

THE REAL QUESTION

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One second ago the brain was multitasking up a storm—processing questions, accessing formulas, monitoring the clock—not to mention calculating my chances of beating out the usual competition, Hofstra and Raleigh.

The brain put away the easy questions first, standard procedure when test questions are equally weighted.

After a quick scan it passed on number three: old material. Leave it to Millikan to pull something from a couple of units back. Plus, it looked complex—not killer, but time consuming—lots of conversions.

Now I've finished the others and I'm back, staring at number three, my fist choking the pencil: *A sample of dry gas weighing 2.1025 g is found to occupy 2.850 L at 82.0 degrees Fahrenheit and 740.0 mm Hg. How many moles of the gas are present?* Time to dust off the old ideal gas law: $PV = nRT$. Millikan calls it “pivnert.” But when I get to the conversions, I've got nothing. The value for R? The conversion to Kelvin? The brain can't shake the information loose. All I

have is Millikan's stupid "pivnert." Pivnert... pivnert...the brain sputters. It's like facing the blue screen of death when your CPU dies—a complete brain crash.

I back up, read the problem again, but this time the words fail to register; is this thing even written in English?

I cross-check the one above it, the one below, problems I burned through minutes ago. Suddenly, they don't make sense either. What the hell is happening?

I knew all this crap last night. I knew it at five this morning. All those hours chained to my desk? I *know* this stuff. Why can't I access it?

Pencils scratch paper—no one else is having a problem. While the doom clock over Millikan's desk obliterates the final minutes, I wipe my sweaty palms on my jeans and try to breathe; all of a sudden it's hard.

God, I'm having a stroke!

Can a person have a stroke at sixteen?

I don't think so, not unless they're shooting hoops and have a bad heart valve or something.

Maybe I'm the first: Honors Student Strokes Out in Chemistry Exam.

Concentrate. Got to concentrate. As I stare at the question, my field of vision shrinks. Words break down to letters. I'm seeping through the spaces between them.

Hofstra shifts in the chair behind mine. His pencil hits the desk. He's done. One through twenty-five, inclusive—done.

From further down the row I hear a chair creak. Crap! Raleigh's done too.

Thirty seconds left. But now the letters are disintegrating,

becoming quivering molecules of ink on paper. The pencil slips in my sweaty hand.

“Time,” barks Millikan. “Pass your exams forward.”

Hofstra flaps a stack of papers against my back. I take the tests, add mine, and pass them up; the stack moves along like some small hapless mammal being ingested by a snake.

We’ve got three minutes to kill before the bell. Millikan has no mercy. He could have given us those three minutes. It might have come back to me.

But when I close my eyes I see those ink molecules uncoupling, devolving into their constituent atoms. I’m scaring the shit out of myself.

All around the room the complaining begins. “Man, that sucked!” “Yeah, big time.”

“How’d you guys do?” Raleigh’s voice. The test isn’t cold yet and Raleigh’s checking the competition. “Fisher?”

“I tanked on number three.”

“One wrong is still a 96. How about the other twenty-four?”

“Think I did okay.” Under my desk I press two fingers against my wrist. I usually have to run miles to make my pulse surge like this.

“Hofstra?” Raleigh asks.

Behind me I hear a dull thud. “I am so dead,” Hofstra groans.

When I turn, his forehead is on the desk, the top vertebra in his neck sticking up.

Raleigh detects blood in the water. “Number three elude you too?” He hops up and squats on his chair.

“Three...four...five...” Hofstra slams his head repeatedly, ramming the desk forward with each head bang. “Basically, all of them.”

“No lie! *All?*” Even Raleigh’s frizzy hair seems to perk up. “Define *all*.”

“One through twenty-five. All. I totally zoned.”

“Twenty-five percent of the final grade!” Raleigh crows.

“Quit gloating,” I say quietly, watching him grin like a malevolent elf.

“Who’s gloating?” he asks, still wearing his triumph like a Hawaiian shirt. “Okay, okay. I am. But think about it. A slide by Hofstra could affect the world order. I could move up. You could move up.”

