

Plato's Student

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A gypsy fortune teller inspires an old man to change his life and become a philosopher

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Gordon Fink looked in the bathroom mirror and muttered to himself, I look like an old man. He leaned over the sink, then moved his face closer to the mirror and noticed the wrinkles on his forehead, his thinning white hair. I'm losing so much hair. He looked at his pale, watery eyes. My eyes aren't as blue as they used to be. He turned his face to the left. Maybe it's the florescent light. Look at you. You're old. Your life is almost over. You could die at anytime. Gordon turned on the hot water in the sink and looked at the bags under his eyes. He took a wash cloth, put it under the hot water, wrung it out and placed it on his face. He liked the warm feeling. When he removed the cloth, his cheeks were red, his forehead shiny. But nothing could make the youthful face return. Oh well, Gordon sighed, picking up his comb and running it through his thin, white hair. Gordon often read the obituaries to see if he recognized anyone. He noticed the ages: fifty- eight, sixty two, sixty-nine, seventy five. I'm sixty-four. My name could be there. I shouldn't read this page. But every day he found himself turning to the obituaries and noticing the ages. Gordon worked as a tailor for Diamond Brothers and Sons, a men's clothing store on South Street started by Max and Benjamin Diamond in 1948, and now Max's son, Arthur ran the business. Both of their sons grew up in the store, but Arthur's cousin, Gerald was not interested in the business and became a lawyer, handling all the legal aspects. Gordon became the store's tailor when Max and Benny were in their prime, and he saw the boys grow up and learn the business. Diamond Brothers had been around for over sixty years and managed to stay in business and compete with the Wal-marts, J.C. Pennys and Targets, though it was getting harder and harder. They sold high quality, fashionable, expensive suits, and very few stores still had tailors. Gordon's job was to shorten or lengthen the pants, take in the jackets, or make the sleeves come to right below the wrist. He wore a yellow tape measure around his neck and would sit on a little stool, while the men stood on a platform in front of a three-sided mirror. At work that day, while measuring the pants of a young boy whose parents were getting him a suit for his Bar Mitzvah, Gordon winced when he looked at himself in the three way mirror and saw his balding head and wrinkled skin. He stretched his tape measure the length of the boy's leg, folding up the pants, putting pins in place so he would know where to sew. The boy's mother and father stood watching. He glanced at the boy's face as they both looked at themselves in the mirror. He looked back at his face and felt a slight pang

in his heart when he noticed the boy's smooth, pink skin, how his long brown hair almost touched his shoulders. He was a small boy like Gordon was when he had his Bar Mitzvah. When the boy stepped down from the platform, Gordon took one more look in the three-way mirror and saw the bald spot. "Oy vey," he groaned, then swallowed his disgust when he stood up. "You look very handsome in this suit," Gordon stepped back to admire how the suit looked. "Who cares," the boy said. Gordon was shocked by the boy's answer. His parents didn't say anything, although it was clear from their frown they were embarrassed by his answer. "You should care," Gordon said. "It's important to care. You have your whole life ahead of you." "Yeah, maybe, whatever," he muttered, shrugging his shoulders, then said to his parents, "Can we get out of here now?" "We have to find a tie," the boy's mother said. "C'mon, Mom, do I have to wear a tie?" His father, standing in back of his plump wife, closed his eyes at his son's protest, then spoke up, "Listen to your mother, Stephen." Gordon looked at the boy's father, remembering that several months ago he had shortened the sleeves of a blue blazer with gold buttons for him, but couldn't remember his name. On his lunch break, while walking down South Street to Hymie's Delicatessen, Gordon stopped in front of Madam Blavinsky's, the Fortune Teller. Gordon had walked past Madam Blavinsky's place everyday for years but never paid attention to it. The windows were always dark and bare except for a small sign that said, "Tarot Cards and Palm Reader. Your Life is in your Hands." There was also a small faded photograph of an old woman wearing a turban with a big red jewel in the center. But on this day, Gordon stopped, not sure why something made him look at her face in the photograph. "I wonder if she can really tell the future by looking at hands," Gordon thought, then sighed. "Nah, this is ridiculous," and started up the street for lunch. Then, for some reason, he stopped, thought a moment and walked back to the fortune teller's window, not sure why he was suddenly drawn to her. He stood in front of the window and looked at the picture of Madam Blavinsky. He looked at his hands, wondering if he should go in. Why not? he asked, then walked up to the