

Simple Fractions

Ennis is deeply regretting his education as a computer scientist. When he sees a New Hampshire license plate in front of him that reads “Live Free or Die,” he starts wondering where he can go online to buy a nice grenade launcher. He and his new girlfriend, Jill, could become survivalists, and live in a grass hut on a beach somewhere, and not pay any income tax. They could fish for their food, and wear sarongs, and he would re-write *Das Kapital* as a graphic novel. His red string guru bracelet, a gift from his previous girlfriend, has gotten stuck on his watch, which is distracting. The car in front of him, the New Hampshire guy with the rusty pickup, is inching forward, and jams on his brakes hard, which Ennis knows is an act of hostility. Gotcha, flatlander dog from Massachusetts. Die! But Ennis’s reflexes are faster.

He is stuck on Route 3 trying to get to Chelmsford, late for a conference call (do they have to call them “telenars”?) with the up-all-night software group in Bangalore, engineers with soft accents, and (he knows this from his two business trips) undriveable roads full of potholes and motorized tricycles called tuk-tuks. But is his own commute, surrounded by high-powered German cars (leased from dealerships), going 4 miles an hour, any better than that?

Ennis wishes he had a jelly donut.

As his girlfriend Jill tells him, he really ought to eat healthy. And she’s right, of course, but possibly part of that half-pound of beef jerky he bought yesterday is still in the back seat. Emergency rations he can eat in case of a breakdown, he’d tell Jill, or in case Route 3 some day totally becomes a solid line of cars welded together, and there’s some horrible existential meltdown into a different dimension, and he will need the beef jerky, even though it’s full of

nitrates, to trade with the alien life forms, or roving post-apocalyptic gangs not held in check by police.

“Fuck,” he says, reaching over the headrest and winnowing through the pockets of the sweatshirt he’d thrown into the back seat after his last pick-up basketball game. No beef jerky. He does find a package of sugarless gum designed to prevent cavities, and that will have to do. He opens four pieces, puts some of the wrappers in the cup holder, and throws the rest in the back.

The CD player has been broken since somebody in his band (no one will admit to this) accidentally dropped a cigarette on a CD as they were shoving it into the player, and fried it. At least, that’s how Ennis reconstructed it when he took apart the CD player last Saturday and found melted plastic in the middle of Volume II of the Delta Blues, welded into the mechanism. Guilt and sabotage. No one confessed, so it was probably their ex-drummer, Duane, who comes from the Midwest and is still therefore embarrassed by his failures.

The New Hampshire pickup has gunned suddenly into an empty space in a neighboring lane, startling a woman talking on her cell phone in a Lexus. She blows the horn. The truck flips her the bird. Ennis chews harder.

Human beings are numberless, Ennis chants in his head. I vow to save them.

You can tell the Land Rover ahead is a leased car, because the driver is afraid to apply bumper stickers.

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On Tuesday Ennis is driving his girlfriend’s son, Tyler, to soccer practice when he notices Tyler is crying.

“What’s up?” Ennis asks him, refraining from calling him buddy. Tyler, as some other man’s child, and evidence of someone else’s grown-up life, with his small, blond head, soccer uniform, and tendency to blurt out in public that Ennis is not his real father, actually intimidates him.

“Nothing,” Tyler says. “I hate everybody.”

“Is it soccer?”

Tyler shakes his head. Ennis suspects this may have to do with Tyler’s recently rearranged custody visits, and the fact that his father is moving to San Diego with his new wife, Sondra, an insufferable (in Ennis’s opinion) real estate agent with overly white teeth, and obviously cool feelings about Tyler himself, who is a good kid. Sondra is (Jill has said) unhappy because Tyler admittedly is evidence that Tyler’s father has had sex at least once with Tyler’s mother, Jill. A fact that doesn’t bother Ennis, but then he’s not a woman, and as Jill has told him more than once, women feel differently about these things.

“You want to blow off soccer?” he says to Tyler.

“No.”

“I can take you to my work afterwards,” Ennis says. “You can use the cafeteria.”

“I don’t care,” Tyler says.

“We have a satellite link to anywhere in the world. We can Skype Lapland, or Russia.”

“I don’t know anyone,” Tyler says.

“They have soft-serve in the cafeteria.”

“I don’t care about junk food, Ennis. I wish my mom would drive me.”

“She has to work until eleven. Come on, I’m not that boring.”

