

## *Doing the Math*

MARTIN CLOUTIER

James was experiencing a breach – a psychic breach. Like his real self was coming into contact with a parallel universe self. He studied his face in the restaurant's tarnished mirror for signs of change. He came to work early this afternoon to be alone with his thoughts, but the deadly quiet of the place was creeping him out. It had only been two days since returning from his grandmother's funeral in Ann Arbor, though that wasn't the cause of the breach. It had to do with what happened the night before with Roger.

In the mirror, he inspected his neck. Roger's stubbly cheeks had left pinpricks from throat to sternum. All sorts of constellations: a red Andromeda under his ear, the long tail of Ursa Minor reaching for his collar bone. How do women stand it! He immediately felt guilty for all the times he put off shaving for Tracy and Joanne.

"Don't kiss me with that face," Joanne had said.

"This is the only face I've got," he replied. Though as soon as his fingers found their way inside her panties, she stopped thinking about beard stubble.

Afterwards, she would say, "Look at my neck. Look at my thighs." And James would smile to himself and smell his fingers.

Joanne was his college sweetheart and first girlfriend. He came to like the marks he put on her body. He would study them after sex as they lay quietly on her dorm room bed. He'd watch the redness around her thighs fade to pink, then an imperceptible blush as she crossed her ankle over her knee and read the latest Judith Butler. Now karma was kicking his butt for all those unshaven moments. His own thighs felt kind of tender. He pictured Roger's head moving around down there, making little constellations on his body.

He began taking down the chairs. Lifting each chair in a gigantic arc and sending it to the floor with a crack. He enjoyed the semi-squalor of the restaurant in daylight hours: chairs piled on tables, wine cases stacked on the bar and the occasional glass abandoned on a windowsill, its purple and brown dregs coruscating in the sunlight. Soon this narrow and dilapidated room with its scuffed wood floor and crumbling brick wall would transform itself into a rustic hideaway.

In *Star Trek Voyager*, parallel-universe Neelix had menacing red eyes, while regular Neelix had golden reptilian eyes. James rechecked his eyes in the mirror, but they looked the same. He wondered if the experience might have altered him internally. Would the Tracys and Joannes now be replaced with Rogers, and God forbid, Rods? Had a new code overwritten his old desires? For every T and J, replace with R.

He didn't want to relinquish sex with women. He'd hardly had his fill. Two sexual relationships in 26 years was definitely below average, even for someone who scored a perfect eight hundred on his math SATs. Even subtracting childhood and adolescence from the equation, there still remained eight legal years of sexual functioning with only two women. That was point two-five women a year – a quarter of a woman per annum! At that rate, he would have to wait another four years to have sex with a whole woman.

He had thought coming to New York would improve this ratio. But his year in NYC only made it worse. For James, NYC equaled New York Celibacy. And now he needed to factor Roger into the equation. Did sex with Roger negate sex with women? Was Roger a negative integer or a separate set entirely? Either way, in the set: [James's sex partners] Roger occupied one third. Thirty-three percent of the people he had intimate relations with were men. He scratched his face and vowed to start shaving every day.

As he worked, scenes from last night played in his head. He thought of them as happening to his parallel universe self. Some angry, impulsive self, reckless and ravenous for attention. Someone who would take his hands off the wheel while driving and drop his pants in a co-worker's kitchen.

Most likely he was still in shock over his grandmother's death. The whole trip home had been a series of unpleasant surprises. Who wouldn't have a psychic breach? He placed the chairs more quietly. Grief, pity and alcohol – mix them together and find yourself in a parallel universe.

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He had stayed in Michigan for only the first day of shivah, much to his father's chagrin. His mother went back to teaching the day after the funeral. His Aunt Barbara agreed to stay for the entire seven days, but only if she could sit on a regular chair and wear her teeth-whitening-strips. The rabbinical texts held no proscriptions on teeth-whitening strips, though James's father voiced strong opposition. He had sent a twenty-page email to the extended family on Jewish funeral rites. As a professor of religious studies at The University of Michigan, he assumed two things: that everyone shared his enthusiasm about theology and that his textual interpretations were irrefutable.

