

# The Question

By Jonathon Waterman

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## Dedications

This edition of The Question is dedicated to my deceased father, the man who was the true “John Pontiac” in my life.

“Thanks Dad, for being the best father you could possibly be.”

J.W.

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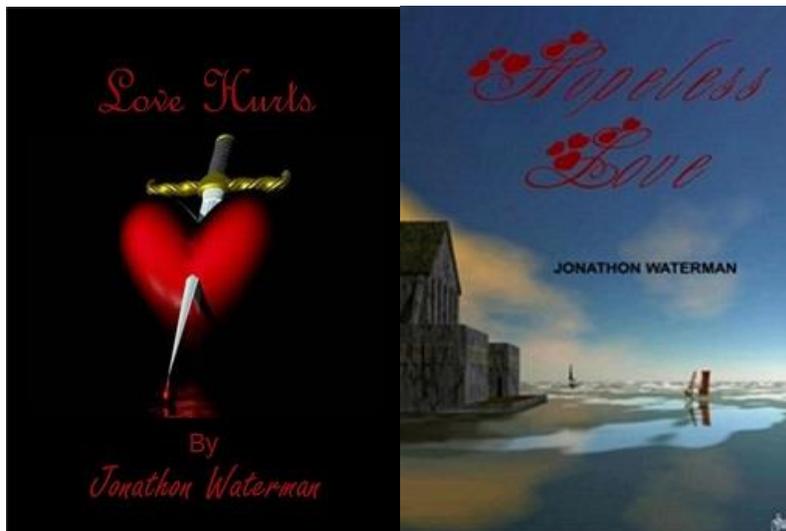
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## Chapter One - The Question

RESERVATIONS CONFIRMED!

“Paul,” Mrs. Pontiac said, peering over the top of her laptop into the living room where her young teenage son was lounging across their couch, watching “The Jetsons” on TV Land like he normally did most Saturday mornings. “How would you like to go with me to visit your brother in High Point for a couple of weeks?”

*My brother? High Point? For two whole weeks? Heaven forbid! Every time Jack gets near me he acts like an overgrown butt head. No, thank you! I'd prefer to stay right here at home in Hollywood, Florida. That way, I could either hang out with my friends, swim in our pool, or stop by the horse ranch and ride Half Pint.*

“Do I have to go?” he asked, dragging the word “go” for a couple of seconds.

“No. Not if you really don’t want to. But since I reserved a couple of airline tickets, I thought you’d be interested.”

“Airline tickets?” Paul immediately jerked himself upright. *Whoa. That’s different.*

“Would that mean we’d fly to North Carolina, instead of driving like we normally do?”

“That’s right,” Ellen confirmed, giving her son a broad smile.

“Hmm. Summer vacation has just started, but...” Paul paused, clearly mesmerized by the idea of boarding an airliner for the first time in his life. “One question. If I do go with you to North Carolina, how soon would we be leaving?”

“Monday morning.”

“Cool. But what about Half Pint? She’ll need to be fed and groomed.”

“She’ll be okay. Your dad can take care of her.”

A prevalent crease quickly appeared in the middle of Paul’s forehead and he frowned.

*With the way Dad’s drinking has gotten steadily worse these past few months, I wouldn’t be too sure about that.*

“Mom, are you sure we could depend on him? You know how he’s been recently. I’d die if anything happened to her.”

“I know. But I can assure you, there’s nothing to worry about.”

Though she tried to sound positive, Ellen shared her son's concern. After all, it was just last night her husband, had again come home drunk. He then proceeded to yell about something he blamed on her and Paul.

Soon thereafter, he passed out on the couch.

"Your father knows Half Pint means a lot to you and I'm sure he'd take good care of her. But if it would make feel better, you can always ask Tim if he'd keep an eye on her while we're gone."

"That sounds like a better idea," Paul said with a nod, before noticing the time stamp in the bottom right-hand corner of their 50-inch 4K TV.

"And since we're talking about her. Isn't it about time we head over to the horse ranch? Yesterday I told Tim I would meet him no later than 9:30 this morning inside of the stables and it's nine already. ... he's probably already waiting for me."

Ellen instinctively glanced at her wrist and her watch concurred with what her youngest said. "We'll leave soon. But before we go, I want you to eat some breakfast."

Paul rolled his eyes and frustratingly exhaled. "Okay. If you insist." *Geez! The things I must do to keep Mom happy.*

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Sliding himself on top of one of the stools in front of the breakfast bar, Paul grabbed a box of Sugar Pops and proceeded to fill his bowl.

