

Chapter 8

It is a staple of Philadelphia folklore that Fairmount Park, beginning at the Parkway and going north to Germantown and Cheltenham, is the largest stretch of wilderness within the precincts of a big city anywhere in the world. This may in fact be the case, although over the past century so many cities have been reduced to wilderness that the very distinction between 'city' and 'wilderness' may be out of date.

Wissahickon Creek runs through the park at the north end. The bridge over this creek is a legendary lover's leap. Philadelphians intent on a lugubrious exit from an unhappy love affair immediately think of the bridge over the Wissahickon as their first option.

Given my extreme state of derangement, I had neither time nor energy to work out elaborate preparations. This made a jump off the Wissahickon bridge particularly simple and convenient. Little more was needed besides a rope, a heavy stone to serve as a counter-weight, and unflinching determination. The janitor at the dorm gave me the rope after I told him that it was needed to keep my bookcase from falling over. Once inside the park, a rock could be selected from the myriads laying about on the ground. The next day I boarded a bus to Germantown that would deposit me off at walking distance from the bridge.

A rock that was neither too heavy, nor awkward to carry was quickly found. The rope was looped around my neck and secured with a simple knot; there would be time enough to knot the other end about the rock. I had no doubts concerning my total lack of confidence in my capacity to work up the courage to throw myself

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over the parapet: the vision of my body breaking to pieces over the rocks in the shallow creek was all too vivid. My plan had been designed to force me out of my natural reluctance. By throwing the rock horizontally away from my body, the added assistance from Universal Gravitation would lift me up and over the concrete banister into the void. Ideally my neck would be broken in mid-passage.

Splashing along the muddy pathways, now conflated with the route of destiny, I tried to bolster my spirits with the fantasy that I would somehow be coming back in another life to avenge myself on all who had so deeply injured me in this one. Frank Kriegle would of course be the first to suffer. Then Hans Mungenlehre, against whom I had no grievances, but whose job it was to take the brunt as representative for Mathematics. Dean Hardball could stand in for Zelosophic U.

My high school would be burned to the ground; nobody would escape. Drs. Baumknuppel and Fraulein Zwicky would be roasted on slowly rotating spits as I charred marshmallows over their sizzling flesh. My parents would be forced to swallow reptiles until they choked to death. In trying to conjure up appropriate tortures for Felicia herself a kind of blessed narcotic slumber enveloped my consciousness like a soft, comforting drizzle.

By the time I'd recovered my state of smug satisfaction had been completely undermined. I didn't want to torture or murder anyone; the very thought filled me with aversion. At that point I simply broke down, collapsing on the roadway and saturating my limbs and light spring garments in the sea of mud left over from recent rainfall.

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Then, when I resumed my march to the bridge, thoughts broke in from another quarter. A ceaseless din of on-going computations churned inexorably on the raw substance of my shattered nerves. Victim to its compulsions, like a computer on overdrive, my brain was relentless substituting 56 for 53 everywhere on all the hundreds of pages of equations and calculations retained in my memory, then storing the results somewhere within its complex folds for use in some future lifetime. Into the symphony of hate, self-pity, guilt, confusion and terror that resonated within my soul, these long strings of inane calculations broke like the disintegrating warbles of a cracked bell. One minute I could be observed flinging my arms in every direction, weeping and shouting " *Felicia, I hate you! I hate you, Felicia !* " The next would find me muttering under my breath : " *Take the 5th number in the 3rd column, multiply it by 37, add 56 (not 53 !) times the first 3 places, rewritten in base 13 , yet treated like a number in base 47, one gets* "

I must once more beg forgiveness of my reader. Indeed it is beginning to look as if I will have to ask forgiveness for asking for forgiveness so often! All the same, my acute sense of responsibility as an author compels me to interrupt this narrative once more, in order to offer up a few more generalizations about the nature of mathematics and mathematicians.

High-level research in modern mathematics is the exclusive domain of obsessive-compulsives. This reality is well understood by persons in the profession although unknown to the general public. The sublime ambition of uncovering a few more eternal truths about the nature of the universe does not, in itself, supply sufficient motivation to inspire even the most dedicated of human

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beings to drudge through endless hours of odious calculation and re-calculation, or sit for hours cramped over a desk manipulating long obtuse columns and tables of numbers, subscripts, indices, parameters, formulae, algorithms and so on, at a time when so few hours of precious sunlight flood the parks and, eagerly chased by the winds of autumn, russet leaves whip along the roads

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Watching a mathematician at work, appalled by the lunatic gleam in his eye, the hand palsied by writer's cramp, a face prematurely haggard, his breathing brought to a virtual halt, one brings to mind some miser, some conception of Molière or George Eliot who, with all the glories of Nature on the other side of his door, sits alone in a dark, smelly room counting and re-counting his gold by dim candlelight.

