

SAFETY IN NUMBERS

By Matt Burch

Dennis didn't know why it disturbed him, what the bartender said. He'd heard it many times before—an aphorism maybe, certainly a cliché. It was the type of line that passed for wisdom in places like this, a Ramada Inn lounge just minutes from the airport. You didn't come here for deep introspection. You came here for watered-down cocktails, faux leather booths, the soothing lull of complete anonymity. You didn't come here for what the place contained but what it lacked.

"You know how to make God laugh? Just tell him your plans."

This was what the bartender said, and the customer he'd said it to—a conventioneer by the looks of the "Hi, My Name is Mike" sticker curling at the edge of his business suit lapel—nodded bleary-eyed, beaten down, his ten-minute account of a soured real estate venture brought to a summary close by the bartender's tired maxim. It was a casual response, doled out as carelessly, reflexively as the battered maraschino now floating atop Dennis' half-consumed rum and Diet Pepsi. So why was it suddenly troubling him?

Dennis checked his watch for the seventh time. She was late. Very late. This was not like her or, at least, not like her online profile: "Sally140 likes intelligent men, pistachio-walnut gelato, punctuality; dislikes Top 40 radio, Lycra, easy assumptions." How could he believe anything Sally140 said now that his watch read sixteen minutes after 8 PM on a Tuesday night, more than a quarter hour past their mutually predetermined meeting time?

"Easy assumptions," indeed. Assuming an intelligent man would overlook the contradiction. An M.I.T. graduate with advanced degrees in astrophysics and quantum

mechanics. A man who lived by numbers and coordinates, trajectories and momenta atomic and subatomic. A man who tangled daily not only with nanoseconds but picoseconds. Assuming a man like this was the kind of man who would patiently wait.

Dennis aligned his wire-framed corrective lenses atop his nasal bridge, took another testy, watery brown sip. The caffeine in the Diet Pepsi was taking hold but apparently not the rum. Alcohol rarely had the intended effect, so he drank it sparingly. The rum was yet another of the night's concessions. He would give her five more minutes, period.

"You know how to make God laugh? Just tell him your plans."

Dennis speared the maraschino with his swizzle stick, rendering it a ruddy pulp as he turned the bartender's hard-luck witticism over and over in his mind. More easy assumptions here. First, the joke presupposed the existence of a god. Second, it assumed the unproven entity had a sense of humor and a cruel one at that. Third, and perhaps most distressing of all, the joke assumed a recognition of personal failure in its listener, depended on it, in fact, for the listener to "get" the joke. Dennis had always identified as atheist when pressed for labels on matters of religion. To appear more agreeable, he often downgraded to agnostic at social functions outside the scientific community. But organized faith was not the enemy in this case. The faulty logic inherent in the bartender's joke was far more insidious than any flyer for weekend inspirations slipped beneath windshield wiper blades in crowded shopping mall parking lots. The joke was an invitation to a different kind of organization, one of which Dennis similarly wanted no part.

Before tonight, Dennis Henderton had never considered himself a loser. The designation was non-quantifiable, based on a series of ever-shifting subjective points of view. One could not graph the trajectory of "loser." One could not find its square root. Yet, sitting alone in an airport-adjacent bar with a rapidly diluting alcohol drink before him, an empty seat in the booth just

across, Dennis imagined for the first time what he must look like from the outside, to a person passing an open barroom window. Losers are people whose plans do not work out. People besieged by unwanted pregnancies, unwanted bankruptcies, unwanted fires that tore through their houses leaving them devastated, penniless, destroyed. Losers are people who do not plan for accident. Dennis had planned for all of life's accidents meticulously, mathematically. Yet, here he found himself in a situation he, for once, could not quantify.

An accident: That which is not expected and occurs without foresight or design.

His right leg twitching beneath the table, Dennis chewed on this definition along with the swizzle stick. For the moment his frustrations with the bartender had vanished. And exactly two hours and twenty-seven minutes later, when his cell phone buzzed to life bearing the text message—"sorry, had accdnt, can we resched?"—so had all thoughts of Sally140.

