

ESCAPE VELOCITIES

Jim Snowden

From the Desk of Henry Ellis

August 25th, 1985

For starters.

I've started this up again because the damn thing is back.

There's nothing I can do about it. It's returned, and I have to start this thing again. Prove that the equation $x^n + y^n \neq z^n$ where $n > 2$. I've got to go back and work on it. It's been five years.

I think I can take it.

I looked around for a long while for my old notebooks.

Imagine spending your last summer week digging through your house for an old Mead loose-leaf binder. My hands are covered with paper cuts from all the packing material I've mined. I never let the parents find out, of course. They don't need to know. I've put them deep enough in hock for counselors and therapists as it is. Christmases were thin for three years because of those leeching motherfuckers.

It isn't so pathetic, really, my digging for my old words. After you've walked up the hill to stand on the big chalk T that stands for Tooele, there isn't much else to do for entertainment here. The bishop who lives next door lets me shoot baskets in his yard. He thinks he'll



convert me and I'll wind up the math genius of the 6th Ward basketball team. It got old the second week of June.

That's Utah for you.

Anyway, I stopped looking for the notebooks this afternoon. It really didn't matter whether I found them or not. It was just something to keep me occupied. I can't just stare at a problem for hours. I need an activity— some purely nonmathematical pastime, or I flip out.

That's why I've started writing again. It's my way of keeping the noise level down in my head (until my mom graduates law school and moves us to a place where I can get some hard drugs—and for any Mormons reading this, I'm not talking about caffeine, you schmucks). After I get all the regular bullshit this place dumps on me out on paper, I can work on Fermat's bullshit.

He never did solve his own theorem. I'm convinced of that. His “no room in the margins” comment was just a dig at mathematicians. Having lived in this shit pit of purity for six years, I know how he must have felt. You know what the last lines of the school song here are?

Here we will stay until we die / Forever and forever in Tooele.

What's shocking is that talk like that doesn't lead to a higher suicide rate here. Therapists used to tell me that I had serious adjustment problems. I think if you can adjust to Utah, *that* is a serious problem.

Anyway, Fermat never got anywhere with the theorem. He didn't have the theory behind him. He didn't have Gerhard Frey and his bizarro world elliptical equation to work with. (His articles paper my walls. It's his fault I'm on this kick again. If I have to be carried

out of here, blame him, not me. If it's true for Judas Priest fans it's got to be true for me, right?) He didn't have Sophie Germaine and Euler and Galois and on and on.

Imagine being that brilliant— that right-on about so much, and not getting it. It's kind of like being the Minnesota Vikings in the Super Bowl. Yeah, you were great, but you never won the big one. Imagine the guy who almost figured out relativity, whoever he or she was. Imagine this poor bastard, following the same logic Einstein followed, with elevators and bicycles and trains and lightning bolts. Imagine he's worked for years struggling with the math and then he turns around and here's this patent clerk taking all the glory— just because our hero went to bed early one night or decided to take in a stage show (or whatever geniuses did in 1905).

This is kind of like my Algebra II teacher, Mr. Call. (I know. I'm taking Algebra II. I was doing abstract algebra at Cal Tech when I was eight. Thank you, therapists. Thank you so much.) The poor guy almost made it to the space shuttle program. You know the deal. The Teacher-in-Space thing that President Hood Ornament recommended last year. He won't pay the poor bastards any more or hire a few so they aren't teaching classes the size of Madison Square Garden, but he'll shoot one into orbit. Like that treatment did anything for dogs and monkeys.

Sorry, I digress.

Thing is, I'm not all that impressed with the space shuttle. I remember when I first heard about it. I asked my mother whether it could take us to Mars (the place that NASA claims we'll go by 2000 or

so). She said no. I asked her if it could take us to the moon, the site of our glorious future moonbase and observatory. She said no. I asked what the fuck it did do. She said it went into orbit. News flash: WE'VE BEEN IN ORBIT! Since then, Utah has sent Senator Jake Garn up so that he could throw paper airplanes in the cargo hold and fart around with ant farms and crystals. It just doesn't do anything for me. All the good NASA projects are on hold, like the sign on the north side of town that says COMING SOON: TOOELE VALLEY MALL. The sign's been there since Ford was President. Dear NASA, wake me when you FUCKING DO SOMETHING!

Still, Mr. Call is dead-solid impressed with the whole idea of sending a teacher into space. He talked about it so much the first day of class that he hardly had time to tell us that tardiness would cost us 1% of our grades. He wasn't trying to impress us with the fact that he was nearly chosen. He was excited, thrilled, and probably hoping that the sixteen teachers between him and STS-25 would come down with mono at the last minute so he could take his ride. He told us he got up early to watch every launch, and nobody watches those anymore.

There is one other thing.

There's this girl. Nothing good ever got started with that, but there it is. There's this girl sitting next to me. I don't know how to describe her, except to tell you how sitting next to her, just sitting next to her, made me feel. When I was six, I was hanging out in the office of a professor friend of my dad's. There was an unfinished modular series problem on the blackboard. It was Gaussian. I didn't know that at the time. My dad told me later. Anyway, I went up to the board and

finished the problem. I just looked at it, felt this instant link. I didn't just perceive the pattern. I was a part of it. I was the part that moved the problem to its solution. I worked it out on the board while my dad and the professor stood there watching. I was right. But that's not even the point. I was in those equations. You couldn't separate us.

I felt the same with this girl. She was the resolution of a Gaussian modular series equation.

Ain't that poetry?

Not that it matters. I know what this is. It's transference. Therapists told me all about it. I'm not really connected to her, and there's no way that I'll solve her. She's a pretty girl who can set her sights on quarterbacks and class presidents. Why should she stick her hands in the back pockets of a guy who talks to himself in hallways? Besides, she's probably a Mormon. If we ever did start talking, she'd probably try to convert me and then I'd have to kill her and bury her body under the big chalk T.

In front of her was a big lump of a guy who looked like one of my cousin's mashed potato statues. His chin just sort of merged into his chest. He wore a denim jacket and jeans with the telltale white circle in the back pocket indicating an intimate relationship with chaw. I figure he must be from Erda, and the mere fact of having to live with twenty brain-dead, Pabst-Blue-Ribbon-drinking motherfuckers forces him to dress like that.

The other kids in the class are the usual college bound/honors suspects. One is the daughter of the Junior High Principal, Mr. Killoworth. She's surprisingly thin, given her family background (her

parents could easily be mistaken for the two fat guys who rode the tiny motorcycles in the *Guinness Book Of World Records*. Maybe that fate awaits her still.). Another couple are the children of Mormon bishops. Three are teachers' kids. There's one guy who's from Pennsylvania with whom I should be friends but am not, for some reason. I don't know. Anyway, most of them are also in either my AP Computer class or my Accelerated English course.

The first exam is tomorrow. It's just a diagnostic test, to see if you know everything you need to know to start the course. So it's a freebie A to anyone who's been awake the last three years.

Tonight I'm going to try to put the cute girl out of my mind. She'd never go for me anyway. She's probably going out with some GQ Mormon guy. She parks her hand in his back pocket and he does the same with her as they cruise the halls. I know you might say that I'm selling myself short, and you may be right. But when nobody's buying, it's hard to sell long.

Besides, I'm moving next year. My mother's finishing law school and then we're *so* out of here. I don't want to get tied down to a girl.

It should be a good class.

August 26th, 1985

The big exam has come and gone. I aced it. (Natch.) I usually don't like to say anything for fear of jinxing it, but in this case I'm sure I brought my brain with me when I attended the exam, so I'm sure I did all right. Everyone else seemed pleased and sure of themselves at

the end as well, so it looks like no one will resent me for blowing the curve this time.

August 27th, 1985

You'll never believe this.

There are some things you see in life that are impossible to describe. I remember the first time I looked at Jupiter through my telescope and made out the yellow cloud bands and the Great Red Spot. It's hard to say why seeing it through a 4-inch refractor has more meaning than seeing a big picture of it in *Life* magazine. The magazine photo is better, clearer, larger, closer. But placing it on the photoplate and printing it next to Princess Di reduces it to the explicable. The planet is the princess is the country singer is the televangelist. Just another thing. But see it through a telescope, and the tiny image is impossible to describe. You have to see it yourself.

It was a different yet similar feeling that I had today in class.

I walked in and all the tests were laid out on our desks for us. Mr. Call occupied himself with the board. I glanced at him for a second just because he was moving, then turned back to the rows of desks.

On my way to my desk, I had to pass Derrick's. I swear I didn't mean to look at his exam. I glanced at it the same way I glanced at Mr. Call, just to note its presence before I moved on to my own business. The glance showed me a grid of red ink on top of which was a circle. Inside the circle was a 2.

A number 2.

I stood there, as if I were that priest in *The Omen* who got the pole through his neck. I had trouble registering the concept. There was his name at the top. Derrick Raleigh. The first problem ($x+4=9$, solve for x), he solved correctly. But after that, his test was covered in more red ink than the Reagan Administration. The guy from Pennsylvania, Pete-something, who should be my friend but isn't, walked into the room and asked what I was staring at. Then he looked and wound up staring at it too. Little Miss Killoworth came in a second later, walked over and stared. Then Gorgeousness walked in. She stared like the rest of us. It was as if we were in some tribe on PBS that's seeing a TV monitor for the first time.

A 2?

Not just two points out of ten, or two out of twenty. We've all seen those before. No, this was two out of a hundred. He'd solved exactly one problem out of fifty. Because he showed no work, my guess is that the first answer was the only one he could discreetly copy from a neighboring test; after that, forty-nine red slashes made it look like one of Jack the Ripper's dinner dates. It froze me right there on the carpet. If any of us were Catholic, we'd have crossed ourselves. I have to say it's one of the few times I've felt close to any of these people. Pure horror will do that to you.

Usually, the idiocy around here comes in ways that are easier to take because they make sense. Some dolt who doesn't really belong in the class decorates his test paper with an artistically-rendered question mark (a skull instead of a period, or lots of spider webs and Motley Crue logos around the curve). It's a challenge. He's saying that

he's stupid, and who the fuck are you to change it? He takes his stupidity as a natural law. Existence itself depends on it. If you took it away, then the universe would collapse into chaos, electrons would crash into nuclei, and all would be dust. The question mark someone like that draws says to the teachers, "Can you even conceive of the monumental forces with which you are trifling?"

I hate people who are stupid by choice.