One gets little sense of a person motivated by some higher calling. Nowhere, in fact, is there any meaningful purpose in sight. What drives him, what drives all similarly obsessed and wretched beings, is the potent anaesthetic delivered to heart and mind by any frustrating, laborious and monotonously repeated activity, mixed with slight variations from time to time to keep it from becoming altogether dull. One's hope is kept alive by that occasional inspiration coming out of nowhere, arousing a delirious sensation, however brief, of transcendent ecstasy.

Like a moth to the flame, many a mathematician is fatally attracted to the solving of problems with many opportunities for making mistakes, obliging him to retrace his steps over and over again. His soul is at rest only in a Sisyphean Hell. One finds a make-and-break circuit in every mathematician's intellect that functions like an electric bell that never stops ringing. If one is

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lucky, the mind's own revulsion at its own operations will trigger a vortex in thought, wherein enormous batches of numbers, variables, predicates, postulates, axioms and so forth , are centrifuged to produce a sediment sinking to the floor of consciousness, from which there emerges something that may be called a theorem, lemma, scolium or, at the very least, a conjecture of some sort.

One dares not allow the process to stop before one's resources of psychic energy have been completely exhausted. Yet sooner or later the crash is inevitable. When that happens it may, more often than not express itself in some terrible form of release, debauchery, alcoholism, sporadic violence, suicide. Herein one finds yet another advantage of the computer over the powerful, albeit fragile brain. Once its work is brought to an end the computer doesn't try to kill itself.

Lugging feet, heart, computations, rope and rock, I ascended the slope of the hill that gave access to the steps leading onto the Lover's Leap bridge, a wide, aqueduct-like structure whose feet squat in the trite eddies of the diminutive Wissahickon Creek. Gasping for breath I sat down to rest. My heart beat violently . Cruel spasms twisted my body. Laying the rock on the ground, I watched in mild amusement as it tumbled down the slope of the hill into the creek. In a moment it had become indistinguishable from thousands of others; yet one more evidence of my incompetence at everything, even the simplest suicide! I buried my head in my hands and wept:

Felicia, I cried, Felicia: why are you not here to save me? Your face, your voice, your tender palms resting, even momentarily, on my shoulders, your life-restoring breath coursing across my cheeks like

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a torrid tropical breeze, your eyes like midnight stars , like limpid pools filled to their depths with love ! Just to see you, nothing more - any one of these things would be sufficient to countermand my tragic resolution, to renew my will to live , to furnish the courage to forge , once again, the blind illusion of some meaningless meaning in the pointlessness of the world's utter pointlessness!

Felicia, Felicia! I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you! I die loving you! If it is so destined that you should see the splattered remains of my body, how will you respond? With remorse ? Or disgust? Will you be moved to caress these broken bones? Will you, in your grief, rend your garments, shave your head and smear ashes over your face? Will my final act of desperation inspire you to discover some theorem in mathematics that will immortalize your name ? Or will you, taking your bliss on the cancerous breast of Frank Kriegle, as his toxic fingernails dig into your back and his nicotine reek glides up you nostrils, feel only a sense of relief from being rid of some dreadful bore ?

Like the slight crack in a glass vase that indicates the beginning of its dissolution , the darkening of the sky heralded the approach of evening. I had to accomplish my task at once or pack it in for the day. As my steps labored mechanically up the remaining arc-cosines of the steep incline, I felt driven by a demon outside my own body. I stood for awhile in mute contemplation of the situation of Aleph Randal McNaughton, not without irony. Crawling in disjointed lurches like a caterpillar over a leaf, was he not nothing more than an evolutionary error moving instinctively to its own self-destruction?

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After reaching the final wide block of stone giving access to the surface of the bridge I pulled myself to a standing position and looked around. The evening haze was just settling over the trees. Never before had I realized how beautiful they were. Philadelphia, Zelosophic U. , all my tortured relationships were like the reflected light from some distant star, nothing more. Could I not leave all that behind and take solitary refuge in some lovely woods like the ones spread out before me. I sighed? My mind was made up and there was no turning back.

With my first tentative steps onto the concrete walkway I was brought me to a complete halt. Was this not some illusion conjured up by all the evil of this world? Some infernal hallucination mocking me at the brink of my immanent destruction? Yet another ingenious torture expressly designed to embitter my final moments? Or merely the confirming evidence that I had indeed lost my mind?

For Felicia was there, after all! She was standing near the bridge's center, leaning over the parapet and weeping without restraint into the murderous void. This was no hallucination, of that I was convinced. My imagination was much too overcharged with oppression and gloom to so powerfully reproduce her presence. She'd put on her red flower-printed dress for the occasion, like a lovely bouquet awaiting its baptism in blood. Bare-footed, she'd removed her shoes and placed them beside a stack of books and papers on the concrete pavement. Her long black hair, swirling about like a tangled mop in the wet breeze, had fallen over her face, casting, as it always did, it's diabolical magic on my senses .