The idea first hit him—or nearly hit him—two days prior at the intersection of Woodley and Pine, the same day Dennis first learned he'd lost his job. The vehicle, a canary yellow Porsche, burst into his periphery in a sudden spasm of color and sound, just missing the front fender of his Mazda four-door before receding in a golden hum down the tree-lined country road. The only clue to its driver's identity was the personalized vanity plate trailing from its rear bumper: "PP MAN."

Dennis turned from the shrinking yellow blur to find a strange tan Docksider jammed beneath the steering column, affixed to the brake. The shoe was his own, as was the right leg that supported it, but the action the leg had taken—applying instant, decisive pressure to the brake of its own accord—made it seem suddenly alien, independent, in possession of some artificial intelligence. What if Dennis had not wanted to hit the brake?

Shifting the Mazda to park, he calmly assessed the intersection, your basic four-way T. Four sets of stringed traffic lights loomed at each side, the one above him still a patiently waiting green. The lights appeared new, judging from the rust-free ochre casings that stood watch in the morning sun like little tin soldiers, ticking through their finely calibrated marching cycles of red-yellow-green, stop-caution-go with military precision. The surrounding roadsides were another matter, thick with tree cover and kudzu, that voracious parasite of a plant so clingy and erratic in its reach. Worse than the kudzu, each of the four roads leading to the T was sunken, allowing the overgrowth to hang and obscure the adjoining roadways. This must be why the four traffic centurions were stationed here: the intersection had prior history of accident. Dennis, on the other hand, had never seen the T. This route was not his usual way to work. He'd taken the road leading to it reluctantly, forced from his habitual path by an early morning construction crew waving him onward, detouring him into the unknown with dismissive hand gestures. "Can't come this way." "Doesn't matter where you're going." "Anywhere but here."

Dennis leaned back in the driver's seat, assessing the intersection with a mathematician's steely gaze. A cursory computation of the speed and trajectory of the vanished Porsche and his own car's position on the T indicated that a collision from this angle would have been fatal for him. As for the Porsche's driver, he or she would probably have sustained minor injuries but, undeniably, assumed complete fault in the crash. The extent of the damage would be hard to gauge accurately without the proper testing and equipment. Not to mention time. As Dennis knew from experience, any worthwhile experiment required hours of preliminary trial and error. This is what bothered him most as he slumped in his idling Mazda beneath a traffic light turning from green to yellow to red—not that the Porsche's driver had almost ended his life, but that he or she hadn't given him time to do the math.

When it came to scientific study, the Internet was highly suspect. Pornography had laid claim to largest fraction of online real estate, but junk science certainly had its own sizeable plot. Everyone who was anyone in Dennis' field of computational fluid dynamics knew that the only reliable work was done in think tanks or recorded at test sites and rarely ever published for mass consumption in anything other than obscure trade journals or the online equivalent of such. But for the current problem Dennis was looking to solve, an intensive, anonymous Google search at his local public library would do just fine. Any person owning a Porsche so brazenly primary in color and bearing a license plate so starved for attention was sure to be cruising the portals of the information superhighway just as recklessly as the byways of a back country road. There had to be a digital skid mark out there somewhere, and Dennis was determined to find it.

Starting with the simple query "PP Man," he hit Enter. Before his finger had left the key, the outdated cathode screen burst to life in a virtual fireworks display of urination. Pop-up advertisements for spread-eagled women—"squirters," they were called—trickled and geysered heavily pixilated yellow streams from vaguely identifiable orifices and highly questionable domain names: GoldenShower.com, Pee-On-Me.com, UrineLuck.org. Shocked by the sudden prurient fuselage, Dennis's right leg reflexively stomped for a brake pad beneath the library computer desk. Finding none there, he quickly cut the power on the desktop screen.