*I'm going to have to ask Tim to keep an eye on Half Pint, he thought, while reaching for the milk. It's the only way I can be sure Half Pint would be taken care.*

A few minutes later, after he had finished his breakfast in the fewest number of gulps possible, he skid through his bedroom door, snatched everything he might need during the next 24 hours, and dashed toward the living room.

"Gee, I wish you could get ready that fast when it's a school day," Ellen remarked while standing next to the front door, arms crossed and tapping her foot.

Paul replied with a glance and smiled.

*Well. How about that?* he thought as he started down the walkway toward their blue Chevrolet Impala. *I guess there are a few things in life parents will never understand.*

## Chapter Two - Horse Ranch

Stuck between the metropolis of Hollywood and the dense aquatic jungle known as the Florida Everglades, stood a three-hundred-acre horse ranch which laid about as flat as a slab of freshly poured concrete. Its barn, where the horse stalls were located, was a gray, natural wood structure which could hold at least thirty horses – fifteen on the north side and fifteen on the south.

A three-tier wooden rail fence surrounding the barn and the outer pastures kept the almost a hundred Quarter horses, Appaloosas and other breeds residing there inside.

Among the collection, always pretty much sticking together, was Paul's beloved companion, Half Pint, and her best friend, Brave Boy.

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Paul immediately set out to locate Tim Hegler upon arriving at Southern Pastures, and after not being able to find his best friend, began to stroll past the rather long line of stalls that ran along both sides of the rustic-style barn.

*Hmm. Still no, Tim,* he thought after examining his surroundings.

He then decided to check the gray metallic lockers, where everybody who owned a horse was required to store his or her supplies. They were located at the far end of the building.

*I wonder what the best way would be to approach Tim about taking care of Half Pint while I'm gone? he wondered while reaching to unfasten the small, brass Master lock that secured his locker. Not to mention, should I even go to visit Jack and his family? ... Heaven knows, if it weren't for the chance to fly there, I wouldn't.*

Suddenly, even before he had a chance to seriously contemplate his dilemma, a creaking sound from a nearby door opening echoed throughout the building, and soon after, a boy his age, displaying fiery red hair and a face full of freckles, stepped out from around the corner.

"Hey, Paul," the boy shouted, as an ear-to-ear smile rapidly spread across his face. "When did you arrive?"

"A couple minutes ago," Paul replied, noticing Tim was wearing his usual horse-riding attire – tan sandals, bib overalls, but no T-shirt or socks. "Have you fed Brave Boy yet?"

"Naw. He's still in the pasture. I was waiting for you to show up before I got him."

"Really? Sorry I took so long," Paul said, snatching Half Pint's halter from the side of his locker. "But Mom wouldn't bring me out here until I ate breakfast."

“That’s no surprise. It sounds exactly like something my mother pull.” Tim said. “So, did you get a chance to ask her if you could spend the night at my place?”

“Yeah, last night. Just before I went to bed. ... At first, Mom acted like she didn’t want to. But with the way my dad’s been coming home drunk, I was able to convince her I really could use a break.”

“ALL RIGHT!” Tim yelled, giving Paul an exuberant high five.

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Minutes later, after crossing the ranch’s black asphalt-covered parking lot, the boys approached the front pasture’s five-foot steel gate and began to search for their horses.

Tim’s was a proud, reddish-brown sorrel, who stood fifteen hands high, while Paul owned a twelve-hands-high quarter horse. It sported a distinctive, dark, diamond-shaped spot in the center of her forehead. Not to mention, Half Pint’s white and brown coat always appeared to be gleaming.

Upon seeing their four-legged companions standing next to each other several acres away near the ranch’s back property line, both Paul and Tim put their hands around their mouth and began to holler, “Half Pint. Brave Boy.”

Almost at once, two sets of furry ears perked up, and soon afterward, a dust cloud began to ascend into the heavens above.

“Tim,” Paul said, setting his foot on top of the bottom rail of the sun-bleached wooden fence. “I’ll bet Half Pint makes it to the gate before Brave Boy.”

Tim gazed at his friend and chuckled. “There’s absolutely no way, Paul. He’s already over a length ahead of her,” he said, as the two horses continued their one-on-one race toward them. “And we both know Brave Boy’s a lot faster than your old nag.”

“Oh, yeah?” Paul narrowed his eyes. “If you’re so sure about that, how would you like to place a small wager?”

“Sure. Be glad too. But you know you’re going to lose,” Tim said with a grin as he reached for one of the crumpled dollar bills he had carelessly stashed inside his overalls front pocket earlier that morning. “Whoever’s horse comes in loses has to buy the winner a Coke. Okay?”