door, looked in and noticed it was dark inside. This is crazy, he muttered to himself, hesitating. What am I doing? Then he turned the door knob. When the door opened, he heard a chime above him ring. He stood in the small, bare waiting room and noticed a shabby red leather couch along one wall and a green plastic covered kitchen chair in the corner. Strands of colorful beads hung from the entrance to another room. Gordon didn't know what to do. He couldn't hear anyone. Maybe I should leave. He placed his hands on the door knob and was about to leave when he heard a gravelly voice from the other room. "Please, come in." Gordon took his hands off the door knob in response to the voice, hesitated again, then stepped towards the beaded curtain, took a deep breath before pushing the beads aside, then entered a dark room. He smelled incense and saw a small wooden table with a candle burning. Then from out of the shadows appeared an old, tiny woman wearing a long gray dress that came to her feet, a dark maroon knitted shawl covered her shoulders and a black turban with a red jewel in the center covered her hair with a few loose strands sticking out. Long dangling golden earrings hung from her ears, "Welcome, you may sit and I will be with you in a moment." Gordon sat on an old wooden chair, well worn and a little wobbly. The incense smelled like vanilla or cinnamon. He waited for several minutes before Madam Blavinsky sat down on the other side of the small table. When she sat down and looked into his eyes she didn't speak, but

Gordon trembled slightly at the way she squinted, narrowing her eyes, nodding her head as if she suddenly recognized something in his face. She had a pack of cards on the table and said, "These are tarot cards. They are very ancient and with them I can tell you your story." "My story?" Gordon asked, looking at the cards, then at her. "Yes. You have a long and interesting story." "I do! How can you tell?" "I can tell," she said, shuffling the cards. "But tell me, what do you want to know?" Gordon was stunned by the question. "I'm not sure. I don't even know why I'm here." "Of course you do," she said. "Of course I do?" Gordon repeated. "No, I don't. I have no idea why I'm here." She stopped shuffling the cards. "Ah, this is your card. The Fool!" she said, showing it to him. "The Fool?" Gordon stared at the card. "So you think I'm foolish." "No, no, no. It is not a card of foolishness but of innocence and new beginnings. It's a wonderful card, my friend." "Oh, really?" Gordon looked at the card and saw a picture of a beggar carrying a long pole over his shoulder with a cloth pouch at the end and standing on the edge of a cliff. "Now you must ask a question. Tell me what you want to know. Think of a question--an important question." "What am I doing here?" Gordon asked. "That's my question." He shook his head. "This is crazy." "Is that your question, what am I doing here?" "Yes, what am I doing here?" he repeated, shaking his head back and forth, then sighed. "Why am I here?" She placed the cards on the table. When they were arranged, she looked at the cards, putting a long bony finger on each one and made soft, guttural sounds as she studied them. Gordon watched Madam Blavinsky close her eyes, slowly nodding her head, then she looked up from the tarot cards. "This is crazy," Gordon mumbled to himself as he watched her nodding with her eyes closed. He noticed her long narrow nose, wrinkled skin, high cheek bones, the strands of gray hair on the edges of her turban, the dangling earrings. Finally, Madam Blavinsky looked up at Gordon, took a deep breath, then closed her eyes again before leaning forward and looked deep into Gordon's eyes. "My friend, you are about to discover something that will awaken you," she said in a low gravelly voice, then paused. She glanced down at the cards, then back at Gordon. "You will go on a journey from which you will never return." She paused. "Give me your left hand." Gordon moved his hand towards her. She held it and looked at his palm, then ran her finger down one line and then down another. "Extraordinary," she said, looking Gordon in the eyes, then nodded again before speaking. "I see into past lives," she said. "You have lived many times before." "What are you talking about? What does that mean?" Gordon asked, shaking his head, his puzzled eyes staring at her. "Now I understand the cards," she said. "Now I understand." "What do you understand? What are you talking about? What do you mean I've lived many times before, that's crazy!" "What I am about to tell you will be difficult for you. It will change your life, but only if you hear the truth of what I say." Gordon listened, his breathing quickening. "You must want to hear in order to truly hear. You must be open to my message or you will not hear the profound truth of what I am saying and it will go in one ear and out the other." She paused. "You must hear it deep in your soul." "My soul?" Gordon repeated, perplexed and stared at Madam Blavinsky, then at the cards, then at the candle flickering. He took a deep breath, smelling the incense, feeling the chair wobble, thinking about her question "Do you want to hear what I have to say?" Gordon took a deep breath, touched his thinning hair, then moved his fingers over his wrinkled skin, remembering the feeling he had this morning looking in the mirror, how

