Meeting Cornelius
in New Haven
1993

Full of expectations, memories of previous meetings with Cornelius passed before my eyes as the tiny plane set down in New Haven. Pictures of seeing him standing in the chaos of the old Katmandu airport, of waiting for him at a small hotel in the Plaka of Athens, of Berkeley after his graduation, or a friend's house in Munich. I loved these tentative arrangements with him, often made months earlier. Known only to the two of us, they established secret nodal points in the web of time and space where it becomes possible to make chance and prescience interact and produce a new reality, a new level of understanding. Every time we met in this way, we were reassured that by sheer willpower we could stretch the force lines of this world taut between us.

But the flight was early, and he was nowhere to be seen.

It was a warm May evening, and I sat down on the curb in front of the arrival building and saw myself waiting for him in Athens. He had been *incomunicado* roaming the south of France and Italy for a month, and I had flown in from Los Angeles. It was the first time that we had tried to pull such a long string over thousands of miles and many months. He should have been in Greece for days, but he was not at the agreed upon place, nor had he left a message at the little hotel.

It had become dark in Athens but it was still hot. Shirtless and in underpants I settled on the tiny balcony overhanging the narrow lane watching the people passing below. What had happened to him? I had to remind myself of our old rule never to worry about or search in panic for a disappeared member of the family, but to rely on the hidden, subconscious ties between us that would lead us back together again, and it had never failed. Sure enough, around midnight I spied a tall head of curls above an immense backpack searching the houses along the lane, and a few minutes later we hugged each other.

"My," he said chuckling, "this was difficult. Nobody knew where this tiny lane was. But here you are all the same!"

This time I wait for almost an hour before he swoops down on me in his old, battered, black Turbo-Saab, his curly head sticking out through the open sunroof.

He is a good head taller than I and bends down to hug me in a most endearing gesture.

"Hi, Pappi!" he laughs, "I did not know that you arrived early, and then the car had one of its temperamental fits."

Happy once more, I climb into the worn, red leather seat next to him, and we drive off, the defunct heater blasting us with hot air. Wires hang in a jumbled array out of a gaping hole in the once wood-covered dash where the radio has been ripped out by thieves. At every corner, the automatic steering squeals, but the turbo still works. He drives with concentrated abandon. I watch him from the side. How much he has changed since the days in Athens, his nose has grown longer and more pronounced, he now looks almost gaunt. Behind him, along the road, New England spring flies past, blooming fruit and boxwood trees and white clapboard houses, pretending behind their porches that time never changes. With

a slight embarrassment, I realize, that I am in love with him, as much as ever.

Late that evening we had gone to the Platea Koutlomousiou, the square of the Musical Courtesans, in search of something to eat. Afterwards, over a cup of coffee, he described his adventures among the cliff monasteries of Thessaly in Northern Greece. It was then that I took the picture of him on which he looked like a slightly too serious , but youthful Apollo.

When we reach the gingerbread house, in which he shares an apartment with two other graduate students, it turns out to be a copy of a house I remember from my student years in Cambridge, the grime of generations barely buried under uncounted coats of thick paint. But this one has beautiful wooden floors and is much less messy than expected. The familiar back door from the kitchen opens unto rickety stairs and into a yard, where, by the last light of the day, he shows me, full of pride, rows of tulips and spring flowers he has planted.

Cambridge. The last time we met in a coffeehouse in Harvard Square. I had been on a business trip in the area, and Cornelius came from New Haven by train. It was October, and it had rained all day. I waited a long time for him and felt like moving when we finally had found each other. So I took him on a drive through town to visit the places we had lived in during those seemingly interminable student years before he was born.

We peered through the driving rain at the house of the Oldenbergs, who are now long dead, in its old garden where Barbara and I got married and lived the first summer in Cambridge. It appeared unchanged by 37 years. Then we had moved to Exeter Park, off Massachusetts Avenue, a house just like the one Cornelius lived in now. Here Konrad was born one snowy morning in April.

I passed over the apartments where we lived during the sad time after the accident. But the house on Crescent street, where later we lived for several happy years in an apartment under the roof with little Susanne, made music with Dorothy, and celebrated New Year with fabulous dinner parties. It was all still there, even Susanne's room over the stairwell.