Tyler looks at him dolefully.

A BMW cuts in front of Ennis, because he's paying attention to Tyler, and Ennis says, "Capitalist twit."

Ennis puts his big paw of a hand on Tyler's shoulder, which is small and boney because he is eight and thin for his age. Time to negotiate, Ennis thinks, and arrive at a good solution, which involves, as most good solutions do, a distraction and something slightly illegal or dangerous.

He tells Tyler he can skip his homework after practice and come to Ennis's band rehearsal, if he promises not to tell his mother until after they get home.

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The garage where Ennis and his band practice (it is a garage band, after all) contains about a hundred and fifty thousand dollars' worth of musical electronics, because it's a bunch of programmers, skilled thinkers, logicians, and they know how to make things sound good. Ennis tunes his Fender, and Tyler, after being introduced to the other beer drinkers, sits on the seat of a 1987 Honda 500cc that has been put up for the winter, and picks at the last of the French fries from Burger King. He is not doing his homework, obviously, but Ennis will find a way to explain this to his mother. He wonders if, in Tyler's eyes, the band guys look cool, or if they look like highly paid and educated software engineers who are reliving their high school, when they were anything but hip.

"Tyler," Raj, the lead guitarist says, "don't kick the bike, man."

"He's not kicking it," Ennis says.

"He's rapping his foot against it," Raj says.

“Don’t be so OCD, man,” Ennis says, feeling that Axl Rose wouldn’t give a shit, but none of these guys is stoned, after all, they have to go to work tomorrow. “Tyler,” he says, “you want to sit on my speaker?” Tyler gets up grudgingly.

“I should be doing my homework,” he says. “You know that.”

“You don’t need it,” Lenny the drummer says, tapping triple beat on the snare. “I never did homework, and look where I am now.”

Tyler meets Lenny’s overly-eyebrowed stare head on. Lenny’s blond hair, which he wears to work in a pigtail, is now flowing down his back in crinkles. He looks like someone out of the Bible if it was shot as a low budget film. Tyler looks at Ennis as if for translation. Lenny is from the Bronx, and he radiates eastern Europe even though his family has been in the US for three generations. Tyler says, “My mother will kill me.”

Ratta-*tap*, Lenny goes on the drum. “Mama’s boy, still?”

“He’s still into that mode,” Ennis says, wishing Lenny would shut up.

“You know what my mother says to me about my music?” Lenny says. Ratta-*tap*.

“No,” Tyler says. “I don’t care, either.”

It suddenly strikes Ennis that Tyler is in a room with four fathers, if you count David, who is coming through the door now, with his new guitar case which still has the price stickers on it. A roomful of fathers who are as unsatisfactory as Tyler’s own father, the highly paid migrant worker (dermatologist) who has bought a three million dollar house in San Diego (Ennis has been cyber-stalking, no harm in that) and taken off. Skyping won’t cut it. Who is there that Tyler can rely on?

Ennis volunteers David to help Tyler play the bass line for their first song, if David will let him. “It’s a simple line,” he says. “Tyler can do it.”

David, who is utterly tractable because he is thinking about numbers all the time, and code sequences, and because life seems to swirl and eddy around him while he watches it, amused, says it's fine with him, does Tyler want to learn the fingering? David has two children of his own, which makes him more compassionate than Raj, who is trying to get pregnant, and therefore thinks his children when they are born will all outpace everyone else's, and both David and Raj are more compassionate than Lenny, whose life is mostly channeled through his pigtail, and is otherwise an out-of-body experience. Jill has said that Lenny is a good example of spectrum disorder, but Ennis knows that he is from a long tradition of biblical scholars, and that's what they act like.

Tyler is happy to play the rhythm, and actually shows aptitude. They play fourteen covers from Metallica, and Raj and David sing, with sweat flying off their faces toward the end. Ennis joins in with vocals sometimes. Tyler, hunched against David, plucks the strings with his face crunched up, and eventually bellows like the rest of them, horrifyingly sincere in his expressions of hate and outrage.

Surely, Ennis thinks, this is better than doing your math problems. The kid is a ringer.