This was different. Either Derrick did this on purpose or he is seriously out of it and in need of hospitalization, and since no sane person would bother to think up 49 consecutive wrong answers in order to fail a test when he could just leave them blank, I had to believe that the answer was behind curtain number two. We stayed in a circle around the slaughtered test until Mr. Call finally turned away from his chalkboard, stomped over and broke us all up.

Gorgeousness asked, "Did you see that?"

"Yes," I said, surprised that she would speak to me. She had a voice, oh what a voice. Mathematically perfect pitch. Mozart could have used her to calibrate his piano.

"What do you think it means?"

I struggled to find something funny to say. The best thing I could come up with was something I'd heard on a sitcom (a sitcom I hoped she hadn't seen). "I don't know. But I am afraid."

Gorgeousness chuckled. I wish she hadn't done that. It's so hard to figure out what that kind of thing means. Does it mean she just liked the joke or that she liked me and was laughing because I said it?

The bell rang. Mr. Call said that we'd all done extremely well on the first test, just as he had expected. I suppose he felt it was impolitic to mention Derrick's score, but that was okay. He was telling the truth to all of us who were there. He noted that there were a couple of problems that several kids in the class had missed, and he would go over them before starting us in the textbook today.

As he started number 21, Derrick lumbered into the room. Tardy – automatic 1% penalty. There went half of his two points right there. Mr. Call looked hard at Derrick, but Derrick ploughed right through his stare and wedged himself into his desk.

When I was seven, I failed my first test at Cal Tech Calculus Camp. It was so embarrassing. Everyone else was so happy with their scores and I blew mine. I looked at the happier kids and wondered what business I had around them. I was just a hick kid from, well, let's count them up: Topeka, Irving, Albuquerque, Tucson, Fresno, Pendleton and finally Tooele. Yeehaw! And the other kids were from Bronx Science and Choate and all those famous schools where you wear uniforms and have a house mother like on *Facts of Life*. All the blood rushed to my skin. I was red and scared.

Now, I looked at Derrick for some sign that he felt the same way I had, but he smiled at his test, folded it four ways, and shoved it in his back pocket with his chew. No red face, no pale face, just doughy Derrick, scratching idly at a zit on his chin and facing front. Was I facing the ultimate Farmer kid? Was he the final product, like the Terminator? The next generation, advanced prototype, tobacco-chewing, cow-tipping moron?

I don't know, but I was scared sitting there, really scared. I'm glad it's the weekend. (First week of school—three days on, then Labor Day weekend. Stupid, huh?) I'll have to go out in the backwoods with Spankey (that's my dog's name, you pervert), and get Gorgeousness and the Idiot out of my mind.

Then it's back to work. I have some equations that I have to work through. It's tedious stuff, but if I'm right, I might pair a prime elliptical equation with a prime mod soon. I'm following Euler's and Germaine's idea of solving for the primes in a series first and then...aw fuck it. If I tell you, I don't have to do it, do I?

August 31st, 1985

I had some relatives come up this weekend. My aunt brought her husband, nine-fingered Pete, to our house for the Labor Day weekend. Usually, I'm very interested to see people from outside Utah. You find if you spend more than a month here, you begin to think of them in the same terms as Basilisks, Hippogriffs and Centaurs. And even though I think most of my relatives are simple people, I can tolerate them without yawning too large or vomiting on the carpet. Pete's another case, though. Now that I've met Derrick, I can point to Pete and say, "Derrick, your future."

I felt horrible for my parents all night. They had to try to talk down to Pete without sounding like they were doing it. It was as if they were doing some method actor stunt where they'd remember the last time they suffered a serious brain fever that prevented them from thinking clearly, and then act like that person. My dad had the help of

a lot of good scotch whiskey from the State Liquor Store. You know, you'd think with as many relatives as Mormon families have, they'd be more tolerant of alcohol.

Or maybe all Mormons talk like Pete, "Let me tell you what. When I was a ground pounder in the Pusan perimeter, there was a lot of mud, and sometimes things blew up."

My aunt, Fiona, would rub his shoulder and beam at him as if his every word and gesture fulfilled a dream of hers. I can see how someone might settle for a guy like Pete. Low expectations, self-hatred, the comfort of knowing that, on your darkest day, you'll have someone else to kill before turning the gun on yourself. But I couldn't get my head around the idea that Pete was for Fiona what Fermat's theorem was for me. The best thing my mom could say about him was that he never hit her. How was that enough to ignite a passion?

So we sat at dinner. I brought my math book. My mother shot a glare at me but I returned it, saying with my eyes, "Hey, you don't let me have whiskey." I think she got the message because she looked somewhere else. I kept on with my math.

Pete said he had a lot of food allergies while my mother put lamb and potatoes and corn on his plate. His salt sensitivity didn't keep him away from the shaker. His lactose intolerance and bad heart did nothing to deter him from the butter dish, and his dislike of lamb meat didn't keep him from eating four slices of it.

When it was over, I had hoped that I would be excused so that I could leave my parents to face social doom. But my mother told me no. I was nearly an adult, and should begin to participate in adult

conversation. I tried to say with my eyes, “What has that got to do with this?” but this time her gaze fixed on me. I shut up.

“So, Henry,” Pete pointed his coffee spoon at me, “What are you up to there?”

“Quadratic equations.”

“Let me ask you something,” Pete said, “You got a girlfriend?”

“No.”

“I didn’t think so.”

“What do you mean you didn’t think so?” I said.

“I mean, you’re so involved with your books, Henry. That’s all. You’re a good student, I bet.”

I didn’t say anything one way or another. I hoped silence would make him forget me and move on to another target. But his stupid, flabby face was still pointed at me.

“I wasn’t a good student,” Pete said, “Except in shop. I was great in shop. That’s what got me where I am.”

“And just where is that,” I said.

“I’m furnace maintenance foreman. I know that wouldn’t do much for a brain like you,” Pete said, “But it’s damn good, honest work. Lost my finger doing it. And let me tell you about smarts. There’s two kinds. Book smarts and people smarts, and I’ve got people smarts all over the place.”

Again, I didn’t say anything.

“I know how to talk to people,” Pete said, “That was great lamb, by the way. It almost makes me like lamb, although it’s going to give me the wind something awful, ain’t it honey?”

Fiona laughed and nodded. She reminded me of one of those women on the Jesus Channel who wear big purple wigs and makeup and nod reverently at whatever the guy with the white suit and cement hair says. Motherfuck, what does she see in the guy? I guess it's a good thing she doesn't see it in anyone else.

"Anyway," Pete said, "You oughta get your nose out of that book and start chasing skirts, or else people are going think you're queer. I'm surprised your daddy hasn't told you that."

It was hard to tell if my dad's face was turning red, but I thought it was. His knuckles were white around his scotch glass.

"Well, I do take my studies seriously," I said, "But believe me, Pete, that when all that studying is behind me, I will aspire to gain your people smarts."

"Henry," Mom put her hand on mine and squeezed. She had to know what was coming.

"And though I'm sure I'll never reach your level, I will reach, and stretch and strive, to become every bit the beer guzzling, fat, flatulent pustule that you are. And though I hope to leave a moist trail wherever I move, I'm sure that yours will always be more viscous than mine."

Pete just sat there, his mouth open. My Mom squeezed my hand until the bones ground against each other. Fiona called me a "shitty fuck." I didn't acknowledge the pain in my hand, and I figured if Pete wanted to get up and hit me, that was fine too. He didn't, though. He just kept staring at me in the silence, as if he no one had ever insulted him before. I felt better than I ever had. Though I knew

that my parents would deprive me of money and work supplies until I apologized (and that, faced with this, I would apologize to him), I still got some satisfaction because we'd both know that the apology was forced, and not the result of guilt. I'd feel it short-term, but that fucker would remember it every time he inflicted his smug little lecture on another kid.

I spent the rest of the night in my room, which was where I wanted to be in the first place. I finished my homework. Soon Pete's voice grew loud enough that I could hear him through the door. He went on and on about Pusan and furnaces and this time he saw an African Bushman pee. His brain is like the ocean surface after a ship sinks. Every so often, little bits of meaningless garbage from an unbelievable disaster bubble up to it.

As he blathered and boomed, my feeling of triumph drained. I'd belted him as hard as I could (more crippling insults occurred to me later, while I solved math problems, and I stored them away for future wars with trolls). He'd felt it, yet he kept drooling stupidity and arrogance all over the house. I remembered those big question marks that dumb students made on their test papers and felt sick when I realized that I'd just come up against the colossal force of stupidity, and lost.

My mom extorted an apology from me, as predicted, and grounded me for a week. If Pete knew the apology arose from threats instead of guilt, I doubt he cared. In fact, I got three more chances to hear Pete's secrets of success and happiness before non-refundable tickets took him and Fiona away late Sunday . My parents drove them

to the airport, so I got the house to myself. I listened to Tchaikovsky and Bill Cosby records and worked on Fermat.

Anyway, class on Monday wasn't much. I turned in my work. Derrick turned in his. I was surprised to see him. I wondered if Mr. Call had spoken to him. Somebody should, if for no other reason than to explain to him how to turn on a washer/dryer.

September 3rd, 1985

Miss Gorgeous talked to me. Again! More on that in a minute.

The day started out with a lecture on the quadratic equation. I started thinking about the work I'd done last night. The equations weren't coming out right. They weren't matching and I couldn't tell if it was because they couldn't, or because I was fucking it up somewhere. I needed another pair of eyes.

Paying more attention to Mr. Call but understanding less, Derrick stared at the blackboard as if he were looking into some black, deep void. There's another test in two weeks and the guy from Pennsylvania who should be my friend but isn't is taking bets on what he calls the "Limbo Pool." He calls it that because the main question of the pool is, "How low can he go?"

I've been thinking a lot about Derrick. I wonder if he has a girlfriend. I realize it's a strange thing to wonder and I shouldn't care. But I look at him the way you look at those Amazon tribesmen in documentaries. He's one of those guys who hangs around in the four-way intersection by the cafeteria chewing tobacco, who lives in Erda with two thousand cows. Is there some girl who says when she looks at

Derrick, “Ooh, baby, break me off a piece of *that*. I’ve got the fever, and his balls have the cure”? Looking at that neck that seems to be just a narrowed part of his chest and smelling the decades of cowshit that permeate his skin and denim jacket, it’s hard to picture. He is here though, which means that somehow a similar calamity must have happened before. (Sure, maybe his dad’s a stockbroker and his mother is Queen of Belgium, but we’re talking probabilities here.) Still, maybe love is blind and noseless, and there is a woman desperately longing for him. Out there in the halls she sighs, “When will he notice me? Why won’t he notice me?”

