

Cereal

Vol. 8

a journal of prose and commentary



Cereal Volume 8

Editors-in-Chief

Christina Veladota and Thom Conroy

Editors

Katherine Furler, Jeff Hanson, Roy Seeger, Melissa Tuckey, Tony Viola, Amanda Warren Art Editors David Johanson and Kent Smith Production Editor Eric Freeze Book Review Editor Pat Madden Website Editor Scott Gallagher

Readers

Wells Addington, Carl Boon, Ashley Capps, Brad Chamberlain, Jeremy Countryman, Margaux Cowden, Marnie Ellis, James Engelhardt, Rebecca Fleming, Eric Freeze, Scott Gallagher, Leslie Henne, Claire Kegley, Laura Kusnyer, Pat Madden, Paul Shovlin, Sharon Starr-Koelm, Nikole Stephenson, Aaron Van Dorn, Jonas Williams, Elijah Wright

Faculty Advisor

Robert DeMott

Book Design

Alex Bonin

Cereal accepts unsolicited fiction, sudden fiction, prose poetry, plays, essays, memoirs, interviews, related criticism, and book reviews up to 10,000 words (book reviews should be between 800-1200 words). Submissions must be accompanied by a brief cover letter and a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Submissions should be addressed to the editors at Cereal, Ellis Hall, Ohio University, Athens, OH 45701. Cereal considers manuscripts from September 15—April 15. We can be reached via email at submissions@cerealrulesbreakfast.com. Please visit our website at www.cerealrulesbreakfast.com.

Cereal sponsors an annual Prose Writing Contest with a prize of \$300 and publication in Cereal. Visit our web site or send a SASE for complete Writer's Guidelines and Contest Guidelines.

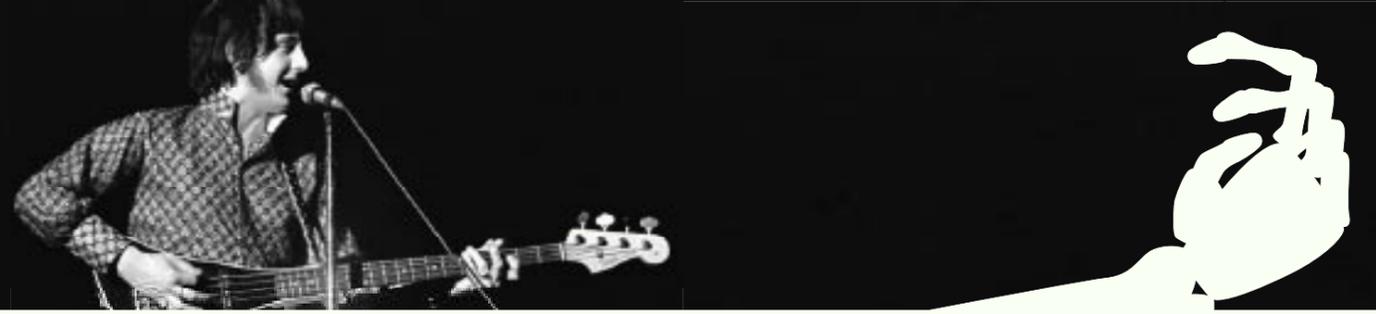
The publication of this issue is made possible in part by a grant from the Ohio Arts Council. We also extend special recognition to the Ohio University Student Activities Commission, without whose continued support the publication of this journal would not be possible.

The editors also wish to thank the following: The Edwin and Ruth Kennedy Distinguished Professor Scholarship, Colette Inez, Casa Nueva Restaurant, Darrell Spencer, Dorothy Anderson, and Kenneth Daley. Special thanks to the English Department at Ohio University for their extraordinary support in the recent year.

Cereal is distributed by Ingram Periodicals, Inc., 1226 Heil Quaker Blvd., La Vergne, TN 37086-7000

Contents

1	John Entwistle <i>An interview</i>	109	The Biography of Broken Things, #1 <i>Sean Thomas Dougherty</i>	193	How I Met You <i>Nin Andrews</i>
7	Tile Fighters <i>Martin Wong</i>	111	A Guidebook to the Closet <i>John Gallaher</i>	195	Sea of Us Sea of Love <i>Walter Bargaen</i>
11	My Father's Business <i>Preston L. Allen</i>	117	Chicago <i>John Vanderslice</i>	199	Touching Words <i>Rush Rankin</i>
21	The Students Get the Last Word <i>Mr. Moore</i>	127	Bourbon and Milk <i>Gabriel Welsch</i>	215	Natural History City upon a Hill <i>John Isles</i>
27	Sue Coe on Art and Politics <i>An interview by Elinor Pettit</i>	133	Instructions for the Savages <i>Andrew Stiles Gill</i>	217	Pages from a Gardener's Journal <i>Julie Cooper-Fratrik</i>
35	A Week Without TV <i>Brandon Rector</i>	135	Bir Aile Filminden 4 Kare <i>Cigdem Altuntas</i>	219	Our Impeded Crabber <i>W. P. Osborn</i>
41	TV as a Window into Humanity... <i>excerpts from a discussion on television</i>	137	Creatures <i>Nadja Recknagel</i>	221	Other Foibles: A Farce <i>Ruth Moon Kempfer</i>
53	Giant Dreams, Midget Abilities <i>David Sedaris</i>	141	Perceptive Assumption <i>Andrew Schell</i>	225	This Will Take the Mystery Out of Pi <i>Tiffany Bergin</i>
63	Threading the Night <i>Andrea Moorhead</i>	143	Curb Appeal <i>Mark Slankard</i>	233	Untitled <i>Tony Tost</i>
65	Autobiography: The Lady from Shanghai <i>Arielle Greenberg</i>	145	Idea Critters <i>Adelheid Mers</i>	235	The Life of Sekine Hiroshi <i>George Kalamaras</i>
69	On Pessoa <i>Rob Morris</i>	149	Native Creatures <i>Gregory Halvorsen Schrek</i>	241	DNR The Expert <i>Kirsten Kaschock</i>
83	Schaner <i>D. E. Steward</i>	153	Selections from Rules of Solitude <i>Eugene Savitzkaya</i>	243	Conewango Creek <i>Alice George</i>
89	Traveling Papers <i>Matt Cooperman</i>	167	Thank You for Joining Us <i>Bruce Tallerman</i>	249	Infant Picasso <i>Virgil Suhrez</i>
93	Sisters Grimke Book of Days <i>Merry Speece</i>	183	Application for Instructional Employment <i>Bonnie Proudfoot</i>	253	Book Reviews
107	Falling Toward the Furnace <i>Joy Katz</i>	191	The Dive <i>Kathryn Young</i>	257	Contributors' Notes



An interview with JOHN ENTWISTLE

"I was a composer as well, I had my own musical brain. I wasn't a robot, I wasn't a cardboard cutout on stage. I had a mind there as well..."

Interviewer: I'll ask you a really obvious question first: How did you get the nickname "The Ox?"

John Entwistle: Ah, since I was the biggest in the group. We all have sort of appropriate nicknames... Roger's nickname is "The Dip," which comes from Dippity Do, which he used to use on his hair to straighten it. Pete's nickname is "Bone" cause he's so tall and skinny. Keith's is "Sponge," or "Barney," like Barney Rubble of the Flintstones, he's always got five o' clock shadow.

Interviewer: Are these long standing names?

John Entwistle: Oh, yeah, about three or four years.

I: How did you get together the people that you were going to use on your solo album "Smash Your Head Against the Wall?" Was it a conscious decision that you needed this kind of drummer, or...

JE: I'd been puttin' off bookin' time for the album for quite some time cause I didn't feel that I had enough numbers to complete the album, so I kept hanging back and waiting to compose the rest of the material. And I went down to the office and Cyrano, the guitarist, works at Track because he's too lazy to join a group, and he decided to give me a push to do the album while I was there. We were looking for a drummer but we just couldn't find one and he was pretty friendly with Jerry Shirley so we got hold of Jerry. He sounds a bit like Townshend. He plays that way because he's seen him so many times.

I: How long had you been planning to do an album? Had this been a long time idea of yours?

JE: Yeah, since Tommy, really, before we started recording Tommy we were thinking about doing solo albums... I'd never accumulated enough compositions 'cause I hadn't composed seriously until like six months before I started the album I suddenly got into composing a lot more stuff.

I: So you don't consider the stuff on the Happy Jack album serious?

JE: No, not really. It was just the first attempt at composing. "Whiskey Man" was like six different numbers all rolled into one that I sort of joined together. "Boris the Spider" took me about ten minutes to write, you know it was just a sort of a brainstorm I had—it just came at once, the tune and the words.

I: The themes of those two songs were more or less carried onto your album.

JE: Yeah. There's another drinking song, "Pick Me Up (Big Chicken)." It's only got that "Big Chicken" there because right, I think it's about the second verse the guitar goes ba-bppmh [he trumpets a chicken noise through his nose].

