quickly.

Cruger stayed where he was. Tamara was traveling with Neswick. So what? He could check with Harris, see what Tamara might have said about going somewhere. Maybe it was a perfectly innocent ski vacation to Colorado — or maybe not. A two-day weekend trip, was it something they did often? Maybe Harris could help track it down, even if it was a wild goose. Cruger watched as they found seats in the waiting area and, with nothing to do but wait for the plane, turned to go.

Then, almost under his nose, Cruger recognized a face. Sky! She swung an Esprit bag onto the conveyor, walked through the metal detector, collected the bag, and walked over to Neswick and Tamara in the gate's waiting area, oblivious to Cruger's open-mouthed stare. He saw Sky kiss Neswick and then Tamara, laughing and talking, saying things and making motions that Cruger couldn't begin to read from that distance.

Cruger felt his stomach sink at least a yard. He knew innocent coincidences like this were harder to find than Dodo birds. Much harder.

To Be Continued…

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quite a fine woman."

Cruger took his word because it didn't matter and asked: "Are you able to do company business here, as well as IRS work?"

"Oh yes. But my Company business is really simpler than you may think — it's not very time-consuming."

"May I ask what it is you do exactly?" Cruger looked for any facial reaction that might say to him *no dice, an out-of-bounds question.*

But Neswick answered, "You know the answer to that; I supervise you and report to my supervisor. It's that simple."

It sounded simple enough.

So Cruger started. "I was wondering about some things, like for instance, the boundary conditions. How it all started. If God keeps evolving as a company, who or what was originally in charge?"

"Excellent question. All it took was one tiny particle of anything. That would be an opposite of nothing. Once you have opposites, you have a definition of the entire universe itself in a microcosm. In a fraction of a second, you have many particles. The inverse law can utilize the molecular energy. A billion years or so and we have galaxies, black holes, and evolving worlds."

"What is so special about opposites?" said Cruger.

"All energy comes from opposites. Also, it is possible to inverse any given state to cause an equal and opposite reaction. Basic Newtonian stuff. Only thing is, this approach can be applied to any matter, state, or dimension.

"Oriental philosophy has similar concepts. In Japanese, as used in the word Aikido, the word 'ki' can be loosely translated as the submicroscopic bit of energy that is ubiquitous and always was, the original particle of the Universe before the Universe expanded with more 'ki' everywhere, in all of us, the energy of life: God. But ki doesn't imply the existence of an opposite of ki; at least not in Zen Buddhist teachings."

Cruger nodded and tried to look as though he'd been following along.

Neswick leaned forward and folded his hands. "You know, sometimes hypnosis is used to accelerate the learning process. Would you like to try that? It only takes a few minutes."

Cruger had no good answer ready. It seemed unusual, but considering that the man was trying to explain the nature of existence, the request didn't seem unreasonable. Neswick was surprisingly quick; Cruger heard his voice become velvety and low as his legs grew heavy and sank deep into the chair. Next thing he knew Mrs. Branner buzzed on the intercom: "Mr. Seager needs the report by three-thirty."

"Right." Neswick began shuffling papers together into a file folder. In a moment the folder was full of small, odd-sized receipts, yellow post-its, and small half-crumpled note-pad pages.

"Excuse me for one minute," he said to Cruger. Neswick got up and walked to the exterior office. Cruger could hear him talking in a calm tone.

Cruger looked around the room. Anything, no matter how insignificant, could be a clue. The chairs, the desk, the pictures on the wall, the smell — no, that was probably only a clue concerning Neswick's horrid aftershave — anything.

Cruger looked at the desk. Two pens and a desk calendar in the center; the telephone, the intercom, an envelope, a tablet — Cruger's eyes returned to the envelope. *Martin Travel* was written across the front in large red letters. Neswick was still in the outer office, talking loudly, so Cruger stepped over and slipped out the itinerary. Flight 85, San Jose to Denver.

Old Neswick going to Denver, Cruger thought. Interesting that he hadn't mentioned it. Cruger replaced the envelope and sat down.

Neswick's voice stopped and in a moment he was back in the room.

"Excuse me, had to get a bit of business done."

"No problem." Cruger sat back in the chair. "Now where were we?"

Cruger arrived an hour early for the flight. Since he had no luggage and wasn't going anywhere, he told himself this wouldn't be difficult.

Jack Cruger, incredible amateur detective. He was really cutting his teeth here. What would they call this, he wondered? A stakeout, or maybe just plain surveillance? Fancy words for sitting around and watching a fat guy get on a plane. But you had to be careful not to get too close, let the fat guy see you. That would be embarrassing, hard to explain.

Maybe he should have a story ready in case Neswick did see him. *Oh, I'm flying to L.A. standby, going down for the Rose Parade*. Well, not the Rose Parade. Going down to visit a friend, an old high school friend. Stanley Slotkin, that's the ticket. Who could be suspicious when you're visiting a guy named Stanley Slotkin?

Deciding that hiding behind a newspaper with a tiny hole cut in the center was passé, Cruger kept his sunglasses on and stood behind a small crowd of people at gate seventeen waiting for arriving passengers. He checked that no entrances were behind him; the only way to Neswick's departure gate was through the screening machine right in front of Cruger.

After twenty minutes of concentration and boredom Cruger finally saw Neswick. He wore a brown sweater over a red sport shirt, tan corduroy pants, and brown Rockport shoes. Neswick slid his leather carry-on bag onto the security machine's conveyor.

Tamara was right behind Neswick. She wrinkled her forehead and looked around as she stood waiting for her father to go through the metal detector. Her bright fuschia pants suit and white leather boots made her easy to spot in a crowd. She then slid her black leather purse off her shoulder and onto the conveyer, stepping through the metal detector

finishing with a double-time arpeggio up to a beautiful, ringing, high harmonic.

"You chump."

"Turkey."

"Jerk." Cruger never had been especially quick to make friends, but meeting himself only amplified the problem. The chemistry sucked. Still, he enjoyed sparring. He had to admit his future self was a great guitarist. Did he feel a pang of pride? Why be proud of himself, if this was not the future self that he would become?

"If you kick my ass, you would only be hurting yourself," the new Cruger said, an ironic gleam in his eyes.

The light reflecting off the future Cruger's body began to shudder and split into tiny waves and particles of dull colors. As the image wavered, Cruger wondered why he had annoyed himself so much. Were they so alike that they couldn't get along? Or had tension and fear of showing emotion created a barrier between them?

"Bye," the future Cruger waved.

Cruger raised the same hand and waved back. "Don't come back soon," he said to his fading replica.

The hands were different. Cruger's had his wedding band on it, and the double from the future's was bare. "Wait!" Cruger yelled. "Wait!"

But the strange colors that had cast a surreal shadow on the wall faded to a muddy darkness and the future Cruger was gone.

Cruger picked up his small, suddenly inadequate accordion. He played *Send in the Clowns*, too slowly, and wondered what it all meant.

Neswick decided to risk it by filling in Tamara.

"One of them is a loose cannon," Neswick said. "Erasures are to be reserved for special circumstances. Quite often there are complications, and it puts a strain on the system. Not to mention the Big Enigma."

Tamara nodded her head carefully.

"Even more importantly, it leaves us exposed. If anyone else catches a period of dissonance — when the deleted life may be remembered by an observer — they may be able to trace it back to us."

Tamara asked, "How is it patched up so that no one remembers the person?"

"Basically, it's like *reverse-spinning* the string that holds a person's life together. The string must be redone from their conception." Neswick wondered if she was playing dumb or if she was honestly inquisitive. He couldn't read her: she had her perpetual block up, as did he. He wanted to trust her; the father/daughter charade that they had been living since leaving the homeland was beginning to ingrain itself as reality.

"What does Harris think about the Tony incident?" he asked.

"Well, he definitely thinks Tony was erased by the Other Company. He seems to think it was a warning for Cruger to stop spinning."

"And what do you think it was?"

"Honestly, I don't know," she said. "Possibly one of our people just has it in for humans. I have to admit, after two tours of duty here, I'm getting a little sick of the constant facade."

"You don't even like the bit with their sex act? It's better than what we have at home," he said, smiling that mealy-mouthed smile that humans do when they think lascivious thoughts.

"Yes, it's good, but I wonder if we ever really experience it the way they do. It's sort of vicarious for me." She crossed her legs and felt a little uncomfortable. What is this, she thought, modesty? She wondered if her acting had become so good that it had finally supplanted her real personality.

"I don't hear you complaining."

She laughed. "Harris isn't too bad. As jobs go, I think I'll keep this one."

Chapter 28

"Good afternoon, I'm Jack Cruger. Mr. Neswick's expecting to see me at three."

She looked up from the nothingness on the large walnut desk. Her response was automatic, like a tape loop playing in her mind: "Please have a seat." She gestured to one of the large, squarish wooden chairs pushed against the far wall. "Mr. Neswick will be with you shortly."

Cruger sat as she continued to sit at her desk and stare disinterestedly at her plump fingers.

"Bet you don't get many happy people coming in here," Cruger said, just to break the silence. "Mostly mad, worried people?"

For a second he thought she might not respond at all, but then she looked at him and said, "I see the poorest scum of the earth to the millionaire sophisticates, the whole spectrum of humanity." She held out the word 'humanity' as if it needed to be emphasized, then shook her head, letting out a little wheezing laugh. "The whole spectrum," she said again, and grinned to herself.

Cruger decided to let the silence hang..

After a minute she reached over to the phone and pressed a button. "A Mr. Cruger to see you," she wheezed into the intercom. There was a burst of static and Miss Congeniality gestured towards the office door. Cruger got up and went inside.

"Make yourself at home," Neswick said, and Cruger found himself a chair across form Neswick's old, hardwood desk.

"Mrs. Branner," Neswick said as he made a gesture past his closed office door. "Been my secretary for eight years."

"Has she cracked a smile in that time?"

"Oh, I see you didn't get too acquainted with her," Neswick said, sounding surprised, as if Mrs. Branner were up for the personality of the month award. "She really is

together, sharing their lives. But would she believe the deep shit he and Harris were into — maybe not. Maybe it was unbelievable. Too big a jump.

Cruger said goodbye to Harris and then, "Thanks for the talk, it was sort of cleansing, talking this deep metaphysical bullshit. It's a nice universe, but I'd hate to paint it."

"That's the difference between you and I," Harris said, his face now full of vigor and irony. "I'd enjoy painting it."

Chapter 27

… for every human being there is a diversity of existences … the single existence is itself an illusion …
—Saul Bellow

Spinning was a solitary occupation, but for Cruger it was the most fulfilling thing he had done. Realizing that he was making some kind of impression on the entire species was a large reward. Did every action of every person every day contribute to the course of the future? Cruger thought that might be so; but spinning was a more direct and substantial contribution.

That night Cruger sat in the den and played. He was in a lazy, lonely mood, so he played ballads. In the middle of *My Funny Valentine*, an image began to appear across the room. At first it shimmered like a reflection in a lake; then the image began to solidify. Cruger, unfazed, kept playing; *My Funny Valentine* seemed a good soundtrack for this strangeness.

Now the image was as solid as Cruger — it smiled at him like a reflection in the mirror. It *was* Cruger standing at the other side of the room: a different Cruger. Under his arm was a small guitar. He wore Cruger's favorite jeans, his watch, and a shirt that Cruger had never seen before.

Cruger stopped playing. He didn't know what to say, so he started with an insult. "Nice shirt. Where did you get it, K-Mart?"

"No, but I bought it with your sense of 'taste', if I could stretch the word that far," the image said. Its voice was familiar, like a less resonant version of the voice Cruger heard in his head.

"Jeez, you really are me. You're abusive and a royal pain in the ass." Cruger thought for a moment. "How do people stand me, or us?"

"Well," the new Cruger said, "considering that I'm from your future, you improve a little with time. And you finally get rid of that damned accordion."

"Hey, I like this accordion," Cruger said.

"Yeah, well listen to this." The new Cruger brought up his guitar and launched into a fast, flamenco vamp. Each note was a round and precisely attacked sound—he strummed and made percussive slaps against the side of the guitar while playing a vibrant melody on the upper strings. Cruger listened with rapt attention.

When he stopped, Cruger wondered if he should applaud. Instead he sneered and failed to make any comment at all.

The future Cruger looked up, mischievous eyes hooded by bushy eyebrows, and said, "As long as I'm here, let's jam." He started a blues tune with a funky, string-bending melody on top of a solid walking bass. "Or are you too nervous?"

Cruger grabbed his accordion. The interplay was clean and exotic: two nearly identical minds trading licks, rhythms, and locking a groove. Only the future Cruger was a better musician. Head bowed in concentration, forehead slightly wrinkled, the future Cruger was more explorative, playing tri-tone substitutions along with diminished and whole-tone scales. They began trading fours, allowing each other to stretch ideas and add to their improvisational statements. The tune then settled down into a quiet, sparse blues.

Cruger talked over the music. "What are you doing here?"

The future Cruger smiled, half his attention still dedicated to his walking bass line and the light chords he comped. "You brought me here. You were spinning, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well," the future Cruger said, "you obviously were spinning your own path and crossed a string right here and now — that's not easy to do."

"But how could you be here right now if you're from my future?" A reasonable question, Cruger thought.

"Simple. I had decided to travel a little. Traveling, the way Harris had programmed it, is still a little flaky, so here I am. I mean, here we are."

Cruger said, "I thought you said that I crossed a string and that's how you got here."

"Right. I would have never time traveled here — incorrectly — if you hadn't crossed that string just now."

The music stopped. Cruger looked at himself standing there and thought he looked a little heavier. God, look at that paunch hang over the belt. Frightening to think that in the future spinning and the computer system were still a little buggy. He would have to remember to tell Harris to fix the time travel program's bug, whatever the time travel program was.

The future Cruger anticipated his thoughts. "I don't know which of your future selves I am. I'm sure to be just one of many."

"I think you're the smart-ass one," Cruger said.

"No, I think we're all like that," the future Cruger said, giving his younger self a wide, nearly sincere smile.

"You were playing some pretty weird licks there. Where did you learn to play like that?" Cruger said.

"So you want to know where *you* learned to play better?"

"No, I want to know where *you* learned. I don't consider it better." Cruger crossed his arms. "You probably can't even play a simple melodic minor scale."

Cruger's future self lifted the guitar and played a fast, perfect, melodic minor scale up and down three octaves,

"Ah," Harris said and took another bite of goop. "I understand."

"What's this?" Cruger said, picking up a piece of paper from the counter. "Been talking to the IRS lately?"

"Huh? No, that's Neswick's office number. He had his secretary call to set up an appointment with me."

"Yeah, Neswick's been setting up meetings with me too," Cruger said. "One-on-ones he calls them. He said he's preparing my performance review."

"Me too. He said he wants little group meetings with the three or four of us — including Tamara — as well as one-on-ones."

"Did he say anything about money, like getting paid for this job?"

"No," Harris said and then licked his lips and inhaled slowly. "Would you even want to be paid for this?"

"No, then it might become the same — the same as work."

"Exactly. But it might start to become tough work anyway. I've been reading up on theoretical physics; is what we have enough to help us complete our implementation? Will people really be able to write a book entitled *How to Make Planets and Galaxies, an Easy Do-it-Yourself Guide?* Will bioengineering progress to the point of a *Build Yourself a Best Friend* book? Isn't this the same as people playing God?"

Look at him, he's on a roll, Cruger thought. Damn engineer's head is too deep in it.

Harris continued: "And what if the evolution process was planned? What if this whole thing is canned, a setup? What if fish were programmed to become lizards to become rats to become dogs to become primates and so on? Then it would follow that you and I and our dumb-luck discoveries were planned too."

"It gets to the question: *is God alive*?" said Cruger. "And we've been through that."

"I think we know the organization is alive. What we don't know is who, when, where or what made The Company and started this whole universe. We know some of the how — at least the spinning part."

Cruger felt nostalgic; his conversations with Tony were rolling back into his mind. "Most of this was predicted, if you can believe what Tony told me. Humans at this point were just expected to have a little more hair and a little more strength than we did thousands of years ago. You know, a chimpanzee could theoretically bench press 2,000 pounds? We're wimps, when you think about it."

Harris smiled. "Speak for yourself, couch potato."

Cruger thought of the complexity of the issues they faced. Could the two of them really handle this? Maybe they needed help. Maybe Neswick was around for a reason.

"Right now, we don't have all the answers, but, with the software in its current state, we theoretically have the ability to generate answers to any question," Harris said.

Cruger wondered what that meant. Was it better to potentially understand everything, or to have a finite set of answers? Potentially, he could see the best alternative was what they had: the ability to eventually understand everything. He asked Harris about it.

"You're right. Then time becomes the issue," said Harris. "If we understood time, then waiting for the answers could be compensated for. I could explore the question of time, but it may *take* a long time just to get that far."

"Damn, and they call me a smart-ass," said Cruger. "Is this the original chicken and egg problem or what?"

"Since we're marching down the path to God's place, at least conceptually, I think we can expect quite a few chicken and egg problems. And I can't figure what this spinning you do has much to do with anything."

They sat a moment, and without a word Harris went to the refrigerator and got them some Cabernet. Cruger watched as it swirled into a glass, his thoughts on spinning and what it meant to him. "Isn't there anything you do that gives you a feeling of *locking in* — a feeling that you are doing more than just you yourself can do? When your game is really on, everything is effortless and pure joy, you know?"

Harris kept his eyes lowered as he sat down and put his feet up on the edge of the counter. "Well, the things that I'm best at are running, and, back in school, football. Sure, when I'm running I get that feeling of, it's like, undeniable *power*. Like I can go on and on. When my second wind kicks in and the endorphins are pumping into my brain, I'm at the top of the world."

"I've seen you at the end of your runs — you don't look so good."

Harris let the comment pass. "When I played football, I played running back," Harris squeezed his thigh as if to recreate an old football sensation. "When my stuff was together, I felt like I was flying through clouds. It was effortless. Each run was a takeoff, a flight, and a landing. But when I was having a rough time, every minute lasted an hour, every carry was pain. The difference between a good day and a bad day was enormous. The funny thing, though, is that externally it didn't seem that way. Sometimes when I felt my stuff wasn't working I was still gaining yards. I guess I'm talking about internal sensations, mostly."

"These feelings, the locking in, the clicking, the effortlessness — they *mean* something. Those feelings are the essence of spinning." Cruger realized that the words he had chosen were pedantic and, as if correcting himself, added, "at least for me they have meaning."

Harris still had a distant look on his face. "No, I'm sure you're right," he said. "I can relate."

Cruger heard Corrina's car pulling into the driveway next door. Cruger was usually pulling out of the driveway when Corrina pulled in. Two cars passing in the driveway — that's modern marriage. Two cars passing in the street, that's friends; two cars passing on the freeway — acquaintances.

He needed to tell her everything, to bring her along on his adventure. Be like a husband and wife, spending time

plained its usage:

"You hear that dude play, man, he's a Monster,"

"Your axe has got a Monster sound,"

"He's a Monster player."