The swift motion roused the librarian's head from her afternoon reading, angled her penetrating gaze at him over the dog-eared pages. Dennis kept his face to the blackened screen, waiting out her glare, ignoring the toddler tapping his alphabet on a sticky keyboard a few terminals down. He couldn't see her eyes but could easily read her mind: "You're one of those men, aren't you? Alone in the children's section of a public library at 3 pm on a Thursday

afternoon." After a few more seconds' scrutiny, the librarian re-planted the roots of her graying bouffant into the rich loam of a romance paperback's soft folds. Dennis waited a few seconds more before re-powering the outdated CRT.

This time, he Googled more judiciously, performed a localized search. He browsed car aficionado discussion groups in his geographic area, automobile-intensive networking sites. He perused the dark netherworld of men who purchase cars to lure women. After fifteen minutes of scanning, Dennis believed he found what he was looking for, a highly suspect entry on PorscheLover.com. The topic of the multi-thread discussion was "Fuel Line Leaks in the 911 Turbo." The post in question, a response to TurboDave11's query concerning model recalls: "TurboD, had same prob with my 2014. Took it to the shop in Greenville. Fixed it with a protective plug in the fuel supply line, no charge—PP Man."

A glimmer of excitement danced behind Dennis' protective wire frames. Here was the same name featured on the vanity plate, the same year and model, the same town in which he lived. He scrolled further down, eyes scanning the flickering screen, closing in on a positive I.D. "For more info on unplugged leaks, check out my website."

The word "website" was highlighted: a link to PP Man's homepage, sure to be the final piece of the puzzle required to unfold the Porsche driver's identity and, more than likely, a very amateur attempt at home-based graphic design. Dennis moved the cursor arrow squarely over the link, hesitated before tapping the gummy mouse's hard plastic spine. He glanced to the librarian at her desk, verified that her head was still buried within the pages of some nameless print-era erotica, and quickly tapped the mouse. The old cathode screen burst to liquid life once more—flash-animated urination this time. Golden yellow geysers erupted from splayed vulvas, dribbled

from flaccid penises, streamed into wide and waiting mouths. Dennis had stumbled into PP Man's online advertising trap, entered the splash page portal of PissPalace.com.

This time, there was no turning back. Angling the monitor away from the librarian's desk, he hurriedly clicked through the onslaught of micturating images like a man charging headlong into the most torrential of rainstorms. After a few more clicks, he found was he was looking for, a tiny headline tucked away in the online archives of Adult Video News. Under the heading "New Online Entrepreneurs" was an article on one Arthur Grazzioni, aka "PP Man," a so-called "piss magnate" who specialized in "secretion fetishes." Dennis skimmed the text, dodging more embedded squirter links, every urination euphemism imaginable, until he found the integer he required. "Estimated worth over 23 million in adult online holdings." Dennis leaned back as far as the stiff public library chair would allow, letting the number and its ramifications wash over him. 23 million. Twenty-three: a good, solid Gaussian prime, divisible only by one and itself. This was a number he could trust.

The intersection looked different the second time around. Smaller, quantifiable, less chaotic. Even the roadside kudzu, now dew-soaked and sagging against the trees, seemed to have surrendered itself to some strain of inevitable computation. Dennis loitered behind the wheel of the Mazda, parked fifty yards from the T, the LiDAR gun precisely calibrated, mounted and aimed out his driver's side window. He'd borrowed the speed measuring device from work after learning from his division supervisor, Randy, that the company would be eliminating his current position as a CFD engineer in the coming week. One could argue that Dennis had stolen the gun. Legally, he was no longer a full-time employee of Intelligent Dynamics. Electromagnetically, it was like he never left. Human Resources had yet to remand his Level 3 swipe card, that magic

strip of hi-coercivity code which granted him complete building access. Dennis intended to return it—both the gun and the swipe card—but not until his own research was finished.