he felt reading the obituaries every day, thinking about his age and his forty years as a tailor. "Tell me. I want to hear. I think my soul is ready even though I n ever speak of my soul, but I think I'm ready." "You were Plato's student, long ago in ancient Greece." "Do you mean Plato, the philosopher?" "Yes, you were one of his favorite students." "Me! That's impossible." "I saw you there," she said. "You were walking with Plato through a garden and he is speaking to you." "What is he saying?" "I don't know. I only see how he looks at you when he speaks. You are nodding, looking up at him as if you are listening to something important." "Do you see anything else?" "Yes. I see you exercising in a big empty room. You are naked and men are watching you." "That's horrible. I'm naked and men are watching me?" "You are dancing, moving your arms, bending low. There are other boys exercising and they are all naked." Gordon's throat tensed. He tried swallowing, but his mouth was dry. "Naked. My wife doesn't even see me naked. I'm not comfortable that way." "In ancient Greece boys exercised naked and older men took pleasure in watching. But that is not what is important about this story." "No, what is?" "That you were once Plato's student. That's what's important." "Why?" "That's for you to learn." "This is crazy. You're making this up." Madam Blavinsky picked up the cards from the table, "I have nothing more to tell you." Gordon nodded, took another deep breath, then cleared his throat. "How much do I owe you?" "Ten dollars." "Really, ten dollars?" Gordon gulped, then took out his wallet and handed ten dollars to Madam Blavinsky. "So I was Plato's student." "Yes, and you are beginning a long journey." " A long journey?" Gordon repeated, shaking his head. "I don't know what to say." He watched her place the ten dollars in a small black purse. "Well, I better be going." He stood up and looked down at the tarot cards and the flickering candle, then walked towards the beaded curtains. Before spreading the curtain aside, he glanced back at her and said, "Thank you." When he entered the other room, he glanced at the red couch, then opened the front door and heard the chimes ring. For a moment, he stood in front of the window and looked at the picture of Madam Blavinsky. So I was Plato's student. I'm beginning a long journey, whatever that means. He stood there for a few minutes, lost in his thoughts, while people rushed past him in both directions. How in the world could I be Plato's student? That's nonsense. Before continuing up the street to Hymie's Delicatessen, Gordon looked up and down the street and thought how he had seen the street change over the years. Many stores went out of business and remained empty for many months, some for years, then gradually galleries, jewelry stores, coffee houses, ice cream parlors, chic gourmet bistros sprouted up around Diamond Brothers, a remnant from another time, but still attracting its older clientele and some of the next generation who remembered going there with their parents. Gordon saw the street transformed and become livelier; a place where artists, musicians, hippies, young people congregated, especially on the weekends when the sidewalks were crowded. A few of the older businesses held on like Alice's Bridal Shop and Hymie's Delicatessen, but South Street had gone through a renaissance, and Gordon liked the liveliness, even though the styles of clothing had changed with most people wearing jeans and colorful T-shirts and fewer people needing a tailor. He walked up to Hymie's Delicatessen and got a corned beef sandwich and a coffee to go instead of sitting at the counter like he usually did. Gordon and Hymie had known each other for the thirty-four years Gordon worked at Diamond Brothers and Sons. "Howz it going?" Hymie asked,

taking Gordon's money at the register. "You're a little late today, aren't you? So, what's new?" Gordon didn't tell Hymie about his visit to Madam Blavinsky, but he wanted to say something. He swallowed, holding back the words, noticing Hymie's thin mustache, his wire rimmed glasses, his slightly soiled apron, the white stubble on his chin. "Guess what, I was Plato's student," he blurted it out. Hymie didn't say anything, but just looked at Gordon and handed him back his change. "You know, the Greek Philosopher," Gordon added. "I was his student in ancient Greece." "Are you feeling okay," Hymie asked. "What do you mean in ancient Greece?" "Never mind," Gordon said. "I'll see you tomorrow." When he left, he looked back at Hymie standing at the register, scrunching his eyebrows, shaking his head as if confused. On the street, Gordon didn't move and held the paper bag in one hand, his coffee in the other. I shouldn't have said anything, he thought, looking at Hymie's bewildered eyes. People were going in and out of the delicatessen, stepping around Gordon blocking the door. It was still the lunch hour and people were rushing. He heard a shrill police siren and saw red and blue blinking