I: When did you decide to finally do the album, did you have to write a whole bunch of stuff to do it or did you finally come up with it...

JE: No, I had about ten numbers of which I only sort of attempted to do about six, and, we were still short two numbers. During the time we recorded the backing tracks, I did quick demos, just wrote out the music for these two other songs I had in me head, but just never decided to sort of get them out. Another one, "My Size," was just written in the studio, we wrote the chord progressions and then I went home and composed the tune and the words.

I: There was a lot of death imagery in the album. People have accused you of being morbid in the past, though I'm not sure if that's quite what it is...

JE: I've always been obsessed with the idea of Heaven and Hell. Not obsessed that it's true, but just obsessed that it's sort of legend, there's such a person as the devil. My family's not the sort of family to be serious about death anyway, we've got rather a sick sense of humor, the whole family, that is, my father, my grandfather before him...

I: It's hereditary.

JE: Yeah, it's hereditary, right. So I don't mind jokin' about death at all. I'd written this number quite a time ago called "Teddy's Funeral" which I retitled "Ted End" and changed a few of the words. That's about four years old, and I wrote "Heaven and Hell" about the same time, those two numbers are connected. They were written in the same sort of spirit, I was writing horror songs at that time, "Boris the Spider" etc.

I: Was "Ted End" inspired by someone you actually knew?

JE: "Ted End" came from a conversation that my grandmother had with a neighbor. I changed the name, but all those things were more or less said, that his children had immigrated to Australia, they wouldn't come back 'cause they didn't have the money, and his wife got married again and wouldn't come either. He wasn't a very popular bloke 'cause he was pretty miserable. There's a whole section on the album that's connected one part to another, it starts off with "Heaven and Hell," then we've got the funeral section, then "You're Mine," which is like the devil saying "there's no such place as heaven anyway."

I: Isn't that song also saying that as long as you're human, "You're Mine," I mean as long as you have human feelings?

JE: There just... isn't anybody that hasn't sinned in some way, I mean, everyone's trod on an ant before, and things, like that, and that means you've broken one of the commandments, so you go to the devil. The end of it, it's like the devil sayin' "Everybody's mine at some time... you'll enjoy your stay 'till you're reborn someday," it's like going to the devil...

I: "You're Mine" ties into "Number 29" too—is there a relationship between the two songs other than just that rhythmic passage?

JE: The only connection is that that's sort of an interval number, it's talkin' about tryin' to look young while you're alive, bringing it back to earth for awhile.

I: Bein' deceitful more or less?...not being truthful about what you really are?

JE: Ah, yes. Having plastic surgery and all things like that, putting a false thing over to the public.

I: What about things like "What Kind of People Are They" and "What Are We Doing Here?" They don't seem to fit in.

JE: Well, the actual shape of the album, when the numbers are associated with each other, that doesn't begin until "Heaven and Hell." The rest are just some of the recent things I wrote. On "What Are We Doing Here" the words were written in the States, they're very homesick words, we were stuck in Houston, Texas, the television had finished, there was no booze, we'd done a terrible show and I'd been away for four weeks and was startin' to get a bit homesick so I wrote those words. I wrote part of the tune when I got back, then I finally finished it when we were actually recording the album. On "What Kind of People Are They," the first thing I wrote was the brass section, the beginning, and then I'd written this song about people in uniforms because they always get so officious. Waiters and policemen, you know, I've been turned out of so many restaurants 'cause I didn't have a tie on. I've got so many parking tickets, I could wallpaper a room with 'em... traffic wardens. In every traffic jam in England, when you get to the front of it there's a policeman sort of directing things but he ends up causing a backup himself. So I had those three things in mind and I joined them together in different verses.

I: So the album is actually three or four more or less throw on cuts and then from "Heaven and Hell" on, one unified idea? How does the last song "I Believe in Everything" fit? It's bit of a ringer, it throws you off.

JE: I've been saying a lot of stuff that I didn't really believe in. I sort of wrote it for the heads, really, the people thinking, "ah, so that's where Entwistle's brain's at, he really sort of believes in the devil and hell and all that sort of business." So I wrote a number that touches on reincarnation, then goes into the absurd, with Father Christmas and the whole bit and right at the end just to prevent the heads from thinking that I did believe in everything like I was saying, 'cause they always seem to believe that you actually believe in your own words. I believe in some of them but not all of them, so I just wrote the joke in to throw them off, and it's done it.

I: Yes (laughing), it has. I think the overall image of the album, aside from "Heaven and Hell" and all that is like a description of middle class sensibility. There's something about the whole album that reeks of that—the idea of guys who can't go home because they're too drunk, which ties into that song "My Wife" from the new Who album. How do you relate to that whole thing now that you're sort of removed from it, you've finished the album.

JE: I don't really... my circle of friends isn't within the pop world, you know, when I'm not working I strictly divorce myself from the pop business unless there's something I wanted to go and see or if I want to go out to a club or something. But I try to stay away from it, just to give my head a rest. I do enough in my own studio at home to cater to my outside tastes.

I: You do what you would consider serious composing alone, at home, that you don't really intend to use for albums and stuff?

JE: Yeah, I've written a couple of classical things on manuscript.

I: You must have felt awfully frustrated at times with The Who.

JE: That's how it became, because I've got the two numbers on Tommy and I started to do a lot of writing during that year and I liked a lot of numbers when I'd written them, but then they suddenly seemed like rubbish to me. I got these all mounted up and cut them as demos in my own studio and then Tommy came along and I had to scrap all that stuff to do the two numbers for Tommy. Then we had that live album which gave me time to start composing again. Well, I just really started to get frustrated, if I hadn't done the solo album, which was the easiest way out for me, I might have left the band. It was getting that bad... It was the only thing for me to do because I had a reputation of being the quiet member, which I am on stage, visually.

I: Why?

JE: It [w]as the only way out for me, to let people know that I was an entity, I was a composer as well, I had my own musical brain. I wasn't a robot, I wasn't a cardboard cutout on stage. I had a mind there as well... It was boredom. I could never... the only time I ever really enjoyed myself on stage was when I was allowed to do something free form. I didn't like playing set arrangements, I couldn't really get off of the other stuff. Tommy I grew to like. We played it some many times... The group always accused me

of falling asleep on stage and carrying on playing, they'd look and they'd see my eyes closed, and I'm leaning against the amplifiers. I must admit, some gigs I just don't remember doing, I'd just sort of get up there and play and then it's finished.

I: You didn't like Tommy at first?

JE: I think it's just an association of ideas really. It took us eight months altogether, six months recording, two months mixing. We had to do so many of the tracks again, because it took so long we had to keep going back and rejuvenating the numbers, that it just started to drive us mad, we were getting brainwashed by the whole thing, and I started to hate it. In fact I only ever played the record twice—ever. I don't think Tommy was all about [what] was on the record—I think it's on the stage. The message is much stronger on stage than on record.

I: The Who have always seemed to work that way. Recorded versions of songs don't take shape until played on stage for awhile.

JE: Yes, like on "Cobwebs and Strange," the brass band sort of thing really makes me crack up. Our manager at that time was completely nuts—he had us marching around in band formation around the studio because he wanted that going away and coming back sound. And like we were marching around this monitor speaker at one end of the studio, which already had the bass guitar, drums and guitar track on it, we'd done that already and were playing it back on the monitor speaker and marching around with Pete leading, playing a recorder, me playing a tuba, Roger was playing bum notes on a trombone behind me and Keith had two straps on two cymbals, doing that while marching around the studio. And every time we got to the monitor speaker we realized we were out of time because by the time we got to the other end of the studio we couldn't hear the backing track. If we'd worn cans we could have gotten tangled up, so we had to finally track it standing still but every time we play it live I'm reminded of that time marching around the studio.

I: When you were gonna do Tommy, how did your two songs fit into the larger concept of the thing, is it that Pete came to you and said "I have holes to be filled here" or something?

JE: No, Pete said that there were two characters that he thought he himself couldn't do as good a job as me in describing. One was a homosexual uncle and the other was a cruel cousin, which were supposed to be two of Tommy's traumatic experiences, that and the acid queen. I found it so easy that I'd written "Fiddle About," with the character of Uncle Ernie, by the time I'd got back to the room. If I've got a subject, an idea for a song, then it comes almost immediately.

I: What about the brass on your album? You originally played brass, so it's not something you decided to pick up to add to the sound.

JE: Right. The Who always wanted to use the whole brass sections on albums, played by me, but The Who had also always prided themselves on being able to play songs from the albums on stage. It is important, though, because the group would have busted up if we hadn't played on stage. Cause that's the only time we really had anything to do with each other, the only time we were really ever together. That's the only time we fit together because we're

so completely different from each other. We don't socialize. In the studio we're always sort of grumpy, everyone pissed off and going in all sorts of opposite directions 'cause everyone's been to the pubs before the session. And it seems to me to be a hell of an existence, just going into the studio recording your latest album, then sitting back and wondering how it's gonna do. Instead of getting out and playing it for people, which is the only thing to do or else you get eaten away.