Cruger wished he had been able to have prepared himself for the evening by reading "Berlitz's Musician Talk in Ten Easy Lessons," or "The Square Guy-to-Musician Translation Pocket Book," where such phrases as "May I play my instrument with your band" are translated to "Hey, man, can I sit in with my axe and play down some standards, maybe trade fours."

They stood around and talked for while until they joined the piano player and a girl at a table.

J introduced Cruger. The piano player was Tony, and the girl was the Tony's girlfriend, Diane, a painter by day, waitress at the Emerson at night. They were discussing art and music.

Tony was saying: "Just like what a painter does, but real time. Actually, don't some painters paint real-time, like real fast in one sitting?"

"I don't know," J said, "but I wouldn't want to buy that painting."

Bailey laughed and Cruger chuckled, wishing he knew more about the intricacies of playing music.

"No man, you're wrong," Bailey said. "Think about it. The painter that works for months on his masterpiece is like the legit composer; a composer will slowly picture the whole piece and its development in his mind. Painting reactively and quickly — what did you call it, real time? — is more like what we do: instant interpretation, instant artistic response."

"That's true," J said. And it was settled: it was true. "I do something I can kind of see, kind of feel, but nothing I can actually put my hands around and really spell out." J shrugged. "I aim for what that feeling is, and the closer I come, the happier I am with the result."

"Yeah," Tony the pianist said, "I have a similar feeling usually. Sometimes, right before I play what I do, I see a texture or a pattern that reminds me of a feeling; then I try to quickly translate that feeling into notes — the right notes."

"You can't go outside the structure too much, you know, just to try to capture what you're trying to say. That's the trick: stay within the chord changes and still express what you're feeling."

They all sat for a moment, nodding their heads.

"What about you man?" the drummer said to Cruger. "How do you approach it?"

Cruger thought for a moment, trying not to blush or gulp noticeably. Finally, he said "I try to clear my mind and just play."

Cruger heard laughing, starting with the drummer and then J. They were busting up and he didn't know why.

"Man, we're sitting here getting all philosophical and you hit the nail on the head," J said. "You *just play*. Shit, if that ain't the truth."

"But still, that's probably coming straight from his unconscious mind. You notice that he said *clear my mind and play*. That's getting his conscious mind out of the picture — he plays straight from his subconscious," J said.

"Cool," Bailey murmured, pushing his hair back over his sweatband.

"But before you learned to clear your mind like that, how did you improvise? Did you think in terms of chords or modes or just use your ear?"

Honestly was, if not the best policy, then better than stammering and going weak-kneed. So Cruger said, "Before I learned to just play straight from the unconscious I literally couldn't play. The only tunes I could play were like *Lady of Spain* — I couldn't improvise at all."

J was smiling and shaking his head. "Amazing, just amazing. You had all of that untapped ability bottled up in there and didn't know how to release it. Just 'cause accordion players aren't supposed to play jazz, play good, play free."

The talked for a while more about music, art, the groove, playing straight from your head. Cruger sucked it up like a bear who'd found his first honeycomb.

After a while Cruger said goodnight. His head was reeling; he felt like a blind man who just got his sight and, first thing, saw a rainbow.

Chapter 26

Cruger rapped on the door and Harris was there in a few seconds, swinging the door open with one hand and holding a Tupperware dish and a fork in the other. A gray t-shirt stretched across his chest, barely reaching to his navel. "C'mon in," he said.

Cruger stepped inside. "On an engineer's salary you should be able to afford the rest of that shirt."

"It's expensive, man. Designer and everything."

"Oh, then maybe it's your Oomphaloscepsis shirt."

"Whatever you say," Harris said, then: "OK, what the hell is Oomphalo-whatever?"

"The art of meditation while staring at one's navel," Cruger said. "Oomphaloscepsis. Surprised you didn't know that, being schooled in the fine arts… or martial arts, cultured, and all that stuff."

"Yep, I don't know how I survived all these years without knowing about Oomphaloscepsis."

"And it's all the rage in Tibet, Borneo, and Mill Valley. Plus, you got a nice looking inney."

"Thanks, I quite like it myself," Harris said, walking back to the kitchen, taking a forkful of Tupperwared microwaved leftover-stuff. "What brings you over, neighbor?"

"I don't know," Cruger said, leaning against the counter. The bright kitchen lights were hurting his eyes. "Seemed better than sitting at home watching the dust settle."

"Oomphaloscepsis not doing the trick, eh?"

Cruger grimaced. "The spheres weren't in conjunction."

When he arrived he immediately went up to the stage to sign up. No one recognized him, no one pointed their finger, hollered loudly or jeered at him. Cruger warily retreated to the bar. The smaller accordion, in its case, didn't look like the larger one he had last time, but it could be a trumpet or flugelhorn — maybe.

The band was playing an up-tempo version of "St. Thomas." The groove was fast and tight, the melody and rhythm clicking together in a colorful, spotless embrace. Cruger hadn't played the tune but after listening for a minute he could see the notes in his head. His mind formed an improvisation based on the melody, and it played across his mind while he blocked out the band's guitar, concentrating on rhythm and chord changes. As a warmup, it was a good method. His ideas and central focus where nearly ready.

Cruger drank his beer and waited for his turn. In one more song he would walk to the side of the stage and get his instrument out. In the meantime he studied the band carefully. The bass player, same as last week, looked like the archetypal jazz musician. Locks of brown, half-braided frizzy hair scrawled a mosaic of collated anarchy across his neck and shoulders. He dressed in baggy earth-tone pants and cloth shirts that either came from impoverished African villages or chic, trendy boutiques that charged an arm and a leg for them.

Cruger's time to play came. He got up on stage, his self-talk hammering away a confidence building slogan that said: *you're good, you're great, you'll play great… .*

The drummer counted off the tune; the lump in Cruger's throat smoothed as he played the head of the tune flawlessly. Notes streamed from his instrument like steam from a pot of boiling water. If Cruger hadn't had his eyes fixed to his somnambulist fingers, he would have seen the eyebrows of the drummer and bassist raise; his ability was a surprise.

After the melody, Cruger took the first solo, slowly building on the melody — expanding its bounds until it became a bridge to new harmonic and rhythmic cousins of the original tune. He pulled along the rest of the rhythm section — they reacted to his piecework innovations and paved new foundations for his expanding ideas. Cruger was playing well — in fact, better than ever. The solo built smoothly to a climax before Cruger gradually took it back down to a final form that was symmetric to the beginning and middle.

Piano solo and guitar solo then followed. When the bass player took a solo, backed by only the sparse hi-hat of the drummer, Cruger noticed that the bassist either emulated some of Cruger's soloing form, or he truly had a similar style. Cruger listened intently. Joy and happiness lived in every note the bassist played. His instrument sang of happy struggle and achievement.

As the tune ended, Cruger heard a burst of applause from the audience. The drummer nodded to Cruger, saying something indecipherable that sounded a little like "Yeah, man." The other players smiled and applauded briefly, saying things like "hot, real hot," and "good chops." A wave of warmth rose up in Cruger, traveling from toe to head. He felt as if he had just been admitted to a club. After he packed his accordion back into his case, he made his way over to the bar, most of the people in the audience either smiling or complimenting his playing.

Half an hour later the band finished for the evening. The bass player made his way over to Cruger. He extended his strong, vein-covered hand.

"Hi, I'm Jay. Really liked your playing, man."

"Thanks. I'm Jack Cruger." They shook hands for a long time, Jay seemingly not in a hurry to let go.

When he remembered to stop shaking, Jay said, "Do you have a card? I might have some gigs to throw your way."

Cruger fished out one of his business cards. A mundane card — "Jack Cruger, Accordion. Weddings, parties, lessons."

Jay glanced lazily at the card, not interested in the content. Jay was a talker, Cruger soon learned, and Jay wasn't his name. He had legally changed his name — surprisingly following the pop performer trend — to a single word name. The difference was, as opposed to Cher, Madonna, Sade, Sting, and Prince, his name was unpronounceable. The bass player's name was Jcxlpsiqzv. His driver's license said Jcxlpsiqzv. His credit cards said Jcxlpsiqzv. His library card said Jcxlpsiqzv.

People called him J.

J was a spiritual refugee from the sixties in a body from the fifties who wore clothes from the eighties. J's razor-sharp haircut had his initial carved in the side of his head above his left ear. Baggy pants, high-tops, a canvas army jacket and peach t-shirt completed his look. Although his image greatly upstaged his playing, at least to the less careful observer, he was a solid groove bassist with great chops.

The drummer wandered over and J introduced him as Bailey. He wore sweat bands around his wrists and forehead. A few strands of dirty blond hair piled over his head band across his eyes. And the biceps.

Bailey was a talker too. He talked about how solid J played. He was the man, the groove. According to the Bailey, J was a MuthuFuka.

Cruger learned the term *MuthuFuka* was reserved for the greatest of talents. According to Bailey, the following acts rated top status:

"Mingus *was* a MuthuFuka,"

"Branford Marsalis *is* a MuthuFuka,"

"The Forty-Niners *is* a bunch of MuthuFukas,"

"That lick's too tough: *it's* a MuthuFuka."

As far as Cruger knew, no accordionist ever was a MuthuFuka.

Cruger gulped some of his beer. Bailey was a born comedian, the kind of guy who could draw a crowd and get on all roll talking about almost anything. But here he was in his element and well-rehearsed with his quips.

Bailey's next musical term was *Monster*. As he ex-

Neswick read his fortune aloud: " 'You are entering a period of great change.' They may have hit this one on the head," he mused.

"Here's mine," Tamara said. " 'To get what you want, you must know what you want. Learn to know yourself.' Damn, I hate these negative ones."

In that moment as Cruger watched her, Tamara looked younger, vulnerable, and anything but centered. For the first time Cruger saw her as less than totally in control. The look vanished as soon as Cruger noticed it — had it been there at all?

Tamara crumpled her fortune and dropped it onto her plate. "You figure there are a couple guys that barely speak English sitting in a cookie factory making these up."

"But it's cheaper than having your palm or your tea leaves read," Harris said.

"Plus," Cruger said, "you get the cookie."

But he re-read his own fortune then: 'Beware of the Tiger disguised as the Lamb.' The guys at this particular cookie factory must have been manic depressive outpatients. Either that or they were very good at what they do.

"Don't worry about yours, Jack," Tamara said. "I'm sure it's not true."

Cruger was surprised. "I didn't read mine yet," Cruger said. "You must be thinking of another one." He handed his fortune to Tamara to read. She looked embarrassed.

"Oh, you're right, I was thinking of another one," she said. She passed the fortune to Harris, who read it and smirked. Neswick read it quickly and passed it back to Cruger.

"Not a fortune you want to keep and put on your office wall," Neswick said.

"That's true," Cruger said. "If I had an office wall, I'd save it for better stuff than this."

Tamara took Harris's fortune and wrote something on it with a pen she had pulled from her purse. She handed back the fortune. Phone number? Knock-knock joke? Harris smiled and pocketed the small slip of paper.

In the parking lot, Harris leaned over and kissed Tamara. It was nothing that Harold Robbins would put in a book or that D.H. Lawrence would write home about, but Cruger was impressed. The two had just met and already the sparks were flying.

Cruger got in Harris's car and they drove home. Harris had a content, dreamy look on his face.

"I don't know about Neswick. He seems pretty dull," Cruger said. "His daughter's quite a woman, though."

"Yeah, she is that." Harris' eyes held more of that far-away look than they did attention for the road.

"Must have bad taste in men, though — I think she likes you."

"Her taste isn't so bad. She doesn't like you a bit," Harris said, smiling to himself.

"Touché. Well, just be careful. I think that secretary from the high school is after your action too, and she may be the vindictive type."

"Well, I'm just doing this to help our work, you know, keep Tamara and Shirley under close observation, investigate them as thoroughly and as often as possible. Don't want them hiding anything from us in their clothes either, you know. I'll tell them we're going on date just so they won't suspect my motivations."

"Oh yeah, hard work."

"Yeah man, hard work. But nothing's too hard for Harris and Cruger Investigations, Inc." They let the proposed company name hang in the silent air for a second, had a certain ring to it. Maybe they should go pro. "But," Harris said, "you're a happily monogamous married dude and all, so the dirty work is left to me."

Cruger nodded his head in agreement. "Yep, hard work for ya, but I think you'll live."

"Oh, yes, I will."

Chapter 25

The next evening, Cruger sat with the ornate accordion in his hands. What do they tell you? *If you fall off a horse, get right back on it again* — ridiculous! What if you broke your goddamned back falling off? His ego had felt worse than a broken back last week. Redemption, a complete reversal of the impression he made the previous week down at Café Emerson, would be the only thing that could help. But, as always, fears played mini-movies in his head, forcing him construct arguments that justified his intentions. He saw himself walking up to the stage, the musicians hooting, shaming him, disgracing him, calling him *Polka man*, yelling *'Where's your monkey, organ grinder?'* and laughing at the request to allow him to play again.

Where's your compassion? Cruger screamed back in his head. *I had one bad night. Give me a chance to redeem myself.*

Hah, redeem yourself, they yelled. The drummer had horns growing out of his head; the bassist had fangs the size of steak knives. They looked at Cruger as if he were yesterday's garbage. *Get him out of here!*. A bouncer the size of the Himalayas grabbed Cruger and sent him sailing through the front door at ninety miles per hour. *No*, Cruger yelled, *I really can play*, he said while horizontal to the ground, moving at a rocket's clip.

The mind games his imagination played were overpowered by his desire to redeem himself by playing well. How could he hide this ability he had when, as an expressive art form, he needed to communicate this music to others?

So he went back to the Café Emerson. Since it was jam night he knew that the same musicians would be there. *I hope they don't remember me*, he started to try to tell himself. What, are you kidding? How many accordion players come in there and trip all over themselves? Of course they will remember you. Just hope that they give you another chance to play, now that you have the right axe.

wasn't nothin' " noises, she turned to Harris and said "I'm especially interested in the computer work, to tell you the truth."

Harris smiled. "You see, Cruger, the women always go for the computer guys — it's such a sexy line of work." Harris had a resonance in his voice Cruger hadn't heard before — that and the sly wink should have warned him what was coming.

Tamara smiled. "You're right, I do find computer work pretty exciting. I did my undergrad work in computer science at Carnegie-Mellon, and my master's work at Stanford."

Harris was impressed. His eyebrows rose and then lowered slowly. "I never would have taken you for a computer nerd," he said, "but, then I don't like it when people judge a book by its cover. For example, you would never know it by looking that I can't play basketball at all."

Cruger had never thought of Harris as an all-out lady charmer before, but, now good old Leon seemed to have the charm turned on with afterburners. Tamara smiled at Harris and her upper lip did its thing again. Harris smiled in return. Cruger was surprised that Harris was flirting with Tamara: what did Harris know about getting ahead in business? The boss' daughter could be dangerous territory. He took a sip of water and looked at a lobster walking across the bottom of a nearby tank. Was this a business meeting or what?

"I was at Stanford in computer science also," said Harris. "Way before your time, though, I'm sure."

"Well, I was there from '85 to '87," she volunteered.

"Yep, just missed you. I was finished in '83. Did you take any courses from Freidenberg?"

"He was my adviser." Tamara's eyes sparkled now. Cruger couldn't help noticing she had the kind of skin that seemed to glow in the dim restaurant lighting. Tamara and Harris quickly descended into jargon-filled conversation; he half-heartedly listened for keywords like artificial intelligence and neural networks, then just gave up.

Fortunately, that was when the waiter brought their food — a seafood salad for Harris, linguine and prawns for Cruger, some odd-looking and allegedly authentic Chinese dish for Tamara, and pure cholesterol and red meat for Neswick. Cruger was relieved: even computer geniuses need to close their mouths to eat.

"You gentlemen will be amused by my job outside of the Company — my 'cover' if you will," Neswick said in an attempt to start up some non-computer conversation. "I work for the IRS. We have records on everybody, and I mean everybody. It's a good job for my line of work."

"Yes, well I guess it's good for us to have a friend in the IRS," Cruger said.

Neswick laughed. "Maybe I'll be around to cut you some slack someday. But, remember, 'I sure hope you have a good accountant.' That's our motto."

Guys like this work for the Company? Cruger looked over at Harris to see what he thought of their new boss, Mr. Dull, but Harris' face was unreadable.

Neswick smiled his careful smile while chewing his steak. He ate in small bites, chewing enthusiastically, enjoying every bit. "You men have the best jobs on the planet — in the universe really. The war between technological advances and the failure of the species is in your hands." He shook his head and wiped his mouth again. "At this point, it looks as if the war is won."

"Yes, I think we're close," Harris said. "Although I don't know if the Unified Theorem is the whole war or just a large battle."

And was winning a war (or battle) satisfying even if your commander is a schmuck? Cruger listened half-heartedly as Neswick launched a discourse on the destiny of humanity and the Company's role in the far future. Then Neswick directed the conversation directly to him as Harris and Tamara launched into even more jargon. Cruger tried to pay attention, then looked away and wiped his mouth. This Neswick fellow's a nerd, the worst kind of boss, he thought. All grand schemes and no details. Cruger wondered about the Company and what Neswick was doing in it. And one question came to mind: can't God get good help these days?

His daughter, however, was a different story. She was bright and funny. By the time they had finished eating, Harris and Tamara had struck up quite a friendship. If body language meant anything, Tamara would probably be having Harris' children. Cruger wondered if this sort of thing happened to Harris every day. He remembered being dateless for parties and playing poker with the guys too often. Harris, conversely, probably spent his time screening calls from women like Tamara.

Tamara and Harris broke their attention from one another, realizing that the meal was coming to an end.

"Can't believe how much Tamara and I have in common," Harris said.

Cruger looked to Neswick to catch his reaction. Neswick smiled, of all things, seemingly totally at ease with the situation.

The waiter brought the fortune cookies and Neswick picked up the bill, despite the gutless protests from Harris and Cruger. Cruger wondered how the bill would be handled. Submitting an expense report to God was an image that few religions had anticipated.

Cruger cracked open his cookie. He especially enjoyed the 'you will meet the man of your dreams' fortunes that you could get at these places. He unraveled his and read it silently. 'Beware of the Tiger disguised as the Lamb.' Cruger thought about reading it aloud to the rest of them, but Harris had just opened his.

"You will make many new friends," Harris read with his testosterone voice. "How true — these guys are on the ball." Tamara laughed. "Don't worry, I'm sure I won't meet anyone as interesting as you," Harris said with a nudge.

Tamara's smile proved that he had said just the right thing.

"Hello, Mr. Harris and Mr. Cruger," it began. "You don't know me, but I'm one of Tony's… associates. I'd like you to meet me at the China Club in San Jose tonight at seven. Ask for Mr. Neswick's table."

It was just ten seconds of cassette tape, but the prospect of meeting someone from the Company was enough to force Cruger into getting dressed up. The China Club was an upscale hang-out posing as a Chinese restaurant. It was the kind of place where a waiter wearing a silk robe will serve you prime rib for dinner and fortune cookies for desert. And it was "stuffy" — Cruger had been there once, and felt totally out of place.

"Relax," Harris had advised him. "No open collar, no sneakers, wear a tie for God's sake, and no plaids mixed with stripes. You'll be fine."

"Anything else, Mr. Blackwell?" Cruger asked.