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By stepping out onto the bridge I had set up a longitudinal wave propagating between the two endposts. Startled, Felicia looked about in terror. From the amplitude of her reaction one would imagine that I'd prompted cascades of torsional oscillations like the ones that destroyed the Tacoma Narrows Bridge on November 7th, 1940.

Then Felicia recognized me. she let out a cry of despair, or so I imagined. The look in her face was absolutely horrid. I sensed her vacillation between the urge to destroy either herself or me, as well as an inability to decide which to do. Then she staggered back onto the roadway before collapsing to the ground. I had to grab onto the banister to keep from falling myself. Responding to a mutual panic, we each ran off the bridge in opposite directions.

I didn't stop running until I'd reached the outer edge of Fairmount Park, where I boarded the next bus back to the campus. A hassle with the driver over my not having the exact change was good for me; it helped me also to have to solicit change of a dollar from the other occupants of the bus, most of whom were black, that is to say, from a world one never saw around Zelosophic in those days. The remainder of that day is a total blank. It must have been one of the worst in my experience.

The next morning, as if nothing had happened, I showed up for the class in Exceptional Logics. Felicia wasn't there; Frank was his usual self, that is to say impenetrable and deranged. He gave the impression of being totally unaware of recent events. This was not the case. After class he took me aside in the hallway and informed me that if I continued to push my attentions on his fiancée he would murder me.

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This new development left me utterly dumbfounded. I'd been going around for weeks under the impression that Felicia was scarcely aware of my existence, let alone my passion for her. It had been part of my design to keep her in the dark until I was ready for her. Yet Frank insisted that on numerous occasions I'd made improper advances at her, compromising remarks, even passes! She'd reached the breaking point. Frank felt it necessary to emphasize to me that she found me unbearable.

I told him point-blank that he was lying.

"Aleph, you little shit! Are you calling me a liar??!!!"

"Only by Russell's Axiom of Extensionality." I squeaked. Then I reminded him of the Cretan Paradox of Epimenides. Frank became very agitated. He started pacing up and down the length of the hallway. On the third time around he shook a finger in my face and swore:

"You'll regret this, asshole! You'll regret it!!!"

His exaggerated pacing continued. On the next approach he yanked my left ear. I punched him in the stomach. My punch couldn't have amounted to much. I've never been very strong, and was still only a kid of 14; yet Frank doubled over automatically as if in response to a stabbing pain. Folding his arms across his stomach he roared:

"I'll make you pay for this, Cantor! Don't you dare show your face around here again!"

Upon which he made a running tackle, picked me up, and threw me up against the wall. As my body slide to the floor and lay sprawled, face downwards, he covered it with stomps and kicks. Hans Mengenlehre and two grad students ran out of the math department office and pulled Frank away. An ambulance

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came and took me to the University Hospital, where I was treated for two broken ribs, a broken right arm and numerous bruises. They kept me under observation in the hospital for four days. For the next few weeks my right arm was covered with a splint and my chest encircled with a thick bandage.

I was sent home on the weekend. Hans called me into his office the following Monday morning. After we'd seated ourselves, he indicated that he was inclined to be sympathetic to my side of the argument. Could I tell him the story in my own words, starting from the beginning? It was easy enough to start, yet soon I found myself meandering about in my delivery until I was entirely lost. While attempting to give the impression that Frank was making everything up, my manner was thoroughly distraught, unhinged is not too strong a word, mixing hysterical outbursts at the simple mention of Felicia's name with strange vacancies punctuated by sobs. Hans, who had begun by believing Frank's excessive jealousy a distorted product of his own twisted imagination, now realized that there was probably something to it.

He waited until I'd calmed down before speaking. He began by cautioning me that it was unwise that Felicia and I be seen to be spending too much time together. She'd taken a leave of absence for the rest of the term. She was also dropping out of Frank's course. Her nerves were shot. Hans seemed to me to be implying, not too subtly, that this might be at least partly due to my harassment. He insisted all the same that the maintenance of a peaceful environment in the mathematics department required my continued attendance at Kriegle's lectures in Exceptional Logics.

Galled more by his tone of voice than by anything he was saying, I stood up to my full height. With the air of bravado quite

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in keeping with a love-struck adolescent I waved aloft the cast - it was the best I could do in terms of the spontaneous production of a gesture of defiance - and swore that either I be allowed to see Felicia, or I would run away from Philadelphia and never be heard from again.

The threat worked. Mengerlehre was thrown into the wildest confusion. It is not overstating the case to say that his entire universe was collapsing before his very eyes. The ship of state of Mathematics, so skillfully guided up to now between the Scylla of the departmental genius and the Charybdis of the departmental marriage, was cracking up on the rocks of puppy love! He reached into his desk drawer and pulled up a bottle of Tranquilizers; taking 3 for himself he gave me one. *Take it easy*, he said, lowering his voice: there was no reason why I shouldn't see Felicia as much as I liked. The embarrassment I was generating around the campus was caused, no doubt, by the crudeness of my tactics. Everyone connected with Zelosophic knew I was in love with her.