lights speeding down the street. He smelled the fumes from the bus pulling away from the corner. He looked across the street at the Swedish Furniture Store, the T-shirt shop, a café with outside seating, then started walking towards his store, stopping a minute at the dark window to look at the photo of Madam Blavinsky. Everything was the same and yet he felt different, perplexed but vaguely excited. What am I suppose to learn? I don't know a thing about Plato. How could this be that I was his student? That afternoon, sitting at his sewing machine, the words "awakening, discover, journey" went through his mind. He decided he would go to the library after work to see if he could find any books on Plato. He was finished work at four-thirty and was normally home at five-fifteen. Gordon was proud of his punctuality and often said, "You can set your clock by me." He was never late. I'll call Bernice and tell her I'm going to the library. She's going to think I'm mashugana, he thought, dialing. Gordon never read books and hadn't been in a library since he was twenty. The phone rang and rang. She's probably on the front porch with Gertrude...Gossip, gossip, that's all they do. Finally, he heard his wife's voice. "Bernice, I won't be home for dinner." "What do you mean? I have this gorgeous roast in the oven." "I'll eat when I come home." "Where are you going?" "The library," Gordon answered, hearing the irritation in her voice. "The library? What do you mean you're going to the library?" "I've got to get some books about Plato, the Philosopher." "Plato? What's wrong with you, Gordon?" "Nothing, I just got interested in Plato, that's all." Gordon wanted to tell Bernice that he was once Plato's student, but he didn't have time for one of her tirades on the phone. "I'll be home around seven or eight," Gordon said. "Good bye." When he hung up, he imagined Bernice telling Gertrude about the phone call. "Now, he's getting books on Plato," she would say. "What's next with him?" she'd go on, shaking her head. When Gordon arrived at the library, he was surprised at the number of people sitting at various tables, reading, taking notes, or standing at the computers, and checking out books. Many people had laptops, some sitting on the floor in a corner, some at tables. He saw men in business suits with brief cases, students with book bags, a woman with wire rimmed glasses writing on yellow sheets of paper, mothers reading to their children, teenagers with baggie pants or jeans with holes at the knees. Two young girls rushed by him. One had green hair, the other blue. At a few tables, he noticed men with shabby overcoats. One had

plastic bags over his shoes. Even homeless people come here. He was impressed with the activity, the quiet, the sense of seriousness and purpose. I haven't been in a library since I was young. He stood at the circulation desk, uncertain where to look or what to do. A stout woman with horned-rimmed glasses looked up at Gordon. "Can I help you?" she asked, picking up a pile of books from the counter. "I'm looking for books by Plato, the Greek philosopher," Gordon said. "Did you look in the catalog?" she asked, pointing to several computers in the center of the room. "No, is that what I'm supposed to do?" "Yes, it's right over there. If you have any trouble, I'd be glad to help," she said, smiling. "Thank you," Gordon said, then glanced at the computers and sighed, knowing he wouldn't begin to know what to do. "Actually, I have to go to the philosophy section," she said. "I'll show you where Plato is." "That would be very nice," Gordon said. As they walked to the philosophy section, Gordon felt he was entering a new world. Seeing all the books and pictures on the walls, people reading and writing made Gordon remember Madam Blavinsky's words about awakening. All these books with people's thoughts. A sense of awe at what was known and how little he knew swept over him. I'm just a tailor, he thought as he followed the woman up a flight of steps and into a huge room with large tables and shelves overflowing with books. "This is philosophy. All of our Plato is on that wall," she said, pointing to the other side of the room. "Thank you," Gordon said, then walked to the Plato section. I don't know where to begin. He stared at the books, walked along the shelf, then took down a book with gold lettering, titled, The Dialogues of Plato. They had several editions of the same book, but this one caught his eye. Opening it, he noticed a picture of a man in a white robe speaking to several men sitting at his feet. He noticed a young boy standing alongside the men. Gordon took the book and sat at a wooden table. He stared at the picture and at the boy. I wonder if that's me. He moved closer so that he could see the boy's face. It's possible that's me...Nah! This is just a painting. But he sat for a few minutes staring at the picture. Then he turned the pages and started to read a few passages. "I'm wise because I know I know nothing," he read. How could that be? Gordon thought, turning the pages. The Phadra, The Republic, The Meno. He read The Apology, about the trial of Socrates. Terrible. They gave him hemlock for teaching...Why? Gordon