"Yes, no bell-bottoms, polyesters, or tie-dyes — but you could put in an earring, that would be a nice touch."

Cruger knew when to stop listening, which is why he was wearing a blue pin-striped suit with a gray shirt, a bold red silk tie, and freshly-shined black penny-loafers. The tie sang out the song of power… or was that confidence? He could never remember if yellow or red were the power look or the confidence look. If he had gone to business school, become an MBA, he would know these things.

Harris was wearing a double-breasted leather jacket that made his upper-body look like an right triangle. His smooth, dark skin shined like the marble floor Cruger's slippery dress shoes wanted to glide across.

"You don't look as bad as I would've guessed," Harris said as they walked into the club.

"Thanks. No earring, though — sorry to let you down."

"That's okay," Harris said. "It would clash with my jacket."

"Well, just don't fall asleep," Cruger said. "Someone could mistake you for their fine Italian luggage. You could wake up in Florence, maybe Rome."

Harris told the expertly-dressed hostess they were there for a Mr. Neswick. Her perfect hair was streaked blond and permed to stand out from her head at just the correct asymmetric angle, regardless of gravity, breezes, earthquakes, other natural disasters. Her western clothes didn't quite clash with the pseudo-Chinese decor. The two men marveled at the bizarre mix of cultures in the place as the hostess led them through the club. Neswick waited for them at the table, seated next to one of the prettiest women Cruger had ever seen.

Her eyes sparkled and she had one of those upper lips — cute and indented — that Cruger loved to watch. Neswick, on the other hand, was a plump, spectacled, balding man who tightly gripped his drink.

"Gentlemen," he said. "It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Neswick, and this is my daughter, Tamara."

"Tamara, nice to meet you." Cruger shook her hand, noticing that she was far more attractive than any child of Neswick's could be.

"You gentlemen don't know who I am — am I right?" Neswick said, his eyes sweeping back and forth from Harris to Cruger.

"Right you are," Cruger said.

"Well, as you may have surmised, I am from the Company, as is my daughter," Neswick said, eyebrows raising as he spoke, as if his words needed more emphasis to be understood.

Cruger and Harris sat in silence, waiting for more information, something they had felt deprived of for too long.

Neswick continued. "Of course, we're all very sorry about Tony. We want to thank you for the work you've done, and would like both of you to continue on with the project."

"Did you know Tony well?" Harris asked. His voice was polite yet direct.

"No. He was never a direct contact of mine," Neswick said. "However, I have been able to closely review his files, and I am very familiar with his accomplishments."

The waiter brought Neswick another martini, and he immediately dipped into it. Fancy suit and all, Neswick looked like the kind of guy who drank five martinis. They sat in silence as the waiter handed out menus.

"So, what is our new relationship with you going to be like? Will you keep us informed, be our Company contact?" Cruger asked.

"Exactly," Neswick said. "I am now *your* supervisor, in addition to being Tamara's. Given the important work you two are now doing, I consider it an honor to be working with you gentlemen." Neswick's wide face got wider as he smiled.

Cruger had a list of questions he wanted to ask, but they all disappeared from his memory momentarily. Questions concerning the Company had a somewhat intimate quality to them. Cruger had felt comfortable discussing the issues with Tony; but jumping into a discussion of this sort with a near stranger made Cruger feel uncomfortable.

"Could you tell us exactly what our job is?" Harris asked.

Neswick laughed. "You're a straight shooter — I like that. Right to the point, eh?" He grabbed his drink and took another small gulp as he composed his answer. "Your charter is to complete the program that implements the Unified Theorem, just as you have been doing. From what I have heard, you're very close."

"I think we might be close, but not having done this before…" Harris's voice dropped off as he shrugged his shoulders.

"Right," said Neswick. "That is the common theme in our work: doing things that have never been done before. Life itself would be interminably dull if we didn't do that."

"Dad's told me about the work you two have already done," Tamara said, her upper lip doing a dance. "It's impressive."

Before Cruger or Harris could make "aww shucks, it

The drummer looked at Cruger and smiled. "OK, man. 'Straight No Chaser.' You want to take it up?" Cruger had no idea what the guy meant but he said "Okay, yeah," as coolly as he could.

The drummer nodded, shook his long dishwater-blond hair away from his face, and began clicking his sticks: *"one-click, two-click, one-two-three four—"*

And they were in. Cruger laid his fingers across the keys. He could feel the fast tempo from his toes to his head; the quick eighth notes of the melody were painted across his mind. He squeezed the box and moved his fingers. Out came an out-of-time, out-of-key, train-wrecked version of the melody. He was shocked. To salvage the situation, he tried to recapture the melody at the second bar but missed the notes; his rendition sounded …badly experimental.

The piano player picked up the melody and finished the head of the tune. Acknowledging the beginning of the solo section, the he nodded to Cruger to take a chorus. Like the gambler who doesn't know when to quit, Cruger tried again and netted the same results. His playing seemed to have reverted to an entirely unskilled level. His improvisations sounded like a random smattering of poorly-timed, unmelodic ideas.

Wanting to escape from the musical low of the evening, the band wrapped up quickly. Cruger just nodded his appreciation and packed up his instrument. In half a minute he was out the door. Fortunately, he didn't run into anyone on the way out. He didn't want to endure a comment like, "That was, er, a very interesting style you have…"

In the car, on the way home, Cruger, with the usual high-IQ hindsight, understood his disaster. Only with the special accordion, the one for spinning, could he really play. Only with that instrument could he play the way he had at home. The stupidity of his error only amplified the sting of his humiliation. *To hell with the blue light*, he told himself. To hell with people seeing the blue light. *That's the axe I'm playing from now on.*

Harris enjoyed a good surmountable challenge. If the challenge was toward the insurmountable side, then the payoff was usually big — very big.

Understanding the software on Tony's computer system was one of those challenges. Backward-engineering all of Tony's code would be a difficult task — it would be impossible if Harris couldn't find the source code files. They had to be in the system somewhere.

Harris tried to run the development software and the system prompted "Password?" Harris had experience with a different log-in sequences, and he hoped this one would be a pushover. The best thing would be if it allowed an unlimited number of guesses. Second-best would be permitting a few guesses and then harmlessly locking him out. The worst would be sounding an alarm or shutting down after three guesses.

Harris decided his first guess would be the most ludicrously simple password imaginable. There was almost no chance that it would work. He typed in "Tony Steffens." Nothing happened.

For a second guess, Harris thought that maybe Tony, being an aspiring physicist, tried something a little different. Harris typed "e=mc2." Nothing.

Next guess. How about something that nobody on Earth would know? Remembering Cruger's rendition of the Tvonen creation story, he typed the name "Remad." Wait — should that be "Rimad," or "Reemad?" Shrugging, Harris pressed the return key. The monitor flashed bright white for a moment, and a blue spark jumped out of the computer's case.

Harris shot back in fear of being electrocuted. But the blue wasn't an electrical spark — it was like the light he had seen come out of Cruger's accordion. Harris looked at the computer — on the screen were lists of files and dates — had he gotten the password right? The blue spark hovered in front of the computer, its light fluctuating slightly. Harris carefully rolled his chair towards the wall. The light stayed where it was, just above the surface of the desk

Harris unplugged the computer. The spark vanished.

"This is damn weird." Harris muttered. He stood up and searched through the bare office, opening drawers and finding nothing useful. Finally he settled on his pocketknife and unplugged the computer's monitor, then proceeded to coax a screw out of the back and pop the computer's top. There, amidst a dozen accumulated dust balls, was something that resembled a glowing blue cocoon. Harris didn't notice the moments slip by as he stared. Its surface undulated slightly, as if it wasn't quite in focus; it seemed somehow warm, but Harris could feel no heat. Tendrils emanated from the object — it was connected to the Mac's circuit board.

He put the top back on the computer and sat down heavily. So that's how a personal computer can control the universe, Harris thought. It was working in tandem with a Tvonen… *thing*. The computer, this little gray box he was staring at, was just like Cruger — it was a spinner. But unlike Cruger, who had to rely on accordion keys to control his device, this spinner worked digitally.

Harris plugged in the computer. It started up. He typed in the password and the blue spark reappeared in front of him. Harris grinned: it was cheery, in an alien sort of way. The light outside was fading as Harris called up Tony's files and began putting together the pieces from information that may not have been in context. He knew that Tony's code must implement the missing pieces of the Unified Theorem. If he had access to the important files, it would only be a matter of time before he could locate the important stuff.

He had the universe at his fingertips. It felt good — but maybe a little sticky.

Chapter 24

The message on the answering machine in Tony's office wasn't very long, but it was perfectly clear.

where else in the world. Never mind the smog, the traffic, the overpopulation, and the water pollution, Cruger thought. Maybe 50 years ago the entire San Francisco Bay area was fruit orchards, rolling golden hills, and forests filled with pines, douglas fir, and redwoods. But now mere pockets of natural beauty were intact.

Cruger always enjoyed this stretch of road. There were closer bars that featured musicians he could sit in with, but he had read that the Café Emerson attracted a strong field of local musicians, the people Cruger wanted to get to know.

The café's neon sign shined clearly into the night air. Cruger turned off University Avenue onto the small, European-looking side street. The café was surrounded by a brightly-lit Gelato shop on one side and a small art film house on the other. The film house displayed posters for two French films, each with a young wild-haired brunette girl who looked trapped between lust and logic. *C'est la vie.*

Cruger parked his car in a free lot across the street from the club. He pulled his accordion case out of the trunk and walked over to the Café Emerson.

His eyes adjusted as he walked in. It was dark enough to make almost everybody good-looking, but not so dark as to make everybody a squinting oaf. Small booths with flat wooden seats and circular candles nearly filled the room. A small bar at the back was the center of commerce.

On the other side of the club was a small stage. The band was on break: the drums, bass, and piano were unattended, looking like hapless artifacts of lost artisans. The house PA system played a track from the Miles Davis quintet, early sixties. The snare drum on stage rustled in sympathetic concert with the flow of melodic improvisations, humming to itself while no one was looking. Cruger surveyed the crowd and noticed that it was impossible to generalize about its composition. College students, yuppies, middle-aged couples, older couples, Asians, blacks, Hispanics, and whites were all in attendance. Cruger whimsically wondered if entrance was granted on a quota system. He got a beer and found a seat at the end of the bar.

"You gonna be playing tonight?" The question came from the young clean-cut guy standing next to Cruger. He pointed at Cruger's case.

"Oh, yeah," said Cruger, "I think I'll sit in a little later." Cruger was careful not to divulge what instrument he carried. He figured his case was shaped like a trumpet or alto sax case. The fear of disclosing his instrument — the fear that he had anticipated since he first contemplated jamming in public — gave rise to a deep chill that rose up through his body.

"You need to sign up on the sheet," the clean-cut guy said. "Otherwise they won't let you play." He pointed towards the front side of the stage.

Cruger went over and found the sign-up sheet. The first column asked for his name, the second column was for his choice of tunes, and the third his instrument. Two people were signed up ahead of him — a guitarist and an alto sax player. Cruger wrote down his name and — deciding to go with a blues to make it easy on himself — picked the classic Thelonious Monk tune "Straight No Chaser." Damn, they'd be impressed. Who the hell ever heard an accordionist playing "Straight No Chaser?" Cruger wrote his instrument in the final column, feeling a little proud of his uniqueness.

He retreated back to his seat at the end of the bar. His new friend, the young guy, was still there.

"I'm going to sit in tonight, too," he said. "The name's Doug Housten."

"Jack Cruger. Nice to meet you." Cruger struggled for something to say: he didn't remember Doug's name or instrument from the list.

Doug set down his drink and stood. "Hate to run, but I need to go out to my car to get my axe; they want you to have your instrument out and tuned before they call you up , that way they don't have to sit around and wait. Hope my strings aren't too bad — I just put on a new set, you know."

Cruger nodded as if he knew and watched Doug leave out the front door. He made a mental note of the vocabulary term: axe. When Doug came back, Cruger watched him tune and set his guitar on the side of the stage. Cruger brought his instrument over and adjusted the strap, made sure the bellows moved well, and then set it down on the side of the stage next to Doug's guitar.

Doug watched him and said, "Damn, I've never heard a jazz accordion player."

"Me neither." Cruger sipped his beer and anticipated the feeling of playing for the audience; he would lock in on that magical something that came over him when he played. When the band came back on stage, they were the motliest group of "people" Cruger had ever seen: the drummer looked like a male aerobics instructor with three days growth on his face; the bass player looked like an underfed truck driver. Conversely, the pianist — hair cut short and yuppily clothed — looked like a poster boy for the Young Republicans.

They struck a funky blues groove, starting off with an updated version of Wayne Shorter's "Footprints." Rhythm and melody merged nicely; they were a pretty tight band.

Cruger listened for a few more tunes and then Doug sat in on an Ellington standard. He was a pretty good player, with good time and a tasty, melodic style. Knots of anticipation built in Cruger's stomach as he listened. When Doug finished it was time for Cruger to play his tune.

Cruger picked up his accordion. He knew his feeling of dread would go away as soon as he struck his first notes. The world was ready for a hot accordion player; he wondered if the reception to his playing would be thunderous, or just enthusiastic. Striking a few quick notes as a warmup, he stepped up onto the stage. He didn't worry: he knew that once the tune was in his head, his fingers would lock-in to the song and he would play effortlessly.

The Unified Murder Theorem

PART THREE OF FOUR

JEFF ZIAS

Synopsis

They killed the guitar player on a Thursday night, as he sat in the bar, playing his instrument, blue light emanating from somewhere within. The last words the hit men said before they shot him were simply: "Goodbye from Nattasi."

***JACK CRUGER,** an accordion instructor, leads a mundane life. But all of that changes the moment that **TONY STEFFEN** walks in his door. Tony doesn't want to learn how to play the accordion he's brought with him — he wants to hear Cruger play it. Cruger begins to play, and a blue light appears. According to Tony, the accordion will only make the blue light if Cruger plays it.*

*Before his next meeting with Tony, Cruger spends hours trying to make a baby with his beautiful wife **CORRINA**, following it up with a bit of time playing the strange new accordion. Much to his surprise, he begins to play songs he's never played before — perfectly.*

*Tony informs Cruger that the blue strands of light coming out of the accordion are **STRINGS**, each representing a path, a possible outcome. Cruger has been chosen to be a "spinner" of strings by the "**COMPANY**," much more than an international corporation — its job is to create and support all worlds, galaxies, and universes. God, or "the **CHAIRMAN**," prefers to have living beings "spin" the fates, rather than just throwing dice. But there's a catch — there's another company, one that does what you expect the Devil to do. If Cruger spins for the "good guys," he'll be given protection in return — other spinners will ensure that neither he nor his family will be harmed… except for what is beyond their control, such as intervention from the Other Company.*

*Cruger begins to spin, arousing the suspicion his next-door neighbor, **LEON HARRIS**. Harris, a computer programmer, is a large, strong health-nut — and extremely nosy. He wonders why the non-descript white accountant next door was suddenly playing the black music that Leon Harris grew up with… and he wonders what caused the blue light that appeared when Cruger played his accordion.*

*Months pass, and Corrina Cruger finally becomes pregnant for the first time since her unfortunate miscarriage a few years before. Jack Cruger continues to play his accordion, knowing that the Company's "health plan" will also cover his new child. Tony, occasionally accompanied by a beautiful young woman named **SKY**, sometimes visits with Cruger.*

Tony tells Cruger that many of the company's executive positions are still held by aliens, most from the planet named Tvonen. The Tvonen evolved in a fashion similar to humans, right down to their ancient tale of creation. But the Tvonen creation story is completely true. Tvonens were created as immortal, androgynous beings — but then two of them fell from grace, and became gendered, mortal creatures. To this day, Tvonens must undergo a change and lose their immortality if they wish to gain a gender.

The Tvonens are now very advanced — but their technology is completely analog-based, with no digital electronics at all. Earth is quickly becoming more technologically adept than the Tvonens. The Tvonens believe that human thought, with its pursuit of the Grand Unified Theory — a theory that could describe every detail of the functioning of the universe — would give the Company a giant edge in its ability to guide the universe.

Tony is in charge of implementing the theory into a computer system that will allow the Company to have such control over the universe. Obviously, such a prospect is not taken lightly by the Other Company, operated by renegade Tvonens and shape-shifting aliens known as Chysans.

But then Cruger finds Tony dead on his doorstep, and Leon Harris, watching from next door, comes over and takes Cruger inside to call the police. In a panic, Cruger runs outside, only to find Tony's body gone. When Harris tries to grab him, he gets a powerful taste of Cruger's otherworldly insurance policy. Cruger, now without Tony, decides to let Harris in on what the Company is all about.

In the wake of Tony's death, the two go in search of Tony's girlfriend Sky. They succeed in tracking her down, but she says she's never heard of anyone named Tony. The school has no records of Tony's. It's as if he's been erased from existence.

After being attacked by a group of thugs from the Other Company — and being saved by the insurance policy — Cruger and Harris try to figure out Tony's notes and how he could have been using his computer to control the entire universe.

Somewhere else, an alien posing as human is spending time in therapy. But while the doctor believes he's helping his patient, she's actually manipulating him in an alien sexual game.

And from above, in a ship orbiting the Earth, God — the company's Chairman — looks down down on Harris and Cruger and saw possible successors. He has been Chairman for two thousand years, but it will be time to go soon. Since the use of Earth's technology would be what gave the Company power over the universe, it seems fitting that a human should be the next chairman. Cruger and Harris, the Chairman realizes, were the Company's best hope.

If the Other Company doesn't get to them first…

Chapter 23

Cruger got in his car and headed north on Interstate 280. The Café Emerson was located in downtown Palo Alto, a college town if there ever was one. Stanford students, faculty, residents, and the south Bay Area's bohemians assembled at the bars, restaurants, and frozen yogurt shops that lined the small downtown area. Cruger tapped his hands on the steering wheel and watched as the dark highway rolled through the foothills of the Santa Cruz Mountains. Signs declaring interstate highway 280 the most beautiful freeway in the country struck him as being arrogant and unverifiable.

If New Yorkers clung to their notions that there was more art, culture, and intelligentsia in Manhattan than anywhere else in the world, then Californians were equally resolute that the natural beauty in California surpassed that of any-

starts at my head and makes my toes wiggle. I think I may be a victim of poetic justice.

Hours pass. Many, I suppose. I am more or less comfortable on the table. Can't think of any reason to move. There is a knock on the door. I'm looking forward to opening it. I have a reassuring feeling of dread. There's no doubt it will be Donna Jo, come to minister unto me. The question is, will she be dressed in an obscene teddy with delicate frills brushing her enormous thighs, or will she be balancing a Bible in one hand and a plate of cookies in the other? The suspense.

"It's not locked," I say, and wonder if she will faint when she sees my naked loins. The door creaks, slowly opens. A shadow crosses the threshold.

"Tribune. Collect," a small voice says. I don't have any cash on me. I think Joan took the checkbook.

"Come back tomorrow," I say, but not before a freckled face peers around the door and gets an eyeful. My reputation among the neighborhood twelve-year-olds will probably suffer. "OK," he says, and slams the door shut. He's probably on his bicycle, racing to the video game arcade at the mall to spread the word about the weird guy on his route.