Paul nodded. “You’re on.”

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While the boys continued to keep a steady eye on both horses, Brave Boy, not unexpectedly, increased his early lead, repeatedly pounding each of his black hoofs into the flat sandy soil as he held his tail high.

However, things quickly changed when they approached the front gate. For an unexpected reason, Half Pint suddenly lowered her head and before one could whistle the first few two bars of “Camptown Races,” she was already next to Brave Boy’s side.

Then with a bit under fifty yards to go, Half Pint, instantly exploded with such an unbelievable speed, it looked as if her four-legged champion had been standing still.

“I won. I won,” Paul shouted, waving his arms high above his head.

Tim hurled his blue and white “Intel Rules” baseball cap to the ground. “I can’t believe it. I just can’t believe it, Paul. During most of the race, Brave Boy was a good two lengths ahead of her.”

Paul exhibited a huge smile, then unhooked the front gate and pulled it wide open.

“Well. What do you expect, Tim? I keep telling you that even though Half Pint’s only twelve hands high, she’s fast. You just won’t believe me.”

Tim glanced at his friend and snorted, and began to lead Brave Boy toward the ranch’s white and red, thirty stall barn.

Thirty minutes later – after both horses had been fed, groomed, and were ready for the day’s activities, Paul gently removed Half Pint’s rope halter and replaced it with her tan leather bridle. He then did a quick 180-degree scan to make sure nothing would be in the way when he was ready to back her out of her stall.

That’s when he noticed neither Tim nor Brave Boy was in the stall next to theirs.

*Oh. There they are,* he thought, upon finding the two of them waiting near the stable’s entranceway. *I wonder if this would be a good time to ask Tim about taking care of Half Pint?*

Unconsciously shrugging his shoulders as a reply to his question, he proceeded to gather Half Pint’s numerous combs, brushes, and other grooming supplies so he could stash them inside his locker.

“So where do you want to go this afternoon?” Paul asked, the moment he guided Half Pint up to Brave Boy’s side.

“How about the lake?”

“Driftwood Lake?” Paul turned and gazed across the southern horizon. “Hm-m-m. That’s not too far away, only about three miles from here. And after we’re done swimming, we could stop by Pete’s Sandwich Shop since it’d be only a stone’s throw away.”

“That’s true. And I don’t know about you, but I want to get a few hours of rodeo practice in this afternoon. Before you know it, the Fourth of July will be on top of us.”

“You’re right. And this time, I want both of us walking away with our hands full of blue ribbons.”

Tim looked at his friend and grinned, while a vision of one of his bedroom walls completely enshrouded with countless First Place ribbons instantaneously flashed before his hazel-green eyes. “That sounds like a winning idea. Let’s go for it.”

“All right,” Paul agreed while displaying a toothy grin. “Let’s go.”

Completely forgetting about North Carolina and what he planned to ask his friend, he promptly climbed onto Half Pint’s back and gently tapped his heels against her side.

## **Chapter Three - Explicit Data Execution**

Though aggressively stretching its bright orange tentacles into the prevailing gray horizon, the evening sun said its final good-bye to the multicultural, suburban residents below.

Soon, another warm, fun-filled, South Florida day would be coming to an end.

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Arriving at his locker so he could get some feed for Half Pint's supper, Paul yanked open its rusty green door and proceeded to scoop the molasses-coated oat, corn, wheat, and rye mixture into the five-gallon, stainless steel bucket his mother given him the day Half Pint first came into his life. And amazingly enough, deep inside his mind, he could still recall his mother's smile and the joy he felt the day she gave him both Half Pint and the brand-new feed bucket.

However, multiple years had passed since that joyous moment and recently he had been longing to see his mother's broad smile again. The fact that recently it was rarely displayed deeply saddened him.

No doubt, Paul loved his father very much. But with his dad was making life difficult, more and more he would find his mother all alone in the living room – sitting in her rocker, either reading her scriptures or in quiet meditation.

Feeling curious about this new trend, one day, he inquired about why she spent so much time doing that. She answered by informing him it was because she felt it helped increase her spiritual strength – and encouraged him to start doing the same.

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While pouring a third scoop of grain into Half Pint's feed bucket, an unexpected metallic squeak not only brought Paul back into the present, it also triggered a neigh from Half Pint. She, obviously, was getting tired of waiting for him.

"I'm coming!" Paul hollered as he turned toward her stall. "Just give me a minute. Okay?"

Half Pint replied by banging one of her front hooves against the hard-concrete floor.

Seconds later, when Paul started to pour the feed into his horse's old, creaky bin, Half Pint forcefully shoved her nose into the wooden box as if she hadn't been fed for at least the past five years.

