

Solomon Zucker had two PhDs. Solomon Zucker wrote a book of wordless logic puzzles that was published by Mensa. Solomon Zucker never married. Solomon Zucker ate Kellog's Special K in whole milk five times a day. Solomon Zucker only owned one pair of pants. Solomon Zucker's house was filled with between ten and eleven thousand books. Solomon Zucker had subscriptions to ninety-four different magazines. Solomon Zucker did not own a car. Solomon Zucker never met Lacy Brothers or Ben Harrison. Solomon Zucker was the psychologist who had been assigned to evaluate Merlin's mental aptitude in the first grade.

After spending one hour with the child, Solomon Zucker recommended to Merlin's mother and his school's administration that the only criteria that should be used to limit the number of grades the child should be skipped was his classmates' ability to tolerate someone as young as he in their midst. Dr. Zucker recommended that Merlin be given access to college-level research materials for unstructured independent perusal. He recommended that Merlin not be required to complete any class work targeted for children his age. He recommended that Merlin be sent to live with his aunt in Brooklyn. Brooklyn was six hundred and nine miles east of his mother's house.

To arrive at these recommendations, Dr. Solomon Zucker never administered any tests to Merlin. He never looked at any of Merlin's writing. He never asked Merlin about his mother. Before their first meeting, Dr. Zucker had never talked with any of Merlin's teachers about the child. After their first meeting, Dr. Zucker never asked to see Merlin again. He never inquired about the child's well-being. He didn't plan to ever contact Merlin. He didn't expect that Merlin would ever attempt to contact him. In fact, at no time before or after their meeting, or at any time during the three-hour span during which the child sat in the psychologist's leather chair, pleasantly glancing around the room and periodically receding deep into his own mind, did Merlin Charles Quinn or Dr. Solomon Anslem Zucker ever say a single word to one another.

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After being skipped ahead two grades, and then being skipped back two grades, exactly ten years, one month, five days, and twenty-three hours after his meeting with Dr. Zucker, Merlin was flying his tray across the lunchroom of Colonel White School for the Arts with sound effects and everything. He was twisting his body in angles meant to give the look of a plane banking sharply in the air. This plane didn't just have jets, though, it had disc brakes and a horn and was equipped with a rotary gun and a pilot-side airbag. Merlin was weaving in and out of the spaces between tables and behind people's chairs, spaces whose fluidity challenged even the most experienced pilot. He never knew when a narrow canyon might suddenly collapse upon itself, fatally crushing the aircraft. As he swerved to avoid such obstacles, the cardboard milk box would slide to the edge of Merlin's tray, threatening to surprise-eject onto unsuspecting freshman laps. Merlin came to a dam of bookbags strewn in the passage between two tables of sophomores, mostly band kids, soccer kids, volleyball kids (preps). Merlin was making an unbelievably loud sound like, "Neeeeeeeeeeeeeeaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaarrrrrrrrrrrrrmmmmmmmm!" which got everyone's attention. By the time he jumped over the bag dam, tray precariously in hand, no one dared to make a single movement that might distract him from the stunt. When other people tripped in the lunchroom, Merlin ran to the site of the accident and, like an umpire, knelt and waved his arms to make the call, "Safe!" But Merlin didn't trip on these bags. He sailed over with corresponding sound effects. By the time he had crossed safely through prep territory, past ROTC territory, past homey-g-money territory, past goth territory, and begun his

final descent in freak territory, in the farthest corner of the lunchroom, his plane was sputtering and coughing gently as it geared down onto the runway where Ben and Lacy were sitting. The two of them were talking about something. Lacy was speaking, but she stopped when Merlin got there. Merlin raised an eyebrow.

"Lacy. Benjamin."

Ben said, "Hey, Merlin."

Lacy said, "Hi."

And Merlin kept his eyes on them both as he opened packets of salt and emptied them indiscriminately across the compartments of his tray. He finished with the salt and threatened to open a capsule of black pepper. He aborted the gesture, thrusting the capsule toward them as punctuation.

"Well...?" he said.

"Well what?"

"What's going on?"

Lacy gently lodged her bare foot between Merlin's legs and wiggled her toes. "Nothing," she said.

Merlin blinked. He shook the pepper and looked at it, indicating that he might be thinking about opening it. "Nothing?"

"We were talking, okay?"

Merlin shifted his gaze. "Ben...?"

