

## SUMMING UP

The stabbing pain in his chest woke Joshua again. The third time this week. He waited – after four or five jolts it should subside like before. Not this time. He felt for the spot, somewhere behind the third rib. It can't be the heart, he told himself. No tingles in the arm, no crushing pressure. And hell, he had been a half-miler in high school. Never mind that was forty-five years and sixty less pounds ago. He pressed his fingers against the carotid and determined the steady throbs were not synchronized with his pulse. Josh sorted through the possible causes of his imminent and inconvenient death. A rupturing aorta perhaps? The final stages of an aggressive tumor eating into his bones? Or maybe just gas. While Rosie snored in the adjacent room he shifted positions, pressed his chest here and there, but the knife blade remained insistent.

Josh lay still and retreated into his comfortable refuge of arithmetic, carrying sums in his mind. Always his way of blocking out everything else. How many days had he lived now? Two years was 730 days; another sixty was three times that, with another zero added. Fifteen extra leap days, add another month and a day since his birthday. Twenty-two thousand six hundred something. In high school algebra Josh had dueled with Mr. O'Brien by handing in quizzes with just a single column of answers rather than filling pages with calculations, insisting on solving the problems in his head. Big classroom hero. Numbers came easily for him because everything was clear. An answer was either right or wrong, and a calculation would yield the same result every time. Not like words, where what you thought you said might not be the same as what a woman heard, because she

knew you were alluding to that other thing, and your tone of voice was different this time, and maybe you weren't telling the truth.

Now in bed at three in the morning, fighting to concentrate through the splintering ache in his ribcage, Josh tried the more difficult calculation – how many more days might remain? Every morning he scanned the obituaries, looking not for familiar names but instead at the ages of the day's harvest. On mornings when all were twenty years beyond him he felt relieved, just as he was surprised when someone younger appeared in the list. Most troubling were those days when someone right next to him on the calendar appeared, as if the random bullet fired into the crowd had hit the person sitting beside him. An actuary might calculate his probabilities, but he was wary of such imprecisions. When you are dealt just one hand, all that matters are those cards and the other possibilities don't count. What might he do with those remaining days, or indeed what could he do? James Joyce spent two thousand of his days creating one imaginary day for Leopold Bloom; how many hundreds of days did Virginia Woolf spend in making the reply of the one day of Mrs. Dalloway? And now to the point, after six decades of indolence and indifference, what mark had Josh left on the world besides a constellation of coffee cup rings on a succession of desks?

Josh pondered what lies Rosie might feed to some bored obituary writer. He knew her style.

Professor Joshua Gibbs, eminent instructor of mathematics at Plymouth State University, was called home to live with the Lord on August 18 after a brief illness. Left to cherish his memory are his devoted wife Rosario

Corgon Gibbs and his adoring daughter Joselyn. During a distinguished career Professor Gibbs was awarded many prestigious honors and touched the lives of countless students. . . .

How much more false could she make it? There had been no awards, and the indifferent students in the remedial survey sections would not have recognized his name if they saw it. If Rosie could manage it, they would run her picture instead of his. Maybe under the title ‘Distraught Widow Mourns Underachieving Husband.’ Any praise she might offer him, to bolster her status in the Filipino community, would be withheld until after he was gone, so that he would never hear it. Would the paper accept an auto-obituary? Sure, Josh grinned, let me give them the truth.

Professor Joshua Gibbs died unremarkably in his home, surrounded by a crowd of self-doubts and regrets and unnoticed by his sleeping wife. He was born exactly nine months after a chance power outage to honest but emotionally unexpressive parents, who impressed upon him, without ever substantiating the claim, that he was the great-grandson of the famous physicist Josiah Willard Gibbs and carried superior genes. Slightly talented in arithmetic, he established a reputation for being clever by perfecting a few parlor tricks with license plate and telephone numbers and was considered ‘promising.’ He studied mathematics under Professor Erwin Rossman at Michigan State University, where he devoted many evenings to the study of the dynamics of the pinball machines in the

basement of the Student Union. He remained dutifully married for 25 years to a woman he couldn't talk to and humored her superstitions by occasionally attending St. Stephens Church, where he devoutly looked down the blouses of the young mothers as they went past to receive communion. Content to receive a modest salary involving minimal effort, Professor Gibbs remained an assistant professor at Plymouth State University for 32 years, teaching undergraduate core courses in mathematics for humanities majors. His colleagues tactfully did not mention that beyond introductory calculus his grasp of advanced mathematics was woefully outdated. He contributed no major papers to the scientific literature, but he occasionally wrote sarcastic letters to the editor of the local newspaper. Of his few achievements, his most memorable was undressing two sophomores in 1985 and . . .