Finally we came to the house on Richdale Avenue, in the poorest part of town, behind the railroad tracks. Barbara had found this apartment when our lease had expired, and my thesis was still unfinished. The apartment on the ground floor had a long, dark corridor connecting the living room with the kitchen. No matter how much Barbara scrubbed, a sweet smell of poverty pervaded the place. We always thought that the sickly stench came from the rats in the basement, but one day, at an office visit, the pediatrician had stuck his nose into Susanna's hair and with raised eyebrows had asked, "Where does the child get that sweet odor of city gas from?" But there was nothing we could do, the stench hung around us all winter, until we left Cambridge for California. The winter had been cold, and to keep the heat up, we used to put ice on the thermostat which was controlled by the landlord.

Yet Christmas had been beautiful in that last abode in the graduate-student slums. Barbara was pregnant again, and with the help of an excellent doctor seemed to be able to keep her child this time, - he had simply sown her uterus closed. Susanne was almost five and perhaps for the first and last time credulous enough to believe in the "Christ Child" who came at night to deliver the Christmas tree. Big footsteps in the snow outside her window proved it beyond any doubt she may have had. As always the tree was splendid and was hung with apples and ornaments made by ourselves during the many years of exile. And despite the shock it caused our American friends, and carefully concealed from the landlord, there were real candles on the tree. Susanna got a canary and a set of hand puppets for Christmas. The bird never learned to sing during its short life, but she played puppet theater with Hashi, the son of Iranian friends, for many months.

In May, when my thesis was finally finished, and I had passed my last examination, we fled town with the first available flight to a gloriously well paid job in California: 17'000 Dollars a year! I never picked up my doctoral certificate, it still lies buried in the files of Harvard University. What a waist of energy and time these graduate student years had been. - Cornelius, after untying him from inside his mother's womb, was born four months later.

And now here he was working on his Ph.D., back on the rundown, greasy East Coast that I had thought to have left behind forever.

The huge, echoing waiting hall of the Hew Haven railroad station is empty, a relic of another era. We climb into the rundown "Metro-Liner," which carries us towards New York at a snails pace. Oh, for the beautiful fast trains of Europe. This must only be the fourth time in over thirty years in America that I am on a train and always on the same track, somewhere between New York and Boston. The first time had been when I picked up Barbara and her boxes of "dowry" at the docks in New York to take her to Cambridge, where we were to get married a week later.

It was a swelteringly hot August, and all the way the air-conditioning of the train dripped condensation on us. I had decided that we were going to spend our "honeymoon" near Hyannis on Cape Cod, before our wedding in Cambridge.

This unusual idea had an equally unusual history. To support myself at Harvard and to pay for Barbara's trip from Germany - under no circumstances was I going to beg my parents or my father-in-law for her fare to join me - I had found a research assistantship at MIT. All during that first winter in America, I spent three nights a week working there. I was always tired. Harvard demanded all my waking hours.. The equipment I was given at MIT was outdated, and so it happened one night that my hand got caught in the gears of a home-made, mechanical film camera attached to an oscilloscope. In a flash of pain the tip of my left little finger had disappeared in the wheels of that contraption. With the help of the janitor, bleeding all over the lab, I dragged myself to the night nurse. Two hours later I lay on an operating table in an emergency room, and a kind Armenian doctor grafted a piece of skin from my arm over the end of the finger. Because it had been an "industrial accident," I was allowed to spend three days in the public ward of the county hospital, sharing a room and the dilapidated bathroom facilities with twenty indigent, muttering old men. Nahama Schechter, the departmental secretary, brought me flowers and a get-well card signed by all the subjects of her fiefdom. She was shocked by my environment, which I found rather educationally entertaining.

In the aftermath the MIT insurance appraised the loss of one-seventh of my left hand, for which I was presented with a whole of 150 dollars as compensation. This unexpected windfall gave me the idea of taking Barbara on this honeymoon. Everybody thought that it was the most romantic story they had heard in years.

There is nothing on the train to divert my attention. Sleepy and rather mute, Cornelius reads the entertainment section of the New York Times trying to find a movie that we could go to. We do not talk much, which leaves me time to follow my own thoughts and the memories lurking along the way throughout this part of the country, which I have not seen for some twenty-five years. Imperceptibly Connecticut has given way to the outer suburbs of New York City. La Rochelle, was it from here that we had visited New York City the last time? I have to try hard to recollect the muddled events there in the winter before we escaped to California.