I stay on my kitchen table, staring at the ceiling. I am curious about a small brown stain in the white expanse. It looks like a coffee stain, and that raises a number of metaphysical questions about my past. I don't remember ever doing anything that might have resulted in coffee on the ceiling. The wildest thing I ever did happened in the basement at the tail end of a long party when Sam Findley's wife asked me to show her my fishing pole. Mulling the mystery of this stain apparently takes a long time. Darkness falls.

Another knock on the door. I open my eyes and immediately notice that I am laying on the kitchen table naked. I'd become so comfortably numb, I'd forgotten my vulnerable state. This could be anyone, the paperboy come back, the paperboy's angry parents armed with buckets of tar and feather pillows, the police come to arrest me for violating the sensibilities of an innocent paper carrier, Joan and her hunk come to take away the kitchen table. There are no dish towels left, no place mats handy. I make the best use I can of my Styro cup.

"Unlocked," I yell. I didn't mean it to sound like a scream. From the corner of my eye I see a large shape standing in the hall, a plate of cookies balanced in its hand. It sighs and shakes its head. "Poor man," it says. I feel the tightness in my stomach uncoil, relax. Donna Jo has come to nurture me, offer solace.

Maybe she will stroke my brow and hold little pieces of chocolate chip cookies to my lips. Maybe she will coo at me, bathe me in sympathy. Maybe she'll read unintelligible parables from the Bible. Maybe she'll slide out of her big clothes and dance around the kitchen, making the floors creak with shock and joy. Doesn't matter. Doesn't matter at all what she does. She's here. That's what matters.

ERIC CRUMP leric@umcvmb.missouri.edu

Helps run the writing center at the University of Missouri, where he moonlights as a graduate student in English. He keeps writing short fiction even though people make it a point not to encourage this sort of behavior. He has a wife and a daughter who love him anyway.

I assume they are siphoning our belongings over to his folks' house.

"Must be nice and cozy over the garage with all that furniture," I say. I can't imagine where they've put it all. I pull my shirttail out. They walk by me, up the stairs and into our bedroom. This sends an involuntary shock down my back. I down the rest of the brandy, refill the cup, and start up the stairs. I will be present, whatever they may do up there. I will stare wistfully out the window while they pack away the possessions I helped buy during twenty years of marriage. I will lean against the wall and let my eyelids droop in resignation while they throw my socks at each other. I will shed a slow tear as they tickle each other and fall on the bed laughing. I will gradually sink to the floor as they entangle passionately. I will not stand for that sort of thing in my house.

As I get to the top of the stairs, Mark's back is coming at me fast. He is the front end of a procession that includes my antique dresser and my wife. I lurch out of the way just in time to avoid being tossed like a wad of paper down the stairs, but not in time to avoid catching the edge of the dresser in my chest. I spill most of the brandy, and clutch my breast, which is in more real pain than I had planned for this excursion.

"Please get out of the way, Ham," my wife says. "You'll get hurt."

Get hurt? Get hurt? Again, the irony. I want to suggest in a very loud voice that her concern is touching, almost overwhelmingly poignant, but even in light of the devastation she has wrought, I doubt she would catch the implied meaning. It doesn't matter. My chest has been bruised by the dresser. I can only gasp and plaster myself into the wall so I don't get nailed by the other end of it as Joan swings around to negotiate the landing. I follow them down, limping a little, and as they go out the door I head for the brandy. I chuck the cup in the sink and grab the bottle. I'm through fooling around here. When they come back in I plan to bop the first one through the door with the empty bottle then collapse and approach death.

I guzzle the stuff. It tastes pretty good now. No burning on the way down. I make loud gulping noises, relishing the precision of the tactic, the courage of the act. I hope they come back in while the bottle is still tipped and the last drops are draining death into my body. The guilt will overwhelm them, put them off their guard, make them easy targets when I pitch the bottle.

When I wake up it is semi-dark. Was that the doorbell? My head hurts. My back is killing me. I wonder if Mark beat me up. Was there a struggle? My stomach feels raw. My mouth tastes sour. The room smells like vomit. What room is this? I seem to be reclined in the bathtub, which answers one question, anyway. My old Styro cup is nestled at my feet. There is an empty bottle of vodka floating in the toilet. I am naked, cold. Did they haul away the furnace? I should go investigate. Somehow, though, I just don't have the energy. I poured so much of myself into trying to salvage my marriage. I just don't have anything left to give. I don't think I'll be able to crawl out of this tub. If only there could have been a little blood at the end, enough to leave a faint stain as a memorial, a thin trickle down the drain, justice might have been better served. And I had envisioned being clothed, too, a bit disheveled, maybe torn, but something to give my corpse a ragged dignity. But the way my head feels, this may be my final resting place. I may have to be happy with minimum effects. I may have to take what I've got.

I lay here for a while, dozing off an on, thinking each time might be the end, but finally the sun is high enough to get in my eyes, and it keeps me up. I start taking a closer look at my predicament. This arrangement is disappointing. It's not the legendary sort of fate I had hoped for. It's OK if people talk about me, over coffee or while pumping gas, "You hear about Hamilton? Guy was a friggin' saint, tough as nails, but that woman of his, she pushed him over the edge. You shoulda seen what she did . . ." But it hardly seems worth the trouble if they talk it wrong. "Hear about Ham? Found the stupid bastard laying in the bath tub, naked as a plucked hen, dried puke all over the place. No wonder his wife left him, the wimp. Just lay there til he died . . . ." I decide it's not worth the risk. Is that the door bell?

Gerald is standing there again, handing me my newspaper again, grinning again. "Hi." He makes a point of looking me square in the chin.

"What?"

"Just wondered if there was anything I could do for you, anything at all."

"You said that before. Why is it so damn bright out?"

"It's tough, I know."

I'm pretty sure there's something wrong with the sun. "What time is it?"

"Eight-thirty in the a.m.," he says. "Say, I know this is kind of personal, don't get me wrong, but do you have a relationship with Jesus?"

My feet are getting cold, and it's the wrong day. I tell Gerald's friendly, honest face thanks for the paper, and I start to shut the door on him.

"I'll send Donna Jo over later with some hot food," he says before the door shuts. "You can't live on coffee, you know."

I look down. The cracked, crusted Styro cup is in my hand.

"You feel free to talk to Donna Jo," he says through the door. "Anything you want."

I lay down on the kitchen table. The surface is cold and hard, but that's about the level of suffering I need right now. I think wistfully about Joan's pills, and the name Jesus occurs to me. How do people go about having a personal relationship with him? Seems like there would be logistical problems. So, Donna Jo is coming over. To talk about Jesus? To talk to Jesus? I can't remember now if Gerald said talk to Donna Jo, or take Donna Jo. The thought causes a shiver that

I had the flu and coughed all over the phone, which is a ploy he doesn't fall for, but is part of office etiquette. It would be considered impolite not to sound awful. Miller would be offended if I didn't even care enough to fake it. When I walk in, the senior secretary, Madge Murphy, gives me a solid hate-filled glare. Obviously, I'm dead meat. What the hell? I wonder. This can't be for calling in sick. Wonder if I forgot to pay the office coffee fund again. Madge threatened to cut me off last time I forgot to pay. I had to beg for mercy. It was embarrassing. I skirt far around her desk, but she shouts at me anyway. "Mr. Miller wants to see you in his office *now*!"

I'm spooked. There are contracts piled up on my desk, and I suppose some of the clients are getting a little antsy, but it sounds more serious than that. Miller has been known to make a stink over late contracts, but only a minor stink. I look around my cubicle a couple of times. Nothing to suggest a major fuck-up. I hide under my desk, hoping to buy some time so I can figure out what's up. As I'm getting myself tucked as far under the desk as possible catch a whiff of something that reminds me of a high school locker room and realize I forgot to shower. I try to estimate how long I can remain under the desk. A month would be nice, but I figure I've got an hour.

In ten minutes my back is killing me. I try to shift my position and end up cracking my head on the side of the metal desk, sending a boom echoing through this end of town. Now I have to scramble out before someone, likely Madge, comes to investigate. I peep around the corner. She's not at her desk. I slide over the coffee pot, moving fast and intent so everyone thinks I'm busy as hell and that any strange sounds that might have just come from my cubicle must be the result of frenetic and explosive filing.

Amber Reed, a shapely little nymph with poofed blond hair who sits at a desk near the coffee, giggles as I pour a cup, purses her moist, glossy lips in an almost indescribably erotic effort to control herself. She's great fantasy material. Bends from the waist when she accesses the lowest file drawer and all male work in the office grinds to a halt while her small round bottom and long legs put on a show. I think she's got a crush on me. I've seen her look away when I look at her. And it seems like she tends to reach for that bottom file drawer whenever I happen to be at hand. I think it might be appropriate to let her know that I'm about to become available, but when I turn around, she's on the phone.

By noon I've had six cups of coffee and made four trips to the john. Luck has been on my side. I've missed Madge all morning. She left a note on my desk once while I was off peeing. It said Mr. Miller wanted to know why I had not come to his office and to please report to him after lunch. I wad the note and play a game of waste-basketball, getting beat by myself 16 to 2. The coffee is starting to get to me. I miss my old tolerance. The angry little rodent is tearing at my stomach lining, growling and gnashing his teeth. I'm starting to feel a bit dazed and jumpy, finding myself staring at the calender for ten minutes at a time, tapping my pencil a million miles an hour. I fix on September 13, next Thursday. I beat out a complex percussion section to the rhythm of the air conditioner (part of which sounds a little like the drum solo from "In-a-gadda-da-vida") leaving a chaos of welts in my blotter. It looks like a crazed monkey wrote a symphony in braille. I have to get out of here.

I leave a note on Madge's desk. "Must have tried to push it too soon. Fading fast. Will call from the hospital to let you know how I am doing." She won't buy it, but she won't challenge it publicly. Office etiquette. Amber giggles again as I leave. Maybe I'll call her later.

When I get home I find the door is unlocked. Did I forget to lock it? Inside, I discover that all the living room furniture is gone. There is a broken lamp in the middle of the floor. Old magazines are strewn about. An ashtray is overturned.

Then I hear voices coming from the kitchen. Adrenaline mixes with the caffeine and creates some kind of explosive new chemical compound. My fight-or-flight response is about to turn me into a human rocket. I'll either waste these burglars with my bare hands or I'll run to the next state. I'm poised, vibrating.

"Is that you, Ham?" says one of the voices. It is my lovely wife. "What are you doing home?"

"I live here," I say, dripping with irony, the fiery internal chemicals draining into my feet.

"Well, I thought you'd be at work or we wouldn't have come," she says, coming down the hall with a box full of dishes. "We'll come back later if you want." Mark follows her down the hall, a shadow trying to hulk up, like his big shoulders will scare me, but he is not carrying any boxes.

"Don't let me get in your way. The last thing I want to do is slow you down," I say, trying to maintain just a tinge of sincerity in my voice. I want this to cause mixed feelings.

I go into the kitchen. The pills are gone, but the liquor cabinet has not yet been ransacked. There's only a dribble of bourbon left. Vodka we got, but I think the situation has gone way past vodka. I notice a brown bottle neck sticking up in the back. It is the brandy we were saving for a Christmas toast. Perfect. I think it will carry all the right connotations: the inevitable dissolution of an abandoned soul, the poignant attempt to numb the pain with wild excess, the irony of a celebratory drink consumed in the depths of despair. Unfortunately, there are no brandy snifters in the kitchen. In fact, there are no glasses at all. The only container I can find is the Styro cup left over from my morning coffee. I had a good ceramic mug up until a week ago, but I don't know what happened to it. The cup has brown rings around inside, a coating of semi-coagulated coffee on the bottom, and a brown streak down the side where I dribbled. I don't even rinse it out. I am reckless. I fill it with brandy and drain it, then fill it again while the heat sears my throat and the vapor billows up my sinuses. I light a cigarette and trudge into the hall. I think I've created the low point in my life.

Joan and Mark come striding back into the house, all energy and efficiency. I didn't see a car or truck outside, so

The Fine Hammered Steel of Woe

ERIC CRUMP

I suddenly realize I have been staring at the kitchen table for an unknown period of time. There are 31 pain pills arrayed on the table. The pills are Joan's. They are powerful, prescribed to ease her poor back, which she twisted badly in a mysterious "accident" that I now suspect had something to do with our next door neighbor and an unnatural position. The pills are placed in neat rows because neatness counts, but I don't exactly remember putting them there or making those rows. Another indication of the depths of my suffering: these little fade-outs are becoming more frequent. I don't have my glasses on, so I can't see the clock. I could be very late for work. And I may have been contemplating a very desperate act involving these pills.

I'm on my fourth Styro cup of coffee this morning. This is regular caffeine coffee, and the kick is nostalgic. This is the first week back to the good stuff after six months on decaf, and my tolerance to kicks is low, which may explain certain lapses, certain pills. The Decaf Period, as it has come to be known by me, was horrible. For six months of my blood felt like molasses oozing through my veins. The latest studies at the time said caffeine would kill you, and I didn't want to die. I still don't. But a few weeks ago I read about the latest studies, which reported that actually it was decaf that would kill you and that regular coffee was more or less OK, so instead of molasses I've got this friendly old buzz zinging through my nervous system, heart palpitating away, just like old times. There may be drawbacks; I'm aware of that. Sometimes this frenzied rodent gnaws at the lining of my stomach. I'm used to it.

The gnawing rodent also shows up whenever I think about Joan, my soon-to-be-ex-wife who has been living with our next-door neighbor's 20-year-old son, I'm pretty sure, for about three weeks now. The feeling in my gut makes me wonder if I should give up coffee altogether, or if I should drink a lot more and try to develop serious stomach trouble, lend an even more tragic air to my demeanor. I feel I could go either way on that.

She says she's going to file next week. Mark is a muscular kid with jeans that may have been grafted to his body. He's young enough to be the son we never had. He refused to wear a shirt when he mowed his parents' lawn last summer, and his bare chest caused problems. Joan used to sit on the patio and watch him, slurping margaritas and ravishing him with her eyes. I was indulgent. I thought, hey, guys have always looked at neighborhood females, stretched out under the sun or bending over the begonias (not that I would look at Mark's mother, Donna Jo, who weighs about 250 pounds) — why not let women do the same? Men don't corner the market on lust, reputation notwithstanding. Joan sprawled in the lounge chair, peering over her dark glasses, lusting in her heart (and elsewhere) for a kid with nicely defined pectorals, while I propped my elbows on the bedroom windowsill upstairs, lusting for her, imagining all sorts of erotic little fantasies that usually involved some sort of struggle.

The kid would come over, hot and sweaty, make crude, violent advances. My wife, panties wet with excitement, would gasp, chest heaving. He would grab her, waggle her like a doll, squeeze her bottom like a melon, claw her delicate breasts, and suddenly she would realize she had been making eyes at a vicious clod and would cry out, her lust poisoned by fear. I would leap from the window, grapple with the fiend, suffer some not too painful, non-debilitating injury before vanquishing my foe, and Joan, unable to contain her gratitude, would lunge for me, pull me down right there on the concrete patio, and express her gratitude.

What actually happened was that Joan started sneaking out of the house regularly after I was asleep, knocking on the kid's window, and performing carnal acts in the basement, behind the water heater, practically right under his parents' noses. Now she lives with them. She and Mark share a room over the garage. If I happen to be trimming the juniper bush on the west side of our house at about midnight, I can see their silhouettes undress in the window.

I would have started drinking heavily when she left, but I had begun long before that. I switched from vodka to sour mash bourbon, though, so I would have some sense of progress. I started smoking again, too. She should be able to see right away what she's done to me. When she comes to collect her things she should be able to tell at a glance that she has delivered a fatal blow to my soul. I wonder if I should start mixing a little bourbon into my coffee. It's something to consider.

There's a knock at the door. It's Gerald, my neighbor and the father of my wife's lover. He's holding my newspaper out to me, a big fake smile on his face. "Good morning, Hamilton," he says. This is a guy I have something to say to. Like aren't you proud of your son the homewrecker? Like why didn't you teach him to keep his pecker in his pocket? I don't know where to start.

"What?"

"Thought you'd want your paper," he says, straining to keep that grin going. "Is… is there anything I can do for you?"

I can only stare. I haven't seen this much irony in one spot since I took a literature class in college.

"I'm fine."

"Well, anything I can do, you let me know, OK?"

You've done enough, I think about saying, but he is backing down the walk, still grinning. "You've done enough, you son-of-a-fucking-bitch," I say as he enters his house.

I go to work, very late. I missed yesterday. Told Miller

They reached the end, and stood looking out over the waters.

"A beautiful sight, is it not?" said the dealer. "It is why I am here, in a way." He breathed deeply, "My father was a kindly man, but a rich one. He owned almost all of this island, in one way or another, but he lived up on the mountain." The dealer turned away from the sea to look up at the central mountain. "There." he pointed. "That large, white house, toward the top. You can just make it out from here."

The player turned, wearily.

"Ah, yes. At any rate, when I reached my twentieth birthday, my father decided that it was time for me to become a man, and so he took me out on our veranda, and told me that I could have any portion of the island that was within his gift, any at all, to own and run as my own, and he showed me all of his lands from that veranda. He pointed at his shops in the town, and his gardens, and all that he had, but I never saw them."

The dealer smiled, and turned back to the sea. "I only had eyes for the sight of the setting sun against the sea, and so I asked for the wharf, to be close to this sight."

The player looked at the dealer.

"I didn't know how much of my father's wealth came from the wharf, or I would not have asked for it. But he was a kindly man, and a generous one, so he let me have it, just so that I could be closer to my beloved sea." He breathed deeply again. "I did not know, either, how hard it would be to be the owner of all this, but I have managed.

"It is to my regret, however, that I have not been able to operate it as my father would have wished. The tides of the world have changed, and I was faced with the choice of either allowing those Colombian bastards into my harbor, or selling what they sold, to make enough money to keep them out. My father would not have approved.

"But that is why I have brought you out here. Not to regale you with stories, but to offer you a job. The Medellin have vanished, but their successors are as persistent, and I am now in need of more staff to run my operation. You are a pilot, correct?"

The player nodded.

"And a good one. I have had my men check up on you. I have need of a good pilot, to run my airplane in and out of, well, if you accept the job, then I will tell you. It is too dangerous otherwise."

The player stared, with a glimmer of hope in his eyes.

"I will employ you, for a short period of time, no more than that, to fly my airplane. Once you have finished, perhaps, five flights, I will pay you handsomely and return you to America. Will you?"

The player nodded, gratefully, almost frantically.

The dealer laughed, and turned away. He gazed out to sea.

"American, I have long held a belief that America is a land of the blind, and that a man who can see can do what he will, because of the fact that he *can* see." The dealer reached into his pocket, and withdrew the player's wallet, folded twenty-dollar bill, and a small slip of white paper. "Here, American. Take it back. I have no need of these, now that I have won."

The player took it all, looking at the slip of paper.

"You have your wallet, and you have a ticket to Galveston, on that ship there." The dealer pointed. "I have no need to keep you around as a trophy of my victory."