put the book down and thought for a minute. So this is philosophy. It's pretty hard to read but interesting. He turned the page to the Dialogue of Meno and read out loud in a low voice, "Can virtue be taught?" He read several pages, then looked up at the clock and saw it was almost seven o'clock. Bernice is going to be furious. He picked up the book and went to the circulation desk. "I'd like to take this book out," he said to the woman. "Do you have a library card?" she asked. "No, this is my first time here." "Well, fill out this card and you will be able to check that book out." Gordon filled out the card and noticed the woman with horned-rimmed glasses and waved to her. He picked up the book and showed it to her. She smiled and nodded and he smiled back at her. This is exciting, Gordon thought as a warm wave of exhilaration swept over him. Bernice was silent when Gordon arrived home. Finally, she spoke, after putting his dinner on the table. "It's cold, but that's what you get when you come home after eight o'clock for dinner." Gordon began eating. "I've been reading Plato." "So!" she said, not looking at him. "So, it's interesting. He was put to death for teaching." Bernice didn't respond. She was wiping the counter and putting food away in plastic containers. "Here's a question," Gordon said. "Can virtue be

taught?" Bernice didn't answer, but sighed deeply, wearily, then glanced at Gordon and sighed again. "What do you think?" Gordon asked. "About what?" "Can virtue be taught?" "What kind of question is that? Come on, Gordon, eat your supper so I can clean the kitchen." Gordon turned the pages of his book and read in between bites. "Bernice, I want to show you something." She came to the table. "What now?" "See this picture. That's Plato and see this boy," he pointed. "That could be me. I found out today that I was Plato's student." Bernice glanced at the picture then at Gordon. "What's gotten into you? Going to the library and then telling me you were Plato's student." "Sit down. I've got news." Bernice put her dishtowel on the table and sat down. "What news?" "I went to the fortune teller down the street from work." "You what!" Her eyes widened. "Yes, now listen. This is what she said. She said I was once Plato's student in another lifetime. I lived in ancient Greece and she even said I danced naked in front of older men." "Gordon!" she shouted. "Naked!" "Yes, that's what boys did when they exercised. It's not like that now." "You expect me to believe you lived in Greece and you were Plato's student. That takes the cake." She picked up her towel. "That's the news?" "Yes." "Are you finished with your supper, Gordon?" "I'm finished, thank you. I think I'll have some tea and read." Bernice picked up his plate. "Go read. I'll put on hot water." The next morning when Gordon looked at his face in the mirror, he remembered a line from his reading. He had stayed up late. He said it out loud as if speaking to himself. "The unexamined life is not worth living." He remembered Madam Blavinsky saying he would be awakened and would go on a journey and never return. Gordon suddenly understood. He felt curiosity. He wanted to know what life was all about. It's not worth living if you don't examine life. That's what Socrates meant. Gordon felt special. He was inspired. So what if Bernice makes fun of me. He smiled at himself in the mirror. I'm going to read everything about Plato. I'm going to ask questions and teach people that I don't know anything and that's why I'm wise. Gordon remembered he was suppose to get a haircut today, but as he looked at himself, he made up his mind he was going to let his hair get long and he was going to grow a beard. He smiled at himself and instead of seeing an old man, he saw wisdom in his narrow blue eyes and wrinkled skin. Within a week, everyone noticed there was something different about Gordon. He hadn't shaved and his hair was growing over his ears. He stopped wearing a white shirt and tie and instead, wore turtleneck sweaters. "Gordon, are you growing a beard?" Arthur Diamond asked. "Yes," Gordon replied. "By the way, have you ever heard of Plato?" "Of course." Arthur answered. "Well, I was his student?" "You mean Plato, the Greek philosopher?" "Yes, that's the one. I was his student." "You were Plato's student?" Arthur repeated, narrowing his eyes, looking at Gordon then sighed. "Are you feeling alright?" "Yes, I feel fine, better than ever." Arthur nodded and walked away, shaking his head. Later, Vicki, the cashier said, "Hey, Gordon, that turtleneck looks really cool on you." "Thank you," Gordon responded. "Can I tell you something?" "Sure, anything," Vicki said, smiling at him. "What's up?" Gordon put his hand on the counter, "Please, don't laugh." "I won't, Gordon, I promise I won't laugh." "I was Plato's student." "Cool. That's really cool, Gordon. My boyfriend's taking a philosophy course at Community College and he's reading Plato. I saw his book." "Well, I actually studied with Plato back in ancient Greece." "No kidding," Vicki said, turning the pages of a magazine. "That's really cool, anyway, that color looks good on you," she said glancing up at him. "You don't believe me, do you?"

