

Chapter 13

I Go Mad

Heart and mind negotiated an uneasy truce that lasted for the next two months. Little did we know that the real storm was about to break. Fads and fashions have gone through many phases over the last half century, but in my day college students were pretty square. And it would have taken some doing to unearth a major institution of higher education more square than Zelosophic U.

Zelosophic was, (and still is as far as I know) , a raging cauldron of Ivy League conformity. At the graduate level a certain amount of lip service is bestowed on the quest for higher knowledge ; for most undergraduates it's more an institution of higher earning rather than of higher learning. 99% of the coeds enroll for the purpose of finding a husband among the 99% of the male student body, who are there to earn the credentials to land the jobs that will enable them to marry the coeds. Very few go there to actually learn something.

The social milieu within which I was forced to perambulate was particularly severe in matters of dress. One had to dress to the Ivy League standard. The co-inhabitants of my floor in the dorms looked for any excuse to treat someone like a bum. You could expect to be ridiculed if a button was loose on your sports jacket. They might turn away in feigned embarrassment if your tie weren't properly knotted. They could pretend to be avoiding being seen with you in public if your trousers weren't properly creased. Some of them went so far as to inspect your right hand to see if it was clean before shaking it .

In retrospect a morbid hyper-sensitivity may be projected into my interpretation of their actions : I was still a teenager. Yet if there is some exaggeration in my recollection, I am not unjust in my assessment.

They were idiots. Yet because I'd entered college at age 13, while most of my peers were 18, 20 and in some cases as old as 26, it took some time for me to realize that they *were* idiots. My first year was rendered excruciatingly painful from the sense that I might appear unfashionable. My adolescent self-consciousness lay within tolerable limits, and it wasn't all that unusual for me to be obsessed with my appearance.

My desire to emulate the mores of the surrounding community did not extend beyond my freshman year. In that period I might have been taken for an Ivy League clothes dummy in a Wanamaker's display window¹ : drab conservative coloring, striped tie, blazer, tight-fitting scrupulously creased slacks, tennis shoes perhaps, or hush puppies, or black leather shoes with narrowly converging toes, the whole surmounted by an asinine smile without which the uniform is meaningless.

Within a few days after the beginning of my sophomore year it dawned on me that the discomfort of being ostracized by my neighbors dwindled to nothing in comparison with the discomfort of their company. Five years of frigid silence on the part of the clods living next door to me was preferable to five minutes of their conversation. Instead of dressing to please them I began

¹Wanamaker's is to Philadelphia as Filene's is to Boston.

experimenting with ways to enrage them. Somebody walking about with his shirt hanging out isn't thinking about his shirt. Therefore he must be thinking about something else. But what else is there to think about?

Well, if you don't know nobody's going to tell you. Being the campus genius I was one of the few people of whom it was actually *required* that he think about all those things about which nobody else had the faintest notion. Under pressure from all sides I found myself being mercilessly maneuvered into looking and acting like a slob. It was a matter of brute psychological survival. Thereby, because Mom had inculcated me with the dogma of cleanliness, I became a boy at war with himself: in a word neurotic. An *à la mode* shrink might say that I suffered from dysphoria.

The mere sensation that someone was looking at me could cause intense pain. Repeatedly, like a leper fondling his sores, I reviewed all my characteristic anomalies. If my tie was awry I knew it before anyone else. No-one needed to tell me that I looked like a freak for me to feel like one. My embarrassment embarrassed others, and their embarrassment intimidated me. My attempts to appear normal propelled me into even greater idiosyncrasies, like a compressed spring that upon release surges outwards with redoubled force.

Life would have been simpler had I cultivated a manner totally divorced from the norm. Wearing blue jeans, Army/ Navy store togs, torn sweaters in the Einstein tradition, rounded off with moccasins or sandals, would have removed me from one category

and placed me in another. They would have typecast me as someone to snub. Somehow I'd found a way of dressing in the Ivy League mode that gave off an aura of moccasins and jeans. The creases in my slacks always stuck out in the wrong places; or there might be 2 or 3 creases in different directions. It must have been some special magic that caused the pant cuffs to swell into bell-bottoms. Somehow my shoelaces were always coming untied. I often neglected to fasten my belt; I must have jammed my shirt back into my trousers 20 times a day, yet it always kept slopping out. My sports jacket looked as if it had been slept in, while my tie might have been taken for a theorem in *Analysis Situs* .