I: And, the album in front of you adds so much credibility to the new act, which must be important?

JE: Tommy had just been released when we played it quite a few times a while back during a tour of the states. At first, people were going "Yeah, too much," mostly because it was such a mammoth. But as we got on with the tour, it started to mean something to everybody, it started to work... (At this point the telephone rings, and Entwistle picks it up. "Hello? Yes...ah, hello Mr. Fox [he's talking to the drummer for the James Gang, Jim Fox]. An Army problem?...Really?...Oh, Jesus Christ, ha! Yeah...I've got this fantastic knife if you want to cut your toe off, heh, heh." Entwistle hung up and explained to me that Jim Fox had just been drafted.)

I'm gonna try and keep guitar off my next album, if I can...there's quite a few numbers on this album where I haven't used electric guitar at all, like "What Are We Doing Here" just has acoustic guitar, "You're Mine" has just acoustic on it...On my numbers I prefer a piano texture, rather than a guitar. Mainly because I either write on bass guitar or in my head, just transfer it to manuscript paper, or piano. I write mainly on piano now, and I can't play lead guitar, so there isn't a guitar part on the demo and the whole number takes shape around piano, brass, and whatever other instruments I'm using, so the guitar just doesn't matter. If you play the same figures as on the demo, then you don't need

the guitar. You can just stick an acoustic on the [] thicken it out a bit, jangle wise.

I: What's your next album going to be like?

JE: It'll still be black humor but it won't be about death and funerals and so much. There might be a couple of numbers about old age. It's sort of instruments to be used that I'm looking forward to and the way it's going to be recorded, 'cause we've got our own engineer now, Glyn Johns. He's sort of signed to us, we don't need a producer, we need a sort of producer-engineer who can just sit in the box and give us the sound we want while we're outside, since we can't sit in the control booth and play at the same time.

But as I said, on the next album I want to try to get rid of the guitar almost completely. I bought some new instruments on this tour. I bought a French horn because my old one seized up, that's why I didn't use it on the album. I've bought a mellophonium which is like a French horn only it's easier to play—it's like a French horn only it's straightened out, I bought a piccolo trumpet so I can get some sort of high range, and a bass trombone so I can get some trombone sounds.

I: You're gonna have to do a lot of tracking over...

JE: Oh, I did on this one too. On "No. 29" we used four tracks with stereo drums, bass guitar and rhythm guitar, then there were two electric piano tracks, four trombones, four trumpets and four voices. So on a 16 track we still had to mix down to get it all down. Oh yeah, also on all the vocal tracks we stuck on a percussion track as well.

I: That's getting a bit complex.

JE: Yeah. It took me three weeks to record.

I: It's amazing that it can keep so much life to it, doing that much overdubbing.

JE: If you get enough energy in the backing track, and if you don't relax when you're overdubbing, if you really sort of play with a lot more energy all the way through—I mean, I must have drunk about fifty bottles of brandy doing that album...I'm gonna do a bass solo on the next album—it's about time I did another bass solo...

I was struck by Entwistle's urbanity. Notwithstanding his notoriously morbid sense of humor, he behaved with the exacting intent of a rough Scottish nobleman. It seemed that of the four members of the group, Entwistle would be the one most approaching sanity.



Tile Fighters

In Thailand Scrabble competitions are not gathering places for geeks, but linguistic battles fought in arenas packed with screaming fans.

In August 2003, word nerds from across America and around the world gathered for the National Scrabble Championship in San Diego to compete for a piece of \$90,000 in prize money. Contenders included top-ranking Massachusetts Latin teacher Jeremiah Mead, Chicago options trader and previous champ Brian Cappelletto, and National Scrabble Association director Joe Edley from New York. Conspicuous among the field of 132 Division I competitors were nine Thai players.

Other non-English-speaking countries, like Malaysia and Canada, were represented in Division I but Thailand's presence was impossible to miss. In Round 7 of the linguistic fray, Thai student Charnwit Sumrattanaporn executed a double-double EXTERNS through ERN for 56 points. Four rounds later, Dr. Jakkrit Klaphajone scored seven-letter bingos like GOATLIKE, EUPLOID, and FANFARE on his way to accumulating 464 points in a game. Another Thai student, Panupol Sujjayakorn, racked up the high scores of 572, 632, and 556 in Rounds 12, 28, and 38. Other Thai Scrabblers included Taewan Sutthasin, Thavach T, Komol Panyasoponlert, Nuttakrit K, Pakorn Nemitrmansuck, and Thailand Crossword Club director Amnuay Ploysanggam.

How do the Thais do it? One hypothesis is that Thai people's brains are wired to handle incredibly long words—such as their last names. Another theory is that compared to Thai words, which use upper and lower level letters, spelling English words is child's play.

While the benefits of speaking Thai are pure speculation, there are definite cultural advantages. In general, Thai students are good at memorizing long word lists. Also, their unfamiliarity with English words may actually give them an edge. Stefan Fatsis, who took a sabbatical from his sports reporting gig for the Wall Street Journal to write *Word Freak*, a best-selling account of his immersion into the world of competitive Scrabble, says, "In a weird way, I think their unfamiliarity with English as a tool for communications might be helpful. Their brains aren't cluttered with meanings. When any English speaker plays, it's naturally difficult to divorce the words from some outer meaning. The best of them (Panupol, Jakkrit, et al.) know plenty of words, to be sure, but they approach the game very mathematically. They understand the geometry and the probability. It's easy to say that they play 'like a computer' because their understanding of the words is divorced from

by Martin Wong

the clutter of meaning, and that might be true. They are very smart, mechanical, and technical.”

It also helps that in Thailand Scrabble competitions are not gathering places for geeks, but linguistic battles fought in arenas packed with screaming fans. Fatsis says, “Alas, I didn’t get a chance to play in one while researching my book. It sounds like quite a scene—royalty welcoming the players, thousands of kids in one room, the top players seated on a stage playing on a giant board, corporate sponsors.” The prestige and payoffs have drawn North American competitors to contests in Thailand.

When the dust settled in San Diego, pro Scrabble player Joel Sherman walked away with the \$25,000 prize as Division I champ. He dealt CAROLING, NIRVANAS, and RENATURE for 83, 74, and 61 points, respectively, against Baltimore’s Marlon Hill in Round 24. Then in Round 31, Sherman followed up with TENACES, STANDERS, and UNAWAKed for 74, 72, and 92 against second-place Nigel Richards, who took home \$10,000. Third place belonged to Klaphajone. Joining the Thai doctor in the top ten was Sujjayakorn, who earned \$600 for finishing ninth, and an impressive seven of the nine Thai Scrabblers finished in the top half.

Does the North American Scrabble community accept and respect the Thai competition? “Totally,” says Fatsis. “At the highest level, all that matters is whether you put the letters down in the right order. Doesn’t matter if you can pronounce the words or know what they mean. I think the Thais are respected for their discipline, understanding, and mastery of the game—even more so because the language isn’t theirs. Imagine us trying to play in their language—or any second language. Incredible.”

SCRABBLE KNOWLEDGE

1. After developing many prototypes, unemployed architect Alfred M. Butts introduced the current version of Scrabble in 1948. Today, one of every three American homes has a Scrabble set, and the National Scrabble Association oversees more than 175 tournaments and 200 clubs in North America every year.

2. The goal of Scrabble is to use your seven tiles to spell words on a crossword grid and earn points. There are 98 lettered tiles, each with assigned values, and 2 blanks. The board has premium squares such as “double letter score” and “triple word score.”

3. When transcribing words that are used on a Scrabble board, capitals are used to denote the lettered tiles. The blanks, which can be used as any letter, are represented by a ? when not in use or as lowercase in a word. For example, in ROBOtS, the “t” is a blank.

4. In international competition, acceptable words are combined from the old British Official Scrabble Words (OSW) list and the third edition of the North American Official Scrabble Players’ Dictionary (OSPD). Because Scrabble players are anagram fiends, OSWOSPD has been rearranged as SOWPODS. In international play, words from North America are marked with a \$ while British words are marked with a #.

5. In competition, players will hang on to certain letters to try to set up a bingo, which uses all seven tiles in one turn and earns an extra 50 points.

6. Maintaining a balance of vowels and consonants, or “balancing your rack,” will help you form words and increase your chances of getting a bingo.

7. Serious players memorize lists of acceptable two- and three-letter words. Memorizing seven- or eight-letter bingos also helps if you compete with the Scrabble elite.

