What’s the one thing you should never do? Quit? Depends on who you talk to. Steal? Cheat? Eat food from a dented can? Myron Lufkin’s father, Abe, once told him never get your temperature taken at the hospital. Bring your own thermometer, he said; you should see how they wash theirs. He ought to have known; when he was at Yeshiva University he worked as an orderly in the hospital, slid patients around on gurneys, cleaned steelware. Myron knows all his father’s hospital stories and all his rules. On the other hand, there are things you should do. Always eat sitting down. Wear a hat in the rain. What else? Never let the other guy start the fight. Certain inviolable commandments. In thirty-two years Myron Lufkin had never seen his father without an answer.

That is, until the day five years ago when Myron called home from Albert Einstein College of Medicine and told his father he had had enough, was quitting, leaving, kaput, he said. Now, Myron, living in Boston, sometime Jew, member of the public gym where he plays basketball and swims in the steamy pool after rounds, still calls home every other week. The phone calls, if he catches his father asleep, remind him of the day five years ago when he called to say that he was not, after all, going to be a doctor.

It was not the kind of thing you told Abe Lufkin. Abe Lufkin, a man who once on Election Day put three twelve-pound chains across his chest and dove into San Francisco Bay at Aquatic Park, to swim most of the mile and three-quarters across to Marin. As it turned out they had to pull him from the frothy cold water before he made the beach—but to give him credit, he was not on a young man. In the Chronicle the next day there was an inside page, sputtering and shaking on the sand, steam rising off his body. Rachel, Myron’s mother, is next to him in a sweater and baggy wool pants. Myron still has the newspaper clipping in one of his old butterfly display cases wrapped in tissue paper in a drawer in Boston.

On the day Myron called home from Albert Einstein to say that three years of studying and money, three years of his life, had been a waste, he could imagine the blood-rush in his father’s head. But he knew what to expect. He kept firm, though he could feel the pulse in his own neck. Itzhak, his roommate at medical school, had stood behind him with his hand on Myron’s shoulder, smoking a cigarette. But Abe simply did not believe it.

Myron didn’t expect him to believe it: Abe, after all, didn’t understand quitting. If his father had been a sea captain, Myron thought, he would have gone down with his ship—singing, boasting, denying the ocean that closed over his head—and this was not, in Myron’s view, a glorious death. It just showed stubbornness. His father was stubborn about everything. When he was
young, for example, when stickball was what you did in the Bronx, Abe played basketball. Almost nobody else played. In those days, Abe told Myron, you went to the Yankee games when Detroit was in town and rooted for Hank Greenberg to hit one out, and when he did you talked about it and said how the goyishe umpires would have ruled it foul if they could have, if it hadn’t been to center field. In Abe’s day, baseball was played by men named McCarthy, Murphy, and Burdock, and basketball wasn’t really played at all, except the very very tall, awkward kids. But not Abe Lufkin. He was built like a road-show wrestler and he kept a basketball under his bed. It was his love for the game, maybe, that many years later made him decide to have a kid. When Myron was born, Abe nailed a backboard to the garage. This is my boy, he said, my mensch. He began playing basketball with his son when Myron was nine. But really, what they did was not playing. By the time Myron was in the fifth grade Abe had visions in his already balding pharmacist’s head. He sat in the aluminum lawn furniture before dinner and counted out the one hundred layups Myron had to do from each side of the basket. One hundred from the left. One hundred from the right. No misses.

But it paid off. At Woodrow Wilson High, Myron was the star. Myron hitting a twenty-foot bank shot. Myron slipping a blank pass inside, stealing opponents’ dribbles so their hands continued down, never realizing the ball was gone. Myron blocking the last-second shot. It was a show. Before the games he stood alone under the basket, holding his toes and stretching loose the muscles in his thighs. He knew Abe was sitting in the stands. His father always got there before the teams even came upstairs to the gym. He took the front-row seat at one corner and made Rachel take the one at the opposite corner. Then at halftime they switched. This way Abe could always see the basket his son was shooting at. After the games Abe waited in the car for Myron. Rachel sat in the back, and when Myron got in, Abe talked about the game until the windows steamed or Rachel finally said that it was unhealthy to sit like this in the cold. Then Abe wiped the windows and started the car, and they drove home with the heater blasting up warm air between the seats.