An unmistakable insolence in the combined impression was not apparent in the details. The very clash of colors, maroon against gold against the military black of my trousers communicated an implacable hostility. I'd become a walking affront to the merciless scrutiny of a social milieu I had no desire to relate to, but whose opinions I dreaded. The consequent ostracism, though by no means unwelcome, did nothing to diminish my feeling of being unloved.



On the morning of May 4th, 1951, following a night of close-succeeding nightmares, I awoke to find my face covered with a dense population of pimples. Formerly smooth as a bar of Philadelphia cream cheese, it now bristled with acne. Gregor Samsa's shock could not have been greater. My first thought was that (though having no clear idea of this disease apart from its name) I'd come down with scrofula. Still half-asleep yet dimly

conscious that something was wrong , I touched my face with the tips of my fingers, and screamed. It had the consistency of *steak tartare* , with a tackiness like drying varnish. When I trailed my fingers down my face it ran off a kind of slime resembling raw egg-whites.

I sprang off the bed and ran to the sink. A brief glimpse of myself in the mirror was enough; soon it was splattered over with vomit. Hot lava poured over my cheeks from a hundred nauseous volcanoes. In each pusy pimple I imagined the shape of some venomous black bug. Then fever hit me like a brick at the base of the skull. Shaking with chills and helpless, I stood for 15 minutes doubled over at the sink. The crisis passed, I staggered back to my bed and fell back once again into a feverish slumber.

Later that afternoon, a towel wrapped about my face, I slinked to the clinic of the Student Health Services located on the 3rd floor of the University Hospital. A dozen or so clients were seated in the waiting room. The towel stayed wrapped about my face. Huddled over my chair awaiting my turn , I shrank from the cruel persecution of inquisitive glances. It did not occur to me that, having troubles of their own, the others might have more important things on their minds than the outrage of my appearance. After an eternity of waiting I was called into the office of Dr. Srinivasa Chakrabarty Narasimhan.

Narasimhan was a young man from Bombay with a medical degree newly minted from Philadelphia's Jefferson Medical School. Initially I found his unsympathetic manner most reassuring . It spoke the professional, it made me feel that I was in

the hands of a truly competent scientist. Narasimhan asked me to remove the towel. He didn't seem particularly shocked by what he saw, although the way in which he grimaced made me think that he thought that I'd intended to insult him deliberately. Within a few minutes he'd diagnosed my case as acne in an advanced stage of infection.

"Why did you wait so long before coming to see me?" Narasimhan rasped. His contempt was all that it should be:

"It just appeared out of nowhere." My voice was hoarse and came out in a whisper " - Just this morning. When I went to bed last night my face was as smooth as that wall ." I pointed to the uniform pastel green of the office walls.

"That's tripe!" He became indignant, "It takes months for a face to look like yours. When's the last time you had a regular check-up?"

That made me think that he might be right after all. My mind was always preoccupied with finding solutions to difficult mathematics problems. I rarely looked at myself in the mirror:

"September ,1948. But there's nothing wrong with me! I haven't had even a cold between then and now."

Narasimhan began trembling with rage. For a moment I thought he was getting ready to throw the stethoscope at me. Wagging an index finger in my face he barked:

"We live in the era of *Modern Medicine* !! It's an absolute scandal that people like yourself, Aleph Cantor, haven't got the gratitude to avail themselves of it!! It's because of people like yourself that the United States has become a nation of pot-bellied,

pimple-faced, lily-livered invalids!! Haven't you got any pride at all? Is it any wonder that Chairman Mao calls you paper tigers? "

Narasimhan began ticking off on his fingers the diseases of a self-indulgent America:

" *Heart disease! Liver disease! Lung cancer! Prostate cancer! Emphysema! Kidney Disease! Brain Tumors!* That's all one finds in the *Land of the Free* ! *Your* kind of America!! Hmph!!...And I suppose you smoke, too." Though everything he said was coming out in the form of a question I was unable to get in a word edgewise:

" And you have the insolence to sit there and lie to me!! Aleph, do you realize what would have happened to you had you gone on neglecting this condition for another week? Why I'd be writing out your death certificate! *Blood poisoning! Gangrene! Complications! Pneumonia!* What else!!" He beat a pencil on the hardwood desktop:

" People like you are sick all the time! If it's not one thing, it's another. You never go to a doctor, you never get a check-up, you smoke like a fish, you eat any old damn thing..... you're dead by the age of 45 from a stroke! Or else you rot away like a vegetable on a hospital bed for 15 years!

" Frankly I'd rather be in Africa, in the Congo perhaps , in Rajasthan or Bengal, or up in the Nilgiri Hills, places where I might be able to do some good. They've never heard of Modern Medicine in those forsaken holes, but they try to take care of themselves!!!"

Once again I made a vain attempt to say something; he put up his right hand to indicate that silence was the only answer permitted me.

"Let's see what we can do about that face. "

Narasimhan instructed me to lie down on the cot; then he disappeared into another room. In a few minutes he was back with a nurse, an overweight middle-aged woman with a kindly face. In his hands he held a horrific set of tools for draining the infection. He and the nurse went into a huddle over the advisability of giving me anesthetic. Narasimhan felt that doing the operation without anaesthetic would teach me a much-needed lesson, and his opinion prevailed. They strapped me to the cot and went to work.

Srinivasa Chakrabarty Narasimhan was determined to make a man of me, even if he had to cut off my balls to do it. With every howl he let out a low chuckle. The nurse caressed my forehead with one flabby hand, wiping my face with a sponge held in the other. From time to time she murmured in my ear: " Just lie still. It's almost over." Ten minutes into the ordeal I passed out.

By the time I recovered consciousness the straps had been untied. The nurse helped me pull myself up to a sitting position. Then she sat on a metal stool to my left, regarding me with Anxious Concern. Narasimhan was at a side table, writing out a prescription. When he finished he waved it in my direction:

"Don't eat any sweets. If you can do without sugar so much the better. Don't buy anything from the corner hot dog stand,

follow the instructions on the bottle and come back to see me in two weeks."

The prescription was handed over. Then he swiveled around in his chair and stared out the window until I was gone.

Reappraising this experience in the light of the accumulated wisdom of age, I feel a species of gratitude for Dr. Narasimhan. I'd walked into his office half out of my mind with embarrassment and shame. In leaving all I could think of was the quickest way to kill him. Self-consciousness over my appearance had been completely obliterated by the passion for revenge, so much so that I ignored my facial condition for a week. Besides, with the infection drained it didn't look so bad.

The transaction at the hospital pharmacy in the basement kept me there only briefly. Acne is a common problem among college students, and large quantities of this medication were always available. I was given a dark brown bottle made of smoked glass filled with a gallon of some nasty-looking liquid; a box of ordinary talcum powder; and a roll of surgical cotton. The girl behind the counter winced as she handed over the bottle. So much disgust was combined with so little pity in that wince! I could scarcely tell if it referred to the way I looked or because of the treatment I was about to undergo.

The fever had broken and I was hungry. What little spending money I had was invested in a good dinner at an off-campus restaurant, one where the food had not yet been rendered inedible through being overrun by students. The meal restored me enough to consider taking in some extra-curricular activity. As I recall it

was one of those soirées given by the French Club, with lots of phony girls watching old Marcel Carné movies and singing *Chevaliers de la Table Ronde* . Returning to my room around midnight I was too tired to examine my face in the mirror, and turned in immediately.

Narasimhan's snake-oil sat on a shelf in the bathroom, untouched , for the next 10 days. In the back of my mind was the hope that I wouldn't have to use it.



.Normally I am up and around by 6 AM. The morning of May 14th, 1951 found me in exceptionally good spirits. The winter had lingered, as it tends to do in Philadelphia, and I was happy to see that this was one of the early days, perhaps the first of genuine spring. I sat up and went into the bathroom to wash.

