

"Lost at C"

fate, in the form of an awesome equation,
finally catches up with the smartest little s.o.b.
on the cleveland street

By Jean Shepard

A wave of numbness surged through my body with stunning force. At last I knew what it felt like to be sitting with that brass hat on your skull with those straps around your ankles as the warden pulls the big switch. Out of the corner of my eye I caught the glint of Mr. Pittinger's horn-rims and the ice-blue ray from his left eye. As the giant baroque equation loomed on the blackboard, my life unreeled before my eyes in the classic manner of the final moments of mortal existence. I was finished. Done. It had all come to this. Somehow I had always known it would.

It all started in first grade at the Warren G. Harding School, where I was one among a rabble of sweaty, wrestling, peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich eaters. But it was not until the end of the third month of school that I became dimly aware of a curse that would follow me throughout my life. Along with Martin Perlmutter, Schwartz, Chester Woczniewski, Helen Weathers and poor Francis Xavier Zambarbieri, I was a member of the alphabetical ghetto that sat in the back of the classroom. Medical science is now beginning to realize that those of us at the end of the alphabet live shorter lives, sweat more and are far jumpier than those in the Bs and Es and even in the Ms and Ls. People at the tail end of the alphabet grow up accepting the fact that everybody else comes first. The Warren G. Harding School had an almost mystic belief in the alphabet; if you were a P, you sat behind every O, regardless of myopia.

Me and Schwartz and Woczniewski sat so far back in the classroom that the blackboard was only a vague rumor to us. Miss Shields was a shifting figure in the haze on the distant horizon, her voice a faint but ominous drone punctuated by squeaking chalk. Within a short time I became adept at reading the inflection, if not the content, of those far-off sounds, sensing instantly when danger was looming. Danger meant simply being called on. Kids in the front of the classroom didn't know the meaning of danger. Ace test takers, they loved nothing more than to display their immense knowledge by waving their hands frantically even before questions were asked. Today, when I think of the classrooms of my youth, I see a forest of waving hands between me and the teacher. They were the smartasses

who went on to become corporation presidents, TV talk-show guests and owners of cabin cruisers.

We in the back of the classroom followed a different path. Since we could neither hear nor see, we had only one course open if we were going to pass with reasonable grades. First of all, it was imperative never to be caught out in the open; if possible, not to be seen at all. Each one of us evolved his own methods of survival. Helen Weathers was so fat, her expression so cowlike, her profuse perspiration under stress so pathetic that the teacher never had the heart to call on her. Woczniowski hid behind books, which worked all right until he hid behind Plastic Man Meets the Thing one morning. Perlmutter had the kind of face you can't remember even when you're looking at it, so he didn't have to hide. He was a born cost accountant.

One day during an oral quiz, however--always a dangerous time for all of us--Perlmutter displayed the true stuff of champions. Miss Kleinfeldt unaccountably called on him during an incomprehensible discussion of isosceles triangles. We thought Perlmutter was finished, but we had underestimated him. Without missing a beat, his face turned bright purple, his eyes bulged like a pair of overripe grapes, his neck throbbed and a spectacular geyser of blood gushed from both nostrils.

"This is terrible!" Miss Kleinfeldt shouted, scooping him up in her muscular, hairy arms and rushing him to the nurse's office, where he was excused from school for the rest of the day. She never called on him again.

Zambarbieri, a devout Catholic, relied almost exclusively on prayer. But in his case it was academic, since he sat so far back in the classroom, deep among the galoshes, that even we couldn't see him clearly. Schwartz employed the simple but effective technique of slowly lowering himself in his seat until only his crewcut showed above the top of his desk during risky periods of interrogation. I made it a point to wear bland-colored clothes, the better to blend into the background. I learned to weave my body from side to side, dropping a shoulder here, shifting my neck a few degrees to the right there, with the crucial object in mind of always keeping a line of kids between me and the teacher's eagle eye.