I think stuff like that about women like Miss Gorgeous. I wonder why the law of averages won’t break my way just once. Other people get girlfriends so easily-- it seems like they don’t even have to ask. Women just jump on them. I figure it’s Utah, you know? They run into each other at church and shit, and their parents know each other and that’s the way it works. I can’t fight that. I have hope though. When I move in nine months, and get to a real town in Oregon or Washington (my parents haven’t decided yet), there will be lots of women who don’t care that I’m an atheist and a communist. Hell, there might be women who love me for that, and who won’t think I’m such a freak.

Maybe I’m rooting for Derrick. Maybe that’s it. If he can make it, then so can I. I mean, it stands to reason. The laws of averages eventually have to break your way. From the first amoeba to this afternoon, the laws of averages have been bringing living things together, mating them. So if it can happen for him, it should be able to

happen for me. If anything, my odds are better than his. I shower every day.

I hope he has a girlfriend right now.

That just brings me closer.

Which brings me to Miss Gorgeous. I was in the library, sitting next to an old Commodore VIC-20 computer with its ancient tape drive. There aren't many good books in the high school library (or in the main Tooele library, for that matter). You can read the old classics if you feel like it, but that wasn't why I was there today. I was reading one of those self-esteem books they keep in the career planning section. You know the kind. They have titles like, *Be Proud of Yourself*, *No One is Like You*, and *There's Only What's Right for You*.

I hate these books. I do. I loathe them. I don't believe a word in them. If I wrote one of these books, it would have a title like, *Nursing your Hatred: Resentment as a Lifelong Pastime*, or, *Someday, You'll Get Them All*. I've found that having a good self-image is self-defeating. It takes so much energy to maintain it that you don't have time for anything else. I prefer feeling shitty and getting things done. I look at it this way: the happy guy and I will feel equally good when we're dead. The big question is, who accomplished more?

Still, I like to take the quizzes. I like finding out just how negative I am, and discovering if there's any chance for negativity that I'm missing. A counselor once told me I had an extremely negative attitude, but was astonishingly conscious of it. I question his objectivity: I was strangling him with his pink pastel tie at the time.

(Just kidding. I'd never strangle a counselor. There'd be an inquest, and I'd have to fill out forms.)

So, I'd just chosen *C, three times a week*, on a quiz that was meant to determine whether or not I was a sympathetic wife, when Miss Gorgeous appeared at my table. Too late to hide the book. It was best to make some sort of joke. The trouble was, I couldn't think of one.

"Is it helping you?" she asked. I wasn't sure of her level of sarcasm. I hoped it was high.

"Yes," I said. "My craving for pastel sweaters and berets increases with every line." I put the book down, and realized I'd said something awful. I told myself to shut up.

"Good one," she said.

Again, I scanned for sarcasm. Tough call. "Thanks."

"So, do you like self-esteem?"

It's very frustrating when someone you like asks you questions. All of a sudden there's a right and a wrong answer. Therapists used to tell me there were no such things. Of course there weren't. Not with them. I didn't give a shit what conclusions they reached about me. This was different. I wished I didn't care, so that I could tell her off and get her away from me, but she was making it so difficult by just ... being her.

"Self-esteem? If it doesn't bother me, I don't bother it," I said.

She only let out a polite chuckle this time. Then the bell rang.

I thought about Miss Gorgeous while I sat in AP Computers. I wondered why she would talk to me if she didn't like me. On the other

hand, I couldn't see how she could like me. No one else ever has. I wondered if she were setting me up for some joke. Toy with the school outcast for fun and profit. I sat through an entire class thinking about it, and didn't get too much done on that day's program. On my way out, I looked at several girls and compared the ways that they looked at me to the way that Miss Gorgeous looked at me. The way the other girls looked at me was cold, uninterested, and even slightly disgusted. I wasn't sure I could see that, but then again, I was probably seeing what I wanted to see.

Oh, screw it. You know those word problems they give to kids with the multiple-choice answers? The Iowa tests? Answer *D* on those tests is always, "There is not enough information to solve the problem." Of course, the answer is never *D*. You can eliminate it immediately. In this case, the answer was *D*, it was driving me crazy, and I didn't need this. Only one thing is allowed to drive me crazy at any one time, and that privilege belongs to Pierre De Fermat.

Whether Miss Gorgeous likes me or not doesn't matter. I won't be here much longer. It's probably best not to start anything. It's like I'm an Army kid. I don't want to get into something that's just going to leave me a while later. Best not to bother, and it's better than thinking about all this crap. She was just being friendly. She's a friendly girl. But she'll be gone soon, while Fermat will remain. Best to go with Fermat.

End of story. I'm not sure if it was worth it. My hand hurts.

September 4th, 1985

I should stop calling her “Miss Gorgeous.” I found out today that her name is Teresa Bytheway. I wonder how anyone outside a James Bond movie managed to get a last name like that, but she has. So I’ll call her Teresa from now on.

So, what to say...

Derrick was late today, again. I think he has a negative grade right now. He came lumbering in swinging his arms like a giant ape. It made me wonder how Derrick was manufactured, and what’s more, what he was doing with us. There’s a guy I know, Mike, who takes my AP Computer class. As soon as I mentioned that Derrick stank up a chair in Algebra II, he said, “Did Mr. Call lose a bet? Get this. We were in shop together, back in Junior High. And Derrick came up to me because he’d lost his chaw, see? And he was pissed, figuring I’d stolen it to goof on him. I never would have done that. It would have meant touching his ass, and I don’t want to even imagine what that would feel like. So anyway, he gets up in my face, asking me where the motherfucking chaw was, and so I told him he probably left it behind the Diamoginized Chermaphlrm. And check it out, he said, ‘I already looked there.’”

It’s the sort of story you think someone is making up for a joke, but given Derrick’s exam score, it was hard to see how it could have happened any other way.

Of course, I’m not entirely sure why I care about the adventures of Derrick in school. He has no real effect on me one way or another. I mean, he’s stupid. Amazingly stupid. Wide World of

Sports stupid. Still, while that is not without a certain entertainment value, like a fatal car crash, it can't be all of it. People slow down to look at a fatal car crash, and then think, "There but for the grace of God go I," but they don't stop, take pictures and interview the victim who's still wedged in the passenger front seat. I find I think about Derrick a lot. If you don't care about a person, then what they say and do can have no meaning to you, can it?

So, I wonder what the deal is with my interest in Derrick. If someone were writing one of those after school specials, they'd say that I was insecure about my intelligence and that's why I have to bust on Derrick's. Maybe I am. I bring up my accomplishments a lot, as if I were wearing them as a uniform. But then again, I'm not all that good-looking and I'm not good at sports or any other activity where talent is obvious and readily appreciated, and so I have to boast at least a little about the things I can do that no one would recognize. I think that indicates a social insecurity rather than an intellectual one.

Maybe that's where it is. Derrick is a big joke. A really big joke. Even Mr. Call is in on it. He was explaining gravity as a mutually attractive force between two masses and Nick Jeppesen shouted out, "Yeah, when Derrick walks, the Earth comes up to him," and everyone laughed. Call fought it by biting his cheek. The muscles in his neck bulged out. Derrick's expression alternated between insult and confusion over how exactly he was insulted. After being on the receiving end, it's cool to be in on busting someone else for a change. They used to get me for being smart. They'll get him for being stupid--so stupid that even the ones I used to consider dense are able to see it. I

don't know. Maybe Derrick goes out and steps on as many ants as he can, or goes to the zoos to laugh at rhesus monkeys.

When I put it that way, it makes me sound like an asshole. I can just hear someone saying that I should be more sensitive. I see them shaking their fingers at me. Well, they can put their fingers down. I already feel bad about it and yet I'm going to do it whenever I can, because I know the people pointing their fingers would if they were me. These are the same sensitive people who wouldn't help me when I was the one getting it in the neck. They just point their fingers at everyone and go tsk-tsk-tsk. They never do a goddam thing. So I figure there's something other than ethics or kindness behind what they do.

September 6th, 1985

Homework happened. Derrick said something stupid. My conversation with Teresa went like this.

Teresa: What kind of music do you listen to?

Me: Um, classical, mostly.

Teresa: I love Mozart. There's a mathematical precision to Mozart. Don't you think?

Me: Yes. I have to go now. I'll see you later.

Did she seem hurt that I left abruptly? Oh, fuck it, what do I care. It's so stupid!

September 7th, 1985

See the 6th.

September 8th, 1985

I see a trend developing.

September 11th, 1985

Look, why don't I get back to you when things get interesting, or at least develop a different shade of boring?

October 7th, 1985

My jaw is swollen. I'm glad I'm not doing this into a tape.

Derrick and his friends beat the shit out of me today.

I'd been having a good day. I skipped the pep assembly and spent my time in the library instead. (The Vice Principal said that's where I'd have to go. He said it as if he were sending me to the 8th circle of Hell. How little he understands me.) I sat in a corner. My lamp was the only light on. It felt so cool. You could lock me in there forever and just slip food under the door and I would be fine.

Fermat was a tremendous hermit. He liked his job as a judge and only talked to other mathematicians to make fun of them. He didn't bother publishing and could be left alone forever, farting around with numbers, and he was fine. I was finding work in the library similarly productive today. I didn't have any noisy thoughts to keep my head away from the upper bound of E in modular equation C_l . I managed to resolve the case before the bell rang for the end of school. It was a good feeling. It didn't solve the ultimate problem, and I'll

have to check it again tomorrow because I'd hate to miss something that I'll have to base my work on (if this case applies to primes the way I think it does, it'll carve out a whole class of numbers for me), but it's so relaxing to have a direction. There's nothing like a sense of drift to make my jaw ache.

Also, I'd gone without seeing Teresa for a day. She had to watch football players sit on ice blocks and play that asinine shouting competition at the pep assembly. (I hope she had the decency to sit quietly, or, at least, scream obscenities.) I'm glad it worked out that way. Without seeing her, I managed to get a lot done.

When I was walking toward the double doors that led out of E wing, Derrick and two of his friends grabbed me out of the hallway and dragged me into the toilet. Derrick said to me as he held my head in his armpit, "Don't you go talking to Teresa no more. I'm gonna marry her, me."