This surprised me very much at first, yet Hans was able to supply numerous examples of my recent behavior such as to leave little doubt in my mind that he was right. He reminded me that, just the week before, I'd been seen on the lawn in front of the administration building, rolling around in the snow, rubbing it in my face, scratching myself and crying "Felicia! Felicia!" I did in fact recall the incident, but hadn't realized anyone else was noticing.

All the students in Frank's class had come to him with reports of my scandalous behavior. Many were convinced that I was having an affair with her. What prompted this opinion was the extremes to which I'd been going to give the appearance of

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avoiding her. Hans passed across to me a written complaint form stating that I had once stared at her obsessively through all 45 minutes of the class! He put it up to me: how should be interpret such stories? What conclusions should he be drawing? What sort of action should he take. These were genuine questions, and he had hoped I might be able to supply the answers for at least some of them.

It was the moment I'd been waiting for. With no traces remaining of my former confusion, I related the story of the fortuitously interacting suicide attempts of Felicia and myself at the Wissahickon Bridge the week before. Mengenlehre sat there stunned, much like a mammoth who has seen the Ice Age coming and suddenly slips on a glacier. He sat completely in complete immobility for so long that I began to get nervous. With the intention of cheering him up a little, I suggested to him that departmental unity could still be maintained by arranging that Felicia be married off to me.

He didn't move a muscle; Hans' psyche had congealed into a catatonic trance. I waved a pencil slowly across his field of vision: the pupils stayed fixed. It was the moment to tip-toe out of the office and gently close the door behind me. I knew I didn't want to be there when the fit wore off.

Over the coming weeks life recovered an appearance of normalcy. I abandoned my mathematics project as an exercise in futility. Bob Boolean and I discovered that we liked each other. We began a joint project in Algebraic Topology which culminated in half-a-dozen minor communications to Princeton's *Annals of Mathematics* .

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Hans insisted that Frank and I shake hands in public. Although I was still required to attend his class, we avoided one another as much as possible. Both Frank and I would have preferred me to drop the class altogether, but Hans passed by almost every day just to observe my continuing presence there.

He did not come alone. The individual accompanying him was a short fat man with thick spectacles and a goatee. He wasn't from the department and I doubted that he was even on Zelosophic's faculty. It cannot be denied that he made a decidedly unpleasant impression. I sized him up as the sort of person one imagines standing in front of a mirror for hours, picking out nose hairs with a tweezers.

After Hans stopped coming altogether this man took his place. He sat in the back of the class, industriously taking notes, which was enough to show that he wasn't there for Exceptional Logics. The rest of us spent most of the time staring at the blackboard dumbfounded.

I'd caught on right away: Hans had called upon the services of a staff psychiatrist from the University Hospital to straighten out the Math Department's Oedipus Complex. As expected one morning after he'd attended 3 classes, he approached me and introduced himself. His full name, *emphasizing* title, was Doctor Stanislaus Weakbladder. He would be happy if I would just call him Stan. Could we set up a time and place for an appointment? He'd already discovered a number of insights that could help me over some of my personal difficulties.

Obviously this was not merely a request, he was giving me marching orders. I suggested that we meet in the cafeteria of the Student Union later that evening. He didn't think that would work.

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The revelations he wanted to shared were too delicate to be aired in public. His counter-proposal was that I come to his office the following morning.

I roundly told him to go to Hell: I'd had my fill of experiences with psychiatrists in their offices. Finally we worked out a compromise: the second floor of the Student Union held a number of conference rooms. They were almost always deserted after 5 PM . I could deal with that: if the occasion arose I could always yell for help.

When Weakbladder showed up that evening around 6 he was carrying a briefcase holding the notepads he'd written over in class, a stack of clinical files, and books filled with the usual nonsense. We entered one of the rooms and made ourselves comfortable. Weakbladder made some attempt to ingratiate himself before coming to the point. He expressed the conventional admiration for my achievements at so young an age. He even dropped his guard so far as to express his personal opinion that Freud's psychotherapies were not designed to work well with really intelligent people. Such people preferred to figure things out for themselves. In dealing with subjects like Kriegle and myself, he generally presented them with his findings and allowed them take it from there.

Already he was able to tell me this much: Frank Kriegle was a paranoid with latent homosexual tendencies and a severally repressed Oedipus Complex owing to an exaggerated fixation on a misogynist father figure. I suffered from basic penis envy. My manic-depressive psychosis was only a symptom of a far deeper malady. He'd seen many cases like mine. His expert opinion was

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that I was in an advanced stage of schizophrenia and should have been institutionalized when I was 8.

He didn't know anything about the woman involved in the current "imbroglio" (his exact word) , but he figured she had to be pretty screwed up as well. Weakbladder stopped talking for awhile and looked at me in silent anticipation. I didn't really know how a manic-depressive in an advanced stage of schizophrenia was supposed to react. For want of anything better, I asked him how my learning all these things about myself was supposed to help me.