Hofstra mumbles something into the desktop.

“Quit talking to the desk,” advises Raleigh.

Hofstra rotates his neck just enough so his forehead is no longer in contact with wood. “Consider the Just Man.” Leave it to Hofstra to bring in one of the Great Dead Ones. “According to Socrates, the Just Man wants only to best the Unjust Man,” he explains to Raleigh, who, perhaps wisely, has steered clear of Classics. “The Unjust Man wants to beat the crap out of everybody.”

Raleigh shrugs. “There’s a little bit of the Unjust Man in all of us, right, Fisher?”

Under cover of the ringing bell I ask, “Are you okay, Hofstra?” Unlike Raleigh, who is 95 percent petty annoyance, Hofstra’s a friend.

“I’m fine.” He throws his big, bony hands open. “It’s no big deal, okay?”

“Only life or death,” Raleigh points out as he follows us into the hall. “Among the three of us we have next year’s valedictorian, salutatorian, and one guy who’s going to wish he’d tried just a little harder. That lucky guy could be you, Hofstra—there goes your shot at becoming a nuclear physicist.”

Hands in his pockets, shoulders hunched, Hofstra looks even skinnier and more bent than usual. “Think I’ll become pope instead.”

“You’re not even Catholic,” I point out.

He shrugs. “I could join. It would be fun to be infallible. We’re not having fun now, that’s for sure.”

“Fun comes later.” Raleigh jumps in front of Hofstra. Walking backwards down the hall, he cramps Hofstra’s long, gangly strides. “You forget. We’re working on the Deferred Gratification Model. The payoff is down the road when one of us walks into our twentieth reunion as the next Bill Gates.”

“My money’s on Hofstra,” I say.

“Why him?” asks Raleigh.

“Come on. My brain is decent; yours is too. Hofstra’s is scary.”

“We keep up,” he protests, getting trapped behind an open locker door.

“Only because we outwork him,” I call back. Hofstra and I, both really tall, scout the thin spots in the herd. Raleigh disappears behind us as we move through the crowd. “So, what was your problem in there?” I ask. There’s a chance we both got infected by some airborne pathogen—like Legionnaires’ disease—only this one affects brain function.

“No sleep,” he mumbles. Red creeps up his neck and across the acne battlefield of his face. “I met this girl online last night. A warrior babe named Xandra.”

“You sure it’s a girl?” Raleigh asks, suddenly reappearing between the shoulders of two Leon High T-shirts. “Online, Xandra could be anybody...a guy, a dwarf, a nun—”

Hofstra whips around. “No, she’s for real.”

“As in corporeal, actual, verifiable, authentic?” Raleigh’s got to be studying for the SAT Verbals—the guy never makes a bad academic move.

But neither do I. It’s Hofstra who coasts. Smart as he is, he sublimates tests, gets lost in cyberspace, binge-drinks. He sabotages himself. I work my ass off.

So why was I the one who had total brain lock?

I bounce the point of my pencil on the library table. It’s four-twenty and Annie’s late. As usual. In her universe she’s blowing off algebra. In mine she’s standing me up.

Hofstra goes online to get girls (or dwarfs, or nuns); I get them with a business card printed on my Epson:

Geek for Hire.

Fisher Brown can teach math to your hamster.

(A passing grade guaranteed or your money back.)

555-5175

All I learned when Annie Cagney called for tutoring was that she was a sophomore repeating Algebra IB. I didn’t

realize I was talking to the mystery blonde from the hall until she walked into the library for our first session. *Yes!* I thought. *There is a god!*

Before that I'd only seen her between second and third and at school events. Dez—my friend Desiree—invited me to one of her choir concerts. I went because I knew Annie the Beautiful would be standing on the riser below her. One voice soared over the others. It made the skin on my arms tingle. The voice belonged to Dez, but I was watching only Annie. I gave the voice to her. The other singers disappeared. Annie, all by herself, sang in Dez's beautiful voice as she glowed and kind of floated in her blue choir robe. Then, since this was my fantasy, I pictured her in something more MTV—I tried out various outfits.