This sudden concern for Judaism and rabbinical law came as a big surprise to James. Until a few days ago, his family had been Mahayana Buddhists, decades-long members of The Society for Compassionate Wisdom. If they were now going to be Jews, he would have to reassess his whole position on pacifism and the P.L.O. When asked, his father replied, "Your grandmother was a Jew. We're burying her as a Jew. We owe her that much."

James couldn't understand it; his grandma wasn't the least bit religious. And his father had long ago embraced Buddhism as an escape from the rigid tenets of organized religion. Was this some kind of mid-life quest for his roots? Was he now going to travel to the Wailing Wall and pray for the Messiah? Get a timeshare in Bocca?

Whatever his father's reasons, James was not ready to convert. The Jews he knew, like his Aunt Barbara, were always eating something that made them nauseous. Or worried that they smelled something burning. It was too stressful being a Jew.

His father had discovered Buddhism in his twenties and raised his family according to the teachings of The Eightfold Path. James had never been to a synagogue or atoned for Yom Kippur. On his mother's side, they were lapsed Lutherans. As a child, the only religious events James participated in were meditation ceremonies at the Zendo of The Society of Compassionate Wisdom.

He sat with them that first day, all the drapes drawn and mirrors covered; his dad on a little wooden stool, the price tag still dangling underneath. His Aunt reclined on the couch, sipping Diet Coke from a straw and reading *Entertainment Weekly*. Occasionally, she would make some snide comment about Richard Gere or the Dalai Lama, her speech slightly slurred from the teeth-strips. His dad would shake his head, never taking his eyes from the Talmud. Sometimes James would catch his dad staring at him, raising his bushy eyebrows, as if to say, "When are you going to get serious about your life and become a Jew?"

If there were more people in the room, James might not have felt so uncomfortable. But his grandmother's sister, Libby, and Great Uncle Ned were both too old and feeble to sit shivah. Ned had slept through most of the funeral service; and Libby, when the rabbi tried to rend her garment, slapped his hand away and called him fresh.

As explicated in his father's email, a torn garment symbolized the grief of having a loved one ripped from one's life. In traditional Jewish funerals, the rabbi would rend the garments of the immediate family. However, Barbara had just bought a new Eileen Fisher dress and was

strongly opposed to ripping any part of it. She suggested the family wear black ribbons torn at the end, which was the custom at Reform funerals. James's father bought specially designed shirts, the pockets of which were loosely stitched and made to easily rip out, causing a small tear in the fabric. Barbara griped about covering up her new dress, but agreed to wear the shirt for the service. James didn't mind wearing the shirt, but when the rabbi went to rip his pocket, he accidentally grabbed some of James's chest hair, causing him to cry out in pain. His father took this as a sign of extreme sorrow, and James's eyes were appropriately teary for the rest of the service.

He had expected Tracy to come to the funeral, but she didn't show. The following evening he drove to her house. Tray was his second girlfriend – a hostess at The Lamplighter Grill. At the time James started there as manager, she was going through a divorce. He logged in many sexually frustrating hours at the local burrito joint listening to complaints about her ex-husband: patting her hand, doling out napkins to soak up tears and her runny mascara. To this day, he could hardly look at a bowl of guacamole without getting a hard-on.

The street was just as he remembered: big brick houses floating on wide lush lawns. He took deep breaths, inhaling the loamy night air. It felt good to get out after sitting all day on a stool. He quietly shut the car door and made his way up Tracy's long walk, tapping his bouquet of white lilies against his side.