"Yes."

"How's life?"

"Fine. How's life with you?"

"Fine." Merlin opened the pepper and let the capsule drain into a pyramid on the steak. Then, as though it was the beginning of the conversation, he said, "So what's going on?"

Ben said, "Just eating lunch. Chatting."

"What are you two doing after school?... I was thinking about going to The 'Grind and I wanted to know if you all wanted to come."

Lacy said, "I cannot."

Merlin asked Ben if he was busy, as well.

"Maybe," Ben smiled, "I'm not sure."

Merlin set in on his food, looking only at the tray, refusing meet their eyes.

Lacy said, "Look, Merlin, this is none of your business." She was wiggling her toes.

"Then just tell me, 'No, I can't go with you to The 'Grind because I'm stealing Ben for the rest of the day to go have sex with him my parent's basement.'"

Ben cracked up laughing.

"We were going to invite you."

"Inviting me would eventually necessitate talking to me." Then, Merlin chuckled. "Seriously?"

Ben broke in. "I'm sorry. I like you and all, but I don't think I'm ready to begin a sexual relationship with you...at this time."

Merlin laughed and made a kiss face to his friend. Then he turned to Lacy. "Seriously, where are you two going?"

Lacy took her foot from between Merlin's legs and kicked her chair back. She yelled so loud it startled people four tables away. "You wanna come, too?! You wanna come, too? Meet me after school, out front. You have to come now."

"Lacy, that's oka--"

"No, Merlin. Meet us out front at three o'clock. Do not talk to me anymore, you hear?"

Merlin dropped his fork into the tray of food. "Jesus." People at the other tables went back to their lunch. Merlin pushed his braids out of his eyes. Then, blank-faced, he said, "So. Where are we going?"

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At the corner of Emmet and Linwood, overlooking downtown Dayton and the Great Miami River, there was a house with a sticker on the door that said, "multimedia." On Tuesday, October 18, 1994, after Merlin, Ben, and Lacy met in front of the school at three o'clock, they boarded a city bus that took them to that house. When they got there they didn't knock, they just went in. The Dark Dad was sitting on a woven rug in the corner watching music videos with the sound way up. He was smoking yellow rocks in a glass pipe, nibbling with chopsticks on a plate of raw fish. His feet were bare. He was wearing a robe. When Merlin, Ben, and Lacy came into the room where the Dark Dad was sitting, he turned to them and broke into a warm, wide grin. The children closed the door.

"Welcome." The Dark Dad turned the volume down with a remote. The children left their bags beside the windowless door. Ben's face glowed with fluorescent blacklight as he peered into an aquarium filled with leafy vines.

"Let him out, if you want," the Dark Dad said. Benjamin didn't move except to smile at this remark.

Merlin said, "How goes it?"

"I've been asking the metamorph that very question. Some things you should see."

"Indeed." Merlin removed his shoes and socks and approached the Dark Dad. The Dark Dad extended his pipe and Merlin took it in one hand while coming to rest cross-legged on a sheepskin rug that was just one patch of a quiltwork of blankets, rugs, animal skins. The Dark Dad reached underneath the edge of the woven rug and produced a deck of cards. He handed them to Merlin. Merlin exhaled, closing his eyes.

"You see, Merlin," Lacy said. She was still by the door, unbuttoning her pants, shuffling them off, uncoiling herself from a blue hooded sweatshirt while Ben stood beside her, oblivious, still peering into the aquarium. Lacy unzipped Benjamin's pants and pushed them down with her toes. She unbuttoned his shirt and licked his chest. Ben finally looked away from the jungle, at Lacy, and into and around the room. Neither he nor Lacy had been wearing underwear. Purple light from the aquarium illuminated their bodies. Lacy went to Merlin and said, "Let's get you naked, too."

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Minutes later, Benjamin found himself staring into the freezer. His body was warm except for the air pouring out of the box. He reached into the back corner of the automatic ice bucket and retrieved a glass bottle from beneath a layer of ice. It was labeled, "iodine."