For those rare but inevitable occasions--say, during a chicken-pox epidemic--when the ranks in the rows ahead were too thin to provide adequate cover, I practiced the vacant-eyeball ploy, which has since become a popular device for junior executives the world over who cannot afford to be nailed by their seniors in sales conferences and other perilous situations. The vacant eye-ball appears to be looking attentively but, in fact, sees nothing. It is a blank mirror of anonymity. I learned early in the game that if they don't catch your eye, they don't call on you. Combined with a fixed facial expression of deadpan alertness--neither too deadpan nor too alert--this technique has been known to render its practitioner virtually invisible.

The third, and possibly most important, tactic of classroom survival is thought control. When danger looms, it is necessary to repeat silently, with intense concentration, the hypnotic command, "You will not call on me, you will not call on me," sending out invisible waves of powerful thought energy until the teacher's mind is mysteriously clouded. After endless hours of rehearsal before the mirror in the bathroom, I had developed a fourth and final gambit--my cute look, a shy, boyish smile of such disarming cuddliness as to be lethal in its effectiveness. I flashed it, of course, only with great caution, during comparatively safe periods in the classroom--upon entering and leaving--and elsewhere in the school where one could afford to be seen and recognized with impunity.

Those of us in the back rows learned quickly that grades are handed out not on the basis of actual accomplishment but by intuitive feel. At that crucial moment when Miss Shields sat down to fill out my report card, I knew that my cute look would pop into her mind when my name appeared before her. Since she had nothing else to go on--other than catch-as-catch-can test answers gleaned from my shirt cuff or the bluebook of the kid ahead of me--it was only natural for her to put down a B, which is all I ever wanted out of life.

So it was that I weaved and bobbed, truckled and beamed my way through grade after grade at Warren G. Harding School. Perlmutter, Schwartz, Woczniewski, Helen Weathers and I, as well as poor old Zambarbieri, sat on shore as the deepening river of education flowed by us unheard, unseen. Once in a great while, of course, a teacher would raise her voice above the usual bleat, or a transient air current would carry an isolated phrase or maybe even a full sentence all the way back to our little band, and this would often precipitate labored intellectual debates.

Like the day we clearly caught the word marsupial. We knew it had something to do with animals, since Miss Robinette had pulled down a chart on which we could barely make out drawings of what could not have been people, unless they were down on all fours. After school that afternoon, Schwartz and Chester and I were kicking a Carnation can down an alley when a large police dog with one ear missing roared out from between two garages after a tomcat that must have weighed 30 pounds. The dog's name was Rat and he was owned by the postman, Mr. L. D. Johnson, who, I guess, kept him at home so that he could bite their postman when he delivered mail to their house.

"Boy, I'd like to see old Rat go after one of them marsupials," said Chester.

"They lay eggs," Schwartz stated with satisfaction. He had a way of saying things like that as though he had been the first to discover them, or at least had confirmed them through independent research.

"You mean like ducks?" I asked. My hungry mind was questing for more knowledge.

"Do they quack, too?" Chester asked.

"How should I know?" said Schwartz looking disgusted. "I ain't no mind reader."

Thus the subject of marsupials was closed forever. They were never mentioned again in class, at least as far as I know, and to this day my entire knowledge of marsupials consists of what Schwartz told us about them.

Warren G. Harding was widely known, during the dark ages when I was attending it, for being an "advanced" school, and actual tests were very rare. This worked in beautifully with our survival techniques and made it possible for me and my band of fellow ignoramuses to slide by year after year undetected. Especially at home. Grade by grade, my reputation there slowly grew until I was considered a truly superior intellect. This is one of the great human myths; it has persisted for ages--the unfailing belief that every generation is brighter, taller, more beautiful than the one before it--in spite of obvious evidence to the contrary. Naturally, I did everything I could to encourage my old man in this belief.

"Boy, kids today sure are a lot smarter than we was when we was kids. Why, at his age I hardly new nothin'." The old man, sitting at the kitchen table with a can of Blatz in his mitt, was talking to my Uncle Carl, who kept shoving his upper plate back into his mouth. He had gotten his false teeth on relief money and they didn't fit too well.

"Tell your uncle Carl about Bolivia," he ordered.

"Why, certainly," I said confidently. It was a command performance I had given many times before. "Bolivia exports tin." That was all I knew about Bolivia--but it was enough.