Sledding one day with Susanne in the Fens in Boston, I had "accosted," as Barbara calls my way of making new friends, a French couple with three boys a little older than Susanne. Marc was working as a postdoctoral fellow at MIT in the then just germinating field of molecular biology. Anik did medical research in endocrinology.

Sharing many European prejudices and a huge accumulation of carefully suppressed home-sickness, we had quickly become friends and saw each other often. After a few months they had transferred to the Albert-Einstein Institute in New York and moved to La Rochelle. At the first opportunity we had driven there and had spent a long week-end with them. We hiked around the neighborhood, spent a day in the Museum of Modern Art, and had been invited to a rather formal evening party given by the barely thirty-year-old head of the group Marc worked in.

Molecular biology was a high-wire science in those days, and everybody on that party, especially the wives of the scientists, seemed to be crazy, Jewish, in psychoanalysis, or all three at once. They drank like fish, and soon couples began to disappear. We innocents were all too sober and overwhelmed.

It was then that Anik cornered me in tears of despair and reproach with the news that she had found Barbara and Marc kissing seriously in the dark corner of a neighboring room. She could not understand that I was not as upset as she. - A photo from that year shows Barbara at her most beautiful, and Anik had been much aware of her effect on Marc. Yet, what truly did she know about Barbara? "You three tell me, where I am going to fit in now?" Anik kept lamenting.

Long after midnight Marc drove us home at break-neck speed through the deserted streets. Our relationship with the Girards did survive for many more years, but it continued to be rocked by uncounted ups and downs. I guess it became finally unhinged by my proposing to Anik on a lonely walk, one glorious October day, through the beautiful and completely deserted park of the Petit Chalet in Versailles. But this story belongs to a different time and place.

Strange, how the excitement in the air on this crazy party and Marc's example became one of the decisive influences on Cornelius - who was not even born then - to move into molecular genetics at Yale.

Meanwhile we have entered the city proper. The Bronx then Harlem pass: burnt out houses boarded up at street level, yawning window openings, children playing ball in deserted lots between the ruins of dilapidated apartment buildings. Pictures of the bombed out German cities of 1945/46 come to mind. How fortunate Europe has been by having been burned to the ground during the war...

Soon we disappear in the underground tunnels of Manhattan, and the sorry city view vanishes.

Cornelius closes his newspaper. "Let us go to the Guggenheim Museum. I have never been there, and they show a special exhibition of metal sculpture, 'Picasso and the Iron Age'." He suggests. This sounds fine to me, I have been at the Guggenheim but once, thirty-two years ago.

"And in the afternoon we could go to see 'Qiu Yü,' the latest Chinese film at a movie house near Lincoln Center," he continues, and I am happy, that he makes plans without I determining the order of events, as is usually the case. I am curious to see what will happen to us in between those two points in space and time.

We stumble upstairs from of the diesel-fumes-infested underground tracks into the great hall of Grand Central Station. The semi-dark gloom of this vast monument to the age of American industrial expansion dwarfs us. Behind the glowing windows of the ticket counters clerks with pallid faces seem to sell tickets to the neitherworld. Along the walls on heavily fortified balconies silent people sit, carefully separated, on plastic chairs, waiting for

their turn to commence their voyage. The floors, the walls, the balustrades are all sheathed in travertine once polished now black with dirt and age.

It seems eerily quiet. The only noise is the rumble of the underground diesel trains, the shuffling of feet, and the occasional clapping of a group of bystanders surrounding a juggler trying to keep five balls in the air simultaneously. When he finishes an act, the crowd claps, and he walks around collecting dollar bills in a cardboard box.

Just then a man comes running down one of the travertine stairs, blood streaming from his face. Everybody freezes, averting their eyes from the disaster. After the man has vanished into one of the underground tunnels two policemen run across stage, following the trail of his blood on the floor. Everybody pretends not to have seen anything unusual The juggler starts another act

Cornelius proposes to take the subway, but I need air to dispel this spook.

We emerge into the canyons of lower Manhattan and take an uptown bus along Lexington Avenue. The streets are empty, it is Saturday, and the further we go the more beautiful the city becomes.

Cornelius signals to get off.

"You know," he says, "I am hungry."

We pass a bakery with an array of wonderful sandwiches and croissants in the window. It smells heavenly for fresh bread. Spontaneously I push my way through the crowd and pick out two elegant ham-and-Swiss-cheese sandwiches. The woman gives me a sales slip. Already salivating in expectation, I nearly faint when I read the slip: $36 is stamped on it. I quietly hide the sandwiches at the end of the counter, and we flee the place in a hurry.