Okay, it's lame. But I don't have much to work with. Our only one-on-one is actually a threesome: her, me, and algebra. I haven't made much progress on the romantic front. In fact, I haven't made much progress with her on any front. Her brain is a string of Christmas lights with an intermittent short. She seems to grasp a concept, but by the next time we meet—*blink*—it's gone. If she were anyone else I'd give up and say bring on the hamster, but I can't.

I need to be around Annie.

To graduate, Annie needs to pass Algebra IB.

Why am I here and she isn't?

Guess I need to be around her more than she needs to pass Algebra IB.

I resort to doing Latin homework.

“Hey,” says a small, breathy voice. I look up and there she is. My heart races, but I try to keep my tone indifferent. “Not to state the obvious, but you’re fifty minutes late.”

She swoons into the chair next to mine and falls against me, crying.

“Hey, it’s...it’s okay,” I stutter. “What’s a few minutes? Ask anyone, my time is worthless.”

She snatches handfuls of my sweater and twists.

“Whoa, Annie, what’s going on?” This is like a good dream gone bad.

Between sobs she explains she just had a blowout fight with her boyfriend.

Boyfriend? Of course a girl like her would have one. But between second and third when our paths cross in the hall, there’s never a guy with her. Girlfriends, yes, but never a guy.

“Why is he like that?” she sobs. “All I said was, ‘Ramos, how come you didn’t call me last night?’”

“Ramos...Ramos Cruz, the quarterback?”

She nods against my chest, her hair tickling my neck. “I didn’t know you liked football,” she sniffs.

Actually, she doesn’t know anything about me, but she’s making physical contact so I let it slide. “Ramos and I used to be tight.”

“*You* and Ramos?” Crying her eyes out, she still manages to sound skeptical.

I shift subtly and her cheek is pressed against my sweater. “Best friends, as a matter of fact.” I don’t mention it only lasted a semester, and it was sixth grade. I have to admit, the fact that we were ever friends is staggering, even to me.

But at the time we seemed the same. Or maybe it was just that we were undifferentiated, like cells that hadn't yet specialized. When we did differentiate, I specialized in acing every class. Ramos specialized in throwing long.

Dez says I miss the important stuff while obsessing about the insignificant. Annie the Beautiful is pressed against me and what am I doing? Reliving sixth grade.

I close my eyes and fold my arms around her. Wow. It's like she hit the perfume counter and sampled everything.

If I smell her, does she smell me? Did I put on deodorant this morning? Of course, I did. It's part of the routine.

But is it still working? That's the critical question. I resist the urge to sniff a pit.

"Should I apologize to him?" she moans.

"No," I say. "Definitely not." My shoulder feels wet. Her tears have soaked through to my shirt. I hold her carefully, afraid she'll realize the algebra guy's arms are around her.

With a shuddery sigh she presses herself into my chest, and at that exact moment, through the thin fabric of her blouse, my fingers detect the fastener of her bra.

I stumble off the late bus. With only one degree of separation I touched Annie's bra—in fact, the part of the bra that facilitates removal. Hofstra would give major points. Too bad it was meaningless. Ten seconds later, while I sat staring at the book open to the quadratic formula, she was whimpering into her cell, "Please, Ramos, please?"

FYI: Ramos Cruz is number one on her speed dial. What are the odds that the Geek-for-Hire is even on the list?

I kick a rock and jog up the hill, fishing the key out of my pocket as I go. I let myself into the empty house. Taking the stairs three at a time, I sprint to my room. I change into my Nikes. As I toss my sweater over the back of my desk chair, I discover the latest index card taped to the windowsill: *What is the real question?* Sounds cosmic, but since it was put there by my guidance counselor dad, it's bound to be test related. He's advising me to identify the intent of the question before answering—or something like that. This card joins all the other subtle hints taped up around my room.