I laughed.

I'm going to put that in my geek's handbook as a DON'T.

He and his friends threw me against one of the urinals, and two of them pounded me while the third flushed the urinal. They didn't get my face too much. They hit me in the body mostly. I guess they didn't want to break a tooth or do anything else that would bring my injuries to the attention of the principal. Derrick did, however, clip me once in the jaw.

I broke loose at one point. As the water went down my back and Derrick switched with a friend of his, I pushed myself off the wall and smashed his friend Darrell or the other Darrell (as you might want

to call them for easy reference), square in the nose. I knew to go for the nose because it causes instant tearing and disables the person for several seconds. The guy doing the flushing grabbed me right after, though, and pinned my arms while Derrick rammed his fists into my stomach.

I don't think the whole thing lasted more than a few minutes. At the end, I was on the floor, staring at the checkerboard blue and white of the tile. The floor is slick and wet in toilets.

I told my parents I fell on the way home. They don't know any different. Maybe they suspect, but I'd rather they not go into it. I have a great deal of experience in getting the shit kicked out of me.

My parents gave me some Tylenol with Codeine for the pain. They got it on a trip to Canada. Socialized medicine and a relaxed policy towards narcotics. What a country. You can't beat that.

Take that, Nancy Reagan!

October 8th, 1985

I considered staying home today, but there was an exam and I didn't want to miss it. Oh, sure, I could have made it up, but I wanted to get in on the Derrick's Exam Limbo Pool before it closed. I had five bucks saved up and I put them all on twelve. Peter from Pennsylvania saw that as irrational exuberance, but I had an inside source telling me that Mr. Call had been tutoring Derrick.

Teresa approached me at my locker. "So much for your modeling contract," she said.

"Yes," I said.

“Are you all right?”

My head was killing me and I didn't want to talk. What I said next, I feel bad about now, “Get away from me. I don't want to talk to you.”

As soon as the words came out of my mouth, I felt bad and wanted to get them back, but air is much less forgiving than paper. You fuck up on paper, you just flip the pencil over. You have to run 2000 meters per second to beat your own words, and once you catch them, what do you do about them?

“Well fuck you then,” she said.

After I felt bad, I felt good, of course. What business did she have talking to me anyway? She wasn't going to sleep with me and she didn't really want to be my friend. Guys are easier. They just hit you. Girls insinuate themselves first. They torture by confusion and ambiguity, which wouldn't be so awful if I didn't want this particular one.

But was it her fault or mine that I felt that way?

The bell rang. I arrived in class. I took my seat next to Teresa even though I could tell she was setting it on fire with her mind. I repeated to myself, just to calm myself down, “Modular equation C_1 corresponds to elliptical equation E_1 in all cases where n is prime.” But that didn't wind up calming me down because I hadn't proved it yet. So I turned my mind to the Limbo Pool.

A minute passed.

Mr. Call checked the clock and looked at the door.

Another minute passed.

Everyone stared at that door. There was a lot of money at stake.

Mr. Call started to pass out the tests. Peter stood up, “We should wait for Derrick.”

“Are you sure he’s here today?”

“I saw him earlier.”

“We really should get started.”

“Give us-- er-- him, a minute.”

“Do you all want to wait five minutes? This is a tough exam. You’ll probably need the time.”

“We’ll be okay, sir.”

Everyone nodded or raised their hands in support. Grades were grades, but money was money, and not even the most pessimistic of us had bet on a zero.

Another minute passed.

There was some coughing and undertone chatter. You could hear the clock in the next class click when its hand moved.

Boom, Boom, Boom, came the footsteps. Derrick turned the corner. Everyone sighed. Mr. Call served up his test. Derrick sat down. He glared at me, and then, and this was the weird bit, he put on the sweetest moonface he could manage, turned and smiled at Teresa, exposing irregular rows of teeth that looked like a never-cleaned toilet.

Derrick’s intended looked like she’d just been told she had liver cancer.

Derrick turned back around and took his exam. I finished mine in ten minutes, handed it in, and did the homework for the first week

of next term. The rest of the class was a bit behind me. When we all left, Derrick was still there. Mr. Call stood over him, shaking his head.

I will never be a teacher. Never in a million years. Never at gunpoint. I will not do it in a house. I will not do it for a mouse. I will not do it on a train. I will not mess with Derrick's brain. I do not like to teach the damned. I do not like it, Sam-I-Am.

October 31st, 1985

The days are starting to get really cold. That's the way it goes in Utah. You have this sort of indian summer right through the middle of October, then two weeks of fall, and you're lucky if you're not wearing ski boots under your ghost sheet come Halloween.

I lost the pool. Little Miss Killoworth hit it with a 9. One hundred bucks. She said she was going to get lift tickets in Park City in a couple of weeks.

Some people come in costume on Halloween. They're mostly the popular kids or the tough kids, because they're the ones who can get away with it. They'd bust on the rest of us (or the rest of me-- I'm not a member of any sizeable or influential us's).

Teresa wore a costume. She was dressed as Fugit. For the uninitiated (and I have to confess I was one of them before she explained it to the class), Fugit is a villain from the Batman comics who has the power to manipulate time. She wore little eyeglasses with hour and minute hands in them. Every so often during the lecture, I would look at them, and they seemed to be keeping correct time. They weren't hard to see, of course. She kept them on her desk.

When the lecture was over, I asked her if I could examine her glasses. (I hate it when people say “look at” when they want to grab and touch. I was *already* looking at them. I wanted to inspect them more closely.) Teresa told me to help myself. I picked up the glasses and looked at the back. What I saw was ingenious. The glasses were clear. The motors that drove the clocks were mounted on the sides of the glasses, with some kind of differential gear arrangement running along a clear plastic tube to the hands.

“Who did this?”

Teresa said, “My mom’s a mechanical engineer. She made them for me.”

“This is cool.”

“I think so.”

We exchanged a look which made me think that something might happen. It was a look from her that said, “I know you. I can see how you feel, but don’t be embarrassed. You don’t have to try to explain it to me if the words don’t work.”

I’d seen that look before, from an Army girl who passed through here. She was only here for six months. I knew she was only temporary, but somehow the idiot feelings overwhelmed me. I had to win her, and I would win her. I watched *Cyrano De Bergerac*-- the Jose Ferrar version. I decided I would try to win her with poetry. True, I’m a mathematician. I write poetry like Tiny Tim sings. Still, I worked on several poems for a week in every spare second between classes, on walks home, sitting in parking lots amid the empty Buckhorn beer cans and oil slick stains. I thought if I wrote with

enough force I could make her feel what I felt. I wanted her to understand how impossible it was for me to believe that a person could just show up and drag me out of the ocean of shit that was my life in Utah, and how grateful I was that she had.

She read the poems, looked at me and said, "I'm flattered, but no."

I took them back, and watched her walk away. I wasn't afraid of rejection or hurt by it. If you're an atheistic socialist in Utah, you get used to rejection. In fact, I'd rather hoped she'd laugh in my face or run screaming from me or say, "Go fuck yourself." I figured I could handle that. I wouldn't feel that I'd lost anything. I'd had nothing to lose. What really stung was that I felt so stupid for having thought that I could just go up to someone, say, "I feel lonely, and you make me feel less lonely. I'd just like to know you better. I couldn't hurt you. Without really knowing me you've already done so much. I'd like to do something for you in return," and expect it to get anything other than polite dismissal. You get much further if you're a meanspirited asshole. I felt like I'd tricked myself, and that a vicious part of my mind was having a good laugh at me.

For five months I felt like shit, and avoided this girl that I'd wanted as much as I could. I changed the route I took home so that I wouldn't walk on the sidewalk where I'd given her the poetry-- or even come within sight of it. I took the poetry out to the reservoir in the hills south of town and burned it. Then I scattered the ashes over the rocks and dirt.

I gave Teresa's glasses back to her without looking at her. Derrick then turned around and started with her. "Who's that s'posed to be?"

"Fugit," Teresa stared straight at her book.

"Who?"

"Never mind, Derrick."

"Are you going to homecoming dance?"

"I don't think so."

"Would you like to come with me?"

I think everyone in class was listening. No pencil scratched. No page turned.

"I think I'm going to have the flu that day, Derrick."

"You know ahead of time," Derrick said, in what was either awe or mock awe. "That's cool. You can plan and stuff."

I hope he was kidding to cover his pain.

November 7th, 1985

I won the pool! One hundred and fifty bucks on eleven!

We got Fermat's Theorem in class today. Mr. Call said that if any of us came up with a proof for it, he'd buy that student dinner and even give him extra cheese on the pizza. That's damn nice of him.

I'm sitting here now, trying to think of how to proceed next. I'm not sure if I have enough of an understanding of number theory. Apart from my parents smuggling me out of this toilet for a summer to do the math program at Cal Tech, I've been stuck with the people who would teach people in this town on a Utah teacher's salary. How hard

can you train your mind on your own? The logic in proofs is too rigorous. You need someone kicking your ass to make sure you have every part right. Maybe I can get Mr. Call to do it. He seems like he has more than four active brain cells. (I'm surprised the Mormons haven't arrested him yet.)

I've got an essay due for Accelerated English on Orwell and I should start it tonight, but the idea of this problem that's never been solved is stuck to me. I'm sure that everything that is going to be written about Orwell already has been. (Although I like him a lot. I'm amazed Mr. Richardson let me read *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, considering all the fucking that goes on in it.)

That's the thing I like about mathematical problems like this one. They're always here. You can devote your whole life to studying them, writing papers about them, looking at them from every angle. They don't go anywhere. You get a connection to all these mathematicians over two-and-a-half centuries of academic work. All these brilliant people, living in different places, in different eras, thinking about the same problem. Everyone around them is bustling and fucking and drinking and wasting time-- *they're* thinking about this problem.

I've been trying to figure out why I get so wrapped up in this. I remember reading Plato when I was seven. I found the ideal plane fascinating (as well as the idea that in Plato's world, the smart people ran everything). I looked at everything and thought, "That's not a chair. It's just an imperfect rendering of a chair. That's not a cloud. That's just an imperfect rendering of a cloud. Somewhere, there are

perfect clouds and chairs and blades of grass and graveyards.” Figure somewhere there’s a perfect Derrick Raleigh. Imagine that. He probably wears a tuxedo and can hum all of Strauss’s waltzes backwards.

