

But then he laughed.

—I know, I know. But it would never work *here*.

June asked me

—You said back then. How is it different now?

—Americanized

Everybody laughed.

—But back then it was ok?

—Basically yes because it united the people by having *everyone* learn how to read and write French and do basic arithmetic.

—That all?

—Not at all. I remember also learning about things like how do hand pumps work, there were still plenty of those in the countryside, the life cycle of ferns, I don't know why. Things like that. And there were lessons about how the government was organized and how it worked. And it was always down to earth. An arithmetic problem might go like "*A farmer wants to fence in one of his fields ... How much will it cost him?*"

Martha asked

—Girls too?

—Yes. In fact women teachers eventually got to be paid the same as men teachers.

—Amazing.

—But it still took women a long time to get the vote.

Everybody laughed.

Rob asked

—What was not ok?

—There were at least two big problems.

—Like?

—You got to realize that back then a lot of people spoke only regional languages. So, yes it unified the country but, by the same token, it also killed regional languages, regional history and regional culture.

—Why didn't they go bilingual? Anyway. Anything more serious?

—It *was* serious because in the long run it cut people from their roots.

Rick asked

—How about the second problem?

—It sure did not make it easy to access secondary education and *that* was to protect the bourgeoisie. It maintained unequal classes in a very profound way.

—But basically, with all that, it worked?

—Yes because what it did is people acquired what got to be called "Republican Values".

Rick asked

—Like there ain't no such thing as a lonesome cowboy?

—Things like that. Like starting to think they didn't have to leave all the power to the rich. But. also because of the fact that the system knew how to make exceptions. One of the very great mathematicians, Lebesgue, was the son of a typesetter and a school teacher. So he was not about ever to get to secondary school but he was noticed by his elementary school teacher who then passed him to the secondary school which then sent him to the Ecole Normale Suprieure. All on scholarships.

Martha said

—I wonder if a black woman would have been noticed

—Most probably not. But without the primary school system, Lebesgue would never have become the world-wide know mathematician he became., the inventor among other things of something called *measure* theory.

The kid said

—Ok, ok. France is a wonderful country. Why are you *here*?

Everybody laughed. Then Martha asked

—But then the question is how could an elementary school system like that come about in *this* country?

Brad said

—Thank God no way it ever could. You couldn't force something like that on the people. You are talking socialism here.

The kid said

—How about the Post Office? That socialism? But in fact there would be no need to force it on anyone. You would just have to make people *want* it.

—Yeah? How?

Martha said

—Suppose you had a Corps of Elementary School Teachers like you got a Corps of Engineers or the Peace Corps or even the FBI. Then a township might *ask* the Corps to assign teachers to its elementary school. I mean its two elementary schools.

Kill said

—Yeah, one for girls, one for boys.

Brad said

—Nobody would be forced? No way. You would have to ram it down their throat.

Rick said

—I don't see why anybody should. The township would just provide the buildings and the Corps would provide and pay the teachers and supervise the teaching. That would be a pretty good deal for the towship.

Brad said

—No more real estate tax then?

—No because obviously the Corps would have to be for the whole country so the money would could only come from the federal income tax.

Ian asked

—Who would pay for the busing?

—That's an issue. I don't know. In the cities, remember each school would only serve a neighborhood so there there would be no need for busing.

But out in the country of course, there would *have* to be busing. Less than now but still. Who would pay for that? Not the Corps because the Corps would only be concerned with the teachers. I don't know. We would have to think and talk about it.

The kid said

— And if the people in the township didn't like the teaching all they would have to do is tell the Corps: thanks but no thanks, goodbye and get lost.

Brad says

—And start the local taxes again.

Everybody laughed. Ian added

—And the parents could always get a private school of their own for their kids if they wanted. Like they do now.

Jenny said

—Rich parents

—Well, you could have scholarships

—Wouldn't that be charity?

—What's wrong with charity?

—You like to depend on charity for your kids?

Lisa said

—And if these Corps teachers were any good, you could organize competitions between the schools and then you should be able to wipe the floor with these private schools.

Lisa had always had that fierce streak that would surface every once in a while.

Rob asked her

—So you think maybe it could sell?

Lisa said

—Once *one* township does it I would bet the bar it wouldn't take long for neighboring townships to do the same.

Social . . . Er,

—So now the do-gooders are really at it! Can I help?