In the meantime, he and the borrowed LiDAR had waited patiently, eyeing the intersection's T-axis while listening to the morning *Bach Block* on the local classical radio station. Now that Dennis had the preliminary time, he used it—snapping cell phone photos of the T from every angle, determining road width, length, slope, rain spill gradient, taking asphalt samples for later chemical testing. As for the traffic lights, those little tin soldiers looming above, he'd begun to know them intimately, locating their precise highway pressure points, timing their marching cycles down to milliseconds. He listened to the steady kerchunk-kerchunk of the roadside control box as the few cars that passed triggered them from green to yellow to red. It was time worth spending. Besides the LiDAR gun, these hanging lights would be his sole accomplice. Dennis eyed them a few moments longer, visually binding their unspoken pact, checked his watch for the forty-seventh time. 8:37 AM—one minute earlier than the Porsche had run the red light four days before. $8 + 3 + 8 = 19$. Another solid Gaussian prime. Also, a Higgs prime and a Happy prime, which was always reassuring.

Suddenly, a bassy hum beneath Contrapunctus VII of "The Art of the Fugue" pulled Dennis' gaze from his watch. He quickly lowered the radio's volume, Glenn Gould's virtuoso fingerings succumbing to the steadily building thrum of a 911 Twin Turbo engine which, as Dennis had learned from hours scanning entries on PorscheLover.com, could have its own harmonic qualities when properly tuned. There growing on the black ribbon of road in the distance was a yellow more garish than anything splashed across all of PP Enterprises' online holdings, yellower than the traffic light the vehicle barreled toward with no outward signs of slowing down. Dennis checked the traffic light facing him—still a solid red. It would only be

seconds now, and his right leg shimmied in anticipation, again of its own accord but harmless this time, like the last desperate spasms of a beheaded garden snake.

Soon, the Porsche's humming engine jumped an octave. The unseen driver was speeding up, gunning for the intersection, blithely ignoring the cautionary yellow light as it had days prior. Its bug-eyed head lamps were cold and lifeless, its windows blanked out with opaque smoked glass. Dennis knew the Porsche's impressive zero to sixty in 3.2 seconds acceleration specs would not put it through the T before the light turned red, not at its current distance, even with its optional over-boost package. He knew this, having had time to do the math. His eyes watched serenely behind their glass and wire frames as the opposite traffic light turned from yellow to red and, 1.4 seconds later, the light facing him from red to green. He did not accelerate, but targeted the blurring yellow sports car in the LiDAR's viewfinder, then pulled the trigger as it whooshed through the belly of intersection. He watched as the Porsche sped past, oblivious to the laser pulse that had just bounced off its forward-facing vanity plate, then reflected silently, invisibly back into the LiDAR.

It was over that fast, the Porsche shrinking down the tree-lined road, once again trailing a flurry of roadside leaves. Mathematically, Dennis had everything he needed to know and all in under 2.8 seconds. The Porsche driver's intentions in brazenly ignoring basic traffic laws might be a mystery, but Dennis could say this for "PP Man"—he knew how to stick to a schedule. The time was 8:38 A.M. His speed in crossing the T was 123 mph.

Dennis paced the tiles, caffeinated and calculating, at home in comfortable slipper-shoes. Night had fallen on the intersection, but down in his basement rec room the overhead halogens burned midday bright, illuminating a blackboard splashed in feverish strokes of chalk. Time,

distance, velocity, acceleration and deceleration formulas. Friction coefficients, slide-to-stop ratios, crumple zones. Good old reliable Conservation of Momentum. Newton's First and Third Laws. All of Dennis' best friends—his only friends, really—come over for a midnight play date.

Earlier that afternoon, he'd found an old toy box packed away with childhood things, unearthed a set of die-cast metal Matchbox cars. He rendered his red Porsche 935 Turbo bright yellow with leftover house paint. He coated his limited edition *Knight Rider* KITT car in touch-up Mazda blue. Black construction paper strips for the asphalt roads. A leftover string of Christmas bulbs transformed into makeshift traffic lights. Old tufts of iron wool for the roadside kudzu. He used them all to reenact the collision in miniature, a collision which had yet to happen. "How does one plan an accident? 'Very carefully,' said the wise man."