In the TV room, the three children knelt on sheepskin with their faces turned upward, mouths open and waiting, like baby birds, for their mother's beak. The Dark Dad opened the bottle and fed several drops of liquid to each of them. Benjamin went to the bedroom and laid on top of a

white down comforter that lay over the futon. The bedroom was completely white. The cover of the overhead light was missing. Four 100-watt bulbs flooded every corner of the space. Benjamin remembered a time he almost had sex with Kristen in this room just to make Lacy jealous. He and Kristen had gotten down to their underwear. They messed around until they heard Lacy slam the outside door. As Ben lay on the comforter remembering this, Lacy entered the bedroom. Merlin watched her from his sheepskin mat, saw Lacy's thin arm, her delicate hand, slide its fingers down the doorframe. He saw her creamy back, saw the duckling fuzz on her head, saw the curves of her bottom gently meet each leg. She went in and drew the door behind her.

"Forget about that," suggested the Dark Dad.

"I'm trying." Merlin exhaled and handed the pipe back. Then he shook his head and said, "Metamorph."

The Dark Dad went to the aquarium by the door while Merlin shuffled the cards and arranged the stones. The aquarium was uncovered, and the Dark Dad reached in with both arms. Merlin didn't see that. He was setting stones on a square magnetic board with sides two feet long. The board had markings on it, drawn in white chalk. The stones weren't particularly magnetic, but Merlin knew that, to some degree, everything was magnetic. The earth was magnetic. Stones were magnetic. Light was magnetic. Even people were magnetic, gravitational, electrical, but he was trying to forget that for the moment. Remain abstract. Remain detached. Remain objective. Three stones. A triangle. Three atoms. Three axes. A hyper-dimensional quantum-relational field. Trade color for emotion, though, numbers for reaction. Stay detached. Merlin pushed the stones off the board into a pile. Each was carved with a symbol that could be viewed as corresponding to a number from one through nine. He and the Dark Dad had collected the stones from the Llano River, in a hunting ground twenty miles south of Llano, Texas. They had carved them there, by the fire at night, over a period of weeks. Merlin drew a single stone from the pile and placed it near the center of the magnetic slab. The Dark Dad was sitting again. He also drew a stone, then placed it near Merlin's.

The Dark Dad said, "Now one for each of them."

"One for both of them," Merlin said.

The Dark Dad raised an eyebrow. "Conglomerates?"

Merlin shook his head. "Intermediates."

"Conglo-intermediary motherfucking insanity!" the Dark Dad said. Then he screamed, "The freak is back!"

Merlin said, "Indeed." The Dark Dad switched the TV to a music channel. Voiceless background technotrance. The screen pulsated with a visualizer. Merlin recognized some form of plenoptic IFS; it was a perfect choice for that audio. They each drew a representative stone and Merlin placed the appropriate conglo-intermediaries. Five stones. Merlin visualized the techno seeping into the temporal lobe of his cerebral cortex. Like water to a basement, he thought, it's beginning. Six stones. An ample pile of scraps. A closed door behind which, for all he really knew, was absolutely nothing. Quantum-mechanical irrelevance. Existencelessness. He clapped his hands together and looked the Dark Dad in the eyes.

"Let's go."

Dark Dad flipped the X. It switched from red vamp to red sink. Merlin responded by casting Z's blue float up one quantum to cea, causing a change in the intermediary, which necessitated a Dark Dad response in the A-X axis. The Dark Dad countered with another move at X, an

internal state change that took Merlin almost half a second to figure out. He kept losing it. He was thinking too much. It was like Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle: sometimes, paying attention to one aspect of a situation meant you had to pay less attention to another aspect. Then Merlin saw it. The Dark Dad was trying to force Y into a metaphorical Robertson. Merlin leaned back, tabling the side rock.

"Early," the Dark Dad commented. Merlin assembled the axes of the side rock, dictated internal state with the cards. He re-aligned stones to move newly born D farther from the edge of the slab. D-A: balanced blue at zig, slightly D-heavy red (A dot, D oh), strong balanced yellow (fang). Set up D-X, D-Y, D-B, D-C, using references for the latter two. Merlin hoped the Dark Dad didn't see what he was planning. He suddenly remembered the other room. Let it slide, he insisted, like the water, into the basement. Merlin was done. He stood up and went to the aquarium. The Dark Dad was smiling broadly, looking at the board. Merlin peered into the tank.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

The Dark Dad was clutching his chest to keep from laughing out loud. He pointed to the base of the bedroom door. Merlin followed the line of the Dark Dad's finger. Lacy hadn't locked the door. She hadn't even pulled it to. The eight-foot albino boa constrictor had pushed it open, and only three feet of him were still in the room with Merlin and the Dark Dad. They both held their breaths in anticipation, waiting almost a minute before Lacy, like a mother at her child, using the child's full name, yelled, "Polo Ralph Lauren! Get the fuck out of here!"