The face in the mirror knocked me off my feet.

Catching my breath I looked again. The miasma had returned, just as horrible as ever. Once again the field of my face was covered with meadows of pimples. The stickiness and the discharges were, if possible, even more intense. I felt and squeezed the pulpy mass, not certain of how to proceed. The urge to exit outdoors and avail myself of this beautiful spring day was strong, yet not so much as to outweigh the fear of having to deal with my peers.

Then I remembered the bottle of medicine sitting on the top shelf of the book case. With a heavy sigh, I crossed the room and hoisted the brown bottle by its long, fluted neck. Instructions were typed onto the label in a minuscule font, legible only by the strong

light coming in through the window. They indicated that one should first apply the talcum powder to the face, forming a base for holding the liquid. The medication was to be applied 3 times per day using the cotton wads: waking, after lunch and before going to bed.

Given that the proper design of wrappings and bottle caps is one of few remaining challenges to Western technology, it was gratifying to discover that the cap to this bottle could be twisted off at once without complication. I raised the opened bottleneck to my nose. The only way I kept myself from collapsing was by clutching the radiator. The rancid odor of rotten eggs that floated, thick and foul, over the bottle's orifice could have been a hen's miscarriage. Though I was able to keep my hold on the bottle my hands were trembling, and a thin stream of the fluid fell into the sink and spread through the cracks in the ceramic. The stain could never afterwards be removed.

The brown concoction resembled ... well, it looked like...What can one say? It looked and smelled like the contents of a bottle of Guinness stout that had received the farts of a hepatitis victim who'd eaten a dozen hard-boiled eggs. Such a stink remained in the apartment after the cap had been screwed back on that I had to run around opening all the windows.

This was the brimstone in which I was expected to saturate my face for the next three weeks !!

I was in a terrible fix. To ignore the inflammation was not only out of the question. Indeed it was impossible. The mere prospect of a renewed visit to Srinivasa's horror chamber sufficed

to make me recognize that something had to be done, and that quickly. But what could I do?

I couldn't remain in this room with its abominable odor. The inbred character of mathematical research had accustomed me to exploit every opportunity to sop up what few particles of precious sunlight there were. Philadelphia is not known for its fair sunny weather: Washington and Jefferson had needed few excuses for moving the nation's capital to the District of Columbia. The keen disappointment I felt at the possibility of having to pass up the chance to partake of a matchless spring day was almost strong enough to override all other considerations.

Throwing on some clothes I gathered up my books and papers and stumbled to the door. As my right hand touched the shiny surface of the bronze doorknob my body froze: fear of having to confront the public in my present state had paralyzed my scant resources of will. Unfocused panic shook my whole being. Stunned by a pitiless fate, my knees turning to jelly beneath me, I crept back to the bed from which I'd just recently arisen.

For the next hour I lay under the covers, immersed in that Beelzebubian stench. Bit-by-bit my heart-beat returned to normal, breathing became easier, muscles relaxed until I was able to sit up and take stock of my situation. It was time to face reality.

There was no escaping it: I would have to take the medication. Dr. Narasimhan had estimated that the treatment would take three weeks. Perhaps I could hide in my room during the day and come out at night. There weren't many classes left before the end of the term. I could work quite well in my room. For

the next 3 weeks my social life would be more or less restricted to the heaps of mathematics texts, reprints and papers lying about the room and the ingratiating fumes of sulphur dioxide. That night a postcard sent off to my parents. It explained that I wouldn't be coming home for awhile. Nothing was the matter; they shouldn't worry about me.

A settled routine emerged. Late at night I would sneak out of the dorms for a bit of air and to scrounge up some food. With the arrival of darkness I ventured, a veritable Dracula in search of sustenance, out into the streets. Concealed in the shadows of the Quad, being careful to avoid groups of students, I crept stealthily along its ivy-covered walls. It could take as much as half an hour to walk to the grocery store, 3 blocks away. My presence in the store evinced strong reactions from clerks and customers. The odor of rotting eggs emanating from the strange skin coloration of my face - unlike that any known race of man yet equally disgusting to all - hovered about me like the aura of some primal curse.