Cornelius laughs: "You picked the most fashionable sandwich shop in town. What did you expect?"

Eventually we buy some microwave-reheated lasagna and a can of coke in a Greek corner store and sit down on a bench in front of the Metropolitan Museum.

It has become a glorious day. Everybody is out to enjoy the sun, the blue sky, and the blooming trees. Fifth Avenue, alongside the park, is crowded with people and children of all colors and races, rich and poor, elegant and drab. I cannot remember of ever having seen this city in this mood before.

The first time I had been in New York was in December, shortly before Christmas, in the days after I had arrived in America. I was staying in Yonkers with the German parents of a friend. I had escaped from their little, suffocating suburban house to explore the city on my own, to search for the long imagined places in this mythical town. It was cold and wet, snow-slush hiding in the dark and windy corners of the great canyons. The most lasting impressions were the noise of the hundreds of Salvation Army soldiers ringing their Christmas bells, and the Horn & Hardat Automates where I had gone to warm up, eat lunch, and write a long letter to Barbara, whom I had left behind in Göttingen.

Somehow, it seems it had always been cold in New York: One gray, late October weekend a couple of months after Konrad's death, we had stayed with a young writer-couple, who hid out in a cheap, dark apartment on the Lower East Side. It was Yom Kippur, and orthodox Jewry was celebrating. We were surrounded by an unimaginable Eastern European ghetto pageant. Men with their long cork-screw locks hanging from under black hats, people kissing the ringed and jeweled hands of rabbis dressed in precious Siberian furs, women in black shawls in the streets of the dry-good markets: Bruno Schulz's "Streets of the Cinnamon Stores" come alive, Nizhnii Novgorod revisited.

It was on this visit to the city that we saw the silver necklace in a store window in Greenwich Village that gave me the idea to start making jewelry.

It is afternoon when we reach the inverted ziggurat of the Guggenheim Museum. The

exhibition is as exquisitely eclectic as the building. Each sculpture is separately exposed, but curiously, after seeing some twenty pieces, my memory becomes blurred and fails my eyes, something that has never happened to me with paintings.

I loose Cornelius for a while, and sit waiting for him at the bottom of the spiral. A young couple carries a small child in a seat on their back. Nobody but I seem to notice them, and yet I remember that, twenty-five years ago, we were a sensation, when we carried Susanne up the spiral ramp in her back-seat.

Was it possible that it had become even more glorious outside. The sun was glittering on the reservoir in Central Park, and the skyscrapers were like mountain peaks in the blue distance. Cornelius suggested to go to the museum store in the Metropolitan and find some postcards for Barbara. Afterwards we rested for a while sitting with many other people on the great entry stairs to the museum.

It was there that suddenly a very beautiful young woman came down the stairs, long slender legs, a tightly fitting, thin sweater barely hiding a pair of lovely breasts, exuberant and in love with her companion she litterally danced through the crowd and vanished into a taxi.

"Look, Cornelius, did you see this wonderful creature." I cried, but he got up and smoldering in anger walked away alone.

When I caught up with him, his mood was dark, and we walked across a Central Park crowded with roller-blade skaters, bands playing improvised jazz, groups of people lying under blooming trees, we walked through the beautiful light of this late afternoon in a gloom, silent and nearly insensitive to its unusual beauty.

What had happened? I could not figure it out. The moment I had waited for all day, when time stops and space expands to infinty, was lost. A deep despair came over me.

Maybe we should have something to eat, I thought. It was early dinner time and long experience of travelling with him had taught me that besides sleep, hunger was the cause of all unhappiness. We went to one of the dismal eateries where retired old couples take their dinner in New York in the late afternoon. I tried to cheer us up by joking good-naturedly with the middle-aged waitress, but Cornelius' gloom would not lift.

"Pappi," he finally said, "when we get out of here I have to talk to you."

"I would be relieved, if you did," I answered. "What is it that is such a problem for you?" and in an attempt to lighten the moment with a suggestion of the absurd, I told him that I could only think of two reasons, either that he wanted to get married or that he had contracted AIDS.

But this remark was, I should have known, entirely the wrong thing to say. He glowered at me in silence between spoons of food.

Realizing my mistake, I started once more in a more conciliatory voice. "What is it that bothers you? Don't keep me in suspense like this, it's unfair. Please, give me a hint before this black mood is eating us both up."