My father, his jaw slack with amazement, turned to Uncle Carl and said in a low, emotional voice, "See what I mean? Kids nowadays know everything. Didja hear that, Carl? Boliva exports tin!"

They both nodded silent humility and went back to guzzling beer. Coolly, I made my exit through the back door, lugging a Swiss cheese sandwich. I had pulled it off again.

The years passed, punctuated by occasional tight squeaks, but my true identity as a faker was never really in danger of exposure. And finally the big day came. On a glorious sun-drenched morning when even the red clouds of rusty blast-furnace dust glowed in spring beauty, graduation day arrived. I had made it. Dressed in our scratchy Sunday clothes, we were herded, along with parents, uncles, aunts and a few scattered cousins, into the gym.

The despised glee club sang the Warren G. Harding fight song, accompanied by Miss Bundy, the kindergarten teacher, on the piano, her crinkly straw-colored hair bobbing up and down with every beat, her huge bottom enveloping the piano stool. Then a famous local undertaker and Chevrolet dealer delivered a mind-

numbing oration on how his generation was passing the torch of civilization from its faltering hands into our youthful, energetic and idealistic hands. Naturally, we were seated alphabetically, and we in the rear caught only a few disjointed phrases.

Schwartz, sweating profusely in his new sports coat, whispered, "What's all the stuff about torches? I didn't get no torch."

"They must have given them to the front of the class," I answered. Little did I realize how right I was.

But I got my diploma. It was official. I was a graduate. Clasp my sacred scroll there on the stage--while those even farther below me in the alphabet filed up to receive theirs--I found myself growing wise and dignified, a person of substance, well equipped to carry torches, to beat foes, to identify the parts of speech, including gerunds, to draw from memory the sinister confluence of the Tigris and the Euphrates.

At last were we done. Warren G. Harding and its warm embrace, its easy ways, stood forever behind us. On our way home the old man, his clean white shirt crackling with starch, said, "Whaddaya say we celebrate by pickin' up some ice cream at the Igloo?"

Ecstatic, I sat on the back seat of the Olds with my kid brother, clutching the precious document on which--though I didn't discover it till later--my name had been misspelled, in Old English lettering.

That summer sped by in a blur of sun and gentle showers that made the outfields fragrant with clover and sweet William. In September I would be a full-fledged high school kid. Guys in high school had always seemed to be remote godlike creatures who drove cars, wore thick sweaters with letters on them and hung around Big Bill's Drive-In. What actually happened in high school was never mentioned, at least among those of us down among the Rs and the Ys. A few rumors, of course, had filtered down to us, and they only added to our sense of rising excitement about the new life that was about to begin.

The first omen of evil struck early in September, just a few days before school was to open. I came home covered with scratches and mosquito bites from a great day out in the weeds and walked right into it.

"There's some mail for you," my mother grunted to me as she struggled out the screen door with a huge bag of garbage that was dripping coffee grounds onto the linoleum.

"Mail? For me?" I was surprised, since I received very little mail except for an occasional announcement from the International Crime Detection Institute of East St. Louis, Illinois, informing me that I was frittering away my life when I could be "Earning Big Money Spotting Crooks."

I ripped open the envelope and found a printed form stating that high school registration and classes for freshmen would begin next Monday, and that I was assigned to Miss Snyder, to whom I would report at 8:30 a.m. Period.

"Hey, Schwartz," I barked into the phone. "Didja get yer card?"

"Yeah!"

"What's this registration stuff?"

"I don't know!" Schwartz shouted to be heard over the uproar of his mother screaming at his kid brother, Douglas. "I guess that's where you pick the teachers and the classes and stuff you want to take!"

"Yeah!" I hollered back. Ah, the dreams of youth.

Registration day dawned windy, with a flat silver sun gleaming through the haze from the coke plant. Schwartz, Flick, Chester and a whole crowd of us rose the bus to high school. No one had ever taken a bus to Harding. We all got there our own way, the girls strolling down the sidewalk, the boys scurrying up alleys, through vacant lots, over fences, past dogs, chickens, sprinklers and one maniacal goose that from time to time rushed out of its yard and ripped a chunk from somebody's corduroys. Catching a bus on the corner was a whole new thing. I sat in the back, amid the din, my guts in an uproar of excitement. High school!