Gordon asked. "Yeah, sure, I believe you Gordon. Why, not? You were Plato's student. That's really cool." At lunch, Hymie came out from behind the counter and sat down on the stool next to Gordon. "Why the beard and long hair? And the turtlenecks and sneakers. Are you in a mid-life crisis?" "No," Gordon said. "I've been studying Plato. I told you I was a student of his in ancient Greece." "Gordon, we've been friends a long time and I wouldn't kid you or nothin', but you're sounding maschugana. I wouldn't start telling people what you're telling me." A week later, Arthur Diamond called Gordon into his office and told him his appearance was inappropriate. "Gordon, you have worked here for thirty four years. You worked for my father and I have a lot of respect for your ability as a tailor, but we've been getting complaints." "Complaints?" "Yes, customers are disturbed when you answer them and start asking questions and babbling." "Babbling? I don't babble!" "You ask rude questions. Mrs. Rosenblatt called yesterday and complained about you." "I wasn't rude to Mrs. Rosenblatt. She said she knew what she liked and I asked 'how do you know what you know?' Is that rude?" "Mrs. Rosenblatt was insulted by your questions. She's been coming here for years and you've worked on Mr. Rosenblatt's suits, but she thought your appearance was disgraceful and she won't be back unless you shave your beard, get a haircut and wear normal clothes." "Normal?" Gordon asked. "Normal is a relative term. I'm not sure what normal means in this context?" Arthur sat back in his chair and took a deep breath. "This is hard for me, Gordon, but unless you shave and stop acting like a philosopher, you will have to stop working here." "I don't believe my ears. I have to stop acting like a philosopher." "You can't keep asking customers crazy questions. Even the other employees are upset with you." "Why?" Gordon asked. "Because I want them to examine their lives, because I ask questions and expect them to think." "Gordon, this is a men's clothing store. It's not a school. It's not ancient Greece. We are here to sell clothes, not discuss philosophy." "I see." Gordon took a deep breath and cleared his throat. "Artie, I've known you since you were a little boy. I've been lengthening your pants for over thirty years...since your Bar Mitzvah." "I know, Gordon. But jeans, turtleneck sweaters, sneakers, a beard and now you have an earring. I can live with that. But it's the questions. More and more you're interfering with people working by starting all these philosophical discussions. No one wants to hurt your feelings." "Listen. Artie," Gordon said. "No one will have to do that any longer. I've decided to retire from being a tailor. You have my two weeks notice." "Are you serious? What are you going to do?" "Be a philosopher." Arthur looked up at Gordon. "A philosopher, what do you mean? Are you sure?" "I have money saved and I can get Social Security. I'll be sixty five in few months." "What will your family think?" Arthur stared at Gordon, his mouth hung open. "They already think I should see a psychiatrist. Bernice hardly speaks to me. But from now on, philosophy is my life." Two months passed and Gordon was now a familiar sight at the library. He arrived every morning at nine. He sat in the Philosophy Room and read books, articles, took notes, filling up tablets with quotes and his own ideas. His beard was turning white. Though his hair was thin on top, the back was down below his shoulders, curling up at the ends. He wore an old brown sports jacket over his turtleneck sweater with books in every pocket. He had a beat up brief case that was also filled with books and notebooks. As the weather grew warmer, Gordon sat in the park across the street from the library and read. He became a familiar sight in the park with his white shaggy beard and hair, his

shabby jacket and his briefcase bulging with books. He always sat on the same bench near a big fountain. He'd feed the pigeons, say hello to mothers and look into baby carriages. When people sat next to him, he'd ask questions, "What is happiness? What is freedom? How do you know what you know? What is courage?" Most people just wanted to read the newspaper and would get annoyed and give short answers like, "How should I know or what difference does it make?" Sometimes he'd get into a discussion, but most of the time, people would get up and move to another bench. Bernice was fed up with Gordon. "You're not the man I married. Look at you. You look like you're a bum!" One day, his son, David visited him in the park and sat down on the bench. "Pop, we're all worried about you." "Worried? Why? Can't you see I'm happy?" "You aren't yourself. You seem lost and confused." "I do?" Gordon asked. "This nonsense about being Plato's student is crazy. You lost your job. We can't have a conversation with you without it becoming a discussion on paradox. Mom is beside herself with worry. "I know! I know!" Gordon said, "But there's no reason to worry. I'm a philosopher. That's all. It's very simple." "What do you mean you're a philosopher," David asked. "You're a tailor, a husband, a father. No one decides to be a philosopher." "I did!" "That's why I'm here. We've got to do something about you." "Do something? What's wrong with being a philosopher? I feel more alive than ever. I love reading Plato. I love knowing I was his student. It makes me happy." "We want you to see a psychiatrist." "A psychiatrist, why?" "To see what's wrong with you." "David, nothing's wrong with me. What's wrong with being a philosopher?" "But all you do is read and ask questions. You look like a homeless person. You use to take care of yourself and now you hardly eat." "I feel great! I feel young. When I look in the mirror I no longer see an old man. I see a wise philosopher." David got up. "We're going to make an appointment." "I won't go." "Pop, you have to. It's for your own good." When David left, Gordon got an idea. He would hold philosophy classes in the park. "This bench will be my classroom, why not?" That night he sat at the dining room table carefully printing out the words, "Philosophy in the Park 10 A M. Everyday." He then cut up an old cardboard box and made a larger sign with magic markers, then showed