

CROSSROADS

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Was this lunacy or desperation? Here he was, just before midsummer's midnight, in his rusted car, following directions he chanced upon in a tome mis-shelved in the physics library. All he needed was a hint, he was sure of that. And he was willing to pay.

There were no sounds except those he had brought with him. Even those were attenuated to mere suggestions. The ticking of the cooling engine had just about died. Shifting his weight behind the wheel, the squeaking springs and creaking vinyl came from miles away. The disconnection between action and effect, movement and sound made him faintly dizzy.

He took up the battered and coffee-stained notebook sitting on the passenger seat. He grasped the inner handle, and as he pulled and shouldered the door open, it was the crossroads itself that screamed in protest at the insult of his transgression, not the failing, corroded mechanisms of the door. Standing up, and away, he pushed the door closed with more force than was necessary, daring the night to enforce its silence. The door's solid but distant "chunk!" was reassuringly final. He squared his shoulders and faced the intersection.

Maybe it was the moonlight that made the whole scene so strange. The octagonal stop signs seemed more plea than command under that pale light. The midnight moon seemed higher in the sky than was possible, somehow just past overhead no matter which way he turned, craning his neck. Was it an astronomical quirk, or something less canny?

The intersection itself did not seem to be rightly a part of the Indiana hills leading east, nor did it seem to fit with the vast empire of Illinois soy-county to the west. Was the moonlight playing tricks on him? He was sure the scene before him was that of a newly planted vineyard, stakes and bare wire. On second glance, the vineyard seemed overgrown and unkempt. Or was it a field of cornstalks, waist-high and green? No, the stalks were towering and blighted, pale and desiccated. The land about the crossroad seemed to be each of these, and none.

It was a land apart.

He entered the intersection. Consulting the notebook, he began a shuffling dance on the gravel roadbed, recreating in the gravel the sketch on the page. He paused, gathering his bearings. He then took off shuffling again, his feet never completely leaving the ground.

Anyone who grew up in these parts would have gladly given him a warning before backing away and running once they had melted into the surrounding darkness. But the people of the land never seemed “real” to him, not as real as the particles and fields he studied but had never *seen*. He was alone. Anyone who could have warned him off his present course had had their chance years ago.

He seemed satisfied at last that the figure on the ground was what he intended. Intention, he had read, was the most important element in this magic. With a deep breath, he focused that intention. He delicately planted first his right, then his left foot gingerly in the center of the figure on the ground, like a person who had mopped themselves into a corner. His back was turned to the East with the moonlight falling all about.

Holding the notebook open to a fresh page, he spoke, finally.

“I am here to make a deal!” he said. “Whatever you want, take it! Just give me my desire!”

What is it that you want? What is it that you offer?

He was not sure he had heard the voice. But he understood the meaning.

“Here,” he said as bravely as he could, offering the notebook awkwardly with his left hand, the pencil outward in the right. “Finish this theory! I have worked my whole life on this ... everyone thinks it can’t be done! I want the ANSWER. And for it, you have my eternal self.” Even now, the scientist could not bring himself to say the word “soul” out loud.

Hmm. That’s a tricky one. Can I interest you in fame, instead? It is a lot easier for me to conjure up a nice glamour of fame.

“Fame? Fame won’t get my grants approved. This result will. Fame won’t earn me tenure. THIS will. This is my last chance ... My students hate me, my papers are getting rejected, I need THIS! How about you just finish this calculation,” he turned back a few pages, and held his pencil at the last equation that he had written, “from this point?”

Ummm. Hmmm. Ummmm. Nope. I got nothing.

The silence became total. After a minute, it became uncomfortable as well. He found a dog-eared page and tried to make out in the moonlight what he had written. “Can you tell me if,” he circled a set of equations, “there is a sign error in here?”

... ?yes? ... maybe? Can you give me a hint?

“What the actual hell? Do you mean to tell me you can’t help me? That you don’t know? YOU?”

Uh. You know, I hate math. The whole “war against heaven” started because I was trying to avoid inventing geometry. Can I interest you in riches, instead? Working with money is a WHOLE lot easier than this sort of thing.

“Can you send the money through my campus foundation? Do you have a DUNS number? This is great, let me get your EIN down, and then I can get you in contact with my pre-award person...”

Let me stop you right there. What are we talking about? I thought we were talking dollars? We are talking dollars, yes?

“The dollars have to come through a grant or they won’t count for my tenure. Is there someone else I can speak to? Do you have a manager? Is there someone around here who knows what the hell they are doing?!?”

No need to be rude. And I AM THE MANAGER, and I know exactly what THE HELL I am doing. See, what you are asking is for the TRUTH and I have never been that great with truth. Fame is an illusion. Oh, I am good with illusions. The very idea of wealth is a kind of collective insanity I invented to get you all to torture each other. I am GREAT with insanity. To tell the truth, the thing I am not that all that good with is, you know, truth.

“You want me to believe...” he trailed off. Dejected, he simply asked the obvious question. “You can’t help me, can you?”

No, not really, but that, as we say down here, is a feature – not a bug.

“So, there is no solution? I have to go back to square one?”

Ding!

It was too much for him. He realized that he was at the bitter, dead end of a life’s work fueled by high-octane ambition and low-grade skill. His bottom lip quivered, and his sobs escaped and ripened into wailing.

Stop that! I can't stand this sort of thing. Say – We haven't talked about POWER yet... would you like to be the chair of your department? How about the dean of a college? Wouldn't that be nice?

Embarrassed, and sniffing, he looked down and muttered, “Dean would be nice. With a good pension, and retreat rights?”

Whatever. Well, my boy! Why didn't you say so! I think we can do business, after all! Come on, let me see you smile. That's better. Just. One ...

The voice paused for a bit. It seemed that the stars dimmed and the moonlight itself simply sank into the ground without illuminating the roadbed, the stop signs, the crops that were never planted, were never to be harvested.

... minute please. I have just sent your CV to an Institute in Massachusetts that is going to need an associate dean toot sweet. The old one had a debt just come due. Be of good cheer, my boy! You will love this!

Looking down at the notebook, he saw with a sinking feeling that he had not driven the intended bargain. On the page was a neatly penciled receipt: “One soul in exchange for,” and then the crossed-out phrase “Nobel-winning theoretical physics theory” and then the phrase, “a lifetime of administrative drudgery,” and below that his signature and the date of the new day. Midnight had just struck.

Not such a great bargain, huh? But really, the secrets of quantum gravity are worth a whole lot more than just a single worn-out human soul. You did about as well as you could have.

“So there is an answer?” he asked, hope building in the back of his mind.

No way. Not for you. Not for any of you. And now it is your JOB to see to it that the secret is never found. Time to pack, bub. I got a job for you.

And, with that, the cacophony of the night resumed.

END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Galen T. Pickett has been a member of the physics faculty at Cal State Long Beach since 1999. He lives in the greater LA area with his spouse, four grown children, and several canines. His writing is inspired by the grandeur of the physical world and the absurdity of the academic world, in nearly equal measure.