We carried rulers, fountain pens, erasers--a full arsenal of equipment for use on the battlefields of higher learning. Schwartz had a T square made of red plastic and a matching compass. God knows what for. I clutched the brown-and-white fake-marble Parker automatic pencil that my aunt Glen had given me upon graduation from eighth grade. And inside the front of my three-ring notebook, which had green imitation-leather covers, I had pasted a picture of an Indianapolis Offenhauser. I was ready for anything. In keeping with the gravity of the occasion, I was wearing my electric-blue sports coat and my silver tie with its red painted snail, both stars in my wardrobe. And the bus was heavily scented with Lucky Tiger hair oil, since every male aboard had gotten a haircut for the big day.

I had laid in bed making plans the night before. I would grab the front seat in every class and listen to every word. No longer would I duck and dodge behind a screen of kids. That was all behind me. Mentally I crouched at the mark, waiting for the starter's gun to send me flying down the track ahead of the pack.

The bus rolled up before nirvana and we piled out, some on the run yelling hysterically, others ashen-faced and stiff-legged with terror. A few pretended that it was like any other bus ride. The school loomed over us like the walls of the Grand Canyon. Made of dull red brick, it stretched out to either horizon. Thousands of kids milled around the outside, waiting for the doors to open. It reminded me of the days when my old man took us to Comiskey Park to see the White Sox play the hated Yankees. Girls bigger than my Aunt Clara towered over me, and they had bumps in their sweaters like the ladies that Gene Autry sang to at

Saturday matinees. A blind torrent of fear washed over me. For a while, I had been one of the truly big men at Warren G. Harding, and now I was nothing. Clinging to my lunch bag with a sweaty hand, I hunted frantically for a familiar face, but Schwartz and Flick and the others had been swallowed up.

BRRRR-INNNGGG! I was carried forward on the crest of the horde as it surged through the huge front doors. Great staircases with rivers of kids streamed in all directions. My card read REPORT TO ROOM 220. Kids all around me hollered and laughed back and forth. They all seemed to know one another. I had never felt so alone. Figuring astutely that room 220 had to be on the second floor, I joined the torrent raging upward. The second floor looked even vaster than the first. The halls stretched so far in both directions that I couldn't see the ends. Lockers banged and I smelled, for the first time, that indescribable high school building aroma, a rich fragrance made up of thousands of bodies, floor wax, chalk, leftover tunafish sandwiches, chlorine from the swimming pool, disinfectant from the johns and fermenting jockstraps from the gym.

I tried to read the numbers on the doors as I was swept onward like a salmon in the spawning season: 205, 207, 214, 218--220! My home room. A plump lady with gray clothes, hair and face sat like an enigmatic Buddha at a green metal desk at the head of the room. Somehow I sensed that she wasn't going to be a pushover for my cute look, but I turned it on anyway, at full candle power. She glanced up and peered at me coldly through her rimless glasses.

"Your card, please," she snapped in a flat voice. I handed it over. She glanced at it, glanced up at me, registering my face in the rogues' gallery of her mind. I could almost hear the shutters clicking.

"Take that seat back there back of Rukowski. He's the one in the purple sweater."

I walked down between the aisles of alien faces to my seat. It was, of course, in the next-to-the-last row. It would be mine for the next four years. Ahead of me loomed Rukowski, a giant mountain of flesh over which had been stretched a purple jersey covered with chevrons, the number 3 and a row of stripes. Later I learned that Rukowski had been an all-state tackle for the past six years and was the bulwark of one of the toughest defensive lines in seven states. He was a good man to sit behind. I peered around the room. I was the only delegate to room 220 from Warren G. Harding.

Miss Snyder stood at the blackboard and hurled the first harpoon of the season: "You fresh who are with us today are already enrolled for the courses you will be required to take. Here are your program cards." She dealt out 3" x 5" blue cards, which were handed back to the freshmen. Each card was neatly lined into eight periods, and after each period was the name of a teacher, a subject, and a

classroom. One period was labeled LUNCH, and another STUDY. Every minute of my day was laid out for me. So much for my dreams of freedom.