After the first week my nerve deserted me altogether. That Sunday I stocked up on a large supply of groceries and barricaded myself in my dorm room, determined not to venture out again for the next two weeks. Certainly there was enough work lying around to keep me busy. Research projects alone were enough to consume most of the waking day: active projects in number theory, homological algebra, astrophysics, functional analysis; unfinished projects, discarded projects, projects destined never to be finished yet never discarded; and stale old projects that did not sit well on an empty stomach, which had never generated much interest even

on a full stomach. Hunches, conjectures, insights, wild stabs in the dark, programs , programmes.....

A week's hard work enabled me to hammer out a paper setting forth some curious results in the theory of polynomials of mixed algebraic and transcendental character ².

Luckily the clement weather was holding because the windows had to remain open at all times. Nothing availed to remove the odor of sulphur; that stuff was worse than napalm. It permanently stained and stank up whatever it came in contact with. If a few drops dribbled onto the floor, one could not again stand in that spot without getting sick. Three shirts had to be tossed out before I habituated myself to stripping before applying the medication. Black stains had developed down the front of my body and on my hands, face and fingernails, with residues on my jaws, neck and shoulders, even down my back to the base of the spine.

Horrors of this genre never reach equilibrium: the smell kept getting worse. It clung to everything, books, clothing, the bedding, furniture, food. It mixed with the molecules of the air. The mean Brownian velocity of its particles could not have been more than 3 millimeters per hour. After the first week I could have bottled the air and sold it to a match factory. The aroma of rotten eggs pervaded my memories, my free associations and my dreams.

Appetite was likewise affected. The stench had induced a permanent condition of nausea and I'd stopped eating altogether.

²" Jacobi-Siegel methods in the classification of equations of mixed character" - *Quadrature* , Vol.VII#6, June 1953, pgs. 153-197

In the beginning the smell chased away all desire for food; eventually it replaced the desire for food. No longer could any clear separation be made between the odors surrounding me and my own identity. For days I lived on little else than the smell of rotten eggs mixed with the taste of vomit. Every situation has its side benefits: I no longer needed to go to the bathroom .

By the end of the second week I'd reached the lower depths of wretchedness. All extremities, the nose in particular, were swollen to gross disproportions. Periodically, or(to use a technical term from Fourier Series , "almost periodically") , I would work up the courage to look in the mirror. Staring back at me with incredible malignity was something that can only be described as the leer of a ghoul , some wizened old leper with the claws of a vulture and maw of a craven beast .

All my clothes were filthy, yet leaving the room to go to the laundry was out of the question. My terror of leaving the room had risen to the level of a veritable psychosis. I dreaded all encounters, even those with janitors and maids. A fantasy developed which soon took on all the attributes of reality: were I to dare to step outside my door, whoever would see me first would have me committed to a madhouse for life. Faint with hunger I would sit at my desk for hours, my mind in chaos, unable to read, write or study. It seemed as if all of my research papers were covered with the scribblings of a lunatic. Like everything else in the room they were streaked with sulphur stains; I could scarcely bear to look at them.

Thrills of masochistic terror reverberated through my body whenever I touched my face or squeezed my pimples. Seized by random whims I might spring to my feet, like a puppet in the workshop of Dr. Coppelius. Chattering madly to myself, disorganized clusters of incredible thoughts whirling through my brain, I circled about the room in wide arcs without realizing it. As my dizziness mounted hallucinations assailed me: there had to be others in the room. After awhile it seemed quite normal to be talking to them. Visions, perceptions and dreams were all mixed together. I found myself in environments of increasing strangeness, under oceans, or on the continents of mysterious planets, awe-inspiring landscapes teeming with abominable creatures that metabolize lithium and sulphur as we do on oxygen and water.

Incidents from my childhood returned to haunt me like an endlessly recycled curse. No longer was I Aleph McNaughton Cantor the 15-year old college sophomore, but Aleph McNaughton Cantor the 8-year old brat being chased through the corridors of the Agape Institute by Drs. Zwicky and Baumknuppel with whips. Or back in high school dodging bullies and street gangs. Or at home under the relentless and withering scolding of Mom and Dad.