Josh laid back and savored the memory. There, that was the answer – when you came to the end of the road, wasn't the sex really the point of it all? That one night sharing a bed with two 19-year-olds remained vivid after ten thousand others had passed. For the daring, what drove the wars of conquest more than the possibility of rape? For the gifted, what was the point of painting or poetry or singing other than to beguile women into your bedroom? For the timid, what was the reward for a wedding and enduring the complaints of in-laws beyond the rights to regular legal fucks?

Josh snorted to himself as he looked at the wall separating the guest bedroom from his wife's bedroom – once their bedroom. And what was his special appeal? Being clever

with numbers? That had never worked in twenty years of school. The sorority girls had looked right through him as if he were invisible, and the blind dates had never gotten beyond the awkward first conversations over coffee. No, just be born in the right place, and someone will be willing to put out in exchange for a green card. It sounded like a good idea at the time. Ten years out of graduate school and still without a girlfriend, Josh went on the bride hunt. His requirements were simple enough – someone who would occupy his bed when needed and not compare him to past boyfriends. He looked through the pen-pal catalogues for tours to Thailand and the Philippines, flipped a coin, and the following month was on a plane to Manila. At the embassy he tried to think he was different from all the other 40-year-old men filing forms for the dark-eyed girls half their age. The other couples were all Navy vets and bar girls from Onlongapo; Josh had found a salesclerk at the ShoeMart department store in Makati. After providing a satisfactory tryout in his room at the Intercontinental, Rosie led Josh on the two-hour bus ride to her hometown in Bulacan province. San Something-or-other looked to Josh like the hundred other dismal villages they had passed along the way and that he hoped he would never have to see again. The Corgon family was overjoyed to welcome Josh, as if Rosie had hit the lottery. Only later did Josh realize that the primary cash crop of the family farm was to be money orders from Stateside.

Josh grimaced at the thought. He paid the price all right, but for the first few years he got what he wanted when he wanted it. Somewhere on the nightstand was a photo of Josh running next to five-year-old Josie as she learned to ride a bicycle. Those were the good days, the best, the memory he wanted to keep. There were no photos of the scowling teenager with an angry cluster of zits on her forehead, nor of the graduation ceremony

with an empty chair reserved for the girl for whom Josh was at that same moment posting bail for possession with intent to distribute. He tried to remember the names of the various men who showed up at the house on their motorcycles with Josie wrapped on their shoulders. How long had it been now – two Christmases or three – since the last card had arrived from New Mexico? All of three lines, mentioning some Ramon, that Santa Fe was full of phonies, and closing with ‘luv ya.’ In the dark Josh stared in the direction of the child’s photo. My pride and joy.

Josh strained to see the moving blades of the ceiling fan. Outside the moonless night gave no light, and the room was inky black save for the three red digits on the bedside clock. Josh smiled at his small victory – the neighborhood association had petitioned to install streetlights in the subdivision, and Josh had stubbornly resisted. At the first hearing he had been reasonable and persuasive, citing installation and maintenance costs and threats to the few remaining elms, and he won a delay for further study. The neighbors were for the project and they circulated flyers talking about safety and property values. As he became more isolated Josh dug in his heels. At the town council meeting he had faced down two rows of his scowling neighbors. “You think more lights will make you safe? It will just let the burglars see your doors more easily. You think shining lights at night will increase your property values? You all were happy to buy your houses without lights out front when you came here!” As the crowd grumbled Josh invoked energy conservation and preservation of habitat and the death of the planet at the hands of corporate greed, until the mayor gaveled the room to order. The council decided that since the neighborhood did not present unanimity in their request, they could not authorize the project, and the room erupted in curses. Josh had won, and for the three

years since, not one neighbor had spoken to him, which suited him fine. When no invitations to the neighborhood picnic or the Christmas dinner came, his wife had one more reason to deny him breakfast. “Add it to the list,” he said, not looking up. But now, in the middle of the night, he couldn’t see a damn thing.