"Freshmen, this is your first day in high school. You are no longer in grade school. If you work hard, you will do well. If you don't, you will regret it. You are here to learn. You are not here to play. Remember this and remember it well: What you do here will follow you all through life." She paused dramatically. In the hushed silence, I could hear Rukowski wheezing ahead of me. None of this, of course, affected him. anyone who could block the way he could block would have no trouble getting through life.

"Your first class will begin in five minutes. Any questions?" No one raised a hand.

I sat there in silence, staring at my blue card, lost in dark thoughts, when the bell rang out again. The starting gate had opened. I had thundered a couple of hundred feet through the hall with the mob before it hit me that I had no idea where the hell I was supposed to go. As the crowd surged around me I struggled to read my program card. All I could make out was room 127. I had only a minute to make it, so I barged my way down a flight of stairs. Then 101, 105, 109, 112, 117--127, just in time. Already the classroom was three quarters filled. Ahead of me, running interference, was Rukowski, trying his luck at this course. I later learned for the third time in as many semesters. Putting his shoulder into it, he bulled his way through the door, buffeting aside a herd of spindly little freshmen. It was Schwartz, good old Schwartz, and Flick and Chester and Helen Weathers. The old gang! Even poor old Zambarbieri. Whatever it was, I wouldn't have to go through it alone.

"Hi, Schwartz!"

Schwartz smiled wanly. And Helen Weathers giggled--until she saw, at the same moment I did, a tall, square man standing motionless at the blackboard. He had a grim blue jaw and slick kinky, black crewcut hair. His eyes were tiny ball bearings behind glasses with thick black rims. He wore a dark, black suit that looked like it was made of black sandpaper. The bell rang and the door closed behind us. I joined the crowd around his desk who were putting registration cards into a box. I did likewise.

"All right. Settle down. Let's get organized." The man's voice had a cutting rasp to it, like a steel file working on concrete. "We sit alphabetically in this class. A's up here in front to my right. Get going."

I trudged behind Schwartz and Helen Weathers toward the dim recesses in the back of the classroom. Well, at least I'd be among friends. It was about a quarter of a mile to the front of the room, and I sat bolt upright in my seat, determined to catch every word the teacher said.

"Class, my name is Mr. Pittinger." It was the first male teacher we had ever had. Warren G. Harding was peopled entirely by motherly ladies like Miss Bailey and Miss Shields. Mr. Pittinger was a whole new ball game. And I still had no idea what he taught. I would soon find out.

"If you work in this class, you'll have no trouble. If you don't, I promise you nothing."

I leaned forward at my desk, scribbling madly in my notebook: class, my name is Mr. Pittinger if you work hard you will have no trouble if you don't I promise you nothing.

He turned, picked up a piece of chalk and began to scrawl huge block letters on the blackboard.

A-L--the chalk squeaked decisively--G-E-B-R-A. I copied each letter exactly as he'd written it.

"That is the subject of this course," he barked.

Algebra? What the hell is that?

"Algebra is the mathematics of abstract numbers."

I gulped as I wrote this down.

"I will now illustrate."

Pittinger printed a huge Y on the blackboard and below it an enormous X. I doggedly followed suit in my notebook. He then put equal signs next to the X and the Y. "If Y equals five and X equals two, what does the following mean?" He wrote out: $X + Y = ?$

Black fear seized my vitals. How could you add Xs and Ys? I had enough trouble with twos and threes.

Already the crowd in front of the room were waving their hands to answer Pittinger's question. The class wasn't 30 seconds old and I was already six weeks behind. I sank lower in my seat, a faint buzzing in my ears. Instinctively I began to weave. I knew it was all over. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that Schwartz, next to me, had hunched lower and begun to emit a high, thin whimpering sound. Helen Weathers had flung up a thin spray of sweat. Chester's skin had changed to the color of the cupboards in the back of the room. And from behind me I could hear the faint, steady click of Zambarbieri's rosary.