Merlin and the Dark Dad busted out laughing.

Then Lacy sounded scared, "Did you let the other ones out?"

The Dark Dad said, "No."

After a moment, Lacy's voice: "Anyway, get out of here!"

Then Ben's voice came. "Let him play."

But Lacy said, "He's too big!"

Ben, Merlin, and the Dark Dad all laughed. So did Lacy. And for a second, even though the bedroom door was still mostly closed, it was like they were all in the same room together, Lacy, Benjamin, Merlin, the Dark Dad, and an eight-foot snake named Polo Ralph Lauren.

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Merlin was staring at the sticker on the front door. He was thinking about "multimedia." He was thinking about white letters on a black background. He was thinking about the way a white field backs up next to a black field to create a visual edge. He was thinking about distance, and the nature of edge. Then he was just thinking about edge, and somewhere in there the edge he was looking at went away. Somewhere in there he realized that the black and the white had a relationship to each other, and that he had a relationship with their relationship. Somewhere he was beyond the stones, beyond the science, beyond vision and touch, into the stillness and flatness of time. Part of a motionless framework whose finity precluded the possibility of an observer whose efforts at comprehension would, by their nature, make comprehension impossible. It was slices of a loaf of bread. It was dumping the bag of marbles out onto the floor, then taking pictures. It was the way the water dripped from the faucet into the bathtub. It was the way molecules clinged to his fingers. It was the water, indeed, slipping ever unnoticed into the basement. Through dirt and rock into the sea. It was something about seeing, about

what he had been thinking about that time before, locked in the bathroom to steal a moment from nagging sisters. Something about seeing, about the way it gets from the retina to the brain. Something about straightness, he had been thinking, and now he thought, edges, too. The straightness of edges, the mutual collaboration of independent individuations, conspiring to agree on what then becomes our truth. It was something about right angles, and combinatorics, and that threw him into a quadrant of thought bounded by three axes whose coordinates were made up of the concepts of right angles, combinatorics, and graph theory. And he was lost, stuck in vastness, in emptiness, eons before or eons after the existence of planet Earth. He was alone with thought, without even the illusion of time to comfort him. Inevitability. Absolute relativity. Integral uncertainty. A total multidisciplinary ecosystem. A complete dismantling of the idea of distance. With it, the dismantling of the idea of self. Abandonment of the hope of return. Profound inconsolability.

Benjamin and The Dark Dad were laying on their backs on the sheepskin. Their heads were next to one another. Lacy emerged from a journey to the kitchen, her camera hanging by its strap around her neck. She lifted it from her belly with one hand, adjusted nothing, and took a shot of the boys without even bringing the viewfinder to her face. She motioned toward the door with her camera. "Is he ever coming back?"

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And... Action! Lacy, having come into focus, sprawled on the couch. Lacy, dressed in a pair of fairy wings. Lacy, applying red lipstick without a mirror. Lacy's breasts, perky in front of her. Lacy, fingering herself. The creeping of nausea. Zooming in while pulling the camera backward. Cut to: Lacy, lying in the bed, pinching herself. Cut to: the empty couch. Cut to: a glimpse of Lacy in the kitchen, leaning against the door frame. Cross to camera one. Ben, realizing that he himself was naked. Fade to camera two. Ben, thinking that his penis was erect. Three. Ben, lifting his head from the floor to see that it really wasn't.

Dialog. "I'll drink some water now."

The taste of sea water, coming out of the bathroom faucet. Opening the Dark Dad's medicine cabinet. Discovering toothpaste.

"Come'ere, Lace."

Benjamin's character handing Lacy one of the brushes.

"Brush your teeth."

A close-up of Lacy smiling at the sensation of saltwater bristles. Her face as she fucks her mouth with the toothbrush and comes froth all over her chest. A shot of Ben licking it off. Their spit spiraling down the drain in the sink. Ben seeing something on the floor. A book of pictures. A magazine. A nature book about insects. "the natural world of Bugs & Insects" The rich red cover. "Ken & Rod Preston-Mafham" Opening to page twenty-nine. "Along with a few of the katydid's the mantids have some of the most bizarre faces to be encountered amongst the bugs, looking as they do like some imagined alien being from a distant galaxy." Lacy, not on the couch at all, but here, in the bathroom, with the snake twisting around her waist and shoulders.