"I will tell you later," he said moving back in his chair, away from me. "It is very important to me, and it has bothered me for a long time. I get so angry with you and do not know why."

He proffered the tip, and I paid our fare to a fat, near-eastern woman cashier sitting behind a cheap marble table in a glass box, and while we were winding our way through crowds of people, side-walk cafés, and traffic lights around Lincoln Center towards the movie house, he blurted out: "I hate when you comment on women in my presence as you always do. I do also comment on women, and I don't know why it makes me so angry when you do."

I was totally taken by surprise, "I love women, and I do not think I say corny things about them very often."

"Yes," he admitted, "I know, and thank God, you taught me to love women. - It is something else though."

And then, anger rising again in his voice, he charged: "You hurt people, and you do not even notice it. You have hurt me so many times. You love the women I love and take them away from me. You always ask me questions about my relations with my women friends. You leave me almost no room for myself."

We were separated for a few steps trying to negotiate our way in between the tables of yet another crowded side-walk caffee.

When we came together again at the next street crossing, his accusations took a decisively new turn. "And you hurt Mumin. You have had other women while you were married to her. I know that, because you have introduced me to them. And how can you bring them into your house, like Christine? You make no secret of the fact that you had an affair with her in China. And then there was our visit to Moscow, where we spent two days with Natasha. That was pure incest."

We had arrived at the movie house and fell silent. The film, a farce in which a beautiful but stone-faced Qiu Yü fights the party hierarchy in a remote Chinese village, was entirely lost on us.

In the darkness of those two hours, I, deeply hurt, at first, argued against him in my mind. But the Moscow episode was not so easily dismissed. We had visited a woman friend of mine, with whom, I had had an affair a few years earlier - the only one in the Soviet Union ever. Young as she was, she had found Cornelius much more to her liking than his "old" father, and they had walked around hand-in-hand for two days. He did not complain then.

But incest? An alien word, - we never used this trite expression except in jest. Cornelius and Barbara had for a while been so close, that I teased them occasionally of being the true Oedipean pair. But everybody agreed I thought, that by now Freud was no more than a historic joke. How had this word entered his vocabulary? Had he perhaps discussed these incidents with the therapist he had been seeing of and on for several years. That must be it! He had told these stories to his therapist. My God, that warped old Freudian must have had a field day, suppressed incest feelings between father and son! I had to smile. Yes, I do love him, to hell with incest! Poor Cornelius.

This thought did not remove my pain, but it helped to turn my anger into sadness. Had I burdened him with too much understanding in Moscow? He was no innocent virgin, in fact, I quickly counted - and I told him so - that within his 26 years he had slept with more women than I in sixty! But my sarcasm made him only madder.

Why was he unable to cope with the beautiful honesty and openness in our family? Barbara and I had never hidden our affection for each other or for others from our children. I had caught my parents embracing only once in my life, our children have seen us hug and kiss many times. My father was an emotionally stuck-up puritan idealist, a trait that is very far from my nature and comprehension.

My father? On the night train back to New Haven I all of sudden the thought crossed my mind. Oh, my God, did Cornelius inherit some of these problems from my father? It looked entirely plausible, and it would also explain, why since years I have had such troubles in intuitively understanding many other, seemingly unnecessary, difficulties that Cornelius has been plagued by.

I am glad that I did not tell him of my suspicion of either the origin of the term incest, nor of the genetic origin of his puritanical streak.

There remained his defense of his mother. This was a new and surprising voice, but one that I could comprehend. After all, the understanding between Barbara and me , the beauty of our relationship, its honesty and openness, had required much work - and still requires at times to trust each other to an unusual extent. How can he understand all that at

his level of experience. How much does he know about Barbara, and what can he know about the extra-ordinary love that exists between us?

We reached his house long after midnight. I was worn out, and Cornelius, seeing my depressed mood, was very dear and solicitous. But as a few words showed, there was no compromise obtainable on the issue of his complaints. Not with me and not now.

On the following day we both avoided the subject. He worked all day in the kitchen preparing food for a garden party he and his friends had planned in honor of his father's visit. It became a wonderful evening. Very early Monday morning he drove me to the airport.

On the flight home I resolved that, despite Barbara's longstanding objections, I had to try to recount the ups and downs of our relationship, to examine the workings of our love. And to write it in such a way that the mystery remained.