I've never caught him in the act. Dad is the tooth fairy of test preparation.

I throw on a sweatshirt and just happen to look out the window as a guy saunters out of the house across the street. The last few days, whenever I'm at my desk studying, he's been out there loitering at the end of Mr. Traynor's driveway. He's wearing the same frayed jeans, the same cowboy boots he has worn every other day. I assume he changes the shirt, but clean or dirty, a white T-shirt is always part of the outfit. Doesn't he have anywhere to go, anything to do?

When the guy reaches the end of the driveway, he squats on his heels, face turned up to the sun. Eyes closed, he reaches back and casually peels off his T-shirt.

Come on. Winters aren't that cold in Tallahassee, but today's not exactly sunbathing weather. Besides, the sun is going down.

He wads up the T-shirt for a pillow and stretches out on

the strip of grass at the edge of the road, oblivious to what the local dogs use that grass for.

What is the real question? The index card on the windowsill suddenly seems like a caption for the scene outside. When it comes to identifying the real question I don't have a clue, but it's obvious that this guy and I are coming up with different answers.

All work and no play.

All play and no work.

Before starting to run I stand at the end of my driveway and watch the stranger in Mr. Traynor's yard. As his muscular chest rises and falls in deep, even breaths, a repulsive image pops into my brain. What would happen if he met Annie? Abort. Abort. I shut the simulation down. Isn't one muscular guy in her life enough?

Besides, the chances that they'll meet are infinitesimal. Like almost everything else, his presence across the street from my house at this precise moment can be explained by the math term Random Walk: a sequence of movements in which the direction of each successive movement is determined entirely at random.

I think about my own sequence of movements. What would have happened if I'd randomly walked a path more like Ramos's? I push up my sweatshirt sleeves and check out my spindly arms. Too late for that.

I take off running, flat out. As the houses flash by I feel looser, saner.

I started running because Dad insisted that to be a “complete package” I needed a sport. At one-sixty I’m too light for football. At six-foot-five you’d think I’d be a natural for basketball. Too bad I’m a complete spaz. Dad’s friend, Coach Dickerson, suggested track, but I didn’t make the cut. I expend more energy on vertical motion than horizontal when I run.

Last year I went out for cross-country—they take anyone who’s still standing at the end of the distance. Cross-country is over for the year, but I keep running for the endorphin rush.

Me and my endorphin buddies tour the neighborhood. My eyeglasses bounce on the bridge of my nose, beating the same rhythm as my feet, only a nanosecond behind. I pass the sleeping guy twice.

I’m rounding the corner by my house for a third time when the guy yelps, “Holy crap!” and leaps to his feet. He swings the T-shirt that was balled up under his head, swatting his chest and back.

I rest my hands on my knees to catch my breath. “Fire ants?” I gasp, squinting at him through the sweat and sun.

“It sure-as-shit wasn’t a bad dream.” He flips the waistband of his jeans and picks a couple of ants out. “Actually,” he says, one corner of his mouth going up, “the dream was pretty sweet.” He ambles over and turns his back to me. “Mind checking me out, Snowflake?”

Reddish hair streaked with blond hangs long behind his ears. His surfer-tan back is crosshatched with the imprint of grass. He’s half a foot shorter than I am, but ripped. His

pants ride so low I can see that ridge of muscle Greek sculptors were so crazy about.

I don't need this. After PE I always dress fast, avoid the showers. "You look ant-free to me," I say, falling back a step.

"Shit fire!" he yelps again. "Check out the left shoulder blade."

I try to brush the ant away. It won't brush. It won't flick. When I pull it off, it leaves a spot of blood.

The guy snaps the T-shirt again, engulfing me in his personal odors—deodorant, cigarettes, and something faintly minty—the guy equivalent of Annie's perfume cloud. "Thanks, Snowflake."