Three sharper stabs interrupted the dull ache and jolted Josh back to the moment. Is this really all there is to it? he asked himself. No, there has to be something more, some meaning or significance or gift to be left. All those millions of books, all the monuments and testaments and earnest speeches, all the unseen sacrifices unknown people make for other unknown people – surely there is something nobler or truer, something higher or kinder or deeper than scuttling around trying to get laid.

The pain became more insistent, and Josh was startled to find himself praying. His parents had dragged him to church and Sunday school for the benefit of having their neighbors see them practice the faith, until Josh’s sarcasm became unbearable. Pulled from his bed and forced into a white shirt every Sunday morning, he spent the rides to Mass singing the Vatican Rag or asking his father if he needed to sandpaper his soul at confession before the priest whipped up a batch of Jesus for the communion service. He was hoping he could goad the old man into giving him a backhand in the parking lot while the neighbors were watching. In college it was fashionable, even required, for up-and-coming scientists and intellectuals (and surely he was one!) to sneer at the web of mythology the medieval Church spun to keep the bishops in wine and gold. Yet here he was now, crouched on his knees in his underwear. Josh fumbled to remember the words they recited at Sunday school. What was it that ended ‘pray for us now and at the hour of our death’? Hail Holy Queen? No, hail Mary, and the fruit of thy womb. Crap, muttered

Joshua, catching himself reverting to his chant of Fruit of thy Loom from the dormitory days.

Josh pressed his chest against the mattress to see if that would relieve the pain. “All right, whatever you call yourself, here I am. Poor banished child of Eve. Foolish old man, kneeling on the floor in his briefs, does this please you? You know all, you see all, you know what a lazy shit I’ve been. So was I created in your image and likeness? At least I got the part about resting on the seventh day right. Here I am, the black sheep of the Gibbs dynasty. Is the shepherd ready to find his lost flock now? Is there something more in your divine plan for me than shuffling around a faculty lounge or quarreling with this stupid peasant woman? I can’t get laid any more – even my students would rather do homework than get an easy B, and I’m not even asking for that. Just one time, to do one thing that is brilliant or memorable, that’s all. I’m not bargaining here – you don’t want this soul, and I won’t be building you any cathedrals. Just a chance for you not to have one of your creatures be a complete waste.” He paused for a moment. “If you’re even there.”

Josh stood up and peered into the blackness outside the window. The knife blade was gone – when had it stopped? Like a roaring stadium falling suddenly silent, the absence of the pain was as startling as its presence. He stretched his arms to the ceiling, and felt nothing. Warily he twisted left and right, and tried to touch his toes. He could not reach more than six inches past his knees anymore, but that was sufficient. No pain, no discomfort. Had some power heard him? There was time yet.



Still wearing just his underpants Josh padded down the hallway to his study, where his computer blinked its greeting in standby mode. There was no email in the inbox at 4 a.m. His head felt clear, as if he had just awakened from a dreamless sleep. There was that famous old problem about transformation of Minkowski spaces – everyone had described that four-dimensional world with tensors, with only limited success, but there was a little trick in topology that he had toyed with in graduate school. Intuitively that had always seemed the approach, but it would require a tedious proof. It might have been a great thesis project – old Rossman had urged him to give it a try, but Josh wanted something simpler. But now, why not? Nobody in the department would have guessed this prize might fall to him. He clicked on the MatLab graphics program and opened a new folder. Three perpendicular axes, x, y, and z, appeared, glowing green against the black background. Josh created a fourth line, protruding diagonally from the intersection of the other three, and turned it red. There was the start. He was excited now – applying a Laplace transform, then taking partial derivatives along that fourth axis in imaginary space, would yield three-dimensional shadows of that four-dimensional world. All he needed was to set a proper notation system. But first, there was something else. He clicked on a second icon.

Shortly after dawn Rosario made her rounds to stir the lazy man and tell him the trash barrel had to be set outside, today was Thursday. He wasn't in his bed or the bathroom and not down in the kitchen, waiting for his coffee to be prepared. She peeked through the door of his study and saw him splayed in the chair, grey stubbles of day-old whiskers around the open mouth, the smooth white paunch overhanging the elastic of the stained cotton briefs, one arm still outstretched towards the desk. She made no sound. At

last it had happened. Just one final mess of his to clean up. She knew where the papers were, who she would need to call. She glanced at the screen glowing on the desk, at the important work that had always made this room forbidden for her to enter. On a bright green background seven rows of cards were laid out. He was just about to shift the ten of diamonds onto the jack of clubs.