Weakbladder frowned, shrugged his shoulders. I had the distinct impression that he considered it unprofessional to be asked such questions. He coughed a bit, then muttered: Frank and I were scientists . He'd assumed any sort of data would be useful to us. Suddenly I got the picture. I looked at him strangely, and said:

"Dr. Weakbladder: is there something in particular you want to know about me? "

A nymphet smile quivered to life on his pinched lips: *Aha! I was going to cooperate* ! Bending down, he withdrew a folder from his briefcase. As I knew without having to look at it , *Case History of Aleph McNaughton Cantor* , (or words to that effect) were written in pencil on its cover. The leg of his chair made a scraping noise on the planked floor as he moved it over to establish closer proximity:

" Aleph, could you tell me something about your mother?"

" All right ", I said, with a newfound eagerness that startled him:

" When she talks she only uses 3 pitches: C-sharp, D and F."

" What ? "

" That's right. Those are the only three notes anyone has ever heard her use. At the age of 3 I tested her speaking voice with a tuning-fork.

C-sharp is her loving tone. When she talks in D it usually means she's confused. F is reserved for her angry moods. She's funny that way, but that's how it is."

He wrote everything down of course, giving me time to think up new absurdities. Then he held the page up at a distance and regarded it curiously. His expression remained much the same as he turned to me with a grimace: " Look, young man. That's not the kind of information I'm looking for. Well ... for instance ... how did she treat you when you were ..uh ..*bad* . How did she punish you? Did she ..er... *spank* you ? Did she make you stand in the corner? Did she ...uh...*humiliate* you in some way? "

I leaned back in the heavy chair whose dark upholstery reproduced the rest of the room's decor, and seriously considered the matter:

" No", I answered in a low monotone, as if ashamed of my confession, " All she ever made me do was close my eyes."

"*Close your eyes? !' "*

"Yes. Sounds simple , doesn't it? You have to try it yourself to realize how painful it can be . It's like someone ordering you to be blind for an indeterminate period. " I stared at him intently as, no doubt , his old professor in Vienna or Zurich must have done:

" Why don't you try it yourself? I guarantee that after five minutes you'll be begging me to stop."

Weakbladder scowled deeply. No doubt he'd decided that I really was crazy after all, and that it was best to humor me.

" All right, if you promise not to leave the room."

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I gave him my word. My instructions to him were to close his eyes, cover them with his hands, and not move a muscle for the next five minutes. Weakbladder obliged. Covering his eyes with his hands, he rested his elbows on his knees. Once he'd settled into the experiment I reached into his briefcase and pulled out the files on Frank and myself.

Weakbladder had either gotten his wires crossed or he was deliberately misleading me: these documents clearly stated that Kriegle was the one suffering from penis envy with manic-depressive psychosis masking terminal schizophrenia, whereas I was the one with paranoid latent homosexual tendencies and a severely repressed Oedipus Complex derived from an exaggerated fixation on a misogynist father figure. Evidently textbook Freudian psychology maintains that there is so little difference between the two kinds of lunatic that Weakbladder had gotten them thoroughly mixed up.

His theories about what was wrong with Frank were so astonishing, that I had to be called to attention:

"Aleph : are the five minutes up yet? "

" A little bit longer, Stan; it won't be long now. The punitive aspects of your ordeal will begin asserting themselves. "

"Quite the contrary!", he chirped, " I'm enjoying this!" Yet shortly afterwards Weakbladder began to suspect I might be making fun of him. He lowered his hands and opened his eyes, to find me engrossed in the section of Frank's file with his conclusions. I nodded to him and said:

" Hold on a minute, Stan. What you've got here is really fascinating."

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Accustomed as they may have been to the performance of innumerably many fine gestures, Weakbladder's flabby hands broke through the confines of habit as they reached over to tear the stack of files out of my hands. He pulled himself to his full height. Clearly he wasn't used to be treated this way. A warrior in the battle against the demons of Unreason deserved more respect. He must have swallowed an accumulation of phlegm the size of a golf ball, as he blustered:

" What is the meaning of this? "

" Beats me, Doc. That's your problem."

Immobilized by indignation, Weakbladder stared at me as I sprinted out of the conference room and ran down the hallway to the stairs.

I was delighted to have discovered that I wasn't any of the things he's accused me of being. A classic ignoramus if there ever was one.

I looked at my watch. It was not yet 7. If I hopped on a bus into the downtown right away there would still be time to catch that evening's concert at the Academy of Music. Featured as a star billing was the Venezuelan pianist, Mario Robles, in a performance of the Bartok 2nd Piano Concerto.

The program notes explained that Robles had been a child prodigy.