I'm about to tell him my name's not Snowflake when a voice like the squeal of a marker on a white board rips the air. "Oh, boys?" Mrs. Zelinsky's torso juts out the open door of the house next to Mr. Traynor's. "Boys?" She waggles a finger at us. "Can you two help me with a little job?"

I know resistance is futile, so I trot over.

"Thank you, Fisher," she says, patting my arm. She looks over at the fire-ant victim and tickles the air with her index finger. "You too. I'll make it worth your while."

I've cut her grass for years. "Worth your while" means a glass of milk and a stale cookie—if you're lucky.

The guy plunges his arms through the sleeves of his T-shirt and flips the back of the shirt over his head. "What kind of little job?"

Mrs. Z's smile shows off the twin spots of lipstick on her teeth. "Just a couch I need moved to the curb." She holds the door for us.

“Forget to pay the light bill?” the guy asks as we follow her inside.

The place is funhouse-dark. It creeped me out when I was little. I turned down plenty of milk and cookies just so I wouldn’t have to go in there to get them.

“Where exactly is this couch?” the guy asks as we stumble through the gloom.

Mrs. Z grips the stair rail. “Right up here.”

“And how’re we supposed to get it down these stairs without starting an avalanche?” he asks. On either end of each tread is a tall stack of newspapers separated by a path just wide enough for Mrs. Z’s slippers to rest side by side.

“I’m sure you’ll manage.” She leads us into a cramped bedroom and shoos three cats off a balding couch.

The guy fans the air. “You could use a little air freshener in here.”

“It’s the couch,” she says with an indignant huff. “Tiddles has little accidents sometimes.”

He closes one eye and sights along the top of the couch. He paces its length, then does the same to the doorway. “That door is wicked narrow. There’s a good chance the couch’ll get stuck in the turn going into the hall. We’re talking major grunt work. That’ll cost you extra.”

Oh, goody. *Two* cookies.

The guy hooks his thumbs through his belt loops and hikes up his jeans. “Ya ready, Snowflake?”

“Fisher,” I say, holding out my hand. “My name is Fisher Brown.”

“Lonny Traynor.” Instead of taking my hand he grabs my forearm with a slap. My fingers close over a blue snake tattoo. “Mexico,” he says, seeing me checking out the snake. “Seemed like a good idea at the time.”

We stay limb-locked so long it seems meaningful, like now we’d have to die for each other if the situation called for it. And I realize I’ve had more skin contact with this guy in ten minutes than I’ve had with Hofstra in ten years. Before letting go, he gives one last hard squeeze. Then he holds out a pack of cigarettes. I shake my head no, but he lights one for himself. When Mrs. Z objects he mutters, “Smells better than the other odors you got goin’.” He closes an eye against the rising smoke. The cigarette bobs with each word. “Okay, Fish. You take the dog-end.”

I’m not crazy about walking down the stairs backwards, but Lonny seems to be in charge. We lift on three, then flip the couch on its back. While I shuffle toward a door I can’t see, Lonny walks his end sharply left, angling the couch so that the legs go first. The legs are barely through the door when he swings the couch ninety degrees and swivels its length out into the hall.

“Watch the banister!” Out of the corner of my eye I see Mrs. Z press a hand to her heart. “It’s solid oak!”

Just as I step down I hear a yowl. One of Mrs. Z’s cats has inserted itself under my foot. I skip sideways to avoid crushing essential organs and accidentally nudge the top stack of newspapers. An ominous whispering quickly grows to a loud murmur; the sound of a gathering avalanche.

“Stop them!” shouts Mrs. Z. “They’re all in order, by date!”

“Sorry, Mrs. Zelinsky.” Over my shoulder I watch as the paper slide gains momentum. What started with a few papers is becoming a juggernaut. As each sliding stack rushes over the papers below, more break loose. When the cascade encounters the wall where the staircase hooks left, it stops for a moment, then almost imperceptibly starts to move again. The flow makes the turn, riffing down the last three stairs.

“Nice,” says Lonny, nodding appreciatively.

“Nice,” I agree. The whole thing is almost art.