It was a bit forward showing up unannounced, and he didn't know how she would react. He had left town almost a year ago, precipitating their breakup. Some reptilian part of his brain was thinking the funeral might strike a note of sympathy and she would let him sleep over. Using

his dead grandmother to get laid wasn't the noblest of intentions, but James was in desperate need of a sleepover.

He shuffled around on the porch in the new canvas shoes his father had bought him – Jews in mourning weren't supposed to wear leather. Gazing down at the daisies on Tracy's welcome mat, he gently rubbed his rubber soles against them.

Tracy answered the door in jean shorts and a tank top. "James! Oh my god." She covered her mouth with a hand.

"You look great," he said. And it wasn't just the desperation talking. She looked better than he had ever seen her. A short girl with broad hips, Tracy had lost some weight. With her newly toned hips and flatter stomach, her boobs seemed huge. They called to him from underneath her tank top.

"I heard about your grandmother. I was going to come to the funeral but you know . . . death." She said "death" like it was something icky stuck in the drainpipe.

"Here. For you." He handed her the flowers.

"Are these from the funeral?"

"They're pretty. Aren't they?" He tried looking behind her to see if anyone else was in the house.

"Come on in, stranger." She motioned him inside.

The house was still the same – lots of leather and big oak tables. Tracy had kept most of the furniture in her divorce. He recalled being on that leather couch, her legs cinching his back, and her panting, "faster, faster." Every time he had moved though, the couch made an obnoxious farting sound. It made the same sound now as he sat, charging the room with sexiness and shame.

Tracy strode into the kitchen on her newly tanned legs. He watched her toss the flowers on the counter, and wondered what her legs would feel like wrapped around him now. He scanned the room for a blanket or something to put over the couch.

They clinked beer bottles and talked about mutual friends. Tracy still hosted at The Lamplighter, and was taking classes, courtesy of her ex-husband, learning to be a paralegal. They talked about their families and the recent vandalism by a group of college kids who had spray-painted "Texas is the Reason" all over campus. She put one bare foot next to him on the couch and brought the other leg to her chest. He marveled at her little toes painted orange, like butterscotch candies. The inside of her thighs were just the slightest bit red from chafing. He placed a hand on her foot and started rubbing her toenails. She quickly crossed her legs and moved away.

"I missed you," he said.

"Oh James." She said his name like air escaping from a balloon.

"Have you missed *me*?" he said.

"That was a long time ago."

"Not that long. I mean. We had some good times."

"We did." Tracy stared into the black hole of her beer bottle.

"You remember? Right here on this couch?" He stroked the seat of the couch, for emphasis.

"God James." She slammed her beer on the coffee table, making a wet ring.

"I've thought about you."

"Well I don't think about you. Not that way."

"Why not?"

She left the couch, went to the mantelpiece, and started rearranging a vase of silk flowers. "You're just not my type."

He went over to her. "Are you seeing someone else?"

"Look, James, I'm really sorry about your grandmother. But I have an early class. Maybe we can have lunch sometime. Here. Take this to cheer you up." She took a red poppy from the vase and threaded it through the buttonhole of his shirt.

"Aaugh." He cried out, as the wire stem scratched the exact place where the rabbi had yanked out his chest hair.

"What's the matter?" she said. "It's just a flower."

"It's a fake flower. It symbolizes death."

"Oh? And what were those funeral flowers you gave me suppose to symbolize?"

"Life after death." He removed the flower and crushed it in his hand. "Everybody knows that."

Tracy marched to the door and opened it wide. "Goodbye, James."

He followed, plucking at his shirt with his fingertips. "You know who my type is, Tracy? Someone who appreciates the difference between real and fake. That's who my type is."

In the car, he revved the engine and watched the speedometer needle fall through the numbers: 60, 30, 20, 10. He recalibrated all his memories of Tracy with the knowledge that he wasn't her type. He turned the key again forgetting he had just started the engine; the car made that earsplitting scraping metal sound like it was coughing up blood. He zoomed away.