"On the underside of their arms are long spines and these help to immobilise a struggling victim as the mantid hugs it before delivering the first, fateful bites." A flash of Lacy lying back on the futon, self-consciously caressing her own nipples. "Praying mantids" Latin. "(Mantodea)" Cut

to: Lacy with cloud-blue eyes and tiny black pupils. "Above: eating an assassin bug she has recently caught is a female of the praying mantis *Parasphendale agrionina*. Kenya."  
Fade to white...

~

Merlin was at twenty before he realized he was counting the number of times the phone had rang. He thought it was part of the music until the song ended.  
"Hey," tapping the Dark Dad, who was doing Yoga, "phone."  
Lacy said, "That's the television."  
"I thought the same thing, actually, but you see," Merlin said, "the song just changed and it's still ringing."  
Lacy as schoolmarm. "You may be right."  
"Dad," got his attention. "Phone?"  
The Dark Dad made a guttural, "Mmmm."  
Merlin was at twenty-nine. The Dark Dad meditated with his eyes open. Merlin noticed that Lacy was fully dressed.  
"Where's Ben?" he asked.  
"Outside."  
Ben was standing on the front porch, fully clothed, whistling something from Mozart. The sky was dark. Lacy tossed Merlin his jeans. Merlin glanced quickly around the room. He encompassed the changes with a sweep of his hand.  
"When did all this happen?"

~

Lacy had plucked a handful of clover and was pushing the buds underwater. The three of them huddled in a line. Lacy's fingers were cold with the water. She warmed them, one by one, in her mouth. Merlin scratched designs over the granite rim of the pool with a chalk stone. Ben's head was raised. He was listening to everything. To the sound of the stone scratching the granite rim, to the sound of water droplets falling from Lacy's hand as she took it from the pool, the sound of her licking her fingers, the sound of the wind, and also, he was listening to the protective cushion of quiet that surrounded them. He could sometimes hear the sound of cars from there, but not that night. Lacy was singing softly, to herself, "...blueberry pie, walks on by, and I don't know what to do..."  
Then she stopped. Ben turned around. They heard footsteps, crunching leaves. When Lacy turned her head she saw the specks of light coming over the first hill, three of them, flashlights. A dog barked from that same direction.  
They grabbed their bags and headed away from the lights. They went as quickly as they could, but they couldn't run with all the headstones, only the largest of which were readily visible the dark. As lightly as they tried to walk, with every step the crunch of leaves echoed back across the field.  
"Let's stop moving."  
"Let's just get to the fence."

They went the rest of the way without talking. Periodically, they heard the dog bark, and, periodically, Ben turned around to see where the flashlights were. The children came to the fence. On the other side were the crumbling student houses of the UD Ghetto. They found a place where a tree on the other side would help them avoid touching the barbed wire on the way over. Merlin went over first. The barbs cut his leg and ripped the denim of his jeans. As Ben climbed down the other side of the fence, he saw that two of the flashlights had followed them, and were less than a minute away. Lacy threw her heavy bag over the fence. The boys thought she would start climbing, but she aborted the first grasp of fence before her hand ever touched the metal. She was looking past Merlin and Ben, at something behind them.

"Police! Put your hands above your head and turn around. Young lady, do not move."

Ben and Merlin turned around. Ben grinned slightly. Lacy wanted to run, but she didn't. The floodlights made it difficult for her to see anything except two silhouettes cautiously approaching the boys. Benjamin laughed outright when they cuffed him. Merlin was silent throughout. He stared directly at the lights, letting them burn patterns into his eyes. He saw embers circling symmetrically like the flecks of a kaleidoscope. He was thinking of Heisenberg.

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Detective Wasserman stood alone at the edge of Imogen Hill's reflection pool. The back of his Maglite was propped on his left shoulder. He gripped its head with his hand. The beam was trained on a spot at the bottom of the pool. Wasserman felt the wind through his slacks. He peered into the blackness surrounding him. Then he looked back to the pool. The light shone through a thin layer of sticks and decaying leaves on top of the water, illuminating a pair of severed human hands lying perfectly still at the bottom of the pool.