Abe had always believed the essence of the body was in the lungs, and sometimes, to keep Myron in shape for basketball, he challenged him to breath-holding contests. They sat facing each other across the kitchen table without breathing while an egg timer ran down between them. Myron could never beat his father, though; Abe held his breath like a blowfish at low tide. Myron’s eyes teared, his heart pounding in his head, his lungs swelled to combustion, while all the time his father just stared at him, winking. He made Myron admit defeat out loud. “Do you give?” Abe whispered when half the sand had run down through the timer. Myron swallowed, pressed his lips together, stared at the sand falling through the narrow neck. A few seconds later, Abe said it again: “Do you give?”
Myron squeezed his legs together, held his hand over his mouth, stood up, sat down, and finally let his breath explode out. “I give,” he said, then sat there until the egg timer ran down and Abe exhaled.

There was always this obsession in the Lufkin family, this holiness about the affairs of the body. What were wars or political speeches next to the importance of body heat, expansive lungs, or leg muscles that could take you up the stairs instead of the elevator? Abe told hospital stories because to him there was no more basic truth than keeping your bronchial tubes cleared, or drying between your toes. Any questions of the body were settled quickly and finally when Abe showed Myron the smelly fungus between his own toes, or opened the Encyclopaedia Britannica to pictures of stomach worms, syphilis, or skin rash.

Any religious fervor in the family went instead into this worship of the body. Rachel did not light candles on Friday nights, and Myron was never bar-mitzvahed. Instead there was health to be zealous about. It was Abe’s way. But at times he wavered, and these were nearly the only times Myron ever saw him unsure—in the evenings when he read the newspaper and talked about the State of Israel, or on Friday nights sometimes when he stood in the living room with the lights off, staring out at the sidewalk as the congregation filtered by in wool coats and yarmulkes. It put Abe into a mood. The spring after Myron’s fifteenth birthday he told Myron he was sending him to Judaism camp in the mountains for the month of July. They were outside on the porch when Abe told him.

“What? A Judaism camp? I don’t believe it.”
“What don’t you believe?”
“I’m not going to a Judaism camp.”
“What’s this? Yes, you’re going. You’ve got no more religion than goyim. I’ve already sent the money.”
“How much money?”
“Fifty dollars.”

Then Abe went in from the porch, and that was the end of the argument. Myron knew he would have to go off in the hot, bright month of July. That was how Abe argued. He wasn’t wordy. If you wanted to change his mind you didn’t argue, you fought him with your fists or your knees. This was what he expected from the world, and this was what he taught his son. Once, when Myron was fourteen, Abe had taken him to a bar, and when the bouncer hadn’t wanted to let him in Abe said, “This is my mensch; he’s not going to drink,” and he had pushed Myron in front of him through the door. Later, when they stood in line to pee away their drinks, Abe told him you can do what you want with strangers because they don’t want to fight. “Remember that,” he said.

But the day after he told Myron about the Judaism camp, Abe came out on the porch and said, “Myron, you’re a man now and we’re going to decide about camp like men.”
“What?”
“We’re going to decide like men. We’ve going to have a race.”
“We can’t race.”
“What do you mean, we can’t race? We sure can. A footrace, from here to the end of the block. I win, you go to camp.”
“I don’t want to do it.”
“What, do you want it longer? We can do what you want. We can make it two times to the corner.”

Then Abe went into the house, and Myron sat on the porch. He didn’t want to learn religion during the hottest month of the year, but also, he knew, there was something in beating his father that was like the toppling of an ancient king. What was it for him to race an old man? He walked down to the street, stretched the muscles in his legs, and sprinted up to the corner. He sprinted back down to the house, sat down on the stops, and decided it wasn’t so bad to go to the mountains in July. That afternoon Abe came out of the house in long pants and black, rubber-soled shoes, and he and Myron lined up on one of the sidewalk lines and raced, and Abe won going away. The sound of Abe’s fierce breathing and his hard shoes pounding the cement hid the calmness of Myron’s own breath. That July Myron packed Abe’s old black cloth traveling bag and got on the bus to the mountains.

But what Abe taught Myron was more than just competition; it was everything. It was the way he got to work every day for thirty-seven years without being late, the way he treated Rachel, his bride of uncountable years, who sewed, cooked, cleaned for him, in return for what? For Sunday night dinners out, and a new diamond each year. It was a point of honor, an expectation. Obviously on a pharmacist’s salary Abe couldn’t afford it. He bought her rings, necklaces, bracelets, brooches, hairpins, earrings, lockets—one gift at the end of each year for, what is it, almost forty years? One year Rachel was sick with mild hepatitis and spent the holidays in the hospital. On the first evening of Chanukah Abe took Myron with him to visit her, and in the hospital room he pulled out a small bracelet strung with a diamond and gave it to her, his wife, as she lay in the bed. But what is the value of a diamond, he later asked Myron in the car, next to the health of the body?