8. Like counting cards in blackjack, keeping track of undrawn tiles is a common strategy. It is most effective toward the end of a game when most of the tiles have been played.

9. Before 1986, Scrabble tournaments used the wooden tiles provided with Scrabble sets. However, these tiles are easily “brailled,” or felt for indentations while being picked out of the bag. Hence, plastic “Protiles” with silk-screened letters and points were introduced. Clear plastic tiles sandwiching printed paper were used for a while, but now plastic tiles are double injected, like telephone keys.

10. When a player distracts you by talking too much (on purpose or not), it’s called “coffee-tabling.”



my father's
Business
by Preston L. Allen

At sixteen, I met my first great temptation, and I yielded with surprisingly little resistance, I who had proclaimed myself strong in the Lord. There had been, it seems, a chink in my armor, and Satan had thrust his wicked sword through it.

As I wondered how I could have felt so strong and yet been so weak, I labored mightily to get back into the ark of safety.

I took a more active role in the Lord's work. On Sundays, I rose early and joined the maintenance Brethren in preparing the main hall for morning service; I stayed late to help them clean up afterwards. Brother Al and Brother Kitchener were surprised but happy to work with me. Often, we discussed music.

"Elwyn, I really like when you do that dum-dum-da-dum thing at the end of service," said Brother Kitchener, a retired seaman of about seventy who had both a stoop and a limp. When he pushed a broom, he resembled a man perpetually about to play shuffleboard.

Brother Al, a squat man with a massive chest and arms like telephone poles, shouted down from the ladder upon which he stood replacing a cylinder of fluorescent light: "I was first trumpet in my high school band."

Unemployed and in his late twenties, Brother Al spent his days lifting weights or visiting the three children he had sired out of wedlock with a Nicaraguan seamstress named Bettie. This was, of course, before he had accepted the Lord.

"Maybe you and me'll do a duet one Sunday," Brother Al said.

"Maybe we will, Brother;" I said, scraping chewing gum from the bottom of a pew with a butter knife.

Now on those Sundays when it was not my turn to play piano for the youth choir, I stood as usher at the entrance to the church: I'd rather be an usher in the house of the Lord than a prince in the palace of hell. My legs, standing motionless for the better part of the hour, were diligent for the Lord, my knees strong and true.

I stopped the children from talking or fighting, tapped them awake when they fell asleep. "Suffer the little Children to come unto Me," Christ says. When babies cried, I was quick to pull them from their grateful mothers' arms and take them outside into the calming sunlight, or lead some other mother—a visitor—to the restroom at the back where she could change a soiled diaper, or perhaps nurse her baby.

When the Holy Spirit descended, I waited for Him to touch one of His favorites—Sisters Davis, Breedlove, Naylor, or Hutchenson—and set her to trembling, to move upon her so powerfully, in fact, that she would collapse. I would rush to the fallen sister and drop the large velvet shawl over her spasming legs, hiding what would otherwise be revealed—the usher is the guardian of decency—and then with the help of another usher, I would carry the fallen sister to the nursery where she could rest

on a cot until the Spirit had passed.

Scripture says it is not through our works that we are saved; only through His Grace. And scripture can't be challenged. But, I reasoned, after the devil had caused me to offend the widow, that if I were indeed going to work, let it be in the service of the Lord.

It struck me that part of my problem was that I didn't pray enough; yes, morning, noon, and evening found me on my knees, head bowed, but what about the times in between? Scripture does admonish us to pray without ceasing. So I increased my standard prayers to five times a day, and I began a campaign of fasting on the weekends.

One Sunday afternoon, during the lull between morning service and youth hour, I sat in my bedroom reading from the Book of Daniel, searching perhaps for my own handwriting on the wall. I heard my grandmother say:

"Elwyn's not eating today?"

As was customary, we had guests over for Sunday dinner — my grandmother and Sister McGowan, my old piano teacher.

My mother answered, "Elwyn's fasting."

"Fasting?" I heard my grandmother say. "Every time I come over here he's fasting."

My mother said, "All of us Christians should be fasting along with Elwyn. There is so much trouble in the world."

"Especially the way them Arabs have shot up the gas prices," said my father.

"Please pass the salt," said Sister McGowan.

"Here it is, sister," said my father. "Over there in the Middle East, there's sure to be a war. Armageddon."

"We are living in the last days," said my mother.

"Watch and see if the Lord doesn't return soon," said my grandmother. "Watch and see." There was a chorus of Amens, and then she continued, "I still think he's been too serious lately. Something's bothering him."

My mother said: "Know ye not that I must be about my Father's business? The Lord was only twelve when he said that."

My grandmother's voice boomed. "Don't quote scripture with me, girl!"

"Mother," said my mother, timidly.

"I know my grandson. And I know —"

"So much salt?" I heard my father say.

Sister McGowan answered, "I know it's bad for my blood pressure, but I've had more of a taste for it since Barry and Peachie announced they're getting married."

Oh Peachie. My foggy eyes could not read the prophet. I found my ear moving closer to the open door. Why did I want to hear what I already knew?

"Peachie and Barry make a nice couple," said my father. "I pray their children don't witness Armageddon."

"They're so talented," said my mother.

Then there was awkward laughter as they attempted to maintain the pleasant air.

"Humph," snorted my grandmother, "All this time I thought she was Elwyn's girl."

"Mother," said my mother, "Elwyn doesn't have a girl."

"At sixteen?" said my grandmother.

"But he likes girls, I can tell you." My father laughed without vigor. "He's my son."

"I-thought-Elwyn-liked-Peachie," my grandmother said, punching each word.

It became quiet.

I pictured my grandmother, her large arms folded across her chest, her head tilted at a defiant angle, and everyone else seeming to eat but only just touching their lips with empty forks, or filling their mouths with drink they did not swallow. My grandmother was an old time saint. She wielded the truth like the two-edged sword Saint Paul says it is. She was noted for rebuking the women of the Church of Our Blessed Redeemer Who Walked Upon the Waters when in the late fifties they thought it was acceptable to straighten their hair. Later when the skirt-like gauchos became popular, my grandmother exhorted the women not to wear them because skirt-like or not, gauchos are pants, and women weren't supposed to wear pants.

It was about a half minute before my grandmother's voice broke the silence: "But now I guess Peachie and Barry have to do what's best."

"I've seen them ... they do love each other," said Sister McGowan, the mother of Barry, the father of Peachie's unborn child.

I felt a useless anger well up in me. This anger was an emotion I, the meek, forgiving Christian, was unused to. Anger obscured the obvious: Peachie was lost; and the other one, the one I had harmed, the widow, should never be mine. I prayed for a clear head.

"It's probably Elwyn's fault," my grandmother said. "He's too serious for these modern girls, that's what."

"He tries to be a good Christian," my mother said.

"I guess you can't blame him," said my grandmother. "But he could at least give me a hug. He played so nice today."

"Yes, he did," my mother said.

"Lord, I'm proud of that boy," my grandmother said.

"He was always my best student," Sister McGowan said.

"The actual city of Armageddon," said my father, "is somewhere in the Middle East, isn't it?"

Forks clinked against the good china again, and my stomach growled. I sipped from my glass of water, which was the only thing the Faithful were allowed to consume on a fast. Lord, give

me strength, I prayed, and I headed out to the dining room and greeted Sister McGowan and gave my grandmother her hug.

Fasting left me numb, light-headed, closer to God. Fasting was good. Before it was all over, I had fasted four consecutive weekends. A month of hungry weekends.

I was trying to be about my Father's business.

At my high school, I did not speak to my acquaintances except to witness to them. Admittedly, a large number of students fled at the sight of me. Others hungrily accepted the tracts and Bibles I handed out. There was always a crowd at the prayer meetings I held in the back of the cafeteria during lunch. Many came to laugh and deride, but others bowed their heads and uttered their first timid words to their creator. More than a few shed tears.

I skipped classes in order to confront those of my fellows who were themselves skipping to smoke marijuana cigarettes and vent their carnality in the dark dressing chambers between the band-room and the auditorium. These last were not happy to see me, but as God was on my side, they came to respect, both spiritually and literally, the power of the light I brought to them. None could escape the Faithful servant of God.

I was on the battlefield for my Lord.

In fact, I increased my evangelistic efforts so much so that I found myself barely paying attention at school.

I was busy saving lost souls — John Feinstein, Eldridge Pomerantz, Marco Japonte, Marigold Hendricks, the bubbly Anderson twins, Tina and Sabina, and many more to whom I was spiritual leader. What did I care about trigonometry?

I ended up sitting on a backless chair in the principal's office.

Mr. Byrd was a short man with a voice that thundered. His office was dominated by a large, wooden desk overflowing with pink and yellow sheets of paper. In a wooden picture frame nailed to the wall directly behind the desk, was a color photograph of Mr. Byrd and a plump woman wearing a pair of riding pants and riding boots. The woman stood a few inches taller than Mr. Byrd, who had his arm around her waist.