As Dennis calculated, there would be no way of controlling the Porsche's exact speed on the day in question, no way to know for sure if and how quickly "PP Man" would stomp his own brake. However, Dennis could control when and how fast his own Mazda breached the intersection. As long as the Porsche hit the white lines beneath the red light doing his usual 60mph+, then all Dennis had to do was ensure his Mazda was in the T within 2 seconds of that, thus robbing PP Man of the standard reaction-recognition braking time. As the two vehicles collided and went into spin, the Porsche's front fender would continue inward through the Mazda's non-reinforced passenger door. Judging from his own structural assessment of the car (and not the Mazda Corporation's more optimistic crash-test specs), this would crush both the front passenger seat and the gear-shift column inward in accordion-like fashion. Dennis' right leg, raised to apply the brake, would be sandwiched between the crushed gear shift box and the sunken steering wheel. It would be fractured in three to four places (with some small margin of error based on bone density). His left leg, safe inside the hollow opposite the steering column,

would remain unharmed, similar to the rest of his body, protected by a safety belt, the angle of the incoming Porsche fender, his front bucket seats.

Dennis understood the sacrifice required; in fact, he was looking forward to it. The multi-million dollar insurance settlement he would receive from Arthur Grazzoni would be calculated based on the years of intensive rehabilitation his mangled limb would require. Only later would the lawyers and doctors discover that Dennis had no interest in recouping his right leg. Once the settlement check arrived, he would opt for amputation, a replacement prosthetic, one of the newer model programmable hydraulics with a computerized knee and a 50-hour lithium-ion battery. He would be able to turn it on and shut it down with the touch of a button. No more twitching beneath barroom tables. No more braking at traffic lights without his consent.

Dennis glanced to the spill of graph paper and toppled die-cast cars at his feet to find the accused party pale and freckled beneath the hem of his pi-themed boxer shorts. The leg was shaking quietly as if it already knew its fate, maybe due to the basement's chilly but economical 52 degree thermostat setting. It could also have something to do with the three Diet Pepsi's Dennis had feverishly chugged while performing his calculations, no trips to the bathroom to impede his progress. Regardless, the leg was acting of its own accord again, and, looking down upon the miniature collision site, Dennis was struck with a feeling of helplessness not unlike the one that had first overtaken him his on first day at the life-size T intersection.

"You know how to make God laugh? Just tell him your plans."

Dennis defiantly relaxed his bladder, released the urine trapped inside him. He watched as it spilled from beneath boxer shorts down his freckled right leg. The flow felt good and warm against his skin while pooling into a frothy, steaming puddle on his stone basement floor. It

soaked the Matchbox cars, the black construction paper roads, the iron wool kudzu. It finally shorted out the Christmas bulb traffic lights.

8:57 AM. PP Man was late. Very late.

For a third consecutive morning, there was no sign of a yellow Porsche, just Dennis and the borrowed LiDAR idling in the blue Mazda at the edge of the T. He'd arrived here thirty minutes ahead of time, same as the day before, the day before that. He would remain long after the designated time had elapsed. In that interval, countless other vehicles passed, their drivers slowing to eye him curiously as he sat behind the Mazda's idling wheel, the kudzu thick and crawling and voracious in the roadside behind him, amplifying his unease. He waved them all past with noncommittal hand gestures, echoing the ones that first led him to the T. "Can't come this way." "Doesn't matter where you're going." "Anywhere but here." Dennis worried he was arousing suspicion. He suspected the Porsche may have already had its collision elsewhere, some random intersection with some unsuspecting crash partner, one who hadn't planned for accident. He had allowed for every impact contingency—meticulously, mathematically—except the most obvious of all: that on the day in question "PP Man" simply might not show up.

Dennis glanced down to his right leg beneath the steering wheel column—completely serene, no tremors, the picture of a blissed-out appendage. It had been that way ever since the night in the basement. It looked more alien to him than ever before, as if it knew something he didn't, possessed some primordial flesh knowledge available only to the lower depths of bone and sinew, a caveman language too base and simplistic for his complex network of upper-echelon neurons and rapid-fire synapses to understand. His right leg rested beneath the wheel well silently and offered nothing to ease his roiling mind.