He then stood nearby and displayed a small grin for a second. *“Hopefully, the grain would keep her busy long enough until I can get a fresh bale of hay.”*

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“Hey, Paul. Mom’s here,” Tim announced from the far corner of Brave Boy’s stall.

“Okay, Tim. Could you tell her I’ll be ready in about...”

He then saw Mary Lou standing less than three feet in front of him. “Oh. Hi, Mrs. Hegler.”

Mary Lou smiled at him like a proverbial Cheshire cat. “Why, hello Paul,” she formally greeted. “Did you and Tim have fun this afternoon?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, trying to be as polite as humanly possible for someone his age.

Mary Lou grinned, then took a quick gaze in her son’s direction and promptly proceeded towards Brave Boy’s stall.

Upon seeing her leave, Paul loaded the bay of hay he recently grabbed into Half Pint’s feed bin and proceeded to start grooming her.

With Mrs. Hegler already inside the stables, Paul knew he was going to have to perform his brushing and hoof cleaning activities at a faster than normal pace since Tim’s Mom wasn’t known for being patient when she was ready to go.

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Twenty minutes later, when he had finished grooming his four-legged companion, the only task left to perform was to drop her combs, brushes, and hoof picks into the stainless-steel feed bucket and stick them inside his locker.

*I guess the moment I’ve been trying to put off has finally arrived. And there’s no doubt, it’s going to be rough. ... I just hope she won’t take it too bad, ‘cause I need to talk to Tim as well.*

“Half Pint,” he began, wrapping his arms around his mare’s neck as inner sorrow began to rapidly course through each vein and artery inside him. “I need you to be a good girl for the next couple of weeks ‘cause ... well ... I’m going out of town. But don’t worry. My dad will be taking care of you.”

Almost at once, Half Pint slammed her foot against the hardened floor and proceeded to give him a frozen gaze which loudly proclaimed that she deemed this announcement as nothing short of being an unexpected betrayal.

“I understand how you feel, girl,” Paul said as he tried to comfort her by rubbing the top of her nose. “And believe me, I don’t like the idea of having to leave you. But Half Pint, I really don’t have a choice. Can’t you understand?”

Half Pint immediately shook her head “no” and resumed munching on her hay.

Paul, in turn, gazed at his beloved companion and frowned. *I was afraid she was going to take it this way.*

So, grabbing his bucket, he began to head toward his locker. . . . His heart, though still pounding, felt like it had transformed into a hundred-pound weight which could not sink any lower.

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When he reached the back of the barn not long thereafter, “I still haven’t told Tim about the trip and how I’ll probably need him to keep an eye on her,” Paul mumbled to himself. “However, with the way Half Pint took the news, it would be probably better if I wait until sometime tonight.”

“Are you and Half Pint about ready?” Tim’s voice said, echoing from the stable’s front entranceway.

“Almost,” Paul yelled. “Half Pint should be finished any minute now.”

“Well. You need to hurry. Brave Boy’s ready to head back to the pasture and Mom’s already in the car, waiting for us.”

Quickly returning to where his mare was standing, Paul reached over and gave the bottom of her halter a small jerk.

“That’s going to have to be all for tonight, Half Pint,” he said, speaking in a tone that was a bit louder than normal. “We’ve got to go. If I don’t hurry up and get you back in the pasture, Tim’s mom might leave without me.”

Half Pint turned and looked him, before replying with a disgruntled snort.

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Tim watched as Paul and Half Pint gradually made their way towards the barn’s entranceway and began to tap his foot. *Any time now Mom’s going to get impatient, and that’s something I don’t need to happen.*

When Paul’s small procession finally arrived at the stable’s door, both he and Brave Boy joined them, and they proceeded toward the ranch’s six-foot stainless-steel gate which opened into the ranch’s flat multi-acre pasture. The instant they unlatched it, out of nowhere, a jagged streak of lightning abruptly flashed across the distant western horizon.

Paul intently stared at nature's wonder for a couple seconds, then proceeded to lead both Half Pint and Brave Boy inside.

When Tim firmly re-latched the gate after they entered, he removed Half Pint's halter and began to pat his four-legged companion an emotion-filled good-bye.

"What's wrong?" Tim asked Paul, after the two of them had climbed back over the three-rail wooden fence and were heading toward the barn.

"Nothing really." Paul answered, not wanting to reveal his inner feelings. "Why?"

"You seem kind of sad."

Not knowing what to say, Paul remained silent as they continued walking toward the horses' stalls.