That was of course Rob just coming in. But, the question had a completely new sound to it. Josh said

—I was saying we need leaders and I was booed

Rick said

—He just made that up. No really. I think this is a real important thing because that's what a lot of people would tell you.

—What's wrong with having a leader?

—You always need leaders

Lisa said

—What's wrong with leaders is that it gives you an excuse for leaving the thinking to him, for not doing your own thinking,.

—You can't do anything without a leader. Else, everybody goes his own way.

—Not really. I do my own thinking.

—And you would go as far as argue with your leader?

People laughed. Mike said

—Power is power. Getting other people do what *you* want. Whether *they* like it or not. Like a gun is a killing machine. Whether you like it or not.

—Well, yeah, but sometime people need to be told what to do, need to be told what's good for them.

People thought about it. Rick said

—Let me ask you a question.

—Go ahead

—Back then there were three Real Big Leaders, Stalin, Mussolini and Hitler. You heard of them?

—Come on man, my grandfather was in the army that landed there.

—Ok, what did they accomplish? What did they leave behind?

Nobody said anything

I said

—On the other hand, at the very same time these leaders were leading, in 1936, a big fight involving two millions workers in a country of 40 millions ended up with two weeks paid vacation and a 40 hours week for *all* workers. You know the name of their leader?

—I guess not

Kill asked

—What's that? A history exam?

I said

—Well, the reason you can't answer is that there wasn't any

—You kidding?

—No

There was another silence. Then a woman I didn't know said

—How do you know? You were there?

I laughed

—Only sort of. I was born a few months after the big 1936 strikes. But my parents told me the first time they ever went on vacation was summer of '37.

A man asked

—So, how did they do it?

—They had *organizers*. At many levels. You need them. Like non coms and officers in an army. But different. There were people who were writing texts with ideas, yes. But these two millions took their fate into their own hands, figured out what they wanted and then went about getting it. Nobody told them, nobody led them.

—Really! I didn't know. I mean here, for instance, you had Washington, you had Lincoln.

—What about this Leon Blum?

—He was prime minister. He was the legislative organizer so to speak. But the laws he had the political people legislate had come about only because of the two million strikers

—I don't see how we need leaders. All these people talking about us needing leaders, it's either because somebody convinced there there was no way they could find their ass with their two hands if their life depended on it or it's because they themselves want to be leaders and tell the rest of us how to wipe our ass.

—For *their* greatest benefit.

—They the ones that sell the toilet paper

Some people didn't look too amused by the way it was said but didn't seem really to disagree

—You mean the right was not able to stop all this?

—Even though *they* were the ones had to pay for it?

I said

—No. In fact the extreme right was able to grab power only with the help of the German army, when it invaded France at the beginning of WWII.

—How so?

—I think that was entirely because most people shared those Republican Values that they had gotten from elementary school. There were things they just couldn't bring themselves to do because they could see where it would go.

—I have an uncle, his father in law was hidden there by some farmers.

—Well, here there are churches that give sanctuary

—You are right, same thing.

—Catholic churches too?

—Don't know.

Rick asked

—Wasn't it also when they got some sort of Medicare for all?

—No. That happened nine years later, right after the war, right after the rightists that had used the Germans to push their agenda were thrown out.

Then somebody asked Joe

—So what do you think our program should be.

Joe hesitated and then asked in turn

—What do you think?

Somebody else said

—Getting another Constitution like we talked the other day

—Not letting people drop dead or rot.

—Now you are being a socialist

—Don't care. I don't want to see people rot. You?

—You are right. I don't.

—So, Medicare for All?

—Paid vacations for all?

—Minimum wages?

There was a lull while people were obviously thinking about it.

Joe said

—I would say all of the above and some. But we are back to the same problem

—What problem?

—By dealing with separate issues, you are helping the Real Big Money people because their first tactic is divide and conquer.