It was two years later that Abe tried to swim across San Francisco Bay. But there were other things before that. At the age of fifty-four he fought in a bar over politics. Yes, fought. He came home with his knuckles wrapped in a handkerchief. On his cheek there was a purple bruise that even over the years never disappeared, only gradually settled down the side of his face and formed a black blotch underneath his jaw. That was when he told Myron never to let the other guy start the fight. Always get the first punch, he said. Myron was sixteen then, sitting in the kitchen watching his father rub iodine into the split
skin behind his knuckles. The smell stayed in the kitchen for days, the smell if hospitals that later came to be the smell of all his father's clothes, and of his closet. Maybe Myron had just never noticed it before, but on that day his father began to smell old.

Myron was startled. Even then he had been concerned with life. He was a preserver, a collector of butterflies that he caught on the driving trips the family took in the summers. The shelves in his bedroom were lined with swallowtails and monarchs pressed against glass panes, the crystal dust still on their wings. Later, in college, he had studied biology, zoology, entomology, looking inside things, looking at life. Once, on a driving trip through Colorado when Myron was young, Abe had stopped the car near the lip of a deep gorge. Across from where they got out and stood, the cliffs extended down a quarter of a mile, colored with clinging green brush, wildflowers, shafts of red clay, and, at the bottom, a turquoise river. But there were no animals on the sheer faces, no movement anywhere in the gorge. Abe said that life could survive anywhere, even on cliffs like these, and that this was a miracle. But Myron said nothing. To him, anything that couldn't move, that couldn't fly or swim or run, was not really alive. Real life interested him. His father interested him, with his smells and exertions, with the shift bruise on his jaw.

Years later, on his first day at Albert Einstein medical school, the thing Myron noticed was the smell, the pungency of the antiseptics, like the iodine Abe had once rubbed into his knuckles. On that first day when a whole class of new medical students listened to an address by the dean of the medical college, the only thing Myron noticed was that the room smelled like his father.

Medical school was a mountain of facts, a giant granite peak full of outcroppings and hidden crevices. Physiology. Anatomy. Histology. More facts than he could ever hope to remember. To know the twenty-eight bones of the hand seemed to Myron a rare and privileged knowledge, but then there were the arms and shoulders with their bones and tendons and opposing muscles, then the whole intricate, extravagant cavity of the chest, and then the head and the abdomen and the legs. Myron never really tried to learn it all. It wasn't the volume of knowledge so much as it was the place where he had to be in order to learn it. The anatomy labs reeked of formaldehyde, the hospitals of a mixture of cleanliness and death. All of it reminded Myron of men getting old, and that is why in three years of medical school he made the minuscule but conscious effort not to study enough. He let the knowledge collect around him, in notebooks, binders, pads, on napkins and checks, everywhere except in his brain. His room was strewn with notes he never studied. Once in a letter home he said learning medicine was like trying to drink water from a fire hose.
But that was something Abe would want to hear. Once on a driving
trip through the Florida deltas, Abe came upon three men trying to lift an
abandoned car from a sludge pit with a rope they had looped around it. Only
the roof and the tops of the windows were showing above the mud, but Abe got
out anyway and helped the men pull. His face turned red and the muscles in
his belly shook so much Myron could see them through his shirt. Myron didn’t
understand the futility of his father’s effort, or even know why he helped save a
useless car for men he didn’t know, until years later. Abe did things like that; he
loved doing things like that.

Myron, on the other hand, just didn’t want to study. His weren’t the
usual reasons for quitting medical school. It wasn’t the hours, and really, it
wasn’t the studying and the studying. It was something smaller, harder, that in
a vague way he knew had to do with Abe. Perhaps he said his own father in the
coughing middle-aged men whose hearts he watched flutter across oscilloscope
screens. But it was not Abe’s death that he feared. Heart stoppage or brain
tumors or sudden clots of blood were reactions of the body, and thus, he had
always believed, they were good. Death, when it was a fast action, didn’t bother
him. The fatty cadavers in anatomy labs were no more than objects to Myron,
and it meant nothing to him that they were dead. The only time in his life that
he had had to really think about death was in his childhood, when the phone
rang in the middle of the night to tell Abe about his aunt in Miami Beach. The
next morning Myron had found his father downstairs drinking coffee. “Life is
for living,” Abe had said, and even then Myron could weigh the seriousness in
his voice. It was plain that death meant only a little if you still had the good
muscles in your own heart, and that people’s bodies, once under ground, were
not to be mourned. And besides, there really was no blood in the medical school
anatomy classes. The cadavers were gray, no different when you gut them than
the cooked leg of a turkey. They had none of the pliable fleshiness, none of the
pink, none of the smells and secretions that told you of life.