The player stared, dumbfounded.

"Don't you understand? I won. I took you up on that mountain, and I showed you all the countries of the world… and you accepted. You are truly blind, and I have no need of you. So, run, run away, back to your country of the blind."

The player stepped back, then turn and ran.

"American!" the dealer called.

The player turned, and a playing card hit him square in the chest. He caught it with a desperate lunge of his already-full hands.

He looked at it.

It was the jack of spades.

"American!" the dealer called, and touched his eyepatch. "Remember! Remember, that in the country of the blind, the one-eyed Jack is king!"

And the player turned and ran.

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Rob Furr is a graduate student at James Madison University. He's going into the creative writing program there, in the hopes that he'll actually learn how to write. He works in the faculty/staff computer lab on campus, which is where he does most of his writing, and is currently looking around for a job that'll actually keep a roof over his head and pay for the Quadra 700 that he hopes to buy. He's currently working on a project that he calls "another Marx Brothers movie," and he will talk to anyone at great lengths about said project (which has caused many of his friends to start running and hiding when he approaches.)

The dealer smiled. His smile was kind, as if he was in the process of doing someone a favor, and wished that person to feel at ease as he did it. The smile fit his face perfectly. It was neither too warm, nor too uncomfortable, and it curled around his face, avoiding only the eyepatch that covered his right eye. He exuded confidence, but it was a confidence masked by incorruptible politeness. He was in charge, the smile said, and any effort to contest that fact would fade quickly, in the face of such confidence.

The player shivered. It was too hot to shiver, one might say, but the heat was the humid heat that can make a man feel cold, even as the sweat soaks his shirt.

The player's shirt was soaked.

"Do you feel ill?" the dealer asked, leaning forward with solicitude written across his face. His hands never left the deck.

"No…" the player groped for words, and failed. "No." he finished.

"Would you like something to drink, perhaps? The heat, it plays tricks on a man who does not know it. One loses so much water here, in the summer months." The dealer gestured at a glass at his side. It was filled with a clear brown liquid, and had two ice cubes slowly melting in it. The player could smell the alcohol in it, even through the beery haze of the bar.

"I don't think I should," the player replied. He could feel his thin wallet through his sweat-soaked jeans. He wanted a drink, badly, but the constant reminder kept him from it. He wiped his forehead with his sleeve, but the thin fabric wouldn't absorb any more.

"Very well." Even in the all-pervading noise of the bar, the crisp flick of pasteboard could easily be heard. One card flipped, end over end, towards the player, and landed beside the other card, exactly aligned. The table could not be seen between them.

The player looked down.

A nine of spades looked back. The plastic coating shined, bright and exact, against the pitted and patched surface of the table.

The player swallowed.

Another flick, and a card landed beside the dealer's card. It impacted with a sudden noise, as the dealer's fingers drove it downwards to the table. It was the ace of hearts. The dealer's finger rested on it, exactly covering the central heart.

"The cards are dealt, sir." The dealer smiled again, leaning his head forward, to indicate the cards. His white hat cast a shadow across his face as he did so.

The player's hand rose from beneath the table, and slowly crept towards the card.

Suddenly, it halted.

"Ah… the stakes are…" the player asked.

"A ticket to Galveston, on my part, versus the loss of all your funds, on yours. We have already agreed on this." A tiny, tiny edge of impatience had entered the dealer's voice.

"All my funds?" the player wanted confirmation.

"All your funds. We have already agreed on this."

The impatience grew, as if a sword was slowly being drawn from its scabbard. The player looked away from the shiny politeness of the dealer, his perfect white suit, and his calm assurance, toward his cards, lying there on the worn green felt of the table. "You may look at your other card, if you like." The player reluctantly raised his hand from beneath the table, and lifted the corner of his card. His eyes refused to focus on the card for a moment, then he became aware that he was looking at the ten of clubs.

Nineteen.

He had nineteen.

The dealer's voice penetrated the haze through which the player stared at his card. "Will you be wanting another card, then?"

The player's voice shook, as he let the card slap down. "No, no. I don't… I stand."

The dealer's sole eye looked steadily at the player. "I am satisfied with mine, also. Would you reveal your card, then?"

The player reached out, and twisted the card over.

"Nineteen," the dealer said. "Hard to beat, I must say."

Without taking his eye off the player, the dealer reached out and flipped his card over.

The player stared.

The jack of spades lay there, half covered by the dealer's hand.

The dealer's eye was steady. "Twenty-one, I believe, beats nineteen."

The player didn't move.

The dealer reached out his hand. "Your funds? I regret the necessity…"

Wordlessly, the player pulled his wallet out of his pants and threw it onto the table.

"The twenty dollars you keep in your left shoe, please."

The player looked up, shocked.

"I do believe our wager was for all your funds, was it not?"

The player slumped in his seat, then reached down and withdrew a worn, folded bill, and tossed it on the table.

The dealer gathered the wallet and bill, and stood up. "Very good." He began walking toward the door.

The player remained in his chair, motionless. The dealer halted, turned around, and gestured. "We may have further business, you and I. Would you come this way?"

The player looked up, and slowly rose from his seat. The dealer stepped back to the player, and put his immaculate arm on the player's shoulder, and guided him from the bar.

Outside, it was much fresher. The setting sun cast a red pathway over the ocean, and waves sloshed against the wharf's supports. A slow breeze was barely stirring the flag outside the portmaster's office.

The dealer steered the player away from the bar, down towards the end of the wharf.

land between the north- and south-bound lanes, flattening weeds as we bumped slowly across the ground.

A part of me noticed that the dividing strip was amazingly level — usually there was some sort of dip or steep incline, if not a mountain or lake. Another part of me gripped the padded armrest so tightly I thought I'd puncture holes in the vinyl. And another part of me asked, "What the fuck are you doing, Jim?"

Jim laughed and shut off the headlights. He braked when we were nearly at the other side. "I hope we don't have to wait too long," he said. He laughed again, nervously this time.

As if in response, some trees lit up about a mile down the road where the I-5 curved, reflecting and forewarning us of a pair of unsuspecting headlights. Jim put the car in neutral and started revving the engine.

I wanted to scream, "Jesus Christ, Jim! Stop it! Are you trying to kill us?!" but I was petrified. I couldn't speak. I could only watch as the oncoming car rounded the turn and sped swiftly toward us.

Jim slapped the transmission into first gear, and the tires spit gravel as they spun on the roadside. Our car lurched forward, jumped onto the asphalt, and raced down the road. The lights of the other car shone right into my eyes, and I wondered madly if that driver could see the look on my face.

Only a hundred or so feet separated us. Jim snapped on the headlights, high beams and all, and slammed his fist down on the wheel, blaring the horn. His face was a distorted, evil mask of chaotic rapture. He may have been laughing.

The other car swerved to our left, missing us by about ten feet, and I caught a brief glimpse of the driver through his side window. His eyes were wide, and his lips were curled back in terror. I'd never before seen so much white in a person's expression.

Our cars passed, and I heard the other's tires start squealing. I twisted around in my seat and looked out the back window in time to see the other car, skidding sideways, hit the gravel on the right shoulder, go down a slight decline toward the trees, and flip.

Jim switched off his headlights just as the sound of crumpling metal and shattering glass reached us. He slowed down, pulled the steering wheel right, and sent us back into the dividing strip.

We reached the northbound side and got back on, but we didn't speed up, turn on the headlights, or speak until we'd gone around the curve. The Monks of Doom still played on the tape deck.

Finally, Jim looked at me, his face serene, and said, "Quite an adrenaline rush, eh?" He stared back ahead at the road, licked his lips, and, smiling oh-so-slightly, seemed to settle into an almost zen-like driving state.

I would've been lying if I'd said no. Instead, I slumped down in my seat and closed my eyes. I realized that my hands were tightened into fists, and so I unclenched them and, for lack of anything else to do with them, massaged my temples.

"How much longer till we're out of California, Jim?"

"Soon, John. Soon." He floored the gas pedal, and we flew down the road.

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Will graduate any day now from the esteemed College of Engineering at UC Berkeley and is looking for a job. On the serendipitous chance that you or someone you know has a Computer Science-related job opening commensurate with his skills, feel free to send him some e-mail.

All the Countries Of the World

ROB FURR

Around him, the bar stank. Cheap wood, cheap women, and cheaper beer all added their smells to the volcanic odor of the island air. There was a dim roar inside, made from the sound of low talking, the sound of the waves just outside, the sound of buzzing neon. Creaking wood could be heard faintly, through the other sounds, as islanders walked across the old worn wooden floor. The sounds were slightly distorted, as the low tin roof above reflected and shaped their echoes.

It was dim inside. A Budweiser sign lent the bottles behind the bartender a reddish glow, and a small, swaying lamp over the pool table shone green. Candles flickered on the tables, small flecks of yellow in the dim light of the bar. The plastic lamination of the cards reflected all the light, mixing it into a swirl of neon red, dark green, black lines and white card, with the intricate pattern of the Bicycle beneath it all.

They were Bicycle cards, fresh from the pack. They slid, new and perfect, from the fingers of the dealer, their white as white as his suit, their black tracery as black as his tie, and their image was reflected in the perfect, shiny leather of the dealer's eyepatch.

Two cards spun into the air, face down. One dropped down, landing with perfect precision in front of the dealer, and one flew across the table, spinning into place in front of the player, half covering a stain on the green felt of the table. Face down.

Roadkill

ROBERT HURVITZ

"Looks like a big one," Jim said, flicking on his high beams briefly to get better visibility. "Whoa! Probably a dog or something. Raccoon, maybe." He laughed. "Hungry, John?"

I groaned softly, once again reminded why I hadn't gone on a long road trip with Jim since our freshman year. "I think I'll wait till the next Denny's."

I stared out the passenger window at the mountains and the nearby trees rushing by, even though it was midnight and therefore couldn't make out any details. It would have been beautiful during the day. Too bad we didn't leave at noon, I thought, instead of after dinner. Oh well. Perhaps we'll have better luck on the way back. At least this way there are almost no cars out on the road. No one to get in our way.

The song plowing through the car speakers ended, and I prayed that the tape would be over, but yet another Monks of Doom number started up, just as drearily as all the others had.

I had suggested that we put on a Billy Joel tape I'd brought, but Jim had simply laughed at me, saying that it was time I listened to some new music. I might even like it, he'd said. Well, so far, he was wrong. A sudden, irrational panic seized me: What if this tape never ends, just keeps going on and on? I blinked, shook my head, tried to regain my senses.

I asked, "Are we in Oregon yet?"

"Soon, John. I'm driving as fast as I can."

And he was. The speedometer had been hovering around 90 for some time now. As I watched, the needle climbed higher by a few more miles per hour. I clutched the armrest instinctively.

Jim's speeding didn't seem to matter to I-5, however. It still stretched off into infinity, oblivious to the relatively insignificant cars crawling along on its back.

We were heading north, to Seattle, where our friend Jeff now lived and was throwing a big party, conveniently timed to be right in the middle of spring break. Jeff had graduated the year before and had gotten a job somewhere in or near Seattle. Whenever I would talk to him on the phone, Jeff would always complain about the rain, although he seemed to be growing used to it as time rolled on.

"Hey, Jim," I said. "Have you figured out what you're going to do after graduation?"

"Well…" He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. "What's looking better and better each day is taking however much I get in graduation presents, buying a plane ticket to somewhere, and travelling for as long as I can."

I nodded. "Sounds good."

"Yeah. I think I'll do that." He stared ahead out through the windshield, laughed. "Oh hey! What's that, what's that?" He flicked on the high beams and frowned. "Just a strip of rubber. It looked like it could've been interesting." Jim turned to me, smiled. "Sorry to disappoint you."

"Don't worry about it. Just keep your eyes on the road."

He shrugged, glanced down at the speedometer. It had dropped to 80. Jim stepped a little harder on the accelerator to remedy the perceived problem.

"Have you heard from any of those companies you were interviewing with?" Jim asked.

"Nope. Not a peep. Well, actually, I have received a few rejection letters. No call-backs, though. No job offers."

"And grad school?"

I dismissed that question with a wave of my hand, but then said, "Same thing, basically." I shifted in my seat. "Strange. I used to enjoy getting mail. Now I dread it. It's like, what sort of bad news is waiting in my mailbox today? I'm happiest when all there is is junk mail." I looked out the side window again. "I'm glad I'm getting out of town for a while."

"Hey, I know how you feel. Just get away from it all. Distance yourself from your problems."

"Yeah."

"Put some perspective on things."

"Yeah."

"Maybe… Maybe do something you've never done before."

"Uh, maybe."

I looked back at Jim, saw his mischievous, little grin. He glanced at the rear-view mirror, out various windows.

"See any cars anywhere?" he asked.

I was suddenly nervous. "No…. No I don't, Jim. What do you have in mind?"

He took his foot off the gas, and the speedometer began to drop. "Trust me, John." He continued scrutinizing the road, nodded. "It's as empty as it'll ever be, eh?"

"Jim, what are you doing?"

We were now down to 55 miles per hour. The car seemed to be merely crawling along. It made me impatient, uncomfortable.

"What you need is," he began, "a completely new experience. Something that'll get your mind off your current problems. Something exciting." He stepped lightly on the brake, bringing the car to a snail's pace of 40.

"You're scaring me, Jim. Just keep driving. I don't like this."

"Nonsense. Did I steer you wrong with Monks of Doom?" He reached over and turned up the volume just enough to drown out my mumbled "Well…"

Jim looked at me. "Did you say something?" He shook his head. "Anyway. Trust me." He motioned brusquely with his right hand to let me know he wouldn't be listening to anything more I'd have to say on the matter.

Oh well, I thought. Maybe it won't take too long.

The car came to a complete stop. Jim turned the steering wheel left, gave the car a little gas, and smiled a bit too widely. We left the asphalt and headed into the no-man's

all there is to love? Manipulation, agony, self-doubt, and inevitable trauma? Why? Why bother, then, with the hassles, the trials, and the tragedies? Why?"

Well, of course, there's a perfectly logical explanation for love, what makes it tick, what makes it turn out good, and what makes it suck. But then again, that's another book altogether. For now just be satisfied with the fact that it beats bowling.

Chapter Nine
Graduation
or Get the Hell Out Already

Ah, graduation. A time to bid adieu to the final rest stop on your journey to adulthood. A ceremony to reflect upon all you've learned. But most of all, a time to become drunkenly jubilant that you've finally escaped this man-made hell.

Actually, most students could do without the graduation ceremony itself. "Just give us our diplomas," students are heard to mutter, "and we'll leave quietly. You won't even notice that we're gone. Just let us go very far away. Please." But those pleas fall upon deaf ears, and graduation ceremonies are held across the nation. The reason is simple. It's for the parents, so stunned, so unbelieving that they need concrete proof their mixed-up, worthless excuse for a kid actually managed to pass high school and might be moving out of the house soon. And what better proof to give these poor, old fools than a two-hour-long ceremony brimming with diplomas, mortar boards, and "Pomp and Circumstance."

Graduation can be held anywhere — a gymnasium, a football field, even an abandoned warehouse — provided that the chosen space is large enough to hold the vast myriad of parents and their camcorders. There is anticipation in the air, nervousness, anxiety, the faint smell of old sweat socks. But then a hush falls over the crowd, as the school band plays the first chords of "Pomp and Circumstance," the most popular graduation theme song in the world. (Followed closely by Billy Idol's "White Wedding.") The graduates, looking every bit the scholars they're pretending to be, march in trying desperately to remember just what exactly it was they studied over the past four years. The principal steps up to the microphone and begins to introduce the distinguished guests — members of the school board, countless vice-principals, visiting foreign dignitaries, alumni, teachers, and women named Ethel. Forty-five minutes later, when all this is done, the true fun can begin.

The true fun is, of course, the countless speeches given by high school students praising the four years of hardship they have just endured and eagerly anticipating the uncertainty and upheaval of the years to come.

"High school has been the best years of our lives," the pitifully misled fools declare. "And the years to come look just as swell!" Every now and then, the student speakers will throw in a few choice cliches about "reaching for the stars," "giving one hundred and ten percent," and "never look cross-eyed at a large breasted woman." (That last one is particularly sage.)

The reason for the constant repetition of this malarkey is simple. THEM hand-picks the valedictorian from a select crop of students who will parrot verbatim THEM's twisted praise of high school. Even if the valedictorian were to rebel and give a speech detailing his or her true feelings about high school, THEM would react quickly and violently.

Fingers would be broken, cars would be repossessed, younger siblings would be fricasseed, all because of the valedictorian's disobedience to THEM. Consequently, very few speakers feel compelled to alter their speeches drastically from the THEM-recommended path. What we wind up hearing, then, is a sort of "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" meets Secondary School interpretation of high school life, which, as you all know, is as accurate as a compass at the North Pole.

After all the speeches are done, all the diplomas are handed out and all the caps tossed joyously into the air comes the moment of vast relief and euphoria.

You will join your fellow ex-students in general celebration, marked by hugs, high fives, and screaming bizarre, nonsensical gibberish. About this time, in the midst of all this joy, you wig stumble upon a question that will linger in the back of your mind like the odor in a high school locker room. That question is, of course:

WHAT NOW?

Don't worry if you can't find the answer right away. After all, this question will only hang over you for the rest of your life. You'll have plenty of time to anguish over your lack of purpose and direction.

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thought of physical intimacy makes me retch.

• A Special Friend — As of yet, we have not done the Wild Dance of Love.

• Boyfriend/Girlfriend — We neck frequently.

• Bastard/Bitch — What former Boyfriends and Girlfriends become.

After five dates, you and your lucky partner will be officially declared Boyfriend/Girlfriend by the National Dating Regulatory Commission. After this you will be able to have nightly phone calls that go something like this:

HE: I love you.

SHE: No, I love you.

HE: But I love you more.

SHE: Not as much as I love you.

HE: How can you say that? I love you.

(Repeat this pattern for the next three hours or until your parents rip the phone out of the wall.)

Your Boyfriend/Girlfriend status also entitles you to annoy others with public displays of affection, to refer to each other by silly nicknames (like "Poodlemuffin" or "Love Yak"), and to have many fun and entertaining arguments that will further alienate you from mainstream society.

You will also be expected to celebrate the numerous anniversaries of your courtship — the five-month anniversary of your first date, the sixth week observance of your first kiss, the thirteenth-month, tenth-day and fourth-minute anniversary of the sixth time you decided to get back together after breaking up. Failure to remember these all important days and to buy expensive gifts will result in numerous arguments and a lot of pouting. But you sure do save a bundle.

Now we come to a rather sensitive issue — teen sex. When pestered about the subject, most adults will respond "Why eat bologna on your wedding night, when you can have steak?" We have no idea what this means, or if sex even is remotely connected with deli meats. Sex amongst teens is usually coded into baseball lingo, in the interest of politeness, privacy, and real cool double entendres.

• First Base — A gentle kiss on the lips.

• Second Base — Fun with hooters

• Third Base — No clue whatsoever. Possibly the ankle.

• Fielder's Choice — "We watched the movie instead."

• Pop Fly — Premature ejaculation

• Caught Stealing — "Her dad walked in on us."