Listening to the superior quality of his performance led me to speculate on the sorts of problems he, too, must have had in growing up. Mathematical prodigies have a tough time of it, as I could testify, but it can't be much easier for the musical ones. He'd given his first public concert in Caracas at the age of 8 and graduated from the Julliard Conservatory with top honors at age

13. It was gratifying to discover that none of these catastrophes had overwhelmed his innate musicality. I decided to go backstage after the concert and see if I could draw him out on this subject.

A dense crowd of concert-goers obstructed the door of the dressing room. Once inside there was another long delay, while a dozen persons in his vicinity monopolized Robles' attention. Finally it was my turn. I'd given up all hope of comparing our experiences as prodigies and settled on a handshake and possibly an autograph. Still in his 20's, Robles radiated a spirit of vitality. Next to him, though only half his age, I suddenly felt very old. To my recollection he was on the portly side, red-faced, his crop of dark hair sleek and tangled atop his head like the pelt of a muskrat. A suave and bristly mustache decorated his upper lip.

I passed him my program to sign. Pen poised in mid-air he asked for my name:

"Aleph McNaughton Cantor. Special student at Zelosophic U."

"Aleph Cantor!" The pen clattered to the floor, dark eyes flashing beneath thick eyebrows. Extending a muscular right arm he wrapped the sleeve of his tuxedo about my shoulders and strode with me to a corner of the room where we could talk undisturbed.

"So you're Aleph McNaughton Cantor! Aleph McNaughton Cantor ..." Robles rocked my name gently too and fro in a low, coaxing voice, as if to reassure himself that I really was the Boy Wonder whose fame had reached as far as Venezuela. I nodded unhappily with confused pride. His tone of voice suddenly became stern. His manner towards me also perceptibly hardened:

"Yes, Aleph. I'm very glad you were able to come to my concert this evening." He let go of my shoulder, "I have something

very important to tell you. I am for many years a good friend of the family of Felicia de Hernandez de Montalban de Salvador! Having met you I can see with my own eyes that you are not the monster that has been portrayed to me. I am astonished that you could have reduced that poor girl to her present condition. Why, Aleph! I've known Felicia since she was a little child! Since she was - so high!" He indicated a height little different from my own ,

" Ah!" Thousands of hours of Beethoven sonatas were ingrained in the hand he held up to command silence,

" I don't want to know the details. We Latinos are not like you Norte Americanos! We value discretion.

" But I must tell you this, Aleph Cantor: you have brought great distress upon her aged mother, and to a brother whom , I fear, you will find to be a man of action at any perceived affront to his honor !

" Right now you must promise me - this very minute! - that you will stay away from Felicia Salvador! I say this for your own good. Otherwise you may find yourself in great danger, not only from her enraged fiancé - whom I agree is an ass - but also from the obligation to vengeance that you may ignite in the blood coursing the veins of one of the great aristocratic families of old Castile !"

I turned pale as a sheet of cellophane . Robles went on:

" Felicia has asked me to give you this letter. It had been my intention to make a trip out to the University early tomorrow morning, before catching the plane. This is no longer necessary. She sends you this through the generous compassion of her noble heart. It is the last communication that will ever pass between you.
"

He pulled up a chair as I sat down, speechless with grief. With a gesture of authority, he shoved Felicia's letter into my trembling hands :

" ... *Ne -ver ..Ag-gain ?...* " I stammered.

" Never again. Young man, she is no longer even in Philadelphia! She has gone back to Argentina. Let me warn you, do not try to follow her even there, for", he bent over to whisper in my ear, " Her mother has connections with the C.I.A. !" I stared at him terrified.

" And now!" Once more a smile broke over Robles' face,

" Señor Aleph McNaughton Cantor! To show that I personally bear you no ill-will, I invite you to spend the rest of the evening with me and my musical associates at the Russian Inn." The restaurant to which he alluded was renowned in the Broad Street theater district for catering to musicians and actors.

Mumbling fitfully to myself I nodded dumb assent. As he walked to another part of the lounge to get his coat, I followed him, shambling across the floor like an old man, broken with distress. I would never see Felicia again. She was to be lost to me forever. She was to be ravished, night after night, by that abominable brute, that salacious Yeti, Frank Kriegle! A murderous rage took complete possession of me. The will to destruction tingled in my hands like the slippery body of an electric eel, as I projected the horrible death of Frank Kriegle on the screen of my overwrought imagination.

Like some dumb, obedient Quasimodo wagging his hump, I followed Robles out the door into the sparkling ambiance of Broad and Walnut which, at that period of Philadelphia's history, was the

only venue anywhere possessing even a modicum of life and charm.

The reception at the Russian Inn was lavish, so much so that it enabled me, briefly, to forget my miseries. I was flattered to be introduced by Robles to some of Philadelphia's prominent musicians, of which it has always had more than its share.¹ With each introduction he delivered a little speech in praise of my prodigious endowments. By now I was used to this kind of thing. Although it annoyed me somewhat, it was clearly preferable to being informed that one's life was in danger.