both of them to Bernice. She looked at the signs, then at Gordon and left the room without a word, shaking her head. The next day he went to Regal Printing on his way to the park and had fifty copies of the flier made. "So you're a philosopher," the chubby man wearing an apron said, handing him the pile of signs and reading the top one. "Yes and you're not going to believe this, but I was Plato's student, you know the Greek philosopher." "Right," the man said, writing out a sales slip for five dollars plus twenty-five cents tax. Gordon handed him a five dollar bill and a quarter. "Well, have a good day," the man said as Gordon opened the door to leave. "By the way, the word good is one of my favorite words. I think about that word a lot," Gordon said, standing in the doorway just as another customer was entering. After he left the print shop, Gordon put the fliers up in the market, the post office, in the library, at the food coop, the thrift store, on the bulletin boards in cafes. He tacked them to telephone poles, to trees and handed them out to people. When he got back to the park, he leaned the larger sign against the bench, then took out a book and started reading, smiling up at people walking by who glanced at the sign, but he also noticed that most people ignored it and him. The next day, three people showed up--two young men wearing jeans and T-shirts and long hair, and a young girl dressed in a black mini-skirt, black tights, a black turtle neck

shirt and a black leather jacket; her dark hair fell below her shoulders. Gordon noticed the gold stud in her nose just above her nostril, dangling silver earrings and several rings on her fingers. "I'm Gabe and this is my buddy, Steve," the tall, lanky young man said, glancing at the pudgy man next to him. "I'm Emily," the young woman said. What's your name?" "Gordon," he answered. "So you're here for some philosophy," he said, putting the book he was reading beside him on the bench and smiled. "Yes. Sounds fun," Gabe said. "Why not?" "Well, take a seat and we'll begin." The two young men sat on the ground in front of the bench and the girl sat next to Gordon. He asked a simple question, "Can virtue be taught?" The three of them had a lively discussion trying to define virtue and found how difficult it was to explain. Gordon nodded and asked more questions, then said, "If we can't agree and explain what virtue is maybe we don't really know what it is, therefore, how can we teach what we don't know. That's an important question. Come back tomorrow and bring some friends and we'll continue." When the two young men got up to leave, the girl stayed and looked up at her friends, "Hey, I'll see you guys later. I want to talk to Gordon." "Cool," one of them said. "See you later," the other said, chuckling, then waved back at her. "I just wanted to tell you I think it's so cool what you're doing. I really do," Emily said. "Thank you," Gordon responded, sitting back on the bench and stroked his beard and noticed her green eyes with heavy dark lines around them. "Why do you think it's cool?" "It just is. I mean, I think it takes guts to do what you're doing." "My wife and son think I should see a psychiatrist. They're upset with me." "Why?" Emily asked. "Because I decided to be a philosopher, that's why. My son said, 'No one decides to be a philosopher. You're a husband, a father, a tailor.' That's what I was for thirty four years, a tailor. They think something is wrong with me and I should see a psychiatrist. My wife hardly speaks to me now." "I get it," she said, nodding. "I know what you mean. My parents are upset with me because I dropped out of college and want to be a poet, that's all I do is write poetry." "What do you mean you want to be a poet?" Gordon asked. "If you write poetry all the time then you're a poet, it's not something you become. You're already a poet." "I guess, but I've never published anything and when I tell people, especially friends of my parents I want to be a poet, they say, 'Oh, that's nice,' but I can tell they're being condescending because they give me this look and say, 'so you want to starve' or they change the topic." "Well, I never went to college and never studied philosophy until a few months ago when I learned that I was Plato's student a long time ago in ancient Greece." "Really, you were Plato's student, how do you know that? That sounds strange." "A fortune teller, a gypsy woman named Madam Blavinsky, looked into my eyes and said she can see past lives and she told me I was Plato's student and that I was beginning a long journey and nothing would ever be the same. At first, I didn't believe her and thought it was nuts, but something made me go to the library and start reading about Plato and here I am, a philosopher and my whole life is different. It's hard to explain." "Wow, that's so amazing." "So here we are, Emily, you're a poet and I'm a philosopher. It doesn't matter what people think, even if they think it's nuts, so what?" "Wow! I like how you think. It's so cool you were a tailor for all those years and now you decided to be a philosopher." "Right and I have an idea," Gordon said, looking into Emily's eyes. "What?" Emily's eyes widened. "I think you should read some of your poems here and I will introduce you. I have a feeling you're a good poet and this will give you a chance to be heard. What