Second by second, minute by minute, eon by eon, the first algebra class droned on. I couldn't catch another word that was said, and by the time Mr. Pittinger wrote the second equation on the board, I was bobbing and weaving like a cobra and sending out high-voltage thought rays. A tiny molten knot of stark terror hissed and shimmered in the pit of my stomach. I realized for the first time in my school life, I had run into something that was completely opaque and unlearnable, and there was no way to fake it.

That night I ate my meat loaf and red cabbage in sober silence as the family yapped on, still living back in the days when I was known to all of them as the smartest little son of a bitch to ever set foot on Cleveland Street.

"Boy, look at the stuff kids study these days," the old man said with wonder as he hefted my algebra textbook in his bowling hand and rifled through the pages.

"What's all this X and Y stuff?" he asked.

"Yeah, well, it ain't much," I muttered as coolly as I could, trying to recapture some of the old elan.

"Whaddaya mean, ain't much?" His eyes glowed with pride at the idea that his kid had mastered algebra in only one day.

"Abstract mathematics, that's all it is."

The old man knew he'd been totally outclassed. Even my mother stopped stirring the gravy for a few seconds. My kid brother continued to pound away at the little bits of Ovaltine that floated around on top of his milk.

That night, sleep did not come easily. In fact, it was only the first of many storm-tossed nights to come as, algebra class by algebra class, my terror grew. All my other subjects--history, English, social studies--were a total breeze. My years of experience in fakery came into full flower. In social studies, for example, the more you hoked it up, the better the grades. On those rare occasions when asked a question, I would stand slowly, with an open yet troubled look playing over my thoughtful countenance.

"Mr. Harris, sir," I would drawl hesitantly, as though attempting to unravel the perplexity of the ages, "I guess it depends on how you view it--objectively, which, naturally, is too simple, or subjectively, in which case many factors such as changing environment must be taken into consideration.

.. " I would trail off.

Mr. Harris, with a snort of pleasure, would bellow: "RIGHT! There are many diverse elements, which . . ." After which he was good for at least a 40-minute solo. History was more of the same, and English was almost embarrassingly easy as, day after day, Miss McCullough preened and congratulated herself before our class. All she needed was a little ass kissing and there was no limit to her applause. I often felt she regretted that an A was the highest grade she could hand out to one who loved her and sincerely and selflessly as I did.

Every morning at 8:35, however, was another story. I marched with leaden feet and quaking bowels into Mr. Pittinger's torture chamber. By the sixth week I knew, without the shadow of a doubt, after all these years of dodging and grinning, that I was going to fail. Fail! There was no question whatsoever. True, Pittinger had not yet been able to catch me out in the open, since I was using every trick of the trade. But I knew that one day, inevitably, the icy hand of truth would rip off my shoddy facade and expose me for all the world to see.

Pittinger was of the new school, meaning he believed that kids, theoretically motivated by an insatiable thirst for knowledge, would devour algebra in large chunks, making the final examination only a formality. He graded on performance in class and total grasp of the subject, capped off at the end of the term with an exam of brain-crushing difficulty from which he had the option of excusing those who rated A-plus on classroom performance. Since I had no classroom performance, my doom was sealed. Schwartz, too, had noticeably shrunken. Even fat Helen had developed deep hollows under her eyes, while Chester had almost completely disappeared. And Zambarbieri had taken to nibbling Communion wafers in class. Christmas came and went in tortured gaiety. My kid brother played happily with his Terry and the Pirates Dragon Lady Detector and I looked on with the sad indulgence of a withered old man whose youth had passed. As for my own presents, what good did it do to have a new first baseman's mitt when my life was over? How innocent they are, I thought as I watched my family trim the tree and scurry about wrapping packages. Before long, they will know. They will loathe me. I will be driven from this warm circle. It was about this time that I began to fear--or perhaps hope--that I would never live to be 21, that I would die of some exotic debilitating disease. Then they'd be sorry. This fantasy alternated with an even better fantasy that if I did reach 21, I would be blind and hobble about with a white cane. Then they'd really be sorry.