Lots of liquor was floating about the dinner tables at the Russian Inn. I was definitely underage but the musicians, many of whom came from European countries that had never instituted age limits for drinking, encouraged me to sneak a sip of wine now and then as the evening progressed. It was just enough to get me drunk, which was probably a good thing under the circumstances.

My observations on this occasion about this community have since been re-confirmed many times. Narrow specializations like music, mathematics, ballet and others produce some terrific bores in social settings. The musicians are more self-conscious than the scientists : not only do they utter their banalities, they sing them as well. The really interesting conversationalists are truck-drivers, factory workers, cooks, sailors, cops, hospital personnel. People like that. Needless to say they have problems of their own.

Shortly before 2 AM, Mario Robles drove me back to the University. His innate sentimentality had been brought to the fore by the Russian Inn's spirit of conviviality. Steering the car with the

¹The tradition begins with Benjamin Franklin's glass harmonica and Lorenzo DaPonte's Italian academy.

left hand, he put his right arm on my shoulder and affectionately stroked my hair.

"Ah, Aleph! You're young. You'll get over it. Love isn't what you see in the operas. *La Traviata! Tosca! La Bohème!* Love is a fraud, Aleph! A fraud! It never fails to astonish me what men go through for women." He whispered in my ear: "We men understand one another so much better ..." Soon afterwards he leaned over and slopped a wet kiss on the crown of my scalp. Apart from holding and squeezing my left hand in the final mile to the dorm there were no further incidents. Still I was only too happy when Mario left me off at the dorm and waved goodbye.

It was more than I could bear to slog my soul's bitterness up the four flights of stairs to my cheerless rooms. Nothing awaited me there but its frosty burden of memories. Dirty clothing lay in messy heaps over furniture and floor. Papers strewn about everywhere were mixed with scraps of food, cans and other garbage: the relics of a mind in chaos.

The coat was removed and dropped on the floor, the light switched on. After cleaning up in the bathroom I ended up sitting on the arm of my easy chair, gripping the letter from Felicia in dumb, wordless pain. Somehow it was opened, although I do not recall doing so. Nor was I aware of reading it until half-way through the first page.

Several re-readings of the first few paragraphs were needed before I began to realize that this was among the most incredible of all the documents that would ever come into my hands. I experienced - though not for the last time - the unnerving sensation of watching the grounds of sanity giving way beneath my feet. Afterward I howled like a tortured dog for two hours. The

original letter is still in my possession. Here are the relevant portions:

May 29, 1948

Dear Aleph :

I must ask you to stop foisting your attentions on me. They irritate me. You are embarrassing me. It's even worse than you imagine: You are driving me insane!

What makes you think that just because you drive me nuts it means I want to go to bed with you? Oh no! Oh no! You can be very proud of yourself. You can boast about what you've done to me as another one of your accomplishments, you measly little prodigy worm! You've ruined my life: that's what you've done.

Here's another thing you should know : I'm going back to Argentina: just to get away from you ! Did anybody ever tell you that you're a rat and a toad. Aleph? Aleph? Are you listening to me? A rat and a toad; I want you never to forget that.

And a lousy mathematician, too. I bet I'm the first person in your whole life to tell you the truth. You're just no good! Don't think for a moment that I'm in love with you! Oh no! Oh no! Oh, my God ! How could I possibly be in love with a worm? Take your face, to begin with. Your pimply, screwy little face, Aleph, is so repulsive that I see it even in my dreams. I'll tell you something else : I can just picture that stupid little smile on your face when you learn that I dream about you every night. Every single night! Why can't you stop bothering me? Don't you understand that I hate you? Unless I get away from you I'm going to kill myself. I don't

have to tell you that. You already know everything: I did try to kill myself ! You repulsive reptile, you wouldn't even let me do that ! You're just a disgusting monster, Aleph! Did anybody ever tell you that : why were you born ?

Here - I'll tell you something else to inflate your worthless ego- you've ruined my marriage, Yes, Aleph, you really did it. You made me see just how bad Frank is by showing me someone so much worse. Now I hate him, too. Now it's all over between us. Thank you for wrecking my marriage and my career. Maybe I'll have to become a nun. What do you think, Aleph? Should I become a nun?

What I really want to know is : what has convinced you so much that I love you ?! I think of your lips on mine and I want to throw up. I feel your hands on my thighs and shiver with disgust. And if I sometimes imagine certain things that you have no right to know about, a wave of nausea rises up from the pit of my stomach.

Don't you ever dare come near me again, you sack of shit! I'll put your eyes out, I'll tear the skin off your ugly bones! Merely the mention of your name, Aleph, Aleph , Aleph!... Aleph McNaughton Cantor, Aleph McNaughton Cantor ... Aleph Cantor ... makes me want to scream! And if I see you again, I'll never stop screaming! Oh my God, help me please !