• On Deck — Still Masturbating

• The Seventh Inning Stretch — *Ewwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwww…*

• The Dugout — Where you keep the condom

• HOME RUN — An intense mixture of happiness, contentment, and guilt. Lots of guilt. Tidal waves of guilt. Guilt up the yin-yang.

Whatever your position on sex (and most prefer "missionary"…) you must realize that sex is not just another way to kill fifteen minutes of your evening. Sex is a beautiful understanding between two people (so I've been told…), a sharing of one's self, and a felony if your partner is under age. Remember: *sex and love are not the same thing!* Though it's an awful lot of fun to pretend they are.

Breaking Up is Hard to Do
(But nevertheless, it's done a lot.)

The final destination of the Express Train of Love is a visit to Heartbreak Station (Neat metaphor, huh?). Every relationship, no matter how divinely inspired, ends with someone getting dumped. This is a law of nature, just like gravity or the fact that it always rains after you wash your car. Misery, door slamming and angst go hand in hand with the heretofore merry game of dating.

It's not always easy to pinpoint what made a person shoot their true love down like a jet over foreign air space. Arguing, fooling around with someone else, writing wretched poetry, and kissing like a dying squid are all substantial reasons for giving someone the old heave-ho.

It's usually the little things that tear apart a relationship, an unkind word, a lukewarm hug, telling him or her "I hate you, you heap of worm dung." When these little things pile up, people start to go ballistic. What it all boils down to is this: People hate being happy. They would rather ruin their lives and the lives of others than live in constant happiness. People are dumb that way.

Throughout the course of dating history, many dumping methods have been developed, refined, and improved by hundreds of dysfunctional couples just like yours.

• The "I Just Want to Be Friends" Shuffle — In this approach, you soften the blown of rejection by pretending to remain interested in your partner's friendship, when in fact, you secretly hope he/she will drop off the face of the earth, relieving you of any stray pangs of guilt.

• The "I am Not Worthy of You" Facade — This method relies solely on your ability to deprecate yourself. By convincing your partner that you are unfit to bathe in saliva, you just might spare yourself the agony of having to go out with him/her again. *WARNING:* Sometimes, this will make you see noble, and as a consequence, more desirable. Use with caution and only on people who are easily fooled.

• Telling the Truth and Being Honest — Get serious. That trick never works.

• The "Get the Hell Out of My Life" Ultimatum — The popular choice for generations and generations. Still highly effective and really fun.

• While these methods are all fine and dandy, the most effective way to break up with someone is to beat the other person senseless with a tire iron. You cause a lot less permanent damage that way.

A Little Anxious?

At this point you may be saying to yourself, 'Wait! Is that

3) $\frac{6X}{20} = \frac{3X}{(3X)} \frac{dY}{dX} = Y$

What is Y?
A) 9 1/2
B) .000000001
C) the 25th letter of the alphabet
D) [9]

As if obscure, puzzling questions weren't enough, the SAT has devised an inscrutable method of grading its tests. For every correct answer you will receive a point. Every incorrect answer will cost you $3^3/_8$ points. Multiply that total by your body weight and divide by the zip code of Ashland, Oregon. Of course, the grading system is merely an elaborate ruse. Everybody scores a 1050 on the SAT, except for Asians, who score 1230. This is pre-ordained, and you can do nothing to changed it.

With this in mind, you shouldn't worry too much about the SAT. Just remember to stay calm, collected, and to only break down sobbing during the ten minute break they give you during the exam. And remember — always, without fail, *at the risk of your own life* use a #2 pencil. This is because the SAT people own stock in companies that manufacture #2 pencils, and this is just their way of making a profit. If you deprive them of their little side-profit, they will become agitated and flunk you on the spot. So make sure to carry at least two dozen #2 pencils with you at all times until you graduate from high school. You never know when you might need one.

Chapter Eight
Dating
or Sex and the Single Sophomore

Wouldn't it be great if there was a store where you shop for the ideal boyfriend/girlfriend? You could just walk in, throw down your $9.95 and say "That one, that one there with the brown eyes and the good personality. I'll take that one." But alas, life is not that kind. We have to out searching for that special someone whether it's the girl who sits behind you in English, the guy you met during lunch, or the person who mooned you in that passing van.

Who can say what it is that attracts one human being to another? (Well, obviously I can since I asked the question.) Good conversation, a great sense of humor, a friendly smile. These are the things that draw people together. These are… aw, who the hell are we kidding anyhow? It's looks. Looks, dammit!

We're attracted to people who look good. She can be Mother Theresa in the personality department but if she hasn't got legs to beat the band, flowing blond hair, and fairly sizable hooters, then forget it! And he better have rippling muscles to match his sense of humor, or he'll be watching this one from the bench. It's all looks. Accept it. Revel in it. Deny it, and you only fool yourself.

Take 'Em Someplace Cheap

When you plan your dates, first rule out Paris, four star restaurants, Andrew Lloyd Webber musicals, and most major department stores as potential sites for your close encounters of the romantic kind. The situation is further complicated if both of you are without a car because unless you want Mom and Dad driving you around all night, anywhere you go better be within walking distance.

Here, then, are some potential settings o' love that you may want to explore.

• Dinner and a movie — Kind of trite.
• Dinner and bowling — Getting warmer.
• Bungee jumping — Too forward for a "Get to Know You" thing. Maybe the second date…
• Long, romantic walks through the park on a moonlit night, holding hands and just talking — Nah.
• "Wanna just neck, instead?" — We have a winner.

Regardless of where you may go on your date, it is essential to have an evening filled with stimulating conversation. If you appear interesting, easy to talk to, and witty, chances are you're going to get to go out again. Poor conversationalists, on the other hand, appear to be stammering dolts, unworthy of love, companionship, and even minimal human dignity. It is not uncommon for a lousy conversation to lead directly to your date hiding in the bathroom all evening. Topics of conversation, therefore, should be chosen with care. Never talk about killing bunny rabbits, cancer, infamous Nazi war criminals, or how horny you are. Instead focus the conversation on your date. This gives off the illusion that you're actually interested in what he/she has to say.

The Kiss

Toward the end of the evening, you will be faced with that age-old dilemma "Should I kiss my date goodnight?" There are several telltale signs to help you with this quandary. If your date screams, "Take me now, you hot, passionate love-beast!," by all means, kiss away. If halfway through the evening, your date has left you, then, no, a kiss would be too presumptuous. And remember this ancient dating proverb: If your date kisses you goodnight, this is definitely a good thing. If your date hugs you goodnight, this is satisfactory. If your date shakes your hand goodnight, it is probably time to switch deodorants.

What Goes Down Next

If you continue to date the same person, it is very likely that you will be forced to re-examine your friendship status. See how you compare with the handy chart below.

• We're Just Friends — I like this person a lot, but the

[9] The correct answer is… uh, well, uh… oh, hell with it. Just keep reading.

the gift, then use it, don't lose it! There may be things more important in this world than School Spirit (like religion, grades, friendships, functioning human relationships, and breathing, just to name a few…), but nothing will get you laid as easily.

Chapter Seven
Life After High School
or Determining Your Future
Through Standardized Tests

By the beginning of your junior year, you will come to grips with a decision that will drastically affect the rest of your life. But then, the Homecoming Dance will be over with, and you'll have to make another decision — what to do with the rest of your ordinary, uneventful life.

Although it seems interminable, High School does not go on forever. In fact, it's over with faster than you can say "graduation," provided you repeat that word 630,720,000 times.

If High School is just another gas station along the highway of life, then it's about time you started checking your mileage. (I have no idea what this analogy means.) Anyway, it's time to start reviewing your options.

Some High School graduates feel that they are ready to join the nation's work force, to perform honest work for honest pay. While this is commendable, reality informs us that a mere High School diploma attracts very few jobs in which you are not required to ask "Do you want fries with that?" The army offers newly graduated students a chance to be all they can be. This means they expect you to wake-up at the crack of dawn and crawl on your belly through mud all day. Clearly, this is no different from High School, except for the drastic difference that occasionally people will shoot at you.

Having dispensed with these alternatives as undesirable, it's time to give serious thought about going to college. "Oh, come on," you whimper. 'Why would I want put myself through another four plus years of educational drudgery?" Well, Mr./Ms. Hoity-Toity, Nose in the Air High School Dode, college offers many things that High School never can.

A) College allows you to continue to avoid responsibility for just a little while longer.

B) It's a lot easier to get laid at college.

C) You're not required to take P.E.

and most importantly,

D) You get to move the hell away from your parents.

College it is then! But don't get too excited just yet. Not every spank with a diploma and a burning desire to leave home gets into college. It also takes money. Lots of it. But we'll talk about that later.

Standardized Tests — Fun with #2 Pencils

To test your worthiness and aptitude, colleges have developed standardized tests with big evil acronymmed names like ACT and SAT. No one is really sure what these letters stand for, though it has something to do with scan-tron and #2 pencils.

The ACT and its ilk (the Achievement tests, Advanced Placement tests) are relatively painless. In fact, most of the questions on the ACT are identical to questions found in Trivial Pursuit. For example:

1) In what year was the Bill of Rights ratified?

2) What is the Pythagorean Theorem?

3) What is the Kelvin Temperature Scale?

4) Who played the wacky housekeeper Alice on the hit TV series "The Brady Bunch"?

The SAT is an entirely different kettle of fish. The people who devised the SAT believed that testing practical knowledge was just too darn easy. What really needed testing, they thought, was High School students' ability to use good grammar and perform complex trigonometry calculations. Thus, the VERBAL and MATH portions of the SAT were born.

1) Mark the portion of the sentence which contains incorrect grammar.

Let's you and I / go down to the store / and get us /
A B C
some Otter Pops.[7]
D

2) Reading Comprehension

Every now and then, the young boy would stop walking along the rocky path and pick up a small stone. Rolling it gently between his fingers for a long time, the boy would then skip the stone into the nearby woods. Several times he did this, each time with a slightly larger stone. Not even a mile from his grandmother's house, the boy heaved the largest stone of the day. Suddenly, there was a scream, and Uncle Roy crawled out of the woods, his head gashed and bloody. Roy died almost instantaneously. The boy never told anybody.

The theme of this passage is:

A) Little boys who grasp for larger and greater objects will eventually kill their drunken uncles.

B) The young boy is bad.

C) The young boy is good.

D) Both A and B.

E) The author should keep his day job.[8]

[7] The correct answer is E — no human being speaks this way.
[8] The correct answer is B, C, and D.

methods of torture? Why bother?

Because discipline is essential to democracy. Rowdy students set a bad example and lead others into rebellion. As this will create chaos and anarchy, all dissension must be nipped in the bud. Besides, these students might eventually expose high school to be the gigantic fraud that it is, and then all those administrators would be out of work.

Chapter Six
Cheerleading
or Your Pathway to Nirvana

(This chapter is written with the help of Muffy Babkins, head cheerleader at Barbi Benton High in Augora, California, so that past, present, and future cheerleaders may understand it. To make things easier for potential cheerleaders we have tried not to use big words.)

Do YOU (the person reading this) have what it takes to become a Cheerleader?

- Do you like to jump up and down?
- Can you spell words like "fight," "charge," and "win?"
- Are you especially good at chanting and clapping?
- Do you like wearing very small skirts which allow horny guys to see your underpants?
- Do you have large breasts?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions (That means that any of those things *are true*!), then you are on your way to becoming a Cheerleader!

Cheerleading is a lot of important things. It's chanting "Go, Team, Go!" in unison, it's squealing with delight when your team scores! It's dating guys on the football team rather than spending time with sensitive intellectual types!!!

But above all, cheerleading is about having School Spirit!!!

What is "School Spirit"?

School Spirit is feeling good about the place where you go to school! School Spirit is real important. People with School Spirit take pride in the accomplishments of their school. People without School Spirit are geeks and troublemakers. We don't like them. Boo! Hiss!

As a Cheerleader, your *biggest job* is to *raise Spirit!* You do this by *cheering!* Spirit-raising cheers include "We're #1!," "We've got Spirit!," and "Hooray for Us!"

Good places to raise Spirit are Football games! There's something about cheering for extremely large boys to beat each other senseless that brings a school together. As a Cheerleader, you must cheer your team *on to victory!* Cheerleaders can often be the difference between *victory* and *defeat!* Napoleon (a dead French guy) would have triumphed at Waterloo (a really big battle that dead French people lost) if he had brought Cheerleaders along.

Remember: *School Spirit is key!* Without School Spirit, life just wouldn't be worth living anymore. And that would make everybody real sad. And then, they'd wish they had Cheerleaders around to make them happy! So raise that Spirit!

As if Spirit weren't enough, there are a wide variety (that means many) of *super* perks to being a Cheerleader. Cheerleaders wear *cute outfits* — darling sweaters, matching socks, and tiny little skirts that reveal much of the buttocks.

Why such skimpy skirts?

Because they raise spirit!!!

And to add that extra smidgen of school pride, your outfit *matches your high school's colors!* Cheerleaders everywhere agree, "It's fabulous!"

Cheerleaders are respected leaders of the Student Body, appreciated by the fans and loved by the athletes. Of course it isn't *all* a bed of roses. Sometimes, you have to associate with the icky members of the marching band. Boo! Hiss! And of course, there are always mean, nasty people who, out of jealousy for the important role you play at your school, will spread rumors about your morality and intelligence. To put an end to this stereotype:

All cheerleaders are not clueless, scatterbrained, loose-living sluts. Only the successful ones are.

Still not sure if you could cut the mustard in the *high-stakes world of high school cheerleading*? This simple quiz should indicate your cheering aptitude (This means your cheering "skill").

1) Your team is down 51 to nothing at the end of the first quarter in the final Football game of the year. Do you:

A. Start crying uncontrollably.
B. Scream obscenities at the opposing players.
C. Lead the crowd in a rousing cheer of "We've got Spirit, yes, we do!"

2) What do you cheer when your team scores a touchdown?

A. "Oh, thank the Lord!"
B. "'Bout time, dickweeds…"
C. "Yea, team!"

3) Is it okay to have sex before a game?

A. NO! For God's sake, no!
B. Probably not.
C. Only if it's with the starting quarterback.

If you answered "A" to any of these questions, you are far to emotionally unstable to ever be a Cheerleader, though a career in modeling might be promising. If you answered "B," you are too negative and icky and would probably be more suited for the marching band. Boo! Hiss! But if you answered "C", get ready to wear that color coordinated sweater and short skirt. You are *prime cheerleader material*! Three cheers for *you*!

Everyone would love to be a Cheerleader, but only a select few can grasp those sacred pom-poms. If you've got

enhance the student's vocabulary and prepare them for careers as high school administrators. Other schools force you to write an essay with topics like "Why I Am a Bad Person," "Deportment — the Keystone to Democracy," or "A Shameless Plea for Forgiveness." These essays will be read by administrators, go on your permanent record, and be sent off as submissions to Reader's Digest.

The worst punishment a Detention Supervisor can wield is, of course, to do absolutely nothing. Just sit there without making a sound. Don't even breathe loudly. Imagine several dozen rebellious high school students trying to be absolutely quiet. To quote Custer at Little Big Horn, "It ain't gonna happen." It's like giving money to a crack addict and asking him to spend it on a soda. You could engineer lasting peace in the Middle East before high school students will sit still.

If nothing else, keep this one simple rule about Detention in mind: Don't piss off the Detention Supervisor.[6] A wide variety of activities can qualify as 'pissing off' — talking, passing notes, mouthing off, even give off bad vibes. (The last one is prevalent in California high schools only.) Pissed-off Detention supervisors are surly, uncooperative, and generally unpleasant. Worst of all, they have the power to inflict greater punishment upon you — Work Details and Saturday School. Experts agree that this is a bad thing.

WORK DETAILS involve forced labor and sweating, two qualities which are inherently undesirable to any self-respecting high school student. Under the philosophy that "busy hands are happy hands," rebellious high school students are put to work, in hopes that beautifying the school they loathe will help them see the error in their ways. In reality, as no student enjoys picking up garbage or scraping gum off of desks, the exact opposite occurs. Students become more defiant and uppity. After all, busy hands are resentful hands.

Work details evolved out of need. In olden times, back when your parents were youngsters, schools were not the soulless, massive institutions that they are today. Most high schools consisted of a one-room red building with a small playground and outdoor plumbing. In the interest of progress, the teen rebels of yesteryear were put to work building the institutions of happiness we know today.

The only drawback is that nothing practical remains to be done during work details, and students are assigned to menial tasks, such as picking up rotten banana peels, or chiseling the mucus off of bathroom floors. At some schools, work details involve performing odd jobs for the faculty — washing the Principal's car, giving the English teachers massages, and of course, busing tables in the faculty lounge. This adds an element of humiliation which is so crucial to modern education.

SATURDAY SCHOOLS are used as last resorts to discipline the hard-core hellions. Nobody knows much about Saturday Schools. Nobody really wants to. Like black holes, not even light can escape from a Saturday School.

Information about this clandestine form of discipline has been obtained from an ex-detainee who wishes to remain anonymous to protect his family. Therefore, we shall call him Student X, though his real name is Bob Litman of Tulsa, Oklahoma.

"Well, first of all, man," begins Student X, "you have to spend the whole day there. A whole Saturday, just sitting there. You can't sleep in. You can't watch cartoons. You have to go, man!

"To make matters worse, the supervisor is usually the football coach or somebody with a drill sergeant mentality. They make you do push-ups, sit-ups, all of that stuff. Some of them won't even let you go to the bathroom. Imagine sitting around for six hours without being able to take a leak!"

And what about the camaraderie of Saturday School, shown in films like "The Breakfast Club?" "Bullshit, man," screams Student X. "Everyone in Saturday School hates everyone else. Molly Ringwald wouldn't last *five* minutes in there, man!"

At this point, Student X began to wail hysterically about sit-ups and Emilio Estevez. He was immediately sedated and sent off to a Saturday School in upstate New York. Like many repeat offenders, he will not be heard from again.

What They Can't Do to You

Thanks to our friends, the government, physical torture as punishment is a thing of the past. So unless you're into sadomasochism or are taught by nuns (who view corporal punishment as one of life's few pleasures), here's what they can't do to you in Detention.

- Spanking is bad.
- Slapping is bad, too.
- Kicking someone in the groin is also bad.
- Hanging students out a window by their feet is a big no-no.
- Electroshock treatment to the testicles is out of the question.
- Wedgies, titty twisters, noogies, anything having to do with rulers, thumbscrews, and wet willies are strictly forbidden.
- And no matter what anyone says, **CAPITAL PUNISHMENT IS NOT PERMITTED!** (Not yet, anyhow.)

There is a downside to all of this. The ban on physical punishment leaves the door wide open for mental torture, which is far more painful and leaves more permanent scars.

Why?

Why do administrators go through all this trouble just to discipline rambunctious youth? Why devise these intricate

[6] It should also be understood that especially old Detention supervisors have a tendency to be pissed off for reasons beyond your control, i.e., irregularity, hemorrhoids, inflamed prostate, and the like. In this case, your destiny is pre-ordained just like in some Greek tragedy.

photo. DMV workers have a knack for photographing people at the exact moment when they look the goofiest they ever have in their lives. A split second blink of the eye, a silly grin, or the sudden embarrassing appearance of a stray booger will bring you anguish and humiliation for years to come.