"Just stop it," Mr. Byrd said. He sat on the edge of his desk, an unlit pipe hanging out of his mouth. "Stop it."

"I am a child of God," I said.

"Amen. I'm a deacon. A Baptist," he said. "But I'll expel you if you don't stop it."

"Then you understand, Brother Deacon," I said, "I've got to do my Father's business."

"Just stop it." His heavy voice seemed to shake the walls.

"No, sir."

"Would you like me to call your parents?"

"They support my evangelism."

"That's right. You're all fanatics. That whole Church of the Blessed Christ Walking Whatever-you-call-its."

I was prepared for such as he. "The Faithful is what we are called. Feel free to make fun of us because we don't drink, don't smoke, and our women don't wear pants."

"Pants?" Cupping the bowl of his pipe in his hand, he turned and glanced at the picture on the wall of him and the woman in the riding pants. "What's wrong with pants?"

"Pants," I said. "Deuteronomy 22:5. A woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man."

"What a strange lot. And you don't danceth, or wearth jewelry either?" he mocked.

"We do not."

"King David danced. He wore a good deal of jewelry, too."

"David was before Christ's time. That's Old Testament."

"Deuteronomy is Old Testament, too," he said.

"Well, Christ didn't do away with everything under the old law."

"Not those things which please your church, at any rate." Mr. Byrd hopped off the desk. He raised the volume of his already incredible voice. "They didn't even have pants in the Old Testament!"

I was undaunted. "A woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man." But my time was too precious to argue with Mr. Byrd. I should be out serving the Lord. "I guess Baptists can do just about any old thing they please."

"Don't mistake us for you." When Mr. Byrd laughed, the unlit pipe whistled. He opened a folder filled with pink sheets of paper and read: "Six unexcused absences, seven tardies, failing English, failing health, a warning in trigonometry—do you plan to go to college, Elwyn?"

"Yes. Bible College."

Mr. Byrd sighed, as though I, a child of the King, were a lost cause. "Do you plan to graduate high school?"

"Of course."

"Then stop it. Get back to being the student you were."

"God's will."

Mr. Byrd closed the folder. "I don't want to expel you, Elwyn. You're not the worst kid we have here."

He signaled with his hand for me to leave, and I stood up.

"Just stop it."

I shook my head. "No, sir."

"The Bible is a book about life here on earth, Elwyn. For your own sake, start living life."

"I am living, deacon. But perhaps you'd rather I smoked a marijuana cigarette or got someone's daughter in trouble."

"You wouldn't know where to start," he said.

I opened the door and stepped out of his office. "Praise the Lord," I said.

Mr. Byrd's door slammed behind me.

I was gracious with Barry McGowan. I even shook his hand in brotherhood during one of his trips home from Bible College to preach a sermon on humility. Barry proved a charismatic speaker. That and the two songs he performed evoked thunder claps of "Amen" and "Yes, Lord" from the congregation in spite of what he had done. I wished Barry well and meant it.

I also wished Peachie well, now that her condition had become obvious and the congregation was reacting to her as it always did to those who had strayed. Pastor had removed her from the choir and relieved her of her duties as minister of music. She no longer led prayers at youth hour, though she continued to give a cautionary testimony that moved all of us teenagers to avoid lasciviousness and be stronger Christians. Like me, Peachie was determined to regain that special relationship with God which she had lost.

I asked Peachie and Barry if there were anything at all I could do.

"Play the organ at our wedding," said Peachie.

"I'd be honored to, Peachie." I embraced her, careful not to disturb the unborn child, who seemed to kick, she said, especially hard when I was around.

Barry said, "Remember, Elwyn, this is a wedding. None of that boogie-woogie stuff you like to play." Barry was a tall man, broad with thick limbs, whose little head seemed wrong for his Goliath body. When Barry shook his head back and forth, it reminded me of those wobble-headed dogs people decorated their dashboards with.

"Don't be silly, Barry," said Peachie standing between us, holding one of my hands, one of his. "Elwyn's always done a fine job at weddings."

"I'm just making sure. Things are bad enough as it is without the musician going boogie-woogie on us."

"Things aren't that bad," said Peachie, who was five months pregnant.

"I'm just making sure," Barry said. "I'm not flexible on this point."

"I promise I won't play boogie-woogie at your wedding, Brother McGowan," I said, smiling up at him. "Especially since I don't play boogie-woogie. It's called gospel."

Peachie shot me a warning look, but Barry didn't seem to take notice or offense. "Well that's settled," he said, nodding his little head. "Now how much is it going to cost? You know we're on a tight budget with me trying to build the church up in Anderson and all."

Before I could even answer, the groom to be had said, "We'll pay you twenty dollars. If you want more than that, my mother will get one of her students to play." He glared at me with his little eyes. "I'm not flexible on this point, Elwyn."

Sister McGowan, Barry's mom, wouldn't play at a wedding for less than \$350. My usual fee was \$100. But—Praise God—the Holy Spirit bridled my tongue.

"Barry," I said, "there's no charge. Think of my music as a wedding gift."

As Barry struggled to figure out how I was getting one over on him, his eyes grew large in his little head. "A gift?"

"Thanks, Elwyn," Peachie said. She gave me another hug and then flinched. "Ugh. The baby just kicked. Isn't that funny? Every time you're around, Elwyn."

Barry shook my hand. "Thanks a lot, Brother Elwyn. And no boogie-woogie, right? I'm still the groom."

"Anything you say, Barry. Praise the Lord."

I had asked God for grace, wisdom, humility, and strength. And He had given them to me. A little more than a month after my transgression and already I had gotten over Peachie. I had stomached Barry, even Barry. My faith was stronger than it had ever been. I was well on my way to becoming a great man of God, a beacon unto the Faithful.

Now there was but one thing I had left undone, my confession, and with my renewed faith I was willing even to do that.

Of late, I had ceased avoiding the widow's eyes. I had greeted her quite pleasantly one Sunday as I stood usher and she passed through the doorway amid a trio of Missionary Society sisters. I had addressed her by her name, Sister Morrisohn, and cast a friendly smile her way. She had seemed surprised, but smiled back, waved with her fingers. Is this the same Elwyn who had offended me so foul?

Yes, I was he, that vile, weak creature, but now I had thrown off my mantle of iniquity and been reborn. Christ lived in me.

Yes, if the widow so desired, I would even confess my secret sin.

Peachie married Barry the second Saturday in October, and all of the congregation was there. The members of the bridal party were Peachie's thirteen-year-old sister Gwen, who stood as maid of honor; Ricardo, Brother Al's four-year-old Nicaraguan son, who was cute and precocious as the ring bearer (we all laughed when he loudly echoed the "I Do's" of the bride and groom); and Brother Philip, Barry's roommate from Bible College, who stood as best man.

Peachie wore a powder blue dress that was tailored to hide the obvious. O, she was beautiful, my Peachie, despite the somewhat desolate expression she wore throughout the ceremony. Then again, who could be truly happy marrying Barry?

At his own wedding, Barry sang a solo, O Perfect Love, which drew tremendous applause. He sang on his knees, troubadour style, looking up at Peachie. His mother accompanied him on piano while I sat at my silent organ musing. They hadn't told me about the solo, and it wasn't in the program.

Barry and Peachie's reception was the first gathering held in the church's dining hall since we had renamed it three Sundays ago the Buford Morrisohn Dining Tabernacle in honor of our late benefactor. The Faithful ate home-baked pastries and drank grape juice beneath pink and blue wedding streamers and Brother Morrisohn-memorabilia: the photographs of him from childhood to adulthood, the plaques we had given him over the years, his degrees from Tuskegee and Oberlin, even his birth certificate.

He had been our greatest saint.

He had been my friend. It was he who had purchased the old upright that stood in the hallway of our home, the piano upon which I had learned to play.

I had no appetite. In my mind, the Buford Morrisohn Dining Tabernacle that afternoon was divided into three zones. Peachie and Barry controlled the middle zone, surrounded by food, drink, well-wishers, levity. I occupied the zone at a far end, away from the commotion. At the other remote zone sat the widow. She seemed more interested in the pictures of her late husband than the newlyweds. She still grieved, as did I.

I passed through the throng of well-wishers gathered around the bride and groom—"Congratulations, Peachie. Good Luck, Barry, though I know you won't need it, ha, ha, ha"—and made my way to Sister Morrisohn's side of the room.

"Hello."

"Elwyn!"

"I have to tell you how sorry I am," I said, getting right to the point.

"For what?" She closed her eyes, then opened them slowly, remembering. "For that? Don't let it worry you."

"What I did to you . . . what I assumed about you was horrible."

"Did I strike you as that kind of a woman?"

"No, it was all my fault. I was confused. Forgive me."

"I forgive you."

"Thanks for forgiving me."