"Come on, boys. It's time to go," Mary Lou abruptly yelled from across the parking lot as she impatiently watched them lumber toward the barn as if they had all the time in the world. "I don't have all day. There are things at home which need to get done."

"Yes, mother," Tim replied. "Just give us a couple more minutes. Okay?"

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Later that evening after the two of them finished watching one of their favorite episodes of Star Trek – The Next Generation on the Hegler's TV, both Tim and Paul grabbed a soda and shuffled towards Tim's bedroom.

The time had arrived to start participating in one of their favorite activities, putting their joint programming skills to use on the latest video game they had been creating the past few weeks – Clash of the BattleStars.

"Are you sure this is going to work?" Tim asked, after three hours had passed since they sat down in front of his computer.

"Of course it will, Tim," Paul answered while typing the last line of code in the sub-routine he was working on. He then reached out and touched his friend's monitor.

"At this section of the program, we usually have two or more micro processing cores maxed out as they try to fetch data from both the computer's ram memory and its hard drives, and then try to shoot the display part to the graphic cards in time to keep the game's action scene running smoothly. Correct?"

Tim nodded.

“So, let’s try to make some programming changes to improve the system’s performance.”

“Okay,” Tim replied. “But, how is using this newfangled way of grouping computer instructions together going to speed things up?”

Paul gazed at his friend and loudly heaved a sigh. “That’s what I’m about to explain. . . . Data and the instructions which operate on them are theoretically scattered about inside the memory. Right? . . . By compiling our source code into a form consisting of statically allocated hyperblocks containing hundreds or thousands of individual instructions, these hyperblocks can then be scheduled dynamically by the CPU.”

Huge question marks instantly appeared deep within Tim’s dark blue pupils.

“I hear what you’re saying, Paul. But I just don’t get it. Would you mind repeating everything you just said all over again – but this time in English?”

“This isn’t all that complicated, Tim,” Paul impatiently said, before stopping to take a sip of Coke. In setting the plastic bottle down a little harder than he intended, a few drops accidentally flew out of the top of the bottle and landed on Tim’s desk. “Take this...”

“Hey boys,” Joe Hegler’s voice yelled, interrupting their conversation when he walked into his son’s bedroom.

At once, Tim whirled his chair around and an ear-to-ear smile instantly swept across his face. “Hi, Dad. Did you just get home?”

“Sure did, son,” Joe replied while reaching to loosen his necktie. “What are you two working on?”

“We’re creating a new game,” Tim said, pointing to one of the ships on the computer screen. “We’re calling it, ‘Clash of the BattleStars’.”

“Oh?” Mr. Hegler raised a single eyebrow, and a broad grin acknowledged his approval of what the boys were doing. “That’s a good title. Not only is it catchy, it makes the game sound interesting.”

“It will be,” Tim excitedly replied. “Except I can’t figure out this new type of programming architecture Paul wants to use.”

“Really? Let me look at it.” Joe then turned toward his son’s computer screen and proceeded to study the boys’ programming code.

“What are you trying to do here, Paul?” he asked a few minutes later while pointing to an arrangement of commands he didn’t recognize.

“Mr. Hegler,” Paul responded, repositioning his chair so he could face both him and Tim’s monitor. “I know you work with computers, but are you familiar with Explicit Data Graph Execution? It’s an instructional set architecture used to improve computer performance.”

“Only vaguely.” Joe raised his hand and began to scratch his forehead just above his right eyebrow. “I’ve read a couple of articles about it, but that’s about all.”

“Well, you see, Mr. Hegler,” Paul resumed. “Explicit Data Graph Execution is a new kind of programming designed specifically for computers with multi-core processors. Not only can it be used to help computers process multiple types of information at the same time, but it can also be used to teach the processors how to respond to specific data patterns.”

“You don’t say.” Joe’s said, clearly revealing that he found this bit of information to be interesting.

Paul smiled, then continued to explain the intimate details of how Data Graph Execution processing worked and how he wanted to implement it within the game.

“You know, Paul,” Joe stated after the teen had finished. “It sounds like this idea of yours just might work. Where did you find your information?”

“EDGE technology was mentioned on a high tech show I watched the other day, so I decided to look it up on the Internet.”

“Interesting.”

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After watching the two kids resume their programming for a few additional minutes, Joe took a couple of steps toward the doorway, before stopping and turning around. “I do hate to say this, boys. But, you two are going to have to call it a night soon. It’s almost ten o’clock.”

“We will, Dad,” Tim replied, letting his father’s words enter one ear and exit out the other.

Paul watched as Mr. Hegler continued his journey toward the living room.

*Gee. ... I sure wish my dad was as nice as Tim’s always is.*

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