So after months of struggle, all the effort pays off. You've got your license, and you're on your way to adulthood. It's time to celebrate, you figure, but don't let all this go to your head. You're still a sophomore, pal. It's not like you have a life.

Chapter Five
Detention
or High School's Version of Crime and Punishment

In real life, if you do something pretty bad, you go to jail. In the church, if you do something pretty bad, you go to Hell. High school operates in a similar manner when it comes to punishing evil-doers. It has detention.

Who Goes to Detention?

The typical detention-goer is an angst-filled teen mindlessly rebelling against the oppressive, fascist forces masquerading as authority. Nowadays, this teen rebel is a long-haired, head-banging, dope-smoking fiend with ripped jeans and a permanent sneer affixed to his lips (all detention-goers are male). In the 1950s, people who did not like Pat Boone were sent to detention. In the 1920s, it was communists and foreigners. The form of the rebel teen is constantly evolving, but one thing remains the same:

PEOPLE WHO GO TO DETENTION HAVE A BAD ATTITUDE.

So what exactly is a bad attitude?

Nobody has the foggiest, really. It has something to do with good hygiene and genetics. Scientists have determined that people with good attitudes look both ways when crossing the street, smile frequently, floss, and have lots of school spirit.

People with bad attitudes do not use deodorant.

People with bad attitudes resent authority.

People with bad attitudes write snide books about high school, mocking all that is sacred, just to make a fast buck.

But most importantly, people with bad attitudes **EXHIBIT POOR DEPORTMENT.**

What is Deportment?

Deportment is not what happens to Taco Bell employees when they have no proof of citizenship (Well, it is *that,* but it's other things, too). Deportment is the all-encompassing catch-phrase that high school administrators use to describe a student's behavior. So why don't they just say "behavior"? Because "deportment" sounds cooler and makes administrators seem more intelligent.

A DUMB ADMINISTRATOR: Tommy, your behavior has been real bad lately.

A DUMB ADMINISTRATOR WHO SOUNDS INTELLIGENT BECAUSE HE/SHE USES BIG WORDS: Tommy, in the latest three-month period, your deportment has not reached a satisfactory level.

Deportment is the embodiment of everything you can possibly do wrong.[5] Bad deportment includes:

- Talkin' in class
- Runnin' in the halls
- Fightin'
- Spittin'
- Killin'
- Smokin' dope
- Workin' at Taco Bell without proof of citizenship
- Screwin'
- Cussin'
- Talkin' back
- Extortin'
- Masturbatin'
- Goofin' off
- Watchin' old re-runs of "Three's Company"
- Puttin' apostrophes instead of 'g' at the ends of words
- Just plain being a wise-ass

The trouble with deportment is that it includes *everything.* There is literally no way for anyone to go through high school without showing a bad attitude.

So Does This Mean I'm Going to Detention?

Yup.

Detention, Work Details, and Saturday Schools

Now that we've established that Detention joins death and taxes on the list of life's inevitable unpleasantries, let's talk about the different environments where you can pay off your debt to society.

DETENTION varies from school to school. It is usually held in a large, cavernous auditorium and lasts about an hour. You check in with the Detention Supervisor, who is usually an old biology teacher who got conned into babysitting dozens of rebellious teens. It's always fun to make bets on whether the supervisor will die during detention (If this should happen, you are not obligated to stay the full hour). What happens next is anybody's guess. Some schools make you copy pages from the dictionary, believing that this will

[5] And remember: Everything bad you do goes on your permanent record. This is a big folder that contains everything you've done wrong since birth. The government, future employers, and possible romantic partners all have access to this file. There are many reports of highly qualified people being turned down for high-paying jobs with multi-million dollar corporations because they threw spit wads in Geometry back in the ninth grade. The permanent record — fear it.

Chapter Four
Motorized Vehicles
or Riding the Death Machine

There's no way to describe the feeling you get the first time you sit behind the wheel of a car and realize that one mistake on your part can send this two-ton vehicle of death careening at high speed into walls, telephone poles, and unsuspecting passersby. Oh, the power at your fingertips, *the power to grant life or death to whomever you choose! The maddening, seductive power!* [4] But first, you have to figure out how to start the damn thing, and that's where your parents come in.

While for the most part a major inconvenience to any hip teen, parents do serve some purpose in life. Besides conceiving you, picking up after you, and washing your underwear, parents are invaluable driving instructors for one reason and one reason only: *they supply the car!*

This is just another example of the grand and glorious symbiotic relationship you have with your folks. They provide you with a roof, three meals a day, and material possessions. In return, you mock their old-fashioned ways, embarrass them in front of their friends, and spend their hard-earned dough. This is the sort of host/parasite relationship that makes the biological food chain go 'round.

Having risked a rather expensive material possession, as well as the possibility of injury or death should you suck, parents are understandably jumpy when teaching their young'ens to drive. For this reason, they tend to scream at the slightest provocation, be it a minor speeding infraction (say, forty miles per hour over the speed limit) or a tendency you might develop to swerve into oncoming traffic. It is not uncommon for adults in this situation to lean across from the passenger side of the car and rip the steering wheel out of the hands of the startled young driver. Should anyone try this with you, resist at all costs. That steering wheel is yours, dammit! Surrender it, and you surrender all control. Fight for that steering wheel, even if it means plunging your vehicle off the top of a steep ravine to the fiery death that awaits you below. At least, no one can accuse you of being wimpy.

Upon surviving your parent-supervised driver training sessions, it is time to hustle your buns down to the Department of Motor Vehicles to attain that tangible symbol of adulthood, the Driver's License. (Pause for reverent murmuring.)

The DMV has a three step process for proving your worthiness to control a machine with the capability of mutilating a person beyond recognition. The DMV wants to be extra sure that you're a good driver, and this way, you have three possible chances to fail. Failing a driver's test is not the end of the world. The DMV will simply record your name and send out a memo heralding your failure to all your friends, teachers, and associates, thus securing your legacy as an incompetent spank for eternity. And in two weeks, you get to go through the humiliation again.

The Eye Test

In the Eye Test, a DMV employee takes a laser beam capable of slicing uranium and shines it directly into your eyes until your retinas start to sizzle and pop. Once a viscous, blood-like fluid begins to ooze… sorry. This isn't the Eye Test at all. Ignore all that.

The Eye Test *is* a carefully designed examination to test sight. The testee, in this case, you, stands at one end of the room, while a copy of Dickens' *Pickwick Papers* is located on the opposite side. You are then required to read a chapter selected at random from the finely-printed volume. Most people cheat on this section by memorizing *Pickwick Papers* in its entirety before the exam. We suggest you do the same.

The Written Test

This portion of your test taking buffet requires you to supply answers to multiple choice questions in order to display your driving savvy. Questions like:

1) You may turn right on a red light…
   a) when traffic is clear and local laws permit it.
   b) whenever you damn well want.
   c) when you can cause the most property damage and endanger the lives of the greatest amount of people.

2) This sign means:
   a) School Crossing
   b) Heterosexual Crossing
   c) Giant Stick Figures are attacking the city! Flee for your lives!

The Driving Test

Possibly the most stressful and most feared test ever created by human beings. Many people would rather claw out their eyes than submit to the terror of the Driving Test. In this part of the exam, you will drive a car through city streets under the watchful eye of a DMV observer. It is unfair to say that DMV observers are the crankiest government employees on the face of this earth. Certainly, people who handle live explosives are less cheery. But it is true that DMV workers have the same demeanor as someone battling perpetual incontinence. How you drive on this test is utterly immaterial. DMV workers will often fail you for no reason at all, other than to justify their own existence.

But every now and then, when Jupiter and Mars are aligned, when the Fates smile upon you, when not even the most anally expulsive DMV worker can find fault with you, then you will be given that most Holy License, and you will weep. Not out of joy, but because of your Driver's License

[4] It's okay if you don't realize this now. All those films like "Red Asphalt" that you watch in Driver's Training Class will quickly remind you of the awesome killing capacity of automobiles.

antness of a Principal's job requirements fall on the shoulders of the Vice Principal. Vice Principals are responsible for doing the Principal's dirty work, mainly enforcing the numerous rules and procedures that abound in high school.

The quantity of Vice Principals (also known as VPs) varies from school to school. Some schools have just one. Some have dozens. There is one high school in Texas that has two Vice Principals for *every* student. Each of these extraneous VP's has an official title, usually about a paragraph long.

It is not unusual to see such titles as 'Vice Principal for Student Behavior," "Vice Principal for Ordering People to Smile and Say 'Have a Nice Day'," or "Vice Principal in Charge of the Cafeteria Every Other Monday During Months Ending with an 'R'." There has never been a title along the lines of 'Vice Principal who Really Doesn't Do Much, But Is Just Hanging Around Long Enough to Collect a Nice, Fat Pension," though most students believe that pretty much sums up all VP's.

The administrator that students deal with the most is the Vice Principal (or in many cases, *Vice Principals*). In fact, it would not be far off to conclude that every aspect of a student's life is influenced in some way by a Vice Principal, whether it be schoolwork, after-school jobs, or even dating. Many a budding relationship has been obliterated on the whim of one of these nefarious administrators. Vice-Principals know they have this power, and it makes them cocky. If you see one coming, it is best to hide in a nearby locker. You get a lot more dates that way.

GUIDANCE COUNSELORS: *(Blownsmokus upassus)* There's an old saying among smart asses that goes something like this: "If Guidance Counselors know so much about planning for the future, then why did they wind up as Guidance Counselors?" Such an attitude only betrays ignorance and naivete. Guidance Counselors are the smartest people on the face of the earth.

Let's say Johnny goes to his Guidance Counselor seeking advice on a possible career. 'Well, Johnny," says the quick-thinking Counselor, "You show an aptitude for physical labor. Why don't you pursue a career in ditch digging?" Johnny follows this suggestion, and almost immediately, a big, fat check from the Benevolent Order of Ditch Digging Americans winds up in the bank account of the Guidance Counselor, expressing BODDA's "gratitude" for the Counselor's "advice." In other words, Guidance Counselors take kickbacks and payola from professional organizations and occupations for the advice they give. A Guidance Counselor who's on the ball peddles high school students to the highest bidder like some colonial slave trader. This is how Counselors finance their imported sports cars and their summer condos in West Palm Beach.

But it isn't just checks from the Benevolent Order of Ditch Digging Americans or the Federation of Laboring Street Mimes that lines the pockets of the enterprising Guidance Counselor. By convincing students to go to a particular university, Counselors can receive up to a quarter of that student's tuition as a gift of thanks from the college's chancellor.

So while other working class staffs labor eight hours a day for a measly paycheck, Guidance Counselors sit in their air conditioned offices, talking with their stockbroker, making deposits in their Swiss bank account, and raking in the graft, proof positive that capitalism is alive and well, especially among administrators.

SCHOOL NURSE/SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST: *(Medicus nonavailablus)* We're in a new era in which Americans demand the best in services for their school children. As a result, many high schools now feature a nurses and psychologist as part of the administrative staff. Unfortunately, most of these Americans are unwilling to pay the higher taxes that would fund these services, so the nurse and psychologist are only available one day a week, usually every other Thursday between 10 a.m. and 2:30 p.m. Try to limit your illnesses to these particular hours.

Besides, it's not like they can prescribe drugs. The only thing nurses and psychologists can legally do is take your temperature, regardless of whether you have the flu, the clap, Addison's disease, jaundice, or a severe oedipal complex.

BOARD OF EDUCATION/DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT: *(Politicos weaslus)* Members of the community who take an active interest in education usually are elected to positions on the Board of Education. The Board is obligated to hire a Superintendent of Schools, someone who is slightly obese, frighteningly benign, and has some sort of phony Ph.D. in education. Board of Education Members and the Superintendent are directly responsible for the quality of your education. This ensures that you will never see them.

Board Members and the Superintendent are often times too concerned with their huge salaries (four times what the average teacher makes), banning naughty books like *Huck Finn* and *The Catcher in the Rye,* and making humorous armpit noises to be troubled by the day to day hassles of running a school district.

It's probably better that way.

This ends our tour of the administrative beast. As you can see, administrators are essentially harmless if you remember to avoid them whenever possible, refrain from doing bad things in front of them like cursing or smoking marijuana, and appear to be just another directionless, uninspired student. To an administrator, a student who takes interest in his or her education is probably not well in the head, and therefore a *troublemaker,* so they like it if you act as bored and unhappy as everyone else. And carry lots of brownies.

Q: *What the hell is wrong with that kid of mine?*

Parental concern like this is always admirable, but in this case, there's no need to worry. This period of sullenness, angst, and general moping is just another phase children go through in the process of becoming as messed up as their parents. Remember when little Billy used to dress up in Mommy's underclothes or when Mary wished she had a penis too? Well, the little tykes grew out of that phase just like they'll grow out of this one.[3]

High school students go through this stage of teenage angst for many reasons. An obscene number of hormones is rampaging through their bodies like a horde of Visigoths pillaging Europe. While adult-type people are able to work off any excess aggression by exercising, having lots of sex, or starting wars, high school students can only read *The Great Gatsby*. It also doesn't help that most teens are stricken with severe acne, which makes them look like a bit player in a bad 1950's sci-fi movie. This is bound to make anyone moody.

The consequences of these social traumas are reflected in the way teens behave in every day situations. High school students in their wild and never-ending quest for an identity to call their own, blindly conform to the ways and attitudes of those around them, rejecting any idea which contains even the slightest hint of originality. Simply put, high school students are as predictable as bad weather in Buffalo. While this may not be particularly healthy from a psychological standpoint, it sure does make life a heck of a lot easier. Imagine the chaos that would result if everyone insisted upon being different. People would just meander about, glassy-eyed and confused, unsure of what to say to anybody else. Pretty soon, communists would be running amuck in our cities. So realize how swell it is that people are like mindless sheep whom we can easily stereotype into only specific categories of high school students. And as you lay down to sleep tonight, thank God you live in a country as unoriginal and spineless as ours.

Chapter Three
Administrators
or Those Funny Guys in Suits

Up until 1978, very little was known about high school administrators. They were elusive creatures that roamed in packs, making them almost inaccessible to John Q. Public. The only time administrators appeared to the populace at large was at PTA meetings, and then, the only things they said were "So nice to see you" and "These brownies are delicious."

Then, social anthropologist Jennifer "Spanky" Taylor published her highly-respected thesis "Administrators in the Mist." Taylor had spent five years observing high school administrators — what they ate, migratory patterns, mating rituals, etc. Taylor's work shed new light upon these heretofore mysterious critters. It is almost sad that she never lived to see the full benefits of her research, as she was trampled to death by a herd of wild African administrators in 1981.

There are literally dozens of categories of administrators, each with different habits and dispositions. Some generalities can be made:

- All administrators are old.
- All administrators wear suits (even the female ones).
- All administrators are former teachers who couldn't relate to students, and are thus sworn to make adolescents' lives more difficult than they need to be.
- All administrators like brownies.

With this in mind, we can now delve into the realm of high school administrators. The following information is from Dr. Taylor's research, but we can reprint it without permission because she's dead.

THE PRINCIPAL: *(Biggus cheesus administratum)* Just as the mighty lion holds dominion over the vast jungle, just as the sun is orbited by all the planets, just as Gerald Ford was at one point important to somebody, so is the Principal the captain of the mighty ship known as high school. The Principal answers to everyone — teachers, students, parents, the community. Naturally, this situation has rendered them understandably paranoid. Often, Principals can be found cowering under their desks while they eat brownies and mumble incoherently about the PTA. Besides acting as a scapegoat for everything that goes wrong at the school, the Principal has several ceremonial duties. He/She speaks at assemblies, plants trees, and on occasion, can even be spotted *waving* at a student.

Some Principals see themselves as a type of absolute dictator, and as a consequence, the power has gone directly to their heads. A Principal with this type of God complex is likely to be found roaming the halls, grabbing students by the scruff of their necks, and interrogating them in the boys' bathroom. "Who's been starting the food fights in the cafeteria?" the Principal can be heard bellowing. "Which students are smoking dope? Are you loyal to me? Answer me, or I'll have you flogged!"

It is also customary at the start of the academic year for a Principal to request a human sacrifice, usually a freshperson.

One word of warning about Principals: Those who do their jobs well, who satisfy teachers, students, and parents, are usually considered a threat to the educational status quo. These types of Principals are quickly "promoted" to jobs as "administrative assistant" to the Board of Education, where they can do as little damage as possible.

VICE PRINCIPALS: *(Toadies maximus)* All the unpleas-

[3] Unless, of course, they still haven't grown out of that phase, in which case your child is screwed in the head. You'd be better off selling the kid to Iranian businessmen and forgetting this entire parenthood thing before you waste any more dough on the little deviant bastard.

TION HELD HERE) at (INSERT HIGH SCHOOL NAME HERE). A lot of people will say your high school years are the best years of your life. And do you know what? *They're right!* In your four years here at (INSERT HIGH SCHOOL NAME HERE), *you'll make new friends, learn new things, and of course, have loads and loads of fun. I remember my first year of high school.* Boy, was I scared! But *the people* here at (INSERT HIGH SCHOOL NAME HERE) *really cared about my well-being — particularly* (INSERT RANDOM TEACHER'S NAME HERE). Now, I'm sure you've all heard stories about upperclassmen hassling freshmen. These *stories are completely false. Upperclassmen are your friends.* If you have a problem, *they'll help you out.* That's why we're all here, *to make things easier for you*, not to make your life more difficult. And if trouble should arise, *be sure to call on me* (INSERT NAME HERE). *I want to make sure you have the best high school years possible. See you around.*

This speech will be repeated verbatim by several dozen people. In between speech repetitions, the marching band plays, the cheerleaders cheer, and the drill team does whatever it is drill teams usually do.

Next you will break up into groups to go off on guided tours of the campus. Groups can be divided based upon last name, age, family income, eye color, and of course, deportment. Group division is usually meaningless, however, as you will probably wind up not knowing anyone in your group, and they will end up resenting you anyhow. You'll become isolated and loathed, hated by your peers before you even set foot in a classroom. It happens like clockwork every year. It's probably happening to you right now, and you don't even realize it.

The campus tour is generally uneventful, except for the many icebreaker games you will be forced to play. Icebreaker games were invented by Bob Icebreaker of Calumet City, Illinois, who believed that forced introductions made for a better world. Mr. Icebreaker, much impressed with his own cleverness, reasoned that most people were incapable of just shaking hands and saying hello, so he devised inane games that would not only introduce people to each other, but turn them into lifelong comrades as well. Unfortunately for Mr. Icebreaker, he failed to take into account that people were annoyed by his silly, little games, thus creating an atmosphere ill-suited for making pals. During your Orientation experience, you'll make at least two lifelong enemies because of icebreaker games, which include:

• Silly Name Riddles — By far the most popular of the icebreaker games, and not coincidentally, the one most likely to incite homicide. This insipid exercise requires you to somehow mutilate your name into a witty pun, a la Shakespeare or Howard Cosell. An example is the Rhyming Adjective Game where said contestant, i.e. you, must choose an adjective that starts with the same letter as your first name—for example, "Dangerous David," "Pusillanimous Pete," "Slutty Sarah." The true horror to this particular game is that Mr. Icebreaker honestly assumed that rational people would find delight performing an exercise which monkeys can be trained to imitate.