You don’t get too far with the ideal plane in most real-life dealings. The shadows own the field. They elect actors President and change the formula for Coke. They run the world except in one place. Mathematics. The one place where the Platonic ideal of absolute perfection has meaning. I feel sorry for other scientists. People in physics or chemistry don’t have a chance to see perfection. They always have some real world problem that stops the absolute proof. There’s no way to make physical claims for all atoms or all compounds or all frequencies of light that are absolutely certain. You measure them and try to come up with formulae that cover them, but mathematics is absolute. If I can prove that there is a corresponding modular equation for every elliptical equation, that proof is absolute, irrefutable. It’s so liberating. There are no shadows. There is no dust.

I just can’t stop looking at

$$y^2 = x^3 + (A^n - B^n)x^2 - A^n B^n$$

Now this is art. This elliptical equation, Dr. Frey’s, has no modular counterpart. The number sequence the equation generates could never be described in modular form. This contradicts what I’m trying to prove-- that every modular equation has an elliptical counterpart. The reason for the contradiction is that Frey’s equation assumes that Fermat was wrong, whereas Taniyama-Shimura assumes Fermat was right. So we have an avenue to the solution. Prove Frey’s

elliptical equation, and we'll be able to see that Fermat was wrong.

Disprove his equation, and Fermat was right.

I think I was born at the right time.

My mom brought dinner in to me tonight. She's starting to give me shit about getting out more. She tells me that she's going to make me go to my prom when it's time for me to do it.

Mom, I'm planning to have the flu.

I don't get it. Doesn't she realize all these things, all these stupid proms and parties and dances that idiots get so excited about will vanish in time, while Fermat's Theorem will still be there?

Actually. No it won't.

I'm going to solve the fucker. I'll prove it.

Then I'll come up with a working theorem that no one else can prove, and start the whole process again.

November 12th, 1985

I got an A- on my report on Orwell. I'm not happy with that. I look at the paper now and I can't imagine I ever believed I had a talent for writing or thinking. I feel so stupid. It's bad enough that everyone hates me. I have to be a moron as well.

Now I know how Derrick feels.

No I don't. He at least doesn't seem to know how dumb he is. I'd be embarrassed to be in front of someone intelligent. They'd make me look like such a complete ass and I'd know every second the distance that separates me from them. It's like that bit in Dante's

Inferno. The second circle of Hell is a perfectly nice greenery area, where all the Greek Masters are gathered-- Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Archimedes, Pythagoras, the biggies. It would be a great little kaffeklatch if it weren't for their having to look up at God all day and all night, and knowing they'll never be where He is. That's what I think when I see a really intelligent person. What could I possibly say that wouldn't come out stupid?

What am I thinking, really? That I can work out Fermat's Theorem? What's the matter with me? It'll figure. Even if I do get a long way toward it, some really bright guy will solve it and leave me with nothing but to applaud with the rest of the idiots.

Nothing works. Nothing works.

I saw Teresa today. It was after school. I was walking around the ball field, thinking about my shitty grade on my paper. She walked out of the auditorium by herself. I don't think she saw me. Maybe she did for a second. She was looking in my general direction.

If she did see me, she didn't wave or come over to say hello. I think that goes to show I was right. She just talks to me because she sits next to me. It's not as if she'll go out of her way.

Nothing works.

November 28th, 1985

Thanksgiving day.

The Dallas Cowboys thrashed the Detroit Lions with all the excitement of an accountant doing a poor man's taxes.

Pete and Fiona are back for the traditional holiday mooch. We are supposed to alternate Thanksgivings and Christmases. My mom always lays out a home-cooked spread for the vultures, but last year-- I swear I'm not making this up-- they took us to Denny's. I had pancakes for Thanksgiving dinner last year.

The family never takes this sort of thing well. My mother always feels the need to play nice because Fiona's her sister. My little cousin (Fiona's son) Patrick is ten and I feel no such connection. I always tell him, "Don't worry, Patrick, when we grow up, we'll have absolutely nothing to do with each other." Patrick loves Pete. He thinks Pete and Joe Piscopo are funny. All right, granted, some of Joe Piscopo's work isn't completely horrible, and if you're ten maybe I can see it. But Pete? I've seen dead cats lying in the road that inspired more giggling.

Then again, Patrick likes everybody. Girls will probably go for him. He'll become a big success in business and I'll wind up borrowing money from him to keep myself in the rat-infested splendor that I'm expecting. (Assuming he doesn't have me locked up. He would. His favorite toys are his handcuffs and toy pistol.)

For my dad and me, having Pete and Fiona over for the holidays is always tough. We've given up trying to get Mom to uninvite them or say we can't make it because we've all contracted 24-hour lupus.

Today, my dad gave me scotch. I only had two, but they felt good. I didn't cough or anything. That's such a sitcom cliché. Only Ron Howard coughs when he drinks. The rest of us just tear up when

we find out how hot liquor really is, and then we swallow experimentally, then go a little further, adjusting as it happens. By the second drink, it's like Coca-Cola.

My mom, in case you're wondering, didn't have any. She's a rum drinker. She had four of those.

Pete asked me, "So what are you up to in school?"

"Fermat's Theorem."

"What's that?"

"You don't really want to know."

"Come on, Professor. Tell me. I want to know."

"Go ahead and tell him," Mom said.

"He won't get it, Mom."

"Tell him," Mom said.

"Fermat's Theorem states that if x, y and z are whole numbers each raised to the power of n , that the sum of the first two can't equal the third if n is greater than 2."

"See, I got that," Pete said, "Your old uncle Pete isn't so dumb."

"Okay," I said, "if you add x cubed to y cubed do you get z cubed?"

"Uh-yeah. Sure you do."

"Okay, three plus four equals z , what is z ?"

"Seven!"

"Right. Okay, three squared plus four squared equals z squared. What is z ?"

"Um, I--"

“It’s five, Pete. Now, three cubed plus four cubed equals z cubed, what is z ?”

“Come on.”

“Twenty-seven plus 64 is 91. There is no integer that cubes into 91. That’s Fermat’s Theorem.”

“What if they’re all equal to one?” Pete said, thinking he was being clever.

“One cubed plus one cubed can’t equal one cubed. One and one are two, Pete.”

“Okay, you got me. You’re smarter than me,” He leaned over and French kissed Fiona. It’s a nauseating sight. I wouldn’t wish it on anyone. I actually watched his tongue distend her cheek.

Ech.

I wonder if Pete was doing that to make himself feel better or to make a point to me. *See kid, I’m stupid and I get to kiss someone. You’re smart and snotty and you have no one. Who’s the idiot now?*

At that moment the doorbell rang.

Bing-Bong.

Patrick ran to the door and answered it. Teresa stood behind it, wearing a blue and white winter jacket and jeans. I stood and said hello to her. I invited her in and introduced her to the principal players in the room. I’d never done that before, so I stammered through it.

Patrick let out something that is obligatory on television (but then, Patrick seems to be an obligatory sort of kid): “Henry’s got a girlfriend! Henry’s got a girlfriend!”

He looked at me as if it were part of the script for me to hit him or say something devastating that would get me grounded right before the school sock hop. Curse you, Gary Marshall. Curse you.

I did neither. I let the adults have their chuckle, then I invited Teresa to join me in the basement. My parents keep a couch and chairs down there because it's cooler in the summer. One summer I sat down there, read Lloyd Alexander books and watched *Clash of the Titans* thirty-seven times thanks to the miracle of HBO.

After I solve Fermat's Theorem, maybe I'll become a stop-motion animator.

Anyway, I was in my basement with Teresa. I could tell this wasn't a dream. There wasn't a blanket on the floor. The champagne, assorted French cheeses, the loaf of fresh baked bread, were all absent. No fireplace either. Just the two of us in a harshly lit, sparsely furnished basement that smelled like Rug Doctor carpet cleaner.

I pattered around for a second. How I was supposed to do this, I wasn't sure. I didn't want to. "Do you mind if I sit?" she asked.

Of course I mind if you sit, I thought. I don't want you here. I didn't say it. I'd learned my lesson from telling her to go away. That bothered me a lot. I'd look up from my work and stare at the wall worrying about it. I wished I were ten years older-- then this would be illegal and I could just have her go away and forget about it.

"This is a nice house," Teresa said.

"It's exactly the same as five other houses on the block," I said. "There's a photographer three doors down who has the same house, the same carpeting and the same drapes."

“Not the same drapes,” Teresa said.

“Maybe not,” I said, “I suppose I could be exaggerating about that.”

“Not the same carpet either,” Teresa said.

I tried to figure out whether she was nervous or not. It would be logical to assume that she was. She was in the house of someone she hardly knew, and he was acting uncomfortable and his entire family was upstairs. It would be reasonable...then again, maybe she was more extroverted than I was. Perhaps I was proceeding from a false assumption. Shadows and dust. Shadows and dust.

Still, I didn't want to ask why she had come. That would have seemed too much. The question might make her even more nervous, if she weren't nervous enough, and who didn't get nervous when asked, “Why are you here?” My head hurts just thinking about it now.

“Your glasses were interesting,” I said, “Did your mother use a spring-loaded design?”

“Watch batteries driving a master gear,” Teresa said.

What was all this in aid of? I couldn't and still can't help thinking that this was some sort of trick. A lot of kids think I'm weird. They sometimes send someone to hang out with me so that they can probe how weird I am. I'd seen that before. True, that assumption was unfair and irrational, but I couldn't avoid it.

“You're not a Mormon are you?” Teresa asked. The inevitable question. When I first came here and met some kids-- this was when I was seven-- the first question out of their mouths was what religion I was. The friends dried up when I said I didn't have one. All this

ostracism over interpretations of a fable. Mathematics and religion both claim access to a perfect universe. The difference is that we mathematicians can prove ours. Ours works. It has interior logic. Try figuring out Jehovah's motives from one line to the next. (And don't get me started on Pascal's proof of the existence of God. Sure, believing in God might improve your odds of getting into heaven, assuming you believe in the right one, but you're no better off than I am when it comes to Hell.)

Anyway, I said, "Am I Mormon? No. You?"

"No. My dad was a Jehovah's Witness. He died."

"How?"

"Ironically. A blood bank truck hit him. The driver was out cold. One of the other Witnesses would have helped, but my poor dad needed a transfusion and, well, you know..."

"Was that a joke?" I asked.

"No. It could have been, though."