With each successive day the Porsche failed to reappear, Dennis found it increasingly cluttered—his mind. A rogue mantra had begun to echo behind all of his roadside calculations: "Nothing adds up, nothing adds up, nothing adds up." Worse, Dennis had begun entertaining speculations on PP Man's life outside the intersection. Where was he going every morning in such a hurry at 8:38 AM? Did the "secretion king" report to an office? Where did he come from? A nearby estate of some sort? If so, did he have a wife and children? Was he married to one of his own squirts? Dennis tried to delete these questions from his thoughts, knowing them immaterial, destructive to the objectivity his plan required. But soon it would strike him with the G-force punch of a Large Hadron Collider, that his plan—no matter how precisely calculated, how thoroughly tested and re-rested in die-cast miniature—would always contain this one unresolved, uncontrollable variable: Who exactly was this P.P. Man?

"I am the square root of loser, I am the square root of loser, I am the square root of loser."

This was a disturbing new mantra, non-quantifiable yet irrefutable, and Dennis suspected it must in some manner be issuing from his leg. He began running equations again to drown it out. First the crash metrics, then generic Boltzmann equations, Vlasov equations, Churchill-Bernstein, even the Kolmogorov Backward Equation forward several times. But the palliative effects of the steady integer flow coursing through his brain could only last so long. His mind was breaking down. Even numbers, at some point, must run out. There was only one left to try, a number Dennis hadn't considered in more than a week. He reached for his cell phone, scrolled past three unreturned texts from Randy asking if he had seen the lab's missing LiDAR gun, before stopping on the one that read: "sorry, had accdnt, can we resched?"

An accident: That which is not expected and occurs without foresight or design.

Dennis glanced to the number above the message: 727-2113. It added up to 23, a good, solid Gaussian prime divisible only by one and itself. This was a number he could trust. He dialed the number, waited for the ringing on the other end, for the moment taking his eyes off the intersection T.

Here is Dennis Henderton behind the wheel of his Mazda, Sally140 in the passenger seat by his side. There they are on the way back from a movie, talking excitedly about Bach's Brandenberg Concertos. Dennis prefers the virtuosity of the lengthy solo cadenza in Concerto Five's first movement. Sally, whose real name is "Diane," prefers the playful gigue and harpsichord at the end of Concerto Six. They agree the movie was terrible, predictable from beginning to end, but the two cones of pistachio walnut gelato they grabbed afterwards were unexpectedly good. She tells him about her job in freelance advertising doing graphic design work on redundant internet spots for unnecessary companies. It's not what she went to school for (Art History), but, right now, it pays the bills. Dennis tells her about his new job studying oil mass flow rates in recently constructed pipelines. He doesn't like it as much as his previous position, but there are only so many openings in the field of fluid dynamics with comparable job security.

Sally/Diane smiles, says the term "fluid dynamics" just reminded her of another job she had briefly during college, an online ad she responded to on a whim, one she would definitely not put on her résumé. This, in turn, reminds her of the Diet Pepsi she drank during the movie, a typically oversized beverage which is now knocking fiercely at the door of her bladder, urging her to find the nearest bathroom.

Dennis considers this as he drives, turning her suggestive words over and over in his mind, assessing their ramifications. Could she be one of them? One of His so-called "squirters"? If so, would it matter? Is there a calculus to romantic attraction? And, if so, can you graph it, find its square root? Suddenly, Dennis is stealing more glances to her than the road, intoxicated by her numeric and non-numeric possibilities. The light ahead of them is green. A hush has fallen over the T.

He continues to accelerate, his right leg confident on the gas. Sally/Diane turns to him and smiles. There's a warm glow all around her, dancing at the edges of her hair. It's yellow and building fast, spilling over her shoulders and filling the passenger window behind her in an overpowering embrace of bright white light. There's still time to do the math, but Dennis has already done it—over and over and over again—and, as the two vehicles collide and go into spin, the left front fender of the yellow Porsche crushing inward through the blue Mazda's non-reinforced passenger door, he can only think one thing: "This light—it's so beautiful. It must be coming from inside her."