"God, I'm sure, has already forgiven you, and that's what really counts."

"Praise His name."

"I hear," she said, "about all the things you're doing around the church and at school. You're amazing."

"Praise His name," I said.

"And this. I don't think I could have played at Barry's wedding if I were in your place."

"It was just a wedding."

"Don't deceive yourself, Elwyn." She extended her hand, and I helped her out of her seat. *"All liars, even those who deceive but themselves, shall have their part in the Lake of Fire."*

I took my hands away from her and shoved them in my pockets. A few feet away Barry guided Peachie's hand as she cut their cake. A camera flashed. There was applause. It all seemed very far away, as if happening in another country but being broadcast on TV.

"Peachie and I never promised each other anything."

"Deception, deception."

"No, really."

"It must have really hurt you. She reached up and touched the side of my face near my mouth with her fingers. "Poor boy," she

said. "Love is often cruel."

I considered Sister Morrisohn's own mouth, the way the bottom lip poked out when she pronounced a word with an open vowel sound: "You," "Poor," "Boy."

The devil was causing me to focus on the pink on that pulsating bottom lip, and urging the physical manifestations of lust to appear on me. I reminded myself that I was strong in the Lord. Strong! I reminded myself that I was still in control of my feet.

"Sister Morrisohn, I've got to go." I got me away from her and walked straight to my car. In a blur of confusion and emotion, I sped down familiar streets made unfamiliar by my anger at my shameful weakness. Fearing what I might do to myself, I pulled over to the side of the road, clasped my hands, and bowed my head before the steering wheel.

Lord, I prayed, give me a sign. Show me what to do.

My vision cleared. I looked up and saw that I had parked beside a canal. A large turtle rested in the grass on the shoulder of the canal. I got out of my car. I picked up a long branch that still had some leaves on it and prodded the turtle with the branch until it retreated into its shell. I put down the branch and pondered the large turtle safe inside its shell and at length concluded that if this were, in fact, a sign, then I certainly had no idea what it meant.

At about 6:00 p.m., when I figured the reception had ended, I drove back to church to help the maintenance Brethren clean up.

I would work for the Lord. I would be strong. Praise ye Lord!

I was the last one to leave the church that night. And when I left, not a scrap of dirt remained.

The next day was Sunday, and I fasted.

Sunday night, I received a call. I recognized Peachie's voice, but she was crying so much that it took me a few minutes to figure out what exactly she was saying: "I made a mistake, and now everyone hates me."

"No one hates you, Peachie. And you know God loves you. His greatest gift is that He forgives us our sins."

"It's not that, Elwyn. It's just that everyone thinks I deceived you."

I sat up in my bed. "What?"

"Your grandmother makes it sound like I—."

"My grandmother?" Of course. The truth is like a two-edged sword. It cuts going and coming.

"Sister Morrisohn, too, and that whole Missionary Society. They make it sound as though I—."

"Sister Morrisohn?"

"Yes, she wouldn't even talk to me at my own wedding."

Peachie deteriorated into sobs and it was a while before I could understand her again.

"Sister Morrisohn is who pressured Pastor to kick me off the

choir."

"But you're pregnant," I said. "What do you expect?"

"It has nothing to do with my pregnancy!" Peachie shouted. "There've been pregnant girls up there before and you know it. You said yourself God has forgiven me. They wouldn't even let me have a regular wedding. That ugly blue dress! The real problem is I offended their pet. You."

"Me?"

"With all the witnessing and stuff you're doing at school, you make the Church of Our Blessed Redeemer Who Walked Upon the Waters look good. All of those new converts. And me, your perfect mate, big and pregnant for another man."

"That's not how it is," I said.

"That's what it looks like."

I felt a great sadness for Peachie and her plight, but in many ways this turn of events served her right. These were the wages of her sin, the fact that she had wronged me notwithstanding. I could not tell her this, so I tried to change the subject.

"Where's Barry?"

"He's right here. He told me to call," Peachie said. "He's afraid they won't ordain him if I don't apologize to you."

"Peachie, this is ridiculous. You don't owe me any apologies."

"Yes, I do."

"No, Peachie."

"I'm sorry, Elwyn. I'm sorry, Elwyn. I am so very, very sorry," she said. "I hope that satisfies you, you arrogant knucklehead."

"Oh Peachie, don't be that way."

The second day after Peachie married Barry was a Monday, but I did not drive directly home from school.

I stopped by Mr. Byrd's office. I was a conqueror come to claim a new country for the Lord.

With an exasperated expression on his face, Mr. Byrd looked up from a folder whose contents he had been studying. "What now, young evangelist?"

"I feel I'm being persecuted for my religious beliefs."

"How so?"

"Security broke up my prayer meeting today."

"Good," he said. "I sent them." He closed the folder and came around the desk. "The cafeteria, I believe, is a place for eating. Many of the students complain that your activities upset their stomachs so much that they can't eat their meals."

"I don't believe you. What students have complained, sir?"

"Don't press me, boy."

I had him where I wanted him. I opened my book bag, pulled

out five sheets of paper. "I have a petition here signed by over a hundred students and staff who feel that we should be allowed to form a Jesus Club at this school—"

He snatched the papers from my grasp. "I don't see my signature," he said. "I am the principal." He tore the petition into eighths and sprinkled it into the wastepaper basket.

"I have a photocopy," I said.

"Who cares? The real issue is not your prayer meeting but your grades. This is a school, not a church."

We stood toe to toe now, and he proved to be about a half inch shorter than I (and I am no giant), but I was suddenly afraid of him. I shrank at the sound of his deep, angry voice.

"I know Christians, but you're not one, Elwyn. You're weak. And you use your religion to shield your weakness. You can't make it on the football team, so you lure the best players away to your Bible studies."

"I'm not an athlete. They come freely."

"You can't get a girl, so you preach about adultery and fornication."

"Fornication is ruining our women!"

"Not my woman. And I got a woman," he said. He pointed to the photograph behind his desk. "A big, happy, sexy woman. Look at her smile."

"I'm happy for you."

"You should try passing your classes instead of passing out Bibles."

"I can pass if I want to. I'm an honors student."

"You were an honors student. What happened to you?"

"I'm smart."

"Smart enough for Bible College at any rate. What S.A.T. scores does Bible College require?"

"What is that supposed to mean?" I was on the verge of tears, and I didn't know why. "You're persecuting me."

He grabbed me by the shoulders. "Don't use God as an excuse for failure and unhappiness, Elwyn. Don't think that your misery on earth is a free ticket to heaven. Have fun. Be young. Pass your classes."

"No!" I could not prevent the tears from rolling down my cheeks. Satan was winning. Then whack. Whack. Whack. Mr. Byrd slapped me three times hard in the face.

With the tip of my tongue, I tested my lip, which had begun to swell. It stung like a revelation. I stared without anger at little Mr. Byrd.

"Now you'll probably sue me for assault," he said as he ushered me out of his office, one hand behind his back holding the door open against its strong spring.

I did not drive directly home after getting slapped by my principal.

I visited Sister Morrisohn. A Christian must be valiant, brave.

"I am saved."

"By the Grace of God."

"How, then, did I let go of His unfailing hand?"

She forced my hands together. "Pray, Elwyn."

I bowed my head and closed my eyes. A sobering thought prevented me from praying, and I opened my eyes. "You never told anyone what I did that day."

"There was no point in ruining your reputation. A good name is rather to be chosen."

"I would have lost my position in the church, like Peachie."

"You didn't really sin," Sister Morrisohn said. "Peachie sinned."

"I did sin."

"But you prayed for forgiveness."

"So did Peachie. And she confessed openly. I didn't so much as do that. Open confession is good for the soul."

"God knows the heart. That's enough, don't you think? Let your little transgression be a secret between me, you, and God."

"But the secret is driving me crazy." I was at a crossroads of faith. I either had to do what the Bible said was right, or not do what was right at all. It was now 4:15. Sister Morrisohn wore a red sundress. A half hour ago she had removed her shoes. I had been here almost an hour. I had told her the devil had got a hold of me and made me love her, and she had removed her shoes. Another revelation. *She had beautiful feet.*

"There are many secrets in the church. Those who confess are no worse than the rest, but they suffer for their forthrightness."

"The Bible says open confession is good for the soul."

"Everyone will treat you like a backslider. You don't want that." She closed her eyes. "Some will even laugh at you."

"Laugh?"

"You're so much younger than me. They would find that amusing."

"Did they find it amusing," I asked, "when you married Brother Morrisohn?"

This seemed to catch her off guard. Her face underwent a series of quiet transformations, from disbelief to anger to resignation, before she spoke again: "How old are you, Elwyn? Sixteen?"

I nodded.