Aleph you broke my heart. And I'm sure you don't even care.

$$e^{i\theta} = \cos \theta + i \sin \theta$$

Felicia S.

I fell asleep sitting in my chair. At dawn I was awakened by a knocking at my door. It seemed rather early for visitors. If it was some mistake, there would be a second knock. It came, this time louder and more insistent. *Who's there* ! I cried out,

No answer. I sat up.

Who's there ! I cried again.

The reply came in the form of a long series of loud knocks indicating that there was more than one person standing outside my door. I scrambled into my clothes.

Who is it ! I shouted again, at the top of my lungs.

An ax came crashing through the paneling. It sent me racing back to the bed and under the covers. Into the room through the frame of the broken-down door stepped two remarkably similar men. They were tall, dressed in black leather coats, with felt hats pulled down to the level of their eyes, and faces capable of admitting to any crime. They kept their hands in their pockets as they sidled across the room in my direction .

Gripping the covers more tightly about myself, I croaked:

" *Who are you? What do you want?* "

One of them flashed a laminated identity card , briefly but long enough for me to recognize that it was official.

" You will come with us." They moved relentlessly forward. Each took hold of an arm. Together they dragged me off the bed, out of the room and down 4 flights of stairs to the street. My knees bent and body clattering on the stairs. I pleaded with them:

"Look ! I'll tell you what you want to hear! I'm innocent, but I'll confess to anything, anything! Yes: I killed her : for the money! You can charge me with stealing the state secrets! You can see my poverty . Have you no mercy? No pity for me? "

Visibly annoyed at my whining tone of voice, the man holding my right arm pulled out a Lugar from his coat pocket and crunched the butt against the back of my head. I passed out. They put me in the back of a long black limousine and drove away

When I came too we were far away from the city on our way to some destination in the countryside. My two captors held me in a firm grip, tightly wedged between them on the back seat. Two others, equally anonymous and depraved, were sitting up front. All of them treated me as if I weren't there. There was no way of knowing where we were going. Finally the limousine pulled up onto a dirt road and everyone got out. My hands were tied behind my back, and I was rudely pushed across a field to a clearing in the woods.

Gathered together were about a dozen people, all dressed in dark ceremonial robes. They had been waiting for me. Without being able to identify them with any certainty, several of them looked familiar.

Now a complete stranger stepped forward, a forbidding individual, incapable of smiling. He was wearing judicial robes. His elongated skull conjured up the image of a death's head. His skin was grey and emaciated, his hair shaved down almost to the scalp. While speaking to me he had the annoying habit of picking his nose. His gestures indicated impatience, urgency, intolerance. It was clearly his intention that the business at hand be gotten over with as quickly as possible.

"Aleph Randal McNaughton Cantor!", his bass voice droned like a recitation of Gregorian chant: *"You are charged and condemned for the murder of the mathematician Frank Kriegle. You are charged and condemned for the suicide of his fiancée, the*

mathematics graduate student Felicia Salvador . You are charged and condemned for the crime of undermining the security of Argentina. You are charged and condemned for the crime of stealing state secrets from secret agent Stanislaus Weakbladder . "

He turned back to the crowd " I think that's enough. " A resounding "Yea !" rose from the throats of all, followed by a timorous "Yea!" from my own . Upon a signal from him the mob rushed upon me in a blind fury, dragged me to the trees and bound me hand and foot. Then everyone quickly dispersed.

Soon afterwards came the packs of hunting dogs. They crossed the fields from every direction. The first to reach me jumped up onto my chest and starting scratching out my eyes. Others tore at my feet and fought with one another to for my arms and hands. I felt the snout of a wolf-hound burrowing its way into my navel, and I woke up on the floor of my dorm room doubled over agony as its glittering teeth sliced through my intestines. It was noon.

Thus ended my first love, tragic as such things must be for all time, and for all time to come. Felicia was gone, perhaps forever. I comforted myself with the reflection that not all of the consequences were bad: for one thing it would no longer be necessary to attend Kriegle's course on Exceptional Logics . Anyway the term was just about over.

Kriegle resigned from the department at the end of the term. He did this to avoid the disgrace of being told his contract would not be renewed. Before leaving he made one last attempt to avenge himself on me. Hans Mengenlehre happened to be in the office when Kriegle was entering an "F" in Exceptional Logics against my

name . Hans insisted he change the mark to an "A" . A terrible fist-fight broke out in front of all the secretaries. I would have liked to have been there, but my parents had taken me on a vacation to Florida to help me recover from my first year in college.

Fortunately no-one was injured. I say this because, despite the wild fantasies that may occasionally surface in the heat of anger or anxiety, I've never felt any ill-will towards any of the people in the math department.

Yet there is no way one can prevent what people do to themselves. Frank's name was now mud throughout the entire American academic system. The last time anyone learned any news about him - that was a few years ago - he'd just been granted tenure as a pre-calculus teacher in some community college in Eulalia, Alabama.