No, it wasn’t death that bothered Myron; it was the downhill plunge
of the living body—the muscles that stretched off the bones into folders, the
powdery flesh odors of middle-aged men. He longed for some octogenarian to
stand up suddenly from a wheelchair and run the length of a corridor. Once, a
drugged coronary patient, a sixty-year-old man, had unhooked an IV cart and
caromed on it through the corridor until Myron cornered him. When Myron
looked at the blood spots that were in the old man’s eyes, he wanted to take him
in his own arms then and there, in his triumph. That was why Myron wanted to
quit medical school. He hated the demise of the spirit.
So he let the work pile up around him. In his third year he felt the walls of the lecture halls and the sponged hospital floors to be somehow holding him against his will. Fifty-year-old men who could no longer walk, or whose intestines bled and collapsed, Myron felt, were betrayers of the human race. He was convinced of the mind’s control over the flesh.

In the winter of his third year he started jogging. First two, three miles a day, then, later, long six-mile runs into the hills and neighborhoods around the medical school. He left in the early mornings and ran in the frozen air so that he could feel the chill in his lungs. He ran every morning through November and December, and then January after the holidays, until one morning in February, when the grass was still breaking like needles underneath his feet, he realized he could run forever. That morning he just keep running. He imagined Itzhak sitting with two cups of coffee at the table, but he ran to the top of a hill and watched the streets below him fill with morning traffic. Then onward he went, amidst the distant bleating of car horns and the whistling wind. He thought of the hospital, of the arriving interns, sleepless, pale, and of the third-year students following doctors from room to room. He ran on the balls of his feet and never got tired.

When he returned to the apartment Itzhak was at the table eating lunch. Myron took a carton of milk from the refrigerator and drank standing up, without a glass.

“You ever think about passing infection that way?”

Myron put down the carton and looked at the muscles twitching in his thighs. Itzhak lit a cigarette.

“You’re a real one,” Itzhak said. “Where the hell were you?”

“Hypoxia. No oxygen to the brain. You know how easy it is to forget what time it is.”

“Watch it,” Itzhak said. “You’ll get into trouble.”

The next day Myron went to classes and to rounds, but that night he ran again, stumbling in the unlit paths, and after that, over the next weeks of frozen, windless days, he ran through his morning assignments and spent the afternoons in a park near his apartment. There was a basketball hoop there, a metal backboard with a chain net, and sometimes he shot with a group of kids or joined their half-court games. Afterward, he always ran again. He loved to sweat when the air was cold enough to turn the grass brittle, when a breath of air felt like a gulp of cold water. After a while, Itzhak began to ignore his disappearances. One day when Myron returned from running, Itzhak took his pulse. “Damn, Myron,” he said, “you are running.” His professors tried to take him aside, and Myron could see them looking into his pupils when they spoke. But he ignored them. One night he returned late from running, still dripping sweat, picked up the telephone and dialed, and heard his father’s sleepy voice on the other end of the line. “Pa,” he said, “it’s kaput here.”
So why the quitting now? Why the phone call at ten-thirty on a Thursday night when Abe and Rachel were just going into their dream sleep? Myron could hear the surprise, the speechlessness. He heard Rachel over the line telling Abe to calm himself, to give her the phone. He imagined the blood rushing to Abe's face, the breathing starting again the way he breathed the morning they pulled him from the frothy water in San Francisco Bay. Rachel took the phone and spoke, and Myron, because he had lived with his father for most of his life, knew Abe was taking black socks from the drawer and stretching them over his feet.

The next morning at seven Myron opened the apartment door and Abe was sitting there in a chair with the black cloth traveling bag on his lap. He was wide awake, blocking the passage out of the apartment.

“For crying out loud!”

“Who else did you expect? Am I supposed to let you throw away everything?”

“Pa, I didn’t expect anybody.”

“Well, I came, and I’m here, and I spent like a madman to get a flight. You think I don’t have the lungs to argue with my son?”