As the angular momentum of my gyrations peaked, I collapsed from dizziness and exhaustion. I might not recover my consciousness until late at night. The interval between midnight and 5 in the morning was one of relative lucidity. Sleep was difficult. In my dreams were recapitulated all the horrors of the day. Drifting back and forth, in and out of sleep, I found myself

crawling through septic tanks, catacombs and sewers. Among my recollections are some good conversations with bugs, snakes and sewer rats. The rats made me welcome, gave me bread crumbs and bits of cheese.

" Yum! That's delicious!" I said, packing in the remnants of the feast. " I was famished."

"Anytime", replied a dour old grandfather rat with greying whiskers and a pronounced squint : " There's more where that came from." His friends squeaked : " Stay with us! Down here you really feel like a rat."

" Ha, ha", I chuckled, scratching my face with my long fingernails. The rats' hospitality was compensated by an impromptu lecture on Mock Turtle functions. As I rolled over in the slime and fell into a fitful slumber, a giant water snake tickled my belly.

It could happen several times during the night that I would awake screaming in delirium. Often this would be followed by more useless attempts to open the door. I always ended reduced to a crouch in its vicinity , unable to so much as touch the doorknob. The flu that was the inevitable result of keeping all the windows open may not have been as bad as the pneumonia I could have contracted had it started to rain.

New delusions supplanted the old. This one was typical:

There are persons waiting for me to step outside the door so they can kidnap me and put me into a traveling circus as a sideshow attraction: Acne Man . I will be striped naked, all my clothes burned ; trainers will force me to walk on all fours.

Because of the hellish odor of sulphur dissipated by my taut yellowed skin nobody believes that I am, or once was human. Astonished by the evidences of my intelligence the crowds throw me peanuts, raw vegetables, old carcasses and of course rotten eggs. The sign posted before my cage explains that I lived on rotten eggs; therefore the people who throw them are not acting from motives of malice. Sometimes the crowds become unendurable. Goaded out of control with rage, I rise up on the tips of my toes, grip the bars of my cage, and roar.

Perhaps the howls uttered in my room were not so terrible as the ones imagined in my head, for no one else in the dorms appeared to hear them. Or perhaps I chose to roar when all the other students were away in class. Or perhaps, and this is probably closest to the truth, everyone in the dorms believed that Aleph Cantor was a nut, and it was only normal that he should scream night and day.

In my increasingly rare intervals of lucidity I would sit, bent double in my armchair, and weep out my wretchedness. Life's promise was null and void. Marriage, home, career : all now out of the question. Certainly no girl would ever look at me again. My insanity (I already knew that I'd gone insane) had ruined my hopes for a career as a mathematician, or anything else for that matter. I was no stranger to the extensive documentation on prodigies, mathematicians, musicians, and poets who'd gone insane in their youth then rotted away for the next forty years in asylums. I doubted not that my fate would be the same. Suicide became one of my chief obsessions. It may have been my

determination to stay the course of my medical treatment to the bitter end that kept me from doing so. Or my shame at the failure of my previous attempt. Or my inability to leave the room.

My prognosis was grimly accurate. Interminable incarceration or an early death may well have been my fate, had I not been saved on the 17th day of my ordeal by an timely intervention.

It had been remarked around the Mathematics Department that no-one could remember having seen me for quite some time. My reputation as a conscientious student was well established. A few of the regulars had started interlarding their conversations in the lounge during the afternoon tea, with purely academic speculations about what I might be up to. It was Alter Buba, with his greater experience of life and adversity who first realized, correctly, that I had to be sick, and set out to pay me a visit.

Alter hadn't been in this part of Philadelphia, that is to say 3 blocks west of the Math-Physics building, for 20 years. It took him half an hour of asking around and being given contradictory directions to locate the Quad. The Zelosophic dorms for male students consist of 6 buildings connected by underground corridors. In the main office he was given my room number. Another bout of inquiries led him to my residence hall.