Driving back home, he calculated Tracy and his time together: 13 months and seven days. He added the time he had been gone: nine months and 14 days. He subtracted their time together from his time away. He had been gone for almost point seven times the length of their relationship. Ignoring the stop signs, he sped through the leafy tunneled streets – a bullet in the barrel of a gun aimed at nothing. Two questions



came to mind: At what point did he stop being Tracy's type? And, was he ever Tracy's type? It was becoming painfully clear that one third of the people he'd ever slept with had failed to find him desirable.

He pulled into the driveway; the moon was just visible over the house, and a blue TV light flashed in Barbara's window.

Inside, his father still sat on his stool. He had put away the Talmud, but in keeping with his newly reclaimed Judaism was reading *Tuesdays With Morrie*. Candlelight flickered on the velvet drapes. He gave James a nod and went back to Morrie. James felt his silent rebuke for leaving the house during shivah. He walked down their dark paneled hall to the kitchen where his mother was washing dishes. He picked up a cloth and helped her to dry.

"Housework is forbidden," he said. "Didn't you get the email?"

"I don't want your Aunt Barbara telling the rest of the family that I keep a dirty house."

"Is he mad at me?"

"He's mad at all of us. Himself mostly." She put the last dish on the rack and snatched the towel from James.

"What's wrong with him? We're *not* Jews."

"That's debatable."

"You're not Jewish. And Jewish heritage is passed down through the mother. So I'm not Jewish."

"Yes but Reva was Jewish."

"Grandma wasn't a practicing Jew. She never went to temple or had a Seder."

"She stopped all that when your father turned Buddhist. I think that's what bothering him now."

"Okay. But after all these years, he can't just stick on a yarmulke and call himself a Jew."

"People change. You could become a Lutheran and start eating Christ." She took out her basket of vitamin pills and portioned out her dosages for the night.

"What about The Eightfold Path, The Four Noble Truths? Meditation and reincarnation? Do we just forget about those and start separating the milk from the meat?"

"Jamie, I don't want to talk about your father. I want to talk about you. Your life. What are you doing?"

"I'm mourning my grandmother, that's what I'm doing."

"Are you going to grad school?"

"If I'm a Jew, I guess I'd better." He opened the refrigerator and peered inside.

"You said this restaurant job was only temporary, but I don't see you moving forward."

"You mean I'm not on track to be a mathematics professor?"

"Jamie, I don't want you to be like me. You have a gift for math; you can always fall back on that. I thought you were going to apply to film schools."

"I can't afford an M.F.A. right now."

"Well, you could come back here. Go to school for free."

"They don't have an M.F.A. program. How many times do we have to go over this?" He slammed the refrigerator.

"Look Jamie, I'm not telling you what to do, but you're in New York. Make the most of it. Apply to film schools. If you get accepted, your father and I will help you ...

"He doesn't want me to go to film school."

"Well, maybe now that he's Jewish ... There're a lot of Jewish film directors."

"It's my problem. My life."

"Then take out loans. Take small classes on the side. But for godsakes do something. You can't be a restaurant manager all your life."

"But I could be." James lifted the lid of the sunflower cookie jar and extracted a high-fiber cookie. "I could be a restaurant manager. Aren't we supposed to find joy in the simple tasks? Renounce worldly desires?"

"But is that your bliss, James? Don't you want to follow your bliss?" She gave him a tight smile and swallowed a handful of pills. "Be nice to your father. He's very upset over Reva's passing." She patted his cheek and walked out.

James picked up the dishtowel and finished drying the rest of the dishes. Then, out of guilt, he scrubbed the sink and Brillo-padded the stove.

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Taking down the chairs had exhausted him. And there were still tables to set and silverware to polish. He grabbed a handful of knives and vigorously rubbed them with a cloth, as if he could rub out all the questions circulating through his mind and be left with one shining, sharp purpose. There was the question of how much Jewishness makes one a Jew? How much gayness makes one gay? And when does one stop being a type and start becoming a person? All interesting to ponder while ignoring the larger question: What to do with one's life?