“I was planning to run.”

“It won’t hurt you to walk a few blocks.”

It was cold, so they walked quickly. Abe was wearing what he always wore in the winter, a black hat, gloves, galoshes, an overcoat that smelled of rain. Myron watched him out of the side of his vision. He tried to look at his father without turning around—at the face, at the black bruise under the jaw, at the shoulders. He tried to see the body beneath the clothing. Abe's arm swung with the weight of the traveling bag, and for the first time, as he watched through the corner of his eye, Myron noticed the faint spherical outline inside the cloth.

They walked wordlessly, Myron watching Abe's breath come out in clouds. By now the streets had begun to move with traffic, and the ice patches, black and treacherous, crackled underneath their feet. The streetlamps had gone off and in the distance dogs barked. They came to the park where Myron played basketball in the afternoons.

“So you brought the ball,” Myron said.

“Maybe you want some shooting to calm you.”

“You’re not thinking of any games, are you?”

“I just brought it in case you wanted to shoot.”

Abe unzipped the bag and pulled out the basketball. They went into the court. He bounced the ball on the icy pavement, then handed it to Myron. Myron spun it on his finger, dribbled it off the ice. He was watching Abe. He couldn’t see beneath the overcoat, but Abe's face seemed drawn down, the cheeks puffier, the dark bruise lax on his jaw.
“Pa, why don’t you shoot some? It would make you warm.”
“You think you have to keep me warm? Look at this.” He took off the overcoat. “Give me the ball.”

Myron threw it to him, and Abe dribbled it in his gloved hands. Abe was standing near the free-throw line, and he turned then, brought the ball to his hip, and shot it, and as his back was turned to watch the show, Myron did an incredible thing—he crouched, took three lunging steps, and dove into the back of his father’s thin, tendoned knees. Abe tumbled backward over him. What could have possessed Myron to do such a thing? A medical student, almost a doctor—what the hell was he doing? But Myron knew his father. Abe was a prizefighter, a carnival dog. Myron knew he would protect the exposed part of his skull, that he would roll and take the weight on his shoulders, that he would be up instantly, crouched and ready to go at it. But Myron had slid on the ice after the impact, and when he scrambled back up and turned around, his father was on his back on the icy pavement. He was flat out.

“Pa!”

Abe was as stiff and extended as Myron had ever seen a human being. He was like a man who had laid out his own body.

“What kind of crazy man are you?” Abe said hoarsely. “I think it’s broken.”
“What? What’s broken?”
“My back. You broke your old man’s back.”
“Oh no, Pa, I couldn’t have! Can you move your toes?”

But the old man couldn’t. He lay on the ground staring up at Myron like a beached sea animal. Oh, Pa. Myron could see the unnatural stiffness in his body, in the squat legs and the hard, protruding belly.

“Look,” Myron said, “don’t move.” Then he turned and started back to get his father’s coat, and he had taken one step when Abe—Abe the carnival dog, the buyer of diamonds and the man of endurance—hooked his hand around Myron’s ankles and sent him tumbling onto the ice. Pretender! He scrambled up and pinned Myron’s shoulders against the pavement. “Faker!” Myron cried. He grappled with the old man, butted him with his head and tried to topple his balance, but Abe clung viciously and set the weight of his chest against Myron’s shoulders. “Fraud!” shouted Myron. “Cheat!” He shifted his weight and tried to roll Abe over, but his father’s legs were spread wide and he had pinned Myron’s hands. “Coward,” Myron said. Abe’s wrists pressed into Myron’s arms. His knees dug into Myron’s thighs. “Thief,” Myron whispered. “Scoundrel.” Cold water was spreading upward through Myron’s clothes and Abe was panting hoarse clouds of steam into his face when Myron realized his father was leaning down and speaking into his ear.

“What?”
“Do you give?”
“You mean, will I go back to school?”
“That’s what I mean.”
“Look,” Myron said, “you’re crazy.”
“Give me your answer.”

Myron thought about this. While his father leaned down over him, pressed into him with his knees and elbows, breathed steam into his face, he thought about it. As he lay there he thought about other things too: This is my father, he thought. Then: This is my life. For a while, as the cold water spread through his clothes, he lay there and remembered things—thousands and thousands of layups, the smell of a cadaver, the footrace on a bright afternoon in April. Then he thought: What can you do? These are clouds above us, and below us there is ice and the earth. He said, “I give.”