At the top of the stairs Mrs. Z is hanging butt-up over the rail, moaning about her complete collection.

“Use ’em to paper train a few of your cats,” Lonny suggests. That’s when I notice that he’s leaning back, muscles tense, blue snake straining. He’s the only reason the couch and I didn’t make the trip down the stairs along with the newspapers.

I try to imagine Hofstra or Raleigh restraining a runaway couch, but they’re only heroic in joystick-controlled situations. “Thanks,” I say. “I’m good to go.”

Bullets of cold sweat pour down my sides as we lift the couch over the rail to make the turn, but I hold my end steady. Lonny and I slalom down the last four stairs on a complete collection of *Tallahassee Democrats*.

Mrs. Z makes her way down the stairs carefully, stopping to replace a few issues.

“Sometime today?” calls Lonny when we stand in front of the door. “This thing isn’t getting any lighter.”

She sprints ahead and pulls the door open, sweeping it wide and sucking in her gut.

When we drop the couch at the curb, Lonny holds up a hand for a high-five. “Hey, you’re stronger than you look, Snowflake.”

We’ve just slapped flesh when Mrs. Z gives us a “Thank you, boys” and the door begins to close. Forget the stale cookie, the glass of milk.

But Lonny skips up the short driveway and catches the edge of the door just before it shuts. “Excuse me, ma’am. Did you forget it’s pay-up time?”

“Of course,” she says. “Cookies?”

“The bill for today comes to fifteen dollars.”

She takes a long look at the tattoo and scuffs off to find her purse. She meekly counts out a five, nine ones, and a pile of dimes and pennies.

It’s the pennies that get to me. “Keep my half,” I tell her.

“Thanks, Fish,” says Lonny, and all the money disappears into the pocket of his jeans.

Dad’s wearing his man apron, the one that says B-B-Q KING across the chest. Kneeling on the linoleum, he’s sponging off the old plaid suitcase that usually sits on a beam in the attic. “You’re late, Fisher.” The table is already set. Dinner rattles the lid of the pot on the stove.

“Tutoring.” I lift the lid. Steam from the chicken stew fogs my glasses. “Plus, I had to move Mrs. Z’s couch.”

“Sounds like a big job. Why didn’t you come get me?”

“The guy who’s been hanging out at Mr. Traynor’s helped.”

The sponge quits circling. Dad looks up. “That’s Dave Traynor’s younger brother. Dave hadn’t seen him for years. He just showed up on his doorstep a few days ago. Dave says he’s kind of wild.”

“Wild? Most of the times I’ve seen him he’s been asleep.”

Dad rinses the sponge and squeezes it into the sink. “How’d the chem exam go?”

“Think I did okay.” Feeling the fear again, I almost tell Dad about the brain lock. As a guidance counselor I bet he’s seen it before. It probably even has a scientific name. But Dad looks so hopeful—the way my old dog Barney did when I picked up his leash—I decide against ruining his mood. “I’ll know before you hit the road.”

Dad tears off a paper towel and begins drying the suitcase. “I wish I could put this trip off until you could come along.”

“That’s okay, Dad.”

He was planning to wait for the end of the school year to move Nana into assisted living; then a week ago she called because she couldn’t remember how to turn the light off in the pantry. Needing light switch advice is even worse than needing to watch the stewardess demonstrate how to buckle your seatbelt.

“You sure you’ll be okay?” he asks for the fifty-ninth time.

“Sure, fine.”

Dad drops the paper towel in the garbage can and washes his hands. Then he picks up one of the bowls from the table. He spoons stew into it and passes it to me. I hand him the other one.

Now we’ll say grace, eat, talk about something cheerful like SATs. I’ll offer to do the dishes, but he’ll say, “I’ll take care of it, son, you study.” From my desk upstairs I’ll hear the sound of running water.

There’s never a dirty dish in the sink at our house, not even a fork. Mom was the one who let dishes pile up. With Dad in charge, everything is under control.