do you think?" "Wow! I love that idea, thank you, thank you. It's so wonderful that you want me to do that." "It just feels right," Gordon said, enjoying her enthusiasm. "I will tell some people I know to come to the park and learn philosophy from you and hear my poetry." "Good. This could become something special." The next day Emily and her two friends came and a little while after they started, a few more of Emily's friends arrived and participated, then some other people stopped to listen. Emily read a poem and people applauded. Gordon asked a question, "Why did Plato say, 'All tyrants fear the poet?'" and a lively discussion followed. Gradually more people gathered and joined in and they had a two hour discussion. The next day, ten people gathered around Gordon's bench. The questions flew. People spoke up. They listened to one another and Emily read a new poem every day and more and more people stopped to listen, and a few times people asked Emily to read another poem, and then started asking for copies which she handed out. After the discussions ended, Gordon and Emily would continue talking and hanging out. They'd take a walk around the park, go to the library and read. Gordon would sit across from her with a book and take notes, while Emily wrote poetry or drew pictures in the black covered sketch book she carried. They would go to the Gilded Cage Café across the street from the park and have coffee or a bowl of soup, and the sight of Gordon with his shabby jacket, long white hair and beard, and Emily with her long black hair, short skirts or black jeans was a curiosity, but neither Gordon or Emily cared how people looked at them. Every day, Emily would meet at Gordon's bench which was now their bench. She always brought him coffee and a cookie or muffin she had baked. She also made a larger more decorated sign that said, "Philosophy in the Park." Gordon suggested she add Poetry to the sign, but she refused and said, "I'm happy the way it is and I get the chance to read my poetry, that's all that matters." Gordon and Emily's friendship evolved and Emily felt free to say anything that came to her mind and told Gordon, "I don't know why but I love being with you and telling you what I'm thinking and feeling and reading you my poems. I've told you things I've never said to anyone else and I love how you listen to me. You're wonderful." Gordon smiled and often told her how much he loved her youthful energy, what a beautiful person she was, not just physically but in her soul. He said, "Emily, I feel like we were together in another life-time." He told her Plato's philosophy that knowledge is recollection, that we remember what we always knew from another time and that he now understood what Madam Blavinsky told him about past lives, his awakening and beginning a journey from which he would never return. Emily listened to Gordon and he listened to her in ways no one else did and without ever saying the words, they knew they deeply loved each other in a way they could not explain. She would say, "I don't know why, but I love how I feel when I am with you. You inspire me and I love how you make me feel I'm beautiful." "That's because you are," Gordon said and Emily would blush and smile, revealing her dimples and then said to him, "I think you're beautiful too." Emily had a job as a waitress and had to be at work by four and Gordon would go home for dinner and an evening of study. Bernice always had a nice dinner and made meals she knew Gordon liked. She would tell him what she did, and how their daughter Judith's two children were doing in school, that David's son had started preparing for his Bar Mitzvah, and then would describe the trips she was organizing for the synagogue that Gordon never attended. Gordon listened, attentively, nodding, but when Gordon told her about his philosophy in the park and

how more and more people were coming, the conversation ended with a disgusted grunt. Gordon never mentioned Emily and his friendship. He thought about telling her, but knew it would add to the tension that already existed. That was part of it, but he also wanted his friendship with Emily to be special and have nothing to do with his life with Bernice. Two months passed and Gordon's "Philosophy in the Park" was a big hit. A newspaper reporter came and did a big feature story. The TV channels came and suddenly Gordon was a celebrity. The news show had a shot of Emily reading a poem. Though Bernice saw the news show, she didn't say anything except that's interesting and how pretty that young woman was. Gordon became a skillful teacher and asked stimulating questions. On Saturdays and Sundays, a few teen-aged boys and girls came by and asked Gordon his thoughts on various topics. He enjoyed thinking about their questions and would say, "Now, that's a very interesting question, let me think about that." His classes in the park and his days with Emily became even richer, and they became closer, and he was happy at the way they loved each other. Before Emily left for work, they always hugged, and she would kiss him goodbye, either on the cheek or the top of his head and say, "I love you. See you tomorrow." Gordon would squeeze her hand and say, "I love you, too," Gordon would continue reading on his bench before going home, and people would wave and say hello and tell him they saw him on the news. Several called him Mr. Philosopher which always made him chuckle. Often, they would stop and ask him questions and would sit with him or stand and discussions would begin. Then much to Gordon's surprise, people would offer to drive him home to continue their discussions, then others would follow in their cars and he would invite them in for tea. Most of the people were young, but several older people joined them. At first, Bernice was annoyed with all the people showing up, but then would listen from the kitchen while making dinner, or she would sit in their living room and gradually began to like the conversations in her house and the way they listened to Gordon. Then she started making cookies, or serving a cake she made. She got to know several of the more frequent visitors and liked how they complimented and thanked her for her baking. Once in awhile, someone would ask her what she thought about something, but she would avoid answering and say, "He's the philosopher around here." It surprised Gordon to see how Bernice was changing. When he'd hear her say, "He's the philosopher," he'd feel a warm smile come to his face. It delighted him to tell Emily about the discussions in his living room, and how Bernice liked serving her cookies and cake and always had coffee and several kinds of herbal teas that people could select. After the visitors left and Bernice and he had dinner, Gordon would pick up a book and sit in his favorite chair and read. Bernice would bring him tea and sit on the couch across from him and sew or knit. Every once in awhile Gordon would look up and see Bernice smiling at him. He could feel her eyes gazing at his shaggy beard, long hair and happy face. He'd take a deep breath and see a smile come to her lips before going back to the sweater she was knitting for him.