"That makes me twenty-seven years older than you." She rose from the couch where she had been sitting for about the last half-hour, and she walked in her stockinged feet to the other side of the room. She stood under the portrait in oil of her and Brother Morrisohn on their wedding day. It was a painting in broad strokes and drab colors: black, gray, a rusty brown, a pasty yellow where white should have been. "I was married for twenty years to a man over forty years my senior. I loved him every

second of that marriage."

"You're saying it doesn't really matter, then, the age difference."

"It matters little. Oh, there are times when it matters." She laughed suddenly into her hands. "I just can't believe that at your age—well, just look at me." Sister Morrisohn lifted her arms like wings and spun in gay circles, revealing herself from all sides.

I gazed unabashedly. She had dancer's calves, a slender waist, arms that were thin as a young girl's.

"I see nothing wrong with you."

"Look at me again." Now she grabbed her hem with both hands and raised it above her dimpled knees. "All of these imperfections that come with age." She spun. Her sundress spread out like an umbrella, exposing thigh-high garters and the black silk panties of mourning.

When I looked at my watch, it was 8:00 P.M.

"Elwyn, this is a secret you'd better keep." Sister Morrisohn rolled over and buried her face in my chest. She laughed, and then she cried.

I cried.

What pieces of our clothes we could find, we put back on, and then we knelt at the foot of the bed. *But she was too close to me, and Satan won the battle again. My hand went under her dress and touched her there.*

"Oh, God," I said.

"Lord," she said.

And then we sinned again—me and the woman who smelled like spring blossoms, whose slender waist had fit so pleasingly into my palm, the woman who did not weigh much when she fell. Me and the wife of my deceased benefactor and friend.

Afterwards, she said, her cheek against my neck, "How are you going to do this, Elwyn? People may begin to wonder."

"I could be giving you piano lessons twice a week," I suggested.

"Good," she said. Then: "Only twice a week?"

I called home once more.

"I'm still at the mall," I said to my mother. *"Witnessing."*

"Don't forget dinner is waiting for you," she said. "Or are you fasting again?"

"I'll be home in a while. I'm hungry. My fast is over."

"I'll keep your plate warm. Bye, Elwyn."

"Bye, mom."

Father, forgive me.



The Students Get the Last Word

A week-long journal of a public school teacher in the South Bronx

I can't remember a time since the new principal arrived that there has been so much violence in the school. I'm afraid that the school may be getting worse, even before he retires this June. I dread what might happen next year.

Monday, Feb. 23, 2004, at 10:35 AM PT

<http://slate.msn.com/id/2095876/entry/2095882/>

Two days before the start of our midwinter recess, a friend of mine, a fellow teacher, was punched in the face by a student, the son of a school aide. The incident has been handled badly by everyone. My friend waited two days to start the paper trail, for all he knows he might have the kid in his class tomorrow. He told me that when the kid was cocking his fist, he thought to himself, "I wonder if he would do this to Mr. Moore?"

I don't know. I've never been punched in the face. I've been pushed; I've had spitballs, chairs, garbage cans, pencils, chalk, crayons, and other stuff thrown at me. I've been threatened by children and adults with violence; I've been threatened by children and adults with lawsuits, dismissal, "letters in my file." I've been called "White Motherfucker," "White-Out," "Chicken Tender," "Twinkie," "Gay," "White Boy," and "Racist." I've also learned that sometimes these taunts and epithets aren't meant to insult. The kids use these words among friends. I've learned how to react: Nothing attracts more insults than a wounded prig.

I love my job. I also love the regular vacations that my work provides. Tomorrow our vacation is over and I will have to readjust to my workday schedule—the routine that is the comforting structure upon which I build my week.

Teaching involves simultaneously managing hundreds of small tasks—everything from taking attendance to constantly monitoring each child's physical, mental, and emotional needs—so it's necessary to develop a very orderly approach to things. Tomorrow morning I will mechanically rise from bed at 6:23 a.m. (that's 6:15 plus eight minutes of snooze time, if you're wondering), perform my morning ablutions, make my coffee and prepare my lunch (a natural-peanut-butter sandwich and a Granny Smith apple, same thing I've eaten every day for the better part of two years), knot my tie, and then head out into the Astoria morning. This time of year, I feel lucky to be awake early enough to catch the sunrise out here in the big sky country of Queens. I will buy my paper from the guy dodging cars by the train station and head to the M60 bus to 125th Street. I will exchange looks with the other

young teachers holding their canvas "Teaching Fellows" totes, all of us speechlessly agreeing, "Yes, six weeks 'till Easter vacation."

Thursday is a half-day because we have parent-teacher conferences. We teachers will be available to the parents from noon to 3 and 6 to 8. We'll be handing out "Promotion in Doubt" letters, informing many parents that at best, their child should reconsider any summer plans, and at worst, their child might have to repeat the grade. I look forward to Thursday night, but not because I have a cruel streak. I enjoy meeting the parents, especially the parents who support their kids, bring them to libraries and museums, work overtime to get a computer. They're strong people and I admire them.

One girl in my class has, for years now, been failing and getting into all sorts of trouble: threatening classmates, cursing teachers, hiding under her desk. Since October, we've been trying to move her into a special-education class, but these things take time, despite—or maybe because of (depends on who you ask)—the restructuring of the schools. Her grandmother came to a planning meeting we held last week and before even saying hello said, "I want her in special ed." Everyone at the meeting—guidance counselors, psychologists, all of us sitting knee-to-knee in a tiny office—agreed with Grandma. It was a lucky coincidence that we also had a seat open in a special-ed class, so we don't have to wait until next year to move her, as would usually be the case. This girl, in spite of her troubles, has perfect attendance and is usually the first or second person to arrive for class. I wonder whose class she'll walk into tomorrow.

Entry 2

Tuesday, Feb. 24, 2004, at 9:38 AM PT

<http://slate.msn.com/id/2095876/entry/2095981>

I feel unprepared for the week, so this morning I catch the early bus. Outside of school, I bump into my friend who was assaulted. Mr. S. looks shocked to see me so early—it's 7:35 a.m. I ask about the incident, and he tells me he can't say much; he's been advised to get a lawyer. Four years ago, he came to my school as one of the first Teaching Fellows. (The city's Teaching Fellows program was begun to help fill the many vacancies that existed in hard-to-staff schools like the one I teach in.) Out of five Fellows from that year, Mr. S is the only one still teaching. The other four lasted between two weeks and three months before quitting. I think the Fellows program learned from this experience because they don't seem to send teachers to schools like mine anymore.

With 20 minutes left before the homeroom bell, I find the assistant principal, the keeper of the keys, to try to get some books from the book room—no dice. The secretary apparently has the only key and she's running late so I'll have to wait. The assistant principal assures me that she'll look for the books sometime later. I don't have much confidence in that, but I thank her anyway. I ask if I can get the key to a different storage room for the digital projector, to show my class a brief video on Rome. That key is also sealed in the secretary's desk. It occurs to me that many problems in this school could be solved with a crowbar, but I keep the remark to myself.

After lunch, the kids are wide awake. The class settles down, more or less, to write in their journals for 10 minutes. We "freewrite" every day. I don't read their journals—they're private. I suppose that many kids write about whatever they're thinking that day; some of them no doubt write curses and threats; some appear to be composing long poems or rap lyrics, or maybe they're transcribing them. While they write, I walk around the room. I notice that one girl is staring intently at something on the floor. I follow her gaze but see nothing remarkable. She looks at me and then points to her sneaker, gleaming new black and white Jordans. She asks me, "Do you have a tissue?" "For what?" She points at her sneaker with a look that says, "DUHHHH!" I'm perplexed. She hoists up her sneaker and points at what looks like a slight reddish discoloration on the side of the sole. A classmate produces a tissue. She meticulously cleans her sneaker, making a big show of it, and then, eventually content with her sneaker's return to immaculateness, writes in her journal. I wonder if she is writing about her sneakers.

During my second prep period, I have a conference with a student who explains to me that he is misbehaving because he is angry. I ask him if it would be OK if the next time I get angry, I am mean to him and his classmates. He agrees that that wouldn't be fair. I take it a step further: If you go to McDonald's, I ask him, and the girl at the fryer is angry with her boyfriend, is she allowed to spit in your fries? He scrunches his face in disgust, smiles slightly. Does my talk help? I don't know. The next two periods, he is so disruptive to the class that I have to put him into the hallway (something I have been repeatedly warned by administrators not to do) for 15 minutes.

Entry 3

Wednesday, Feb. 25, 2004, at 10:31 AM PT

<http://slate.msn.com/id/2095876/entry/2096099>

8:10 a.m. I get the call—the desk has been opened and the key is available. I rush down the hallway to the storage closet, unlock it (it takes two keys,) and pull out the digital projector. I have only 10 minutes to set it up and prepare myself for the beginning of the day. I recall the mantra all teachers have drilled into their heads the first year: "If you fail to prepare, you prepare to fail."