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By the time they leave to go home, Ennis's ears are ringing, probably terminal tinnitus, and Tyler is hoarse when he asks if they really have to stop now. The band is closing up, guitars into cases, a long, mournful final rattle of the drums, the shifting and dragging of sound equipment to one side of the garage, where David tells Raj to avoid leaving the amp in the oil stain on the floor. There were cars here, once, obviously, with compromised oil pans or hoses. Ennis is slightly depressed, as usual after music, but Tyler is smiling. Ennis rests his hand on Tyler's shoulder, as if Tyler was his own. The band makes plans to meet again, which, Ennis

knows, will be totally rearranged by email several times in the next few weeks before they actually get together.

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When Tyler and Ennis get home, Jill is waiting with the psychic equivalent of a rolling pin at the kitchen table, where she is pretending to pay bills.

“I played in a band,” Tyler says.

“What about your homework?” she answers.

“The kid’s got talent,” Ennis says. “He’s a natural.”

“What about the pages of fractions and the sevens tables?” Jill has beautiful, red hair that falls down her back under the harsh kitchen light, and Ennis runs his hand down the back of her head, and her shoulder, to feel its smoothness.

“Go,” Jill points to Tyler’s bedroom. “Where’s your backpack?”

Ennis is holding it. When Tyler has gone down the hall, and slammed his door, Ennis cracks a beer and stands leaning on the open refrigerator door, which he knows drives Jill crazy.

Ennis knows this and he does it anyway. “He’s upset about his father,” Ennis says.

“I know,” Jill says. “It makes me sick to my stomach.”

“You didn’t do it,” Ennis says, knowing that he’s lying, because “irreconcilable differences” means they (the parents) both failed in some desperate and fundamental way to take care of their kid. Jill lays her forehead on her arm on the table and says to her bills, “He’ll probably lose his hearing.”

“I hope he comes again,” Ennis says. “I’ll get him some of those noise-cancelling headphones.”

“Door,” Jill says, wagging her hand.

He shuts the refrigerator door, a source of chilliness he was unaware of. It seems to Ennis that the kitchen has sunk into a peculiar light, with his ringing ears, and his post-musical letdown. He dreads sitting in his cubicle tomorrow, even if they are paying him six figures. He can feel the presence of the boy down the hall as if it is a melody line, a fragrant little hint of camaraderie. Of asking. He sits down across from Jill and takes her hands. "You're a good mother," he says.

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Fifteen minutes later, he's sitting next to Tyler at his undersized desk, the top of which is killing Ennis's knees. Tyler is hyperventilating, as he does when he concentrates, trying to explain to Ennis the denominators of three similar fractions. Ennis's beer, getting warm, sits on the desk under the lamp shaped like a football. Tyler's fingers strike Ennis, as they hold the pencil, as surprisingly small fingers. He notes that they are red on the ends, probably from the playing. The harsh strings. Metal and flesh. He wants to interrupt Tyler to ask if his fingers are sore, but he doesn't do it. It's part of toughening up, he decides. Tyler can do that, too. He doesn't know how long it will be until Tyler's next screaming fit at Stop & Shop about Ennis not being his father, and having no right to decree broccoli over canned ravioli, and Ennis's other food choices made to curry favor with Jill. Probably those fits will be less embarrassing the more he (Ennis) gets used to them.

Tyler's fingers are looking redder by the minute. After the fraction decision (correct on Tyler's part) is made, Ennis says, "You want to soak them in cold water? That's what we do. But you want to keep the callouses. If you get any."

In a minute, he and Tyler are sitting on the side of the bathtub and the toilet lid, respectively, and soaking their hands in a washbasin full of cold water. Ennis's hands are big,

and Tyler's are small. Ennis's red string bracelet, which he got from the old girlfriend two years ago, before he met Jill, suddenly pops off, and floats in the water, as if some voice from the Great Beyond has made a point of something he doesn't quite grok.

"You want to play with us again when we get together?" Ennis says suddenly, not even sure why he's saying it.

"The guitars?"

Ennis nods. Tyler is swishing his hands, like fish. Which seems tentatively affirmative.

"You've got a knack, man," Ennis says. "I actually think that."

"You aren't my father."

"I know that. But I like you."

"My mother won't want me to," Tyler says, carving the water.

"I can fix that."

"Swish," Tyler says. "Swish, man."

Ennis winks at him, and Tyler, surprisingly enough, winks back. Now Ennis, while he examines Tyler's beet-red fingertips, is making plans. Maybe on Saturday he and Jill and Tyler can go get Tyler a guitar at Big Daddy's Guitar Emporium. Excellent name.