Teresa leaned back. Her hair, I noticed, was shorter than it was a week ago, almost a pageboy style. I hadn't noticed much about her because I'd been kind of wrapped-up. She wore a black sweater underneath her jacket. She always looked at me slightly sideways, as if trying to find the best angle for seeing me (or as if I were saying something she didn't quite believe, but was amused to hear).

"I never liked him much," she said. "He only showed up every other month, and he spent most of his time telling me how wrong my mother was. He said 'secular humanist' a lot. Have any of your relatives died in interesting ways?"

I looked up at the ceiling and said, “Hope springs eternal.”

At that point, my cousin came running down. We suffered his attention- grabbing for a while, then Teresa said she had to go. Her mom got lonely on Thanksgiving if she wasn't around. My mom tried to get her to stay anyway. I guess she was hoping she could have at least one interesting guest, but that was that. I watched Teresa go. I was glad she was gone. Then again, I wasn't.

December 2nd, 1985

I brought Mr. Call my work on Frey's equation and explained its relevance to Fermat's Theorem. (I didn't think it would be an insult to his intelligence. He simply didn't have time to keep fully up to date on the field.) “I was kidding about the pizza, you know,” he said. “I'll help you if you want, but you really ought to be talking to professors, people who keep up. All of what you're showing me is news.”

So he's a little uncertain. “I need a fresh eye,” I said, “and I think you're pretty smart.” I think it's important, though, for me to prove that I can think of something new. Too often when you're dealing with prodigies, they're great at learning and repeating information, but they never seem to be the ones who come up with something new. Think of that kid who did trigonometry at four. Where is he now? He's probably some backwater professor who tells his favorite students what a big star he once was. He wasn't a big star. He was a fucking freak. Where's his unified field theory? Where's the

masterpiece he was supposed to have created, the monument to all time?

Or think of that woman, Marilyn Vos Savant, who writes that column for *Parade* magazine. According to *Guinness*, she has the highest IQ in the world-- 215, I think. I used to think that was impressive, then I wondered why, if she's so smart, she spends her time answering idiots' questions in a Sunday *Deseret News* insert. Why isn't she Secretary of State, or head of the Astrophysics Department at MIT?

My parents told me my IQ after I failed a test at Cal Tech. I was bawling and making an ass of myself on the pay phone, and they spilled the big secret. It's 191. It made me feel a little better at the time, but it's lost a lot for me.

I think "genius" should be a word that's applied like "saint." They only give it to you after a hundred years-- and only if it can be proven that what you did represented a major advance in your field. So the kid could do trig. People have been doing trig for hundreds of years. There are mental defectives who can play Rachmaninov's Third Concerto. That doesn't make them artists, just living, breathing tape recorders.

I know it's not enough to be smart. You have to work, and push to do impossible things. Why shouldn't I be able to solve Fermat's Theorem? If those other mathematicians were so fucking smart, why didn't they get it?

Call and I worked for two hours after school. I decided to ask him something that bothered me. "What's the deal with Derrick?"

Mr. Call kept his eyes fixed on my proofs to date. “I think I see what you’re trying to do here. You’re trying a kind of proof by falsification, right? If such-and-such an equation has a solution, then Fermat was right; if not, then Fermat was wrong.”

“Yeah. You’ve got it.”

“I’m going to have to read up on all of this stuff. Do you have any texts I can look at?”

I reached into my bag and pulled out Frey, as well as my general text on number theory and my tables of known identities.

“This should get you started.”

He looked at the pile in front of him. “And finished.”

“How did you get here, anyway?”

“You mean at this school?”

“Yeah.”

“I started teaching because I got my family before my Ph.D. I don’t blame them. They really did become the priority for me.”

“I don’t see a wedding ring.”

“We’re divorced now. She’s living in Boise.”

I had a pretty good idea of all the things that could have happened to get them divorced, so I didn’t need him to get into it. I pictured him having weekends with his kids, taking them on shopping trips and playing grabass in the front yard. I guess when things started out between him and his ex, he never pictured this. I wonder if it drove him crazy too. When the things you never picture happen to you, you have to spend a little time crazy. It’s the only way to adjust. Still, I thought as you got older you got better at seeing, that after the age of

thirty you learned to anticipate the pain, or the possibility of pain anyway. I guess we always think -- hell, we always *know* -- that we'll beat the odds. I know I will. "Why did you stick around?"

"It's the same all over. I know you're not a Mormon, so it's tough for you here, but I'm one, so here's as comfortable as anywhere. I can find my way around my house at night with the lights out. It would have been something to go on that shuttle though, boy... It would have been something."

I wanted to ask him why he wanted to take the shuttle up, then, if all this was so easy to accept. I could only guess he was making himself feel better with this garbage about comfort. He'd wanted that escape—that run at real escape. He could have moved to Denver or San Francisco, but anyone could do that. Was it better to exchange one floor plan for another, or to fit into that orange suit and take off? Maybe they'd let him take a spacewalk. Maybe he'd deliberately hit the jets in such a way that he'd fly out of reach and never have to go back home. Just stay in orbit forever.

Proof, dummy, proof. Maybe he doesn't feel that way. Maybe everything's fine. Just fine.

I slipped the proof into my notebook. There wasn't anything more to do today, unless he came up with a big idea.

"As for Derrick," Mr. Call said, "I don't know how he got here. I think the administration has decided that, since he fails at everything, it doesn't matter what class he's in. I think he has a crush on Teresa. Maybe that's why he stays. But I've talked to him about his work. I've tried to help him. I keep trying."

“Why?”

“It’s what I do.”

The janitor came in and kicked us out. Mr. Call and I ran into Teresa as we walked out of class. She stood there, with her coat and backpack on.

“Did I borrow something from you?” I said.

“No. I was in the library until they kicked me out. I heard your voice in here. I just wondered if you wanted to hang out,” she said.

I told myself not to fall for anything, but nodded and followed her to the south building exit.

Teresa walked with me to Mutt and Jeff’s sandwich shop. She told me that Derrick had taken to calling her. She was trying to get him to stop. She had her mother making up excuses. I didn’t know what to tell her except to say, “Fuck off, Derrick.”

“That would be too mean. I have to sit behind him. It’s just a crush. It’ll go away. That’s what I’ve learned. Eventually everything goes away.”

We got to Mutt and Jeff’s. We both ordered cheeseburgers, fries and Cokes. It wasn’t synchronicity or anything. That was the best hot sandwich they made. They had this grill with weights on it that pressed the meat and cheese together flat. They toasted the bun, and it was a real whole wheat bun-- not that air stuffed puff they have at Mickey-Ds. And they were the only restaurant that would give you real Coke instead of “new Coke.”

We ate some and we tried to talk, but I think we both knew what had to be said to make the conversation go for real, and neither

one of us was going to say it. It's like in those awful sitcoms on TV when you see the two people stare at each other, coming up with dopey things to say when you know perfectly well that they should break the pause with, "I love you." So we talked about the school play that she wished she'd tried out for.

I wondered if Teresa wrote my name over and over in her notebook or anything. I wrote hers, in four ink colors (the first time I've used green ink in my life). I've also done some work on spelling her name out on my calculator. Texas Instruments has just come out with one that will handle alphanumeric characters, but that takes the fun away. The closest I've come up with is 8.23621. Turn it upside down and put out both your eyes with a brooch and you'll see her name in the LCD readout. I don't think it's possible to get closer.

I think I'll learn to use a slide rule. That'll keep me from getting distracted.

No it won't.

At the end of what she was saying about the school play, there was a long silence. Well, it wasn't quite a silence. The Army Depot shift change was happening, so Main Street was choked with cars in both directions and horns honked. Also, Mutt or Jeff was crashing around in the back in search of something.

I opened my mouth to say what we all want TV characters to say, but I stopped myself. There was no point in saying anything. I would be gone in seven months. I would just be setting myself up to get hurt, and then where would I be with Fermat? Seven wasted months. I'm not under big illusions. High school relationships don't go

anywhere most of the time. Statistically speaking, you're more likely to get a 21 by hitting on sixteen than you are to find your lifetime sweetheart in high school. Also, there's all that distraction and bullshit in high school romance. All that yelling and making up and pleading and if it was this difficult to get started, how much easier could I possibly expect it to get?

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"I had an idea about Fermat's Last Theorem, that's all."

"I was thinking about Derrick," Teresa said. "I saw his report card once. He failed everything. He's going to be here the rest of his life, working the dirt, getting drunk and puking through weekends. I mean, we're outcasts here, but we're both leaving some day right?"

"Not if you believe the school song: *Forever and forever in Tooele.*"

"Yeah. But we're getting out. We have hope that we'll fit in better somewhere else, and go on to do something interesting. What about Derrick?"

I groaned. "You're making it harder to make fun of him."

"You do realize that if he weren't here, it would be you," Teresa said.

"Would you join in?" I asked. I wasn't going to stay on the defensive if I could help it.

"Maybe. I might do it even more than others, because I know that I'd be next, so I'd figure I'd give a little abuse while I had the chance." Teresa licked a gob of meat from the side of her mouth.

"Amazing how fragile the alliances are around here," I said.

“I don’t know,” Teresa paused to suck up the last of her Coke. When the ice settled again, she resumed. “Ours might be made of stronger stuff.”

I’ve spent every second since then trying to figure out what that means, and damn it I need to WORK! I mean, if she’d squeezed my hand or something, I might have gotten a clearer message, but as it stood, it could have just meant friendship-- the common bond of being geeks, plus a couple of mutual interests.

Here’s what I say: *Fuck it! Fuck it! Fuck it! Fuck it! Fuck it!*

Christmas Break, 1985

It’s the night before we go back to school and I have to get in all the non-events before tomorrow.

I’ve taken some time to read the biographies of mathematicians who’ve made a run at Fermat’s Last Theorem. It’s a good distraction from Teresa. It’s cool reading about all these historic mathematicians in different nations who tried and failed but somehow could still claim to have advanced number theory. It must be nice, although I wonder if that’s just a cover for failure. I would imagine that for a long time higher mathematics and its proofs were just toys for those who could afford idleness. I’m thinking of Lavoisier, who was a nobleman chemist. Granted, being a nobleman was a bad thing in his time, but he still had money and influential friends to help him when the pantries held nothing but stale bread and dust.