It would almost be easier if he were gay. He could tell his parents that sexual confusion had stalled his career path. Being gay would give him a ready-made group to identify with, and he'd have the added benefit of

being a repressed minority. If he could also claim to be Jewish, there'd be no end to his moral superiority.

He let each knife fall into the silverware tray with a clank. He was starting to sweat; his skin felt raw and tingly. There were still areas of his body that recalled Roger's touch: a hand on the small of his back, the wet smoothness of a tongue on his thigh. He was 26 years old and had never felt a tongue on his thigh.

He walked down the row of tables and straightened the cloths, making sure the ends hung at exactly the same length. The white of each square reminded him of Roger's brilliant smile. With his stringy goatee and wiry little biceps, Roger resembled a baby-faced pirate, always ready to draw swords, to plunder and pillage. The confidence he projected, James knew to be cold-hearted indifference. Though not traits he admired, he often wished he had the ability to manufacture a little indifference: to make blanket statements and pronounce final judgments. He didn't want to be *like* Roger, so much as *more* like Roger.

Roger had something feminine about him, feminine but not faggy, an unexpected yielding that James appreciated. For all his ballsy sarcasm and stinging critiques, he could sometimes look you right in the eye and say the kindest things, made all the more kind when juxtaposed against the vitriol and rage he vented on others. In the course of their evening together, he discovered Roger's brusque, caustic demeanor slowly replaced by a needy, more unctuous tone, like turning over a stone and feeling the damp, muddy underside.

It had been a long time since he had that much attention lauded upon his body. The thought of any guy doing those things was distasteful, yet Roger touching him, kissing him, licking him, seemed special. Roger

hated so many things that if he approved of James, there must be something right about it. Like when someone gives you a tacky gift and tells you a movie star has the exact same thing; all of a sudden, it becomes a valued treasure.

He just had to make sure that no one at work found out. If they did, it would undermine what little authority James had left. He'd be the punchline of every joke from now until New Year's. And this was the pertinent question of the day: not, was he really a gay man pretending to be straight; but how to stop Roger from *thinking* he was a gay man pretending to be straight?

In Roger's world, given the set b [what Roger believes to be gay], and the set p [all the people of the world], p was definitely a subset of b. Roger's favorite pastime was admonishing the closet cases – exposing all pretenders both local and famous. Like some gay bloodhound sniffing out a taggot in every woodpile, Roger pronounced this actor fey or that diner Queer with a capital Q. And then listed the irrefutable reasons why: his shirt was too tight, he used the word colorist, he never looked his wife in the eye, he had an over-compensating interest in his five children. And if *these* things counted as gay in Roger's mind, then making out with a guy and coming in his mouth could only mean one thing.

James started unrolling the squares of bistro paper and covering the tables. He wasn't ready to have his heterosexuality questioned at every turn. He didn't want to be snickered at whenever he found a woman attractive. And he certainly wasn't going to have Roger telling prospective girlfriends, "Oh, James and I had a thing once. It was small and insignificant – both *our* thing and *his*."

The phone started ringing and James went to answer it. At the podium, as he was bent over writing down a reservation, he felt two hands on either side of his hips.

“Hello James.”

It was Roger. He pretended to be engrossed in conversation and Roger walked away. But the places where he had been touched burned with a will of their own. It was degrading for someone to lay hands on you as if you were a lolling dog, hungry for a hand on your body. His skin goose-pimpled all the way up to his armpits where he felt moisture starting to form and redness heating his face.

He set the phone in its cradle and erased the illegible name he'd written. Carefully, he rewrote the reservation in bold masculine letters. Then he noted the time Roger had arrived – fifteen minutes late. This was his second lateness this week. Once more would be grounds for dismissal.

He gathered his papers and headed to the office to fill out the forms. □