- What's their second one?
- Misinformation, disinformation. Outright lies. You name it.
- How do you know?
- Look at who owns what you are looking at, what you are reading, what you are listening to. Vested interest all the way you know
- I guess
- So, it's all about power, yes? Whether it is against the interests of the people or for their own good?
- What do you mean?
- Well, they have the power to shaft us. We should get the power to shaft them
- People laughed
- Ok, get the power to take the power out of *their* hands.
- I had a feeling Lisa didn't quite believe what she was hearing. To tell the truth, neither did I.
- Yeah but you can't make everybody happy.
- You bound to make some people, people like us, unhappy. Like there are people who are pro-life.
- June said
- Pro-birth*. That's not the same thing. And usually anti-chlldren.
- What do you mean?
- Kill said
- You got to spit the kid but after that they don't care if the kid starves
- Somebody said
- Ok, ok. But what she said was a good question. How do you avoid getting bogged down in that kind of issues.
- Talking about them.
- Takes forever. I got to make a living too.
- Joe said
- How about things that are more general, things that cover the separate issues, something like everybody can do with their body what *they* want as long as it doesn't hurt anybody else?
- Even drugs?
- As long as it does not hurt anybody else. Like you run amok and shoot people
- Doesn't happen that often
- How about suicide?
- Same thing. As long as it does not hurt anybody else. Like you got kids and after you're dead your kids have no support and starve.
- What about you die in an accident and you leave kids behind?

There was another lull.

—And, anyhow, what’s good for *you* is not necessarily what’s good for *me*.

—So?

—So, you can only allow what’s good for *everybody*.

—But, by saying what’s good for *everybody*, you are automatically saying what’s good for *me*. And you just said you don’t want to do that.

—What’s good for everybody is for everybody to be able to say what’s good for themselves.

—That’s real slick but I just can’t see how you are going to implement it.

—Like, what would be good for *me* would be for me to get *your* shirt.

—But that wouldn’t be good for *me*.

—As you said, what’s good for *me* is not necessarily the same as what’s good for *you*. So you are just lucky I don’t see how you can wear that ugly shirt?

People laughed. But Lisa had visibly got impatient. She said

—I don’t care too much about shirts and I have no idea what you have been arguing about. Trying to have fun? No matter what, there are things that *are* good for *everybody*. So before you all get wrapped up in shirts and other *possible* situations, how about *likely* situations? Like being able to eat food and breathe air that won’t kill you? Like *everybody* being able to get medical treatment? I mean *children* too.

Joe sighed.

—Can’t we have a bit of fun around here? I mean, once in a while?

People To Go

Sunday night. We were not saying much of anything Not even shooting the breeze.

Just the three of us.

Joe, who could have become at the very least a trust fund manager but had chosen to work as a janitor in a bank. Mike, who obviously had once had something terrible happen to him and who had chosen to remain mostly silent. Myself, who could never have become much of anything and had chosen to be just my own.

But of course, it wasn't just the three of us. Of course not. There was Lisa, who, upon graduating from Community College, had chosen to join the Marines instead of going for a very likely brilliant academic career. I had never really understood why.

In any case, her only occasionally putting a word in edgewise while polishing a glass because "*that's the only way men will let a woman shoot the breeze*" was of course totally bogus. It was just her way of giving us the time to figure things out by ourselves and it was in fact she who, so to speak, blew the breeze we were shooting.

Everybody knew it

Suddenly, Mike said

—I have two questions.

Lisa said

—Go ahead.

—One: How did the people *get* there?

He seemed to be waiting for an answer. Lisa said

—I think it all goes back to this country being too big and too rich for its own good. From the very beginning, it's what attracted people. And the bigger they realized the country was, the more came. And the richer they realized the country was, the more they wanted out of it.

But what happened with all that empty space is people got used to live by themselves. Alone. And what all the riches did was people thought they

could make it just by themselves. Alone. Not to mention they got used to the idea that there would always be more.

And the possibilities were endless. Sooner or later, you would realize that all you needed was more manpower. Which of course the Europeans were only too happy to sell us. First it was African slaves for the fields in the South whom they traded us for things like sugar and molasses.

Joe said

—But don't forget they bought them from *Africans*. Always follow the money.

—True. Well, nobody's perfect. Then later it was the factories in the Northeast that required slave labor and the Europeans then sent their tired, their poor. You know. Scum of the earth. Which they were very much afraid of and too happy to get rid of.

She reflected for a moment then said

—What is completely overlooked, though, is that all that created a collection of *individuals* who had never had to learn how to live together with others. The rugged individual was glorified. Society was said to be classless but in fact there was no *society* to begin with. There were people but there was no *People*. Never mind the Constitution's "We The People". Which of course was most convenient for the *have's*. It was *only* under the robber barons that the *have not's* started having *unions*.

After a while, I asked

—How about Canada? They didn't go that route. They didn't get to be that way.

Joe answered

—Too cold. You got to remember. It all started in the *South*.

After that, nobody seemed to have anything to say.

But then Mike said

—Two: How can the people *become* a people?