I wonder if we’ll burn ourselves out. We don’t have many people who can afford idleness. Science and mathematics aren’t

gentlemen's hobbies anymore. They're expected to turn a profit. Back then they didn't have to worry about the balance sheet. They had to worry about beheading and exile and torture, but not the balance sheet. Or maybe those were just other forms of balance sheets. The stupid and the greedy get to the top, and afterwards they don't want anyone thinking anything that might topple them. So they invent beheadings and balance sheets.

It's amazing we've gotten this far.

We spent Christmas in Houston with my dad's relatives. It was pretty cool. A lot of them are in the sciences, so everyone has something to talk about. My Aunt Michelle actually made a run at Fermat's Theorem for her Ph.D. thesis. She said she contributed a great deal to the study of M series elliptical equations.

And she conceded that saying that was her cover for failure. Still, she looked at the research I'd done so far and made suggestions on what to look at next. It was so cool that she took me seriously. My mother's relatives would a) not have understood what I was talking about or b) patted me on my head and told me how cute I was.

I asked Michelle what it was like to fail at reaching Fermat's Theorem and she said, "I haven't given up yet, kid. I spend as much time as I can, with teaching and all. It broke my heart at first and for a long time after. Then I got hooked in to teaching, and I figured that even if I didn't make it, I might spark someone else to it. What matters is the discovery, not who makes it. I'll bet the Greeks invented a steam engine, but James Watt gets the credit. Either way, we have a steam engine."

Something in her face told me that this was another thing she said to cover her failure. The first thing she said to cover it to others. The second was what she said to cover it to herself.

January 4th, 1986

First day back. Mr. Call talked about the space shuttle for a few minutes. He said that with this record cold spell, it would be great in Florida-- alternating between training and trips to Disneyworld. Derrick spent the time after the lecture bugging Teresa. She tried to ask me how break went, and then Derrick started in with an endless string of questions that were mostly of the “How are you doing?” type. Long, uncomfortable pauses would punctuate these questions. Finally, Mr. Call had to tell Derrick to turn around and do whatever it was that he did.

I told Teresa what I did and didn't do over vacation. She described her trip to New York with her mother. She took in some experimental off-off Broadway theatre, was lucky enough to miss *Cats*, and hung out in coffee shops. Of course she liked it, because she got to be in a place that wasn't here-- a place where people don't shoot rats after they drink.

I'd hoped that Teresa would be a little less pretty with the passage of time, but she disappointed me. It's not fair. I'm stuck with all this flesh and hormones and these romantic impulses. All this body. In the Bible they keep talking about the body being made of dust, and I think that applies to what I said about dust. The dust gets in the way of pure math.

This journal isn't helping me either. It's just reinforcing.

New topic.

After school I asked Mr. Call about Derrick. I hadn't expected to see him back this semester. Mr. Call said to me, "I don't understand it either. I tried to explain to him that he wasn't doing well, but he insisted on staying. If he's giving you any trouble I'll move him, but he's staying."

I told him Derrick wasn't bothering me. (I didn't tell him that he'd paid for my parents' Christmas presents.) It just seemed irrational to me that he'd want to stay where he wasn't wanted.

Mr. Call said something that might just stick with me. (It has so far.) "Most people spend their lives trying to get into places they aren't wanted."

Mr. Call and I worked on Frey's equation for the hour and a half before the janitor came in and made us leave. For the moment we're operating on the assumption that Fermat was wrong and Frey's equation is valid. Mr. Call asked me if I were getting frustrated with Fermat's Theorem. I said I figured it would be a long-term project, and I was prepared to go as long as it took.

Mr. Call looked like he did when he talked about the space shuttle. On his desk in neat rows were copies of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *The Planetary Report*, each of which ran huge, full-color spreads on the flight. (I was surprised to see him with *The Planetary Report*. For one thing, it was the only copy I'd seen outside my house. Also, The Planetary Society isn't as interested in manned space flight as Mr. Call is. We think of it as a glamour move. Remotes are much cheaper and

easier to send into space. Although there is something about people going into space. Maybe the reason we're all so screwed up is that, unlike our ancestors, we have no place to go. Everywhere we go, there are McDonald's and stuff. We all hate where we are, and wherever we go is the same as the place we left. There's something hopeless about it that space flight kind of cures. They don't have Mickey-D's in space ... yet.)

He saw me looking at the magazines and said, "I remember when they sent that idiot Garn up there. They should have left him. We send him up and all he does is throw paper airplanes around. How stupid. Just because he's on the funding committee..."

I looked at him and he shrank a little. His shoulders came forward slightly and his chest retreated. The look on his face spoke to me of some constant monologue that ran through his head that had inadvertently slipped out.

I guess this journal is my monologue. I wonder if Derrick has one too.

January 14th, 1986

A very weird day. I'm not sure how to put it, so I'll just try to say it as close to straight out as I can.

Today was the first time that Derrick ever came in early. His big round mound of self wandered in about three minutes before the bell rang. He looked right at Teresa's empty desk. I guess she was out sick. He plopped his massive butt in his seat and then turned his desk

around to face Pete and I. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a lady's watch, gold plated, with the price tag still on it.

“Check it out,” he said.

Pete shook his head, “It's a watch, Derrick.”

“A woman's watch,” I said.

“Is there something you want to tell us?” Pete said. This hideous image of Derrick in high heels, a slinky black evening gown and fishnet stockings, smoking a cigarette out of an oversized ebony holder invaded my skull.

“I'm proposing to Teresa,” Derrick said.

“You're proposing what to Teresa,” I said.

“Don't be dumb,” Derrick said.

I once saw the Gracie Allen show. You know that look George Burns gets when she's said something unbelievable about her brother? There are no mirrors in the classroom, but I was sure I had that same look on my face when Derrick told me not to be dumb.

Then there was the next shock. “You're going to ask Teresa to marry you?”

“Yeah. Check it out. It's a six hundred dollar watch.”

Pete took the watch and looked at it, then he handed it to me. The watch had a price tag on it that read \$600.00. I gave the watch back to Derrick.

“I hope she comes in today,” Derrick said.

The bell rang. Mr. Call started his lecture. No Teresa. I think I mentioned a few paragraphs ago that she wasn't there at all today. Yeah. I see I did, or implied it anyway. Moving on. The lecture kept its

usual pace. I love the way Mr. Call lectures. It's so rare that you run into a teacher who likes the subject well enough to give a good lecture on it. Most just go over the examples and then turn you loose. With Mr. Call there's always a story about the problem, and who first proposed problems like these, and why it occurred to them to ask. There's always some turd who asks if this stuff is going to be on the exam, and I want to slap him. That's why assholes like Reagan can be President. The people only want to know as much as will get them through the next exam.

When the lecture was over, Pete turned around and asked me if I thought the watch was real.

I said no. He asked me why.

I said, "Because they don't charge like that. Nothing costs six hundred even. It's always five hundred ninety-nine dollars and ninety-nine cents."

"Yeah," Pete said, "But riddle me this, Batman. If Derrick's as stupid as we all think he is, then how would he have the savvy to buy a cheap watch and stick a price label on it?"

Derrick turned to Pete, "You just call me stupid?"

"Yes, Derrick," Pete said, "I just called you stupid."

"Well, after school, I'm going to put you twelve feet under for that, man."

"Why twelve feet?" I asked him.

"Because he's gonna be twice as dead."

"Derrick," I asked, "Where did you buy this watch?"

"From this guy."

“This guy?”

“Yes.”

“I’m looking for a watch,” I said, “What does this guy look like?”

“I’m not telling you.”

“Yeah, right.”

“I don’t care what you say,” Derrick said. “Because I’m gonna marry Teresa when I see her.” People in the class turned to listen to him. Even Mr. Call looked up from his book on the space shuttle. What I couldn’t get over was the certainty on Derrick’s face. He had spoken, and this was the way things were going to be. It’ll be hard for me to ever be certain of anything after looking into those enormous eyes, and I suddenly felt a moment of, I guess you could call it terror, over Fermat’s Last Theorem. I dismissed it in a hurry. I thought: *I never in my life looked like Derrick looks now*, and that kept me feeling good right up until the time I started writing tonight. Now, I wonder how I know that I never looked like that. Derrick’s face was a challenge, a big question mark to, I don’t know, to life. Life, in the form of Teresa, will punish him. What will Fermat do to me?

I think I’ll go to bed and count ceiling dimples until morning.

January 16th, 1986

M Day.

Derrick was early again. Teresa came in a few seconds behind him. As soon as she walked in, Derrick gave her a smile full of tater tot chunks and affection. You know the sound the safety bar makes

when it drops in front of you on a roller coaster? I could just about hear that sound when Derrick turned to her. The difference is that you expect to make it safely through the coaster ride. This time, the sound reminded me of protection that I needed for a coming disaster but couldn't have.

I told Mr. Call I'd talk to him later, grabbed my copy of a book about Appolonius of Perga and Mahoney's book on Fermat, and took my seat.

The bell rang. Mr. Call stood up and said, "Before I deal with the lecture today, Derrick has something he wants to take care of, that I'm sure most of you know about. Derrick, hurry up. I want to get some things done today."

Derrick turned around. You wouldn't believe how we all watched him. *When E.F. Hutton talks, people listen.* We watched Derrick's trembling hand pull out the watch. Its price tag still dangled from it. He handed it to Teresa and said, "Teresa, I've sat in front of you for a long time now and I think that you're something. I mean you're a lot prettier than the girls I see in Erda." (I hadn't been aware that there were any girls in Erda-- except for that obese woman who sits on a lawn chair outside her trailer and yells at highway traffic. Still, a sentiment is a sentiment is a sentiment.) "And I think that I'd like to be with you forever and everything. So take this watch and marry me."

Now the thing was that there was, in one sense, no suspense here. None of us believed for one second that Teresa would marry Derrick without a gun to her head (and probably not even then). I can

say none of us would believe it because I can't imagine that anyone would believe that anyone would voluntarily marry Derrick Raleigh. It's the same way that no one believes that you can telekinetically move Yankee stadium to Antarctica, or flap your arms and fly to the moon. The suspense came in how she would say no. Would she take it as a shock and pass out? Would she take it angrily and throw the watch at him and beat him as if he were Caliban? Would she be compassionate and gentle, like a girl talking to a boy at the end of a special episode of a sitcom? None of us knew, so we all tuned in to find out.

Teresa looked at the watch and then looked at Derrick. She then looked at us accusingly, as if we'd put him up to this. Then she up and asked me, "Did you guys put him up to this?"