Not that I'd given up without a struggle. For weeks, in the privacy of my cell at home, safe from prying eyes, I continued trying to actually learn something about algebra. After a brief mental pep rally--this is simple. If Esther Jane Alberry can understand it, any fool can do it. All you gotta do is think. THINK! Reason it out--I would sit down and open my textbook. Within minutes, I would break out in a clammy sweat and sink into a funk of nonunderstanding, a state so naked in its despair and self-contempt that it was soon replaced by a mood of defiant exuberance. Schwartz and I took to laughing contemptuously at those boobs and brown-noses up front who took it all so seriously.

The first hints of spring began to appear. Birds twittered, buds unfurled. But men on death row are impervious to such intimations of life quickening and reborn. The only sign of the new season that I noticed was Mr. Pittinger changing from a heavy black suit into a lighter-weight black suit.

"Well, it won't be long. You gonna get a job this summer?" my old man asked me one day as he bent over the hood of the Olds, giving the fourth-hand paint job its ritual spring coat of Simoniz.

"Maybe, I dunno," I muttered. It wouldn't be long indeed. Then he'd know. Everybody would know that I knew less about algebra than Ralph, Mrs. Gammie's big Airedale, who liked to pee on my mother's irises.

Pittinger had informed us that the final exam, covering a year's work in algebra, would be given on Friday of the following week. One more week of stardom on Cleveland Street. Ever since my devastating rejoinder at the dinner table about abstract mathematics, my stock had been the hottest in the neighborhood. My opinions were solicited on financial matters, world affairs, even the infield problems of the Chicago White Sox. The bigger they are, the harder they fall. Even Ralph would have more respect than I deserved. At least he didn't pretend to be anything but what he was.

Wednesday, two days before the end, arrived like any other spring day. A faint breeze drifted from the south, bringing with it hints of long summer afternoons to come, of swung bats, of nights in the lilac bushes. But not for such as me. I stumped into algebra class feeling distinctly like the last soul aboard the Titanic as she was about to plunge to the bottom. The smartasses were already in their seats, laughing merrily. I took my seat in the back, among the rest of the condemned. Schwartz sat down sullenly and began his usual moan. Helen Weathers squatted toadlike, drenched in sweat. The class began, Pittinger's chalk squeaked, hands waved. The sun filtered in through the Venetian blinds. A tennis ball pocked back and forth somewhere over a net.

My knot of fear, by now an old friend, sputtered in my gut. In the past week, it had grown to roughly the size of a two-dollar watermelon. True, I had avoided being called on even once the entire year, but it was a hollow victory and I knew it. Minute after minute inches slowly by as I ducked and dodged Pittinger firing question after question at the class. Glancing at my Pluto watch, which I had been given for Christmas, I noted with deep relief that less than two minutes remained before the bell.

It was then that I made my fatal mistake, the mistake that all guerrilla fighters eventually make. I broke cover. For years, every fiber of my being, every instant in every class, had been directed at survival. On this fateful Wednesday, lulled by the sun, by the gentle sound of the tennis ball, by the steady drone of Pittinger's voice, by the fact that there was just two minutes to go, my mind slowly drifted off into a haze of daydream. I spotted a tiny mote of dust drifting down through a slanting ray of sunshine. I watched it in its slow, undulating flight, like some microscopic silver bird.

For a stunned split second, I thought I'd been jabbed with an electric cattle prod. Pittinger's voice, loud and commanding, was pronouncing my name. He was calling on me. Oh, my god! With a goddamn minute to go, he had nailed me. I heard Schwartz bleat a high, quavering cry. I knew what it meant: If they got him, the greatest master of them all, there's no hope for any of us.

As I stood slowly at my seat, frantically bidding for for time, I saw a great puddle forming around Helen Weathers' desk. It wasn't all sweat. Chester had

sunk to the floor beneath his desk, and behind me Zambarbieri's beads were clattering so loud I could hardly hear his Hail Marys.

"Come to the board, please. If X equals two and Y equals minus one, what is the value of C in this equation?" snapped Pittinger.