DVD player set up and ready to go, the kids begin streaming down the hallway. They walk under two strands of origami cranes that my classes folded back in October. The fact that these 30 or so cranes, hanging on a thread from the ceiling, remain where I put them reminds me how much the school has changed in the past three years. Four years ago, nothing would have hung for long without being ripped down or tagged with a marker. At the end of the school day, the hallways looked like somebody had thrown a party and forgot to clean up: candy wrappers, paper, cafeteria food. When the old principal was removed and the guy we have now hired, things changed—for the better. We used to be known as one of the worst schools in the Bronx. Now parents want to send their kids here. And thanks to the No Child Left Behind initiative, it is now easier to transfer a kid into a school their parent chooses; this year we took in over 40 transfers from other neighborhoods. For the first time in five years, I have 32 kids in my class. I had to ask the janitor for an extra desk.

As the kids walk past me and into the room, some stop and respond to my "Good morning." Some mumble and narrow their eyes, aghast that an adult would even talk to them. Others walk by silently, as if trying to sneak into the class unnoticed.

Third period, I have the more difficult of my two groups. It includes many children who would have been in bilingual education had the school not cut that program last year. I have one student who arrived from Sierra Leone this summer and had never been in school before. The first day, I noticed that when he was asked to write things, he copied from whatever text he could find around the room. For example, Name: Fire Drill Exit 2. This tendency is common to ESL students. I don't blame them; I would probably do the same if I was asked to write in Russian or Arabic. What was unusual was that his letters were not uniform. This indicated to me that he was not accustomed to using our alphabet. I referred him to the guidance department, who sent him to the ESL teacher. She still sees him one period a day and says he's

making some progress, but since he only speaks Fulani, and there is no Fulani translator in the school—or in the Department of Education, even—she feels hindered.

In this class, I also have two students who have been held back in the sixth grade twice. I taught both of them two years ago. They should be looking forward to graduation and high school; instead they are both 14 and looking at summer school. When asked about it, they say, "I don't care," a hardened response that is sadly common.

During a change of classes, a fight involving two large boys from my difficult class almost breaks out in the hallway. Mr. P, a first-year science teacher from Niagara Falls, attempts to break it up. I stand back. They don't seem like they really want to fight. (For all their posturing, boys usually don't.) Quickly, calm is restored, but later in the day I hear that one of the boys punched Mr. P in the back. Mr. P gets advice from Mr. S about which forms to fill out and who to call.

While some teachers and I are discussing this new assault, stories begin to circulate about another incident that took place the week before break. A teacher on the second floor, an Albanian guy who has been teaching here for years, was hit with a chair by a female student. I can't remember a time since the new principal arrived that there has been so much violence in the school. I'm afraid that the school may be getting worse, even before he retires this June. I dread what might happen next year.

Entry 4

Thursday, Feb. 26, 2004, at 1:27 PM PT

<http://slate.msn.com/id/2095876/entry/2096214>

Periods 1 and 2 go well, considering I am teaching my difficult class. The “I misbehave because I’m angry” boy is especially subdued, and he keeps catching my eye to make sure that I notice. The most talkative, disruptive kids snap to attention when I remind them that I spoke to the coach of the Junior Knicks, the after-school basketball program they attend. The coach warned that they will be suspended if they misbehave in class. For today, at least, that’s the silver bullet. It also helps that it’s only 9 a.m. When the period ends, I tell the class, “You see, if you can behave like this every day, you’ll have no stress, you’ll pass all your classes, and you’ll never get in trouble.”

Period 3 begins very differently. When the class comes in, I realize that there is a student in this class who used to be in my difficult class and whom I haven’t seen in months. He was removed from my class after I took a 4-inch letter-opener with a sharpened edge from him. It was the closest thing to a shiv I’ve ever taken from a kid. He was suspended only a short time, but his parents decided to relocate him to the cow country of New Jersey to chill out for a bit. It’s not long before I discover that the rustic tranquility of the Western counties has had little lasting effect on him. No doubt the kid still holds a grudge. The first thing he says to me is that I need to get a shape up. That one I let go with a stern look.

Soon afterwards he advises, “You shoes is dusty.”

In classroom management seminars, they will tell you all sorts of ways to handle situations like this one. There’s The Neutral Path: Ignore it, don’t even engage the child, deal with it after class. Then there’s The High Road: Explain to the child that such blatant disrespect is not acceptable and that his parents, the dean, the principal, whoever the kid is most afraid of, will be told. And then there’s The Low Road, which they tell you (and this is good advice) never to take—engaging the child on his or her level. They tell you that if you challenge a child, you will always lose. And they are right.

“So, you talk about my hair, you talk about my shoes, you’ve checked me out head to foot, when are you gonna get your eyes off of me?”

It comes out in a rapid blast, instinctive, regrettable (maybe), and it stuns the kid. His friend, sensing danger, fills in, spitting noisy, furious syllables, but the class is momentarily awed at my counterattack. I calmly continue the lesson, turning to the other side of the class. The offending student sits quiet and uncertain, so for the moment at least, it seems that I won. Years ago, I’d never have thought of saying or doing anything like this, but there it is; it happened. I put the kid down, and I did it on his level. The kid doesn’t challenge me again, even volunteers an answer or two, but still I’m not convinced I won.

During lunch, the angry misbehavior comes to my classroom to ask if he behaved well this morning. He asks if I saw his mom yesterday when she came to confer with another teacher. He tells me she told him to act that way. I tell him to keep it up and he’ll make everyone happy.

Entry 5

Friday, Feb. 27, 2004, at 1:00 PM PT

<http://slate.msn.com/id/2095876>

Today’s a half-day so it’s an easy morning, but it’s Open School night, which means I won’t be home until 9:30 this evening. We also have two sessions of parent-teacher conferences scheduled, noon to 2:30 and then again from 6 to 8:30. I’ve enjoyed parent-teacher conferences ever since I learned the secret to a productive meeting: Leave the kid in the hallway. There’s a reason they’re not called “parent/teacher/student” conferences. If the kid is sitting there as you’re detailing all his or her failings and misbehaviors, you then have to sit and listen to the parent lecture and yell at the kid, repeating the same. You have to watch the kid turn on the waterworks. You have to sit, tapping your pencil uncomfortably, while other parents hover around the door, awaiting their turn.

Third period, I decide to dispense with my lesson plan and give the kids a chance to write about things they think people should know about their school and their neighborhood.

An 11-year-old girl who wants to be a chef and an author writes: “My neighborhood has such a bad reputation, that when I go to order food over the phone they say, ‘Sorry we can’t send your order.’”

“My neighborhood is messed up, it’s not a good neighborhood. One day this man got stabbed in the neck,” writes a 10-year-old aspiring poet.

“If you walk outside, you have to watch your back because you just can get jumped, mugged, killed,” writes a 12-year-old girl who wants to be a lawyer.

And another 12-year-old lawyer-hopeful writes, “I like this school a lot. The Principal comes to classes to see how they are going.”

Out of 59 students, I see 32 parents. Not bad. About six of them are Spanish speakers, so I have to dust off the old college Spanish. I spent a semester in Granada and used to speak pretty well, but nowadays I only use it on Open School night. It helps. Some parents won’t admit to preferring Spanish, and it has happened that I finish a five-minute speech on a child’s disrespect, disruptions, and academic shortcomings, only to have the parent pause and say, “So the work is good?” I’ve learned to inquire up front, “Spanish or English?”

The conferences are an event. Many children leave in tears.

Sometimes even the parents leave in tears, or fuming. Others leave with wide, proud smiles on their faces. Security guards and deans watch the halls, on the lookout for anything that might go wrong. But tonight nothing happens, thankfully.

After the evening session, the teachers who ride the subway gather to walk together to the station. It is past 8:30, we’ve been at the school for over 12 hours, and we are punchy with exhaustion.

On the subway, we trade stories about parents, kids, what will happen after the principal leaves. Some of my colleagues are nodding off. When I step out of the train I say, “See you in the morning,” and it seems like a joke that we have to return so soon. But we know we’ll see each other every day for as long as we work at this school, on good days, bad days, half-days, days before vacation and after break. Sometimes we’ll see each other doing the right thing, sometimes doing the thing that get us through the day.

One of my students wrote, “I want people to know that not all public schools are violent. Some are, but we can change that by working together, and cooperating with each other.” She’s 11 and wants to be a writer—she’s also right.

(Thanks to Fatima, Jeiry, Ana, Sasha, and Cynthia for their thoughts.)

In this volume:

Maria Murphy

Amy England

Daryl Scroggins

Kirsten Kaschock

Andrea Moorhead

Arielle Greenberg

Rob Morris

D. E. Steward

Matt Cooperman

Merry Speece

Joy Katz

Sean Thomas

Dougherty

John Gallaher

John Vanderslice

cereal
\$18.00 www.cerealrulesbreakfast.com