On the way up the staircase Alter encountered one of the local goons: Stanley Hewitt, a 250-pounder with a crewcut and an erect prick that never deflated:

" Yunk man", Alter asked, " do you know vere I kin faind zee room vrom zat leetle chenius, Alef Mikna'tin Kentir? I've bin vunderink if maybe he's not vell."

Stanley squinted. Because he was in the presence of faculty he took his hand out of his right pocket:

"Aleph whoositz?" He put his hand over his mouth to help him think:

"Oh - you must mean that spook that lives down the hall. Yes, he lives here all right. " He scratched the back of his neck : " I don't know if he's in now."

He accompanied Alter up to the fourth floor and indicated the direction of my room.

" Sir: you just go down that corridor until you come to number 421. That's him. I don't really know him, but take it from me, sir, he's a real fruit-cake! Yessiree - a nut, no doubt about it! "

" En noot? En vroot-kaek? " Alter Buba glowered at him . " Vat kind vroot-kaek ? Yunk man, zat boy iz ennuder Einshtein! Zat chenius ist a mitzvah for all menkint !!!" Stanley watched with amazement as Alter stomped off in a huff in the direction of my door. Then he ran yelling down the stairs, taking them three at a time: "*Yehouieeeeeee!!!* "

Alter Buba halted before my door. He knocked.

" Ahlif? Are you zere?" Getting no reply he waited a bit, then continued:

" Maybe like you not feelink gut? Maybe zat you are verkink too hart? You shouldn't verk so much! Let zee verld vait ennuder

year for your great theorimz. Zay ain't gonna disappear!" He laughed at his own joke,

" Ven I vuz a yunk man, I verk very hart, too. Ach! How I verked! But- vit me, as zee sayink' goes: '*Vrom matzah you don't make shtrudel!* " Vit brains like mine, better I should be a plumber! But you! Vit your chenius! Verk, of course you gotta' verk; but don't kill yourself. Vait vun more year before you drop dead!" Again he chuckled.

" Ahlif; are you zere? I brinkt you a present." In fact, Alter Buba had brought with him a book of inane poems written by some mathematician at Pomona College, all about the harmony of nature and the power of reason:

" Are you zere, Ahlif? " As he continued getting no answer he turned away, a bit saddened, not certain whether or not to come back at a later time.

My horrendous shriek fell short of giving the old man a stroke.

" Ahlif!" he gasped. "Alif! Are you okay?" He trembled " Vat'za metter, Ahlif? Ahlif! You vant I should go get a doctor?"

Another shriek. Alter dropped the book and put his hands over his ears:

" *Oi!! Oi!! Manitzuros !! Vait! Alif! Vait! Don't leaf! I come right beck!* " He ran down the hall as fast as his aged legs permitted.

Several local characters had been attracted by the commotion and were gathered around the staircase. As Alter stumbled back one of them asked: "What's up, prof?"

"Zere is a chenius vat is dyink, zat's vat's up! *Oi Gewalt!! Manitzuros!!* " He was back in 10 minutes with the house master and a pair of toughs. Alter's sense of smell may have been affected by a touch of the flu , but the house master noticed the odor right away.

" Smells like a belch in Greasy Joe's . " He tapped timidly on the door.

" Hey! Who's in there? Open up!" No reply, He turned to Buba

" What did you say the boy's name was?"

" Ahlif Kentir." He was in tears : "Maybe like he's dead already."

The house master looked thoughtful: " Hm. I don't think so. Else we'd know about it." Buba got down on his knees and wrung his hands:

" *Oi! Gewalt!* Vat a bright leetle boy! Vat a gut leetle boy!"

The house master called out again:

" Hey there, Cantor! What're you doing in there?" No answer

" You say you're sure he's in there?"

Speechless, Alter nodded dumb assent.

" Well. Look's like we'll just have to knock the door down. Whew!! That smell ! " He walked away holding his nose. The two students, both football players, took up positions, left foot back, right knee bent and touching the floor, fingertips down. The house master gave the signal:

"Ho! "

They hurtled forward, butting heads and shoulders squarely against the hardwood door. It fell with a resounding crash. Leaving Alter Buba seated on the stairwell and crushed with grief, everyone rushed into the room.