• The Pass the Orange Game — The thinking behind this little task is that passing an orange using only your neck will create an unspoken bond between two total strangers. For an added twist, boys are often forced to pass their orange only to girls, and vice versa, causing further alienation and distress to the sexually unconfident.[2]

• The Stand Up and Tell Us Something About Yourself Nightmare — In this game, you are forced to stand up in front of others and answer probing questions about your background, such as "What's the most exciting thing that ever happened to you?" or "What's a hidden talent that you have?" This seems harmless enough, until you realize that nothing exciting has happened to you, and that the only hidden talent you have is an ability to spit cherry pits a great distance. The existence is completely without purpose or meaning is always a comforting one, especially when realized amongst strangers.

Now that you've had your icebreaker fun, it's back to the gym for a big, exciting Orientation dance. The Orientation dance is a lot like regular dances, except that at this one, people pretend to be interested in you. For a moment, you have the illusion that high school is going to be great, that you've found your place in the universe.

It doesn't last.

Chapter Two
The Students
or Your Guide to Today's Troubled Teen

You know, if you listen to a lot of pop music, talk to a lot of psychoanalysts, or see every Emilio Estevez movie ever made, you'd reach one inescapable conclusion about our nation's teens: they're loopier than a flock of loons. Our culture is hung up on the idea that the average American high school student is a raging sea of misery and anguish, and that at any given moment, Bob the Straight-A Student is going to snap and firebomb Mrs. MacMillan's home economics class. While pretentious brooding is a popular hobby amongst high school students, most teens are far more vacuous, silly, and non-threatening than we normally give them credit for.

But still the same question keeps pouring in from parents across the land…

[2] Sadly, this was Mr. Icebreaker's undoing. His games never caught on outside of orientation, business seminars, and communes that follow bizarre sexual practices. He became the laughingstock of an entire nation. His business failed, and eventually he went insane. Mr. Icebreaker died on March 16, 1988, while trying to play Pass the Orange with several large Marines.

like a cheap rug. Nevertheless, incoming high school Students are easily fooled critters, willing to believe any claim that high school is the education equivalent of Disneyland. The beauty of outright deceit is that by creating false illusions of happiness, the introduction of reality becomes all the more painful. When the poor, whimpering students realize that high school is not the Valhalla they were told about, the results can range anywhere from minor depression to psychological collapse, from loss of appetite to uncontrollable slobbering. Mental health asylums around the country have entire wards devoted to thirteen and fourteen year olds who were crushed when they discovered that attendance was *not* optional.

Now that you understand what's at stake and the methods used by THEM in the bloodthirsty conquest of the human soul, it's time to begin the process that will forever trap you in the bowels of high school. It's time to get Oriented! (As opposed to getting Occidented…)

Phase One: The Line

Ever join the army? Gone to prison? Tried to buy toilet paper in Moscow? Then you've already undergone a sampling of the first phase of Orientation—the Line from Hell.

Imagine an impenetrable wall of juvenile flesh that slowly snakes forward, but never seems to get anywhere. This is the Line from Hell. It is composed primarily of incoming freshmen and their mothers. The mothers are filled with hope and excitement for the future and talk nervously among themselves. The incoming freshmen just wish they were back home in bed.

One of the many sidelights to the Line from Hell is the perverse delight that may be gained by watching mothers embarrass their offspring. Hours of amusement can be had as you witness these mothers 1) talk in voices loud enough to be heard in the next county, 2) say hello to every other mother in line, 3) laugh at stupid things, 4) wistfully reminisce about their first year in high school, 5) try to arrange dates for their children, and 6) sing old Bavarian drinking songs. Some schools even have a "Most Embarrassing Mother" Pageant during Orientation where cash and other valuable prizes may be won. And the swimsuit competition is dynamite.

But not even "Most Embarrassing Mother" Pageants can outshine the true purpose of the Line from Hell. And that purpose is to force you into signing your very life away to the cruel high school gods. Every mildly useful bit of information about you that may one day be used as blackmail is collected through the forms that you sign. Emergency Information. Family Ancestry. Dental Records. Shoe Size. Psychiatric Analysis of Eating, Sleeping, and Sexual Habits. And of course, Deportment. There can also be other forms which ask you to answer questions in a format similar to a pop quiz. Questions like:

• What's the capital of Nebraska? (Lincoln)
• What is the official currency of Greece? (the Drachma)
• A train leaves Chicago at 9 a.m. traveling at 200 miles an hour. At what time will it pass a train leaving at 8 a.m., traveling at 172 miles an hour? (Never—the first train will derail.)
• Explain the basic tenets of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness.* (False)

The answers and contents of these forms are essentially worthless. What THEM is looking for is good penmanship. Students with sloppy handwriting can expect to be whisked away and sold to medical research laboratories, never to be heard from again.

As the line progresses, you will encounter the Valley of the Vapid PTA Mothers. These were once happy and fulfilled people, but years of doing THEM's bidding has left these wretched women staring vacantly off into space with plastered on smiles etched upon layers of make-up. In this sense, they tend to resemble Mary Kay cosmetic saleswomen. There is no truth to the rumor, however, that Nancy Reagan is a Vapid PTA Mother.

These lost souls have but one purpose in their otherwise meaningless existence: *to get you involved!* Join the Homecoming Committee! Join the Student Council! Join the Cheerleading Squad! Join! Join! Or be worthless and unloved. The decision is strictly yours.[1]

Several hours later, you will reach the end of the Line from Hell. Provided that your penmanship is up to snuff and that you've appeased the Vapid PTA Mothers, you are ready to be brainwashed, uh, enrolled. Remember, you're supposed to be enjoying this.

Phase Two: The Big Ol' Rally of Fun

The Big Ol' Rally of Fun is just that — a Big Ol' Rally that in actuality is a little Fun. "Why," you ask, "does THEM incorporate fun? Isn't this a little out of character for sinister forces that are the embodiment of all that is evil?" The answer is a big, fat, capitalized, highlighted **NO,** in the sense that THEM uses fun for its own evil gains. Just as Mom used to trick you into eating strained asparagus by pretending the spoon was a choo-choo, so does THEM fool you into thinking high school is hours of amusement by pretending it's like the Big Ol' Rally of Fun.

The Big Ol' Rally of Fun is mostly a lot of people talking about how great high school is. What follows is a reproduction of an actual Orientation speech obtained at the cost of many lives and some spare change. For your convenience, the parts containing outright deceit have been italicized.

Hi! I'm (INSERT NAME HERE), the (INSERT POSI-

[1] In most cases, it really doesn't matter if you sign up for these groups or not. Many Vapid PTA Mothers who need to fill a quota will forge your signature after you leave, obliging you to serve organizations you have no interest in. This is how people "join" the audio-visual squad and "volunteer" to scrape decade-old gum off the bottom of desks.

free chance to act like a lobotomized ass. This will add subtle meaning to your life.

Millions of people graduate from high school every year. What qualifies you to write a book about it?

Because I took notes.

Is high school really that bad?

Let's put it this way — high school students aren't drinking themselves into a coma every weekend out of happiness with their station in life.

Then how will I ever survive?

Just remember the four most beautiful words on the planet — "It's only four years." Four years is but spit in the great ocean of eternity. Unlike adults who must spend decade after decade in a boring, go nowhere job, you will be totally free in just four years. Of course, once you're out, then you'll become one of those adults with a boring, go nowhere job, so that's small comfort, really. No, I guess you won't survive. Sorry.

Why should I put myself through such misery?

Because you have to. Each culture has a ritualized program of suffering designed to squelch any idealized or romantic notions its young people may have formed. Everyone else had to go through it, so you do too, you whimpering ninny. In olden times, young Indian braves would have to face mountain lions, bears, and other deadly animals as a test of their courage. You have to take Geometry. Granted, the Indian braves got the better end of the deal, but that's neither here nor there. **REMEMBER: HIGH SCHOOL — IT'S THE LAW. YOU'RE NOT SUPPOSED TO LIKE IT.**

So why do adults lie to us about high school?

Because they are old and senile. Years of monotonous, mind-numbing employment and drug use have dulled their brain cells and erased all memories prior to their twenty-fifth birthdays. Besides, adults resent the fact that young people are stronger, faster, more efficient, and more sexually potent than old farts. Consequently, adults hide the truth to make reality all the more painful.

How do I know you're not lying?

Just start reading the book, smart-ass…

Chapter One
Orientation
or the Beginning of the End

Before you embark on the descent into Hell that is high school, you must be officially initiated, in order to insure that there is no possible legal escape for you. This process is known as Orientation. It is particularly insidious because the malevolent powers that be make it seem as if you *want* to be in high school, that you *need* high school, that you can't possibly live another day without high school. Some of the malevolent powers that be (henceforth referred to as THEM) have been known to reduce unsuspecting thirteen and fourteen year olds into weeping, quivering shadows of their former selves *begging* to be let into high school. It is not uncommon to hear newly enrolled students crying out "Oh thank you, malevolent powers that be! Thank you for including me in this grand pageant of secondary school education!"

The theme of Orientation is simple: Break down a young child's resistance by whatever means necessary. And these means make Machiavelli look like Captain Kangaroo. THEM will seize any opportunity to gain control over your mind and destiny, whether it's through subtle manipulation, threatening the family pet, or just making obscene phone calls to your home in the middle of the night. When it comes to shattering the innocence of youth, THEM doesn't futz around.

What makes THEM's approach successful, and at the same time, chilling, is its recruitment methods. THEM lures its potential students (otherwise known as "prey " or "fresh meat") by utilizing respected parents and even fellow students as bait. By making it appear as if high school is condoned and even endorsed by normal, right-thinking members of the community, THEM tricks its prey into accepting high school as a joyous and much yearned for destination (Incidentally, the Republican Party functions in a similar manner.).

Orientation — the Methods, the Madness

There are two basic approaches to Orientation employed by THEM, both equally popular and almost interchangeable. In Approach #1, you, the potential student, are introduced to approximately 438 other students, who through sincere looking smiles, will try to squelch any fear or anxiety you may have. All of them will swear that they plan to spend every waking hour attending to your beck and call. "If you have any problems," they say in soothing tones, "just come to me."

You will never see these people again.

All 438 will secretly disappear to a remote South American country where they will be replaced by new students who couldn't care less about your welfare and will probably revel in causing you undue misery. This is known as the *bait and switch*. Fear it.

Approach #2 is a time tested and highly successful system recognized by Orientation experts the world over as *outright deceit*. There is nothing tricky about this particular approach. THEM simply boasts about aspects of high school that would appeal to potential students, such as free soda for every freshman and optional attendance. You don't have to be a Nobel Prize winner to realize that THEM is lying

Your Guide to High School Hate

PHILIP MICHAELS

A Little Introduction

Welcome! Welcome to the wonderful world of high school, the next stepping stone on your ultimate journey to adulthood. Gone are the youthful days of elementary and intermediate school. Farewell to recesses and childhood games. You've just entered the new and exciting world of secondary school education, four wild and exciting years, chock full of fun and memories. These are the best years of your life! These are the years that you'll look back on and smile.

Actually, that's all a load of crap.

High school is neither a fantastic dreamworld nor a breeding ground of happiness. It's not even a goal to look forward to. High school is the root of more unpleasant memories and psyche-damaging experiences than in any other time in a person's life with the possible exceptions of a brief stint with the Manson family or dousing yourself with gasoline around open flame. Mere social traumas like divorce, war, pestilence, and stomach flu pale in comparison to the four years of educational hell you must submit yourself to in order to be declared a fit adult. What makes high school extra tricky, and as a result, more odious, is the surplus of two-faced liars and infidels who will try to con you into thinking that this suffering and agony somehow builds character. You could cover twelve acres of farmland with that fertilizer.

And that's why this guide exists — to expose such lies, to alert the unknowing student to the sea of deceit swelling around him/her, and to teach students how to gain a perverse enjoyment by making everyone else as miserable as them. *Your Guide to High School Hate* is the one place for troubled teens to turn to for truth, other than "Welcome Back, Kotter" or "Happy Days" reruns. What's more, this book serves as a powerful reminder to ex-students, the lucky few who survived, about the sheer torment and trauma of their high school years, making it even easier to gloat at our nation's young people.

Now to answer a few questions about this high school business that may be dancing around in your brain…

So what exactly is high school?

Some people will tell you that high school is a secondary education system designed to prepare the youth of today for the world of tomorrow. These are *lies*, lies that fester in the mouths of jackals, heathens, and vice-principals. In reality, high school should be thought of as a holding cell, intended to keep minors from enjoying their carefree teen years. It's the one time in your life where the government takes complete and utter responsibility for you, provided you don't wind up on welfare or get elected to Congress.

It wasn't always like this. Once upon a time in our nation's history, there was no high school. Kids 14 to 18 were free to do as they pleased, which usually meant wandering aimlessly about the prairie, shooting at furry critters, or waiting for cable television to be invented. True, not a very exciting existence, but a sufficient one nevertheless.

But this wasn't good enough for some people who just couldn't let things be. The government, exhibiting the same wisdom and reasoning that gave us the McCarthy hearings and the Reagan administration, decided that high school should be mandatory. They claimed that this would only benefit the United States, that teenagers would become fine, upstanding members of the populace, that democracy would thrive, and that our nation would take its preordained place as the big cheese amongst international powers. This was to hide their true motives — the government can't stand to see anyone happy.

And so it was that high school came to be. The fourteen through eighteen year olds, heretofore free as the wild beasts, were cruelly consigned to a stifling classroom to be kept out of sight and out of mind. The students' resentment grew, and America went down the toilet. Now the Japanese own our buildings, the Middle East controls our oil, and the dollar is trounced by the German mark. Even Canada laughs.

So now you have to go to high school. It's the law, just like you can't tear the tags off of mattresses or broadcast a baseball game without the express written consent of Major League Baseball.

High school is just another way-station in the process of avoiding life. Consider the following cycle: You're born. You go to school to learn things. You learn things to get a job. You get a job to make money. You make money to buy stuff. You buy stuff to enjoy yourself. But before that can happen, you die. To summarize: born, learn, work, die. This is the sort of absurdity that will be the cornerstone of your high school life.

What will I get out of high school?

• A diploma that will enable you to work in any fast food restaurant around the world.

• Emotional scars that may take a lifetime to heal.

• A stunning realization that devoting the first eighteen years of your life solely to graduating from high school was probably not time well spent.

• A chance to act immature and do stupid things that you could never get away with in real life. Only high school students can toilet paper houses, urinate off roofs, and drink until they swim in a pool of their own vomit. If real adult-type people tried any of that, they would get arrested, or whopped upside the head. Think of high school as your last

JASON SNELL

First*Text*

You Can't Write *That!*

For me, editing *InterText* is usually a breath of fresh air. As most of you know, I've spent the last year as the editor in chief of my college newspaper, and all told I've been working for the paper for three years. In that time, we've seen the coming of a phenomenon described by some with the obscenely-overused phrase *political correctness.*

Let's avoid the buzzwords, shall we? The key here is that, as a member of the news media, I've been in the middle of this tug-of-war over what is printable and what should not see the light of day, over what opinions are acceptable and what opinions are "wrong."

And on many occasion I've been called an oppressor. The term "dangerous right-wing element" was once used to describe me. I laughed heartily when I heard about it — I'm a moderate with a newly-minted Bachelor of Arts degree from perhaps the most radical social science department in the United States, namely UCSD's Communication Department. Not bad, for a dangerous element.

The key word here is *sensitivity*, a word that usually ends up describing how people who feel guilt for social misdeeds by others try to make up for the problems with wordplay. One UCSD graduate student took to referring to blacks (or, if you prefer, African-Americans) as "Africana/os." As one black friend of mine said: "I'm not an Africano." But even though the term was nonsense, it at least gave off the *sensation* of moral authenticity. That's how it works. Colored People become Negroes, who become blacks, who become African-Americans, who become People of Color. (Let's hope Africana/o doesn't get beyond my own concrete-and-eucalyptus environs.) From Colored People to People of Color? I can see the massive shift in social awareness there.

But sensitivity still reigns, and it crops up in the strangest places. In *InterText*, however, I usually feel safe. It's nice to know that when I placed the different national flags on the PostScript cover of our First Anniversary Issue, I wouldn't get any irate mail complaining about how I put the flags of oppressive, racist countries — namely the United States, Britain, Canada and Australia — at the top of the page.

I put those flags there because I wanted to, and because the bulk of our subscribers are from those countries. On campus, however, I'd simply be branded a "dangerous element."

So why am I telling you all this?

Because of our cover story, a little ditty called "Your Guide To High School Hate" by Philip Michaels, one of my colleagues here at *The UCSD Guardian.*

Michaels is a satirist by nature, in addition to being the 1992-93 *Guardian* Opinion Editor and an award-winning humor writer. He used to write for a campus humor paper, but quit when he became disgusted by the bathroom humor that dominated its pages.

However, some people might consider "Your Guide to High School Hate" to be an evil, oppressive piece of work. First off, it's Americanocentric. (Didn't I promise *no buzzwords?* I'm sorry.) The humor is based on what has become American popular culture's archetypal high school — the kind you might see on ridiculous television shows like, for example, *Beverly Hills, 90210.*

So I'm hoping that most people will see the humor in "Hate," even those who aren't American.

More problems — in real life, high schools in America are riddled with crime; kids carry guns to school every day. Philip's story isn't about that sort of stuff. It's about the banal parts of high school — the subjects that seem so incredibly important when kids live through them, but, ultimately, are worth nothing at all.

It's satire and humor. Some of it may offend you. Michaels makes references to Iranian businessmen, African school administrators, and Russian toilet paper.

Are these racist and insensitive remarks? No. Can they be construed as such? Oh, yes. Definitely.

And if you do get offended by all this, then by all means send your letters here. We'll try to print them, in fact — you're all entitled to your opinions.

As is Philip Michaels.

Some people suggested that we edit out some of the potentially offensive jokes in "Hate" before printing it in *InterText.* Not a chance. This is what Philip Michaels has to say. If some people out there don't understand satire, that's a cross they'll have to bear. They're missing out on what I consider one of the crowning achievements of human art, believe it or not.

And if you ever hear someone talking about how a person they don't agree with shouldn't even be allowed to be heard, do me a favor: hit 'em for me.

An insensitive opinion?

Sure. But it's *my* opinion.

JASON SNELL has graduated *cum laude* from the University of California, San Diego, with a Bachelor's Degree in Communication. He is finishing up as editor in chief of *The UCSD Guardian*, and will attend UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism beginning in August. In the meantime, he'll be interning at his hometown newspaper and continuing to put out *InterText.*

InterText

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Our next issue is scheduled for June 15, 1992.

InterText

High School Hate
from Philip Michaels

Jeff Zias

Robert Hurvitz

Vol. 2, No. 3
May–June 1992