I shook my head and shrugged. Derrick beamed at her, inasmuch as his zit-covered moonface could manage a beam.

You could smell the sweat coming off Teresa along with her perfume. She handed Derrick his watch. "You should take that back, Derrick."

Derrick held the watch as if it were a rotten sardine dangling fin-first from his fingers. His face was green.

Teresa said, "Look at me, Derrick, look at me and understand. I'm not interested in you. I'm not attracted to you. Please stop calling me. Stop sending gifts. Stop following me in the halls. I'm sorry that I'm doing this publicly, but you've left me no choice. I'd like to say I don't mean to hurt you, but if hurting you is what it takes to get you to leave me alone, then that's what I'll do. Get this through your head: I

don't find you attractive. Leave, and find someone who might be interested.”

I remember a scene in *Clash of the Titans* where Harry Hamlin turns the Kraken to stone with Medusa's severed head. The Kraken cracks and collapses under its own weight, its arms and legs and torso falling into the sea. Derrick looked a lot like that. He turned around and faced forward. His fists crushed the watch.

Sandy Killoworth said, and I'm not sure looking back what she was doing, I think it was to lighten the moment, “Now that we've straightened that out, is there anyone in here you *are* attracted to?”

Teresa chuckled and said, “Yes. I've always found Henry interesting.”

People pointed and tittered and said I was blushing. I suppose I was. It kind of upped the ante. I looked at her and thought that maybe I would say something. I mean, I only have six more months here, but they could be a better six months with her, couldn't they? And just because I move away doesn't mean I have to stop knowing her, even if we stop going out. I get along with so few people that I have to hold on to the ones I like, and who like me, or I'll be alone.

Teresa slipped away after class. I'll talk to her on Monday.

January 17th, 1986

I guess I won't be talking to Teresa anymore.

Mr. Call announced that she moved away over the weekend. The office told him that her uncle had met with an accident—they didn't say what kind—and that she and her mother were going to

Spokane to take care of him. Call said he'd hoped to go on teaching her for a while, but that was sometimes the way things went. He said that last part twice, with kind of a sigh. I remember it well because it was pretty much the last thing I heard anyone say to me for the rest of the day. I can't work on anything. I can afford to take zeros. Why not? I already know everything they're teaching. I'm here to become better adjusted socially. What a fucking joke!

I guess I'll check the mail for a note.

January 18th, 1986

No note.

January 19th, 1986

No note.

Tried to work on Fermat's Theorem to distract myself. Useless. Took a walk around the hills. It was snowy and cold and it got dark too early to go very far. Came back with a runny nose. Maybe I got sick. I kind of hope so.

January 20th, 1986

I guess I should have expected that this would happen. It always seems the way. I've moved around a lot, and it seems that when I meet someone I like, something whisks me away. Then I moved here, and I've been here five minutes short of forever, and watched everyone I've ever liked do the same thing to me. And you figure you'll keep in touch. You promise each other. It doesn't happen.

I should get used to it. I think that's just the way of it. For a while you're together. For a while it matters, and then something comes along and screws it up and that's that.

I worked on Fermat's Theorem. I'm making little progress. I guess I'll always have it. No matter who comes and who goes, these problems remain. I think I'll latch on to this and forget about people.

January 28th, 1986

The guys on the news tell me that I'll always remember where I was when I heard them announce that *Challenger* exploded over the Atlantic. This is my Kennedy assassination, or King assassination, or Kennedy assassination (take your pick). The only trouble for Rather and Brokaw is that I didn't hear this from them.

Here's how I found out.

It was in Algebra II. Mr. Call was just about to start his lecture when Derrick bounded into the room and shouted, "The space shuttle blew up."

I said, "Sit down and shut up, Derrick."

"No, really," he said.

"It did not," Pete said.

"It did. I saw."

Mr. Call kept writing, as if nothing were happening. Derrick kept muttering to himself about what he heard and saw and how we'd all be laughing out of the other sides of our faces. I couldn't believe he'd try that stunt to get attention. Now that Teresa was gone, what

was his reason for being here, anyway? I didn't even give a shit about his profit potential for me. I wanted him out.

Then the announcement came over the P.A., "Students and faculty, attention. The Space Shuttle *Challenger* exploded this morning during takeoff. We ask that you observe a moment of silence for the heroic crew."

I felt sick, in part for having to admit that Derrick was right, and in part for the crew. I couldn't imagine what that was like. There they were, with three g's worth of acceleration pressing their chests, and whatever they ate for breakfast threatening to come out. They were expecting to see the equator and the poles at the same time, and auroras over Africa. And suddenly they just weren't anymore.

I wasn't sure if this was heroic. That word seemed wrong. If they'd known they were going to die, I don't think they'd have gone up anyway. If they even thought there was a real risk of death, they probably would have stayed where they were until things were safer.

They were unlucky. The forces of, I don't know, time or history or something, got to them. It came along when they thought everything was fine and screwed them up and now they're gone, that's all.

I've got Fermat's Theorem. During the moment of silence, I looked at Mr. Call, who was tearing up and shaking as he tried to stand straight, and wondered what he had.

Mr. Call left early today, so I didn't get a chance to ask him.

January 29th, 1986

Finally got Patrick out of my room. My dad used the hedge clippers to get his goddamn handcuffs off me. I hope he dies. Good night.

February 2nd, 1986

We have a substitute teacher in Algebra II now. He plays guitar and doesn't seem to know anything except James Taylor songs. I'm not sure what we'll do. I asked when Mr. Call would be back. As I said, the sub knew nothing except James Taylor songs.

Flying machines lying broken on the ground.

February 3rd, 1986

Still working on Fermat's Theorem. It's getting me through.

February 4th, 1986

Still working. Mr. Call won't be back until spring, at least.

February 5th, 1986

Fuck it. I'll tell you when I'm done.

June 24th, 1993

Andrew Wiles announced his proof of Fermat's Theorem today.

It's a sunny day at M.I.T. I hate sun when I feel like this. Seven years' work and all I get is the horrible feeling in my stomach. If it had

been fall, I could have stomped on dead leaves to vent my frustration. Instead I just got in my rusty Chevette and screamed at people who stopped at yellow lights from campus to the Charles River. Now my throat is sore and my head feels like Axl Rose lives in it.

I'm trying to remember what Aunt Michelle said to me about how it mattered less who found the proof than the finding itself. I'm trying to be that philosophical, but it's hard. You anchor yourself to a problem that's gone unsolved for three hundred years and you think you're safe. Then some son-of-a-bitch comes along and takes it away. Now what? What am I supposed to do? What am I supposed to fucking do?

Maybe he got it wrong. I hope so. Why should he be happy and hurt so many of us?

Then again, he doesn't have the problem to kick around anymore either, does he? The stupid bastard didn't just break my heart, he broke his own. He now has to drift with the rest of us.

It's been so long since I wrote in this thing. I'm afraid my pen will tear the pages. Should I catch it up? How would I do it? Attach my résumé? My parents moved us to Eugene, Oregon. It didn't get a lot better for me there. Everyone ignored me and I could spend whole days not speaking to anyone.

You think I did better with teachers? That I was some kind of pet or something? Their emphasis on rote memorization and multiple-choice tests drove me crazy. The National Honor Society was full of people who didn't know that the United States was once allied with the Soviet Union, or that Melville wrote about a whale, or that Pythagoras

was burned to death by religious bigots. Morons. Toward the end I got pissy and told teachers to just give the damn exams. I wasn't filling out their idiotic forms anymore. Smarter folk than I have pointed out that the function of mimeographed sheets is not to get you to learn, but to prepare you for your job filling out forms.

I wrote my last letter to Mr. Call two years after high school. I told him I was still working on Fermat's Theorem. He wished me luck. I asked him about the shuttle and if he still thought about it. He said he did now and again, although he wasn't sure what he thought about it, so when anyone asked, he just said, "Too bad."

He gave me a great recommendation for MIT, which was where I wound up. (Early decision-- I left when I was seventeen.)

I think there was a girl back in Eugene who liked me. I tried looking her up when I was home one summer. She'd gone off to Uruguay.

It has something to do with me, or the way the world is set up, or both. People come and go, the ones you hate never leave, and the ones you like always seem to have somewhere else to go (or you do). I see people together, and for an instant I wonder how they managed, and then reality sets in and I realize that it'll all be over for them, sooner or later. Somebody moves. Somebody forgets to call. Somebody disappoints.

So keep smiling, you fools. Guard the neck you'll get it in.

I'm sorry. I'm just babbling.

There will be other mathematical puzzles. I know that. There are others, and I have a lot of good years left. 23 isn't quite middle-

aged in the world of mathematics. And hell, Wiles is 40. There's hope for us all. I hope when I'm forty I can still do what he does.

Did I just write that? Excuse me while I ram this pen through my neck.

I'm sorry. It's just that I didn't think I'd have to slog like the rest and say to myself and to others, "I've made vital contributions to the field of studying number theory as it relates to elliptical equations, knot theory, chaos and iterated algorithms."

Andrew Wiles says he locked himself up in a cabin for seven years working on this damn theorem. I did about the same thing. For me, my cabin is my apartment in Roxbury, which no woman (or man) has ever visited. I tried to keep the world out, but the world keeps calling back. I spent nights when I meant to work thinking about a woman who gave me a look in a seminar. I'd wonder if she liked me, if she would speak to me. Then she would disappear at the end of the semester and I'd never see her again. People come and go, live and die. Numbers are forever, but numbers don't live here. They live in the place where there is no dust. We're the dust, on the outside of that place, excluded forever. The more gifted of us can watch the patterns in there and figure them out, but we'll never become a part of them. I'm still here. Wiles is still here, we're going to die someday and until then we'll keep having to use the toilet.

My father died last year. Nine-fingered Pete is still alive, but he stopped coming around after Dad died. Maybe he figured his job was done.

Patrick is coming next week. He's eighteen years old and engaged. He says he wants to be a cop. He's bringing his fiancée. I've talked to her. It's like conversing with a chipmunk. She went on for twenty minutes about seeing Harrison Ford in a mall in Los Angeles. They'll breed and I won't. It's a sick sad world.

Stuck as I am with people like this, I can't imagine I'll ever reach the place where there is no dust, though I'm irresistibly drawn to it. Why? Because it's impossible. I can prove it. It's a wonderful proof. Sadly, there just isn't enough room left in the margin for me to show it to you.