"Shit! Stinks like hell!" The house master looked around in amazement. Indeed there was something in the stench of infection, rotting flesh, the accumulated of three weeks of unwashed clothing and the ubiquitous stench of brimstone, that was not of this world. Someone switched on the light. A gasp went around the room as, petrified with horror, they reared up against the walls.

Aleph Randal McNaughton Cantor lay on his bed, face-upwards and naked, the brown bottle of medicine clutched in his left hand tightly against his chest. Its contents had spilled all over the pillow, saturating sheets and bed-clothes. The poison had dried on his hair, which now stood up in broad, matted spikes like a brownfield in wetlands. Lucifer's bed could not look, nor smell, worse.

No form of hepatitis nor jaundice could have accomplished what this medication had done to his face. Hundreds of pimples, some the size of giant warts, suppurated in the killing fields of neck and cheeks. Hands and feet, emanating odors of fungus and visceral waste, were far advanced in their cycles of decomposition. It was a chamber of death.

Wrapping handkerchiefs over their mouths and noses, they carried me out into the corridor. The room was sealed off. It would be a year before it could once again be rented out. Somebody went

to call the University Hospital. With the arrival of the paramedics I was placed on a stretcher, taken down to an ambulance and driven the five blocks to the hospital. I would lie in a coma for three days .

With the recovery of consciousness I was brought into confrontation with the face of Dr. Narasimhan and its habitual sneer of contempt:

" Oh! Ho! He's coming round!"

"Where am I ?"

" You're in good hands, now, young man. Thank your lucky stars for that much. I knew I should never have let you walk out of here. What did I tell you about eating sweets?"

" But - "

"*No buts* ! You disobeyed every one of my instructions! You stuffed yourself like a *pig* on every damn thing. You didn't take you medication! Of course the infection came back ! So, you got frightened and poured the whole damn bottle of gunk over your face! What are you trying to prove, man! Don't you know that stuff can kill you?? Now don't you "but" me - I *know* what happened."

Why argue with him? I changed the subject.

" Can I have something to eat? I'm hungry."

" *Hungry* ?? Listen to him! " He jabbed a finger at me, his eyes flashing with righteous venom: "*Eat! Eat! Eat!* That's all your sort of person thinks about his entire life! What *else* have you been

doing these past two weeks? Why, you ate so much you had to vomit it all over the room! Then you went out and ate some more! I'd be dead long ago if I lived the way you do!"

He calmed down: " Now don't you worry. There'll be dinner coming along in an hour. I wish I could sit here and watch you eat it, just so you can feel what a disgrace you are." Then something or other set him off again. He exploded in an upsurge of wrath:

" Of course you're going to get something to eat! Because this hospital is in America! The biggest Eat-Eat-Eat country in the whole damn world! *Ulcers ! Hypertension! Arteriosclerosis !* " Once again he rattled the litany off on the tips of his fingers:

" *Diabetes! Hepatitis! Cancer! Liver ailments! Gall bladder! Why? In the name of God,? Why!* " He paused a moment as if he were really waiting for my answer; then he exploded once more:

" *Because you're all so damn fat!* That's why! Because you throw away enough food in your garbage pails to feed my mother country, India ! Because you're always munching on something or other, then washing it down with milkshakes and egg-nogs and banana splits! Because you have more doctors than you know what to do with, and you don't even go to them! Because..... " He stopped and sighed...

" Talking to you is like talking to the wall. It won't do a bit of good."

Giving me a sidelong glance he added: "Your condition appears to have become complicated with some serious symptoms of psychological dysfunction. The staff psychiatrist will be in to see

you this afternoon. You may need a month or so in the asylum. No big deal. I wouldn't sweat it."

He looked at his watch:

" I've got to go now. I bet that acne stays with you till the end of your days!"

With that parting shot he turned on his heel. Head held high, erect and proud, Dr. Srinivasa Chakrabarty Narasimhan walked off the ward.