In a stupor of primal fear, I felt my legs clumping up the aisle. On all sides the blank faces stared. At the board--totally unfamiliar territory to me--I stared at what seemed like the first equation I had ever seen. It was well over a yard and a half long and was lacerated by mysterious crooked lines and fractions in parentheses, with miniature twos and threes hovering above the whole thing like tiny barnacles, and Xs and Ys were jumbled in crazy abandon. At the end of this nightmare was a tiny equal sign. And on the other side of the equal sign was a zero. Zero! All this crap adds up to nothing? Jesus Christ! My mind reeled at the very sight of this barbed wire entanglement of mysterious signs.

Pittinger stood to one side, arms folded, wearing an expression that said, At last I've nailed the little bastard! He had been playing with me all the time. He knew!

I glanced back at the class. It was one of the truly educational moments of my life. The entire mob, including Schwartz, Chester and even Zambarbieri, were grinning happily, licking their chops with joyous expectation of my imminent crucifixion. When true disaster strikes, we have no friends. And there's nothing a phony loves more in this world than to see another phony get what's coming to him.

"The value of C, please," said Pittinger.

The equation blurred before my eyes. The value of C. Where the hell was it? What did a C look like, anyway? Or an A or a B, for that matter. I had forgotten the alphabet.

"C, please."

Desperately, I tried to come up with a number--any number. I couldn't remember my name.

"The answer, please."

My watery eyes scanned the room in vain for a sympathetic face, focusing finally on Rukowski's looming purple jersey. There was a big block number on it.

"Three," I muttered.

"What's that?" barked Pittinger.

"Three!" I blurted.

Pittinger staggered backward, his glasses jolted down to the tip of his nose.

"How the hell did you know that?" he bellowed hoarsely, his snap-on bow tie popping loose in the excitement.

The class was in an uproar. I caught a glimpse of Schwartz, his face pale with shock. I had caught one on the fat part of the bat. It was a true miracle. I had walked on water.

Instantly, the old instincts took over. In a cool, level voice, I answered Pittinger's rhetorical question.

"Sir, I used empirical means to arrive at the answer."

He paled visibly and clung to the chalk trough for support. On cue, the bell rang out. The class was over. With a swiftness born of long experience, I was out of the room even before the echo of the bell had ceased. The guerrilla's code is always hit and run. A legend had been born.

That afternoon, as I sauntered home from school, feeling at least 12 and a half feet tall, Schwartz skulked next to me, silent, moody, kicking at passing frogs. I rubbed salt deep into his wound and sprinkled a little pepper on for good measure. Across the street, admiring clusters of girls pointed out the algebra king as he strolled by.

With the benign air of a baron bestowing largess upon a wretched serf, I offered to buy Schwartz a Fudgsickle at the Igloo. He refused with a snarl.

"Why, Schwartz, what seems to be troubling you?" I asked with irony, vigorously shaking the salt shaker.

"You phony son of a bitch. You know what you can do with your goddamn Fudgsicle."

"Me, a phony? Why would you say an unkind thing like that?"

He spat viciously into a tulip bed. "You phony bastard. You studied!"

Inevitably, those of us who are gifted must leave those less fortunate behind in the race of life. I knew that and Schwartz knew it. Once again I had lapped him and was moving away from the field.

The next morning, Thursday, I swaggered into algebra class with head high. Even Jack Morton, the biggest smartass in the class, said hello as I walked in. Mr. Pittinger, his eyes glowing with admiration, smiled warmly at me. "Hi, Pit," I said with a casual flip of the hand. We abstract mathematicians have an unspoken bond. Naturally, I was not called on during that period. After all, I had proved myself beyond any doubt.

After class, beaming at me with the intimacy of a fellow zealot, Mr. Pittinger asked me to stay on for a few moments.

"Look, it'd be pointless for my only A-plus student to waste time on our little test tomorrow. Would you mind helping me grade the papers?"

"Gosh, Pit, I was looking forward to taking it, but if you really need me, I'll be glad to help." It was a master stroke.

"I'd appreciate it. I need somebody who really knows his stuff, and most of these kids are faking it."

Two days later, together we graded the papers of my peers. I showed no mercy, since algebra is an absolute science and there can be no margin for kindness in matters of the mind.

