

## SOMETIMES A HELIX IS A CIRCLE

By Michael Thomas

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IN THE HALLWAYS THEY whispered: fight after school, norms against mods, revenge for the destroyed solar cells in the Prestons' car.

No way, I thought, but at lunch my friends and I decided to hang around the playground after school just in case. As the day wore on, the classroom dulled, the odds on the fight being the only equation to catch my attention. Mr. Dalton, as always, caught me daydreaming.

“Eric?” Mr. Dalton said, “Have you ever considered using that brain your parents bought for you?”

Mr. Dalton taught the modified gene type advanced class. I have never met anyone who smiled as much as Mr. Dalton, the expression seemingly etched into his thin face, permanent wrinkles bunched around his cheeks from the effort. He prowled behind us, smiling, hands clasped behind his back, his head bobbing on his long neck like some bird of prey.

“The logarithm, Eric?”

I stared at the probability model on my monitor, shrugged my shoulders and said, “How about two four time?”

He stared at me for a moment, finally got the joke. His smile stretched tighter across his teeth. Along the circle of terminals my mod classmates stared at me as if I was a somewhat amusing monkey.

The bell sounded, dismissing the advanced classes. I waited for an hour in the parking lot until the norms were dismissed. The late May sun sent heat ripples dancing on the asphalt and the air smelled of sap and newly mowed grass; three weeks until the end of eighth grade and the beginning of summer vacation, freedom in the air as thick as the smell of the grass.

Soon my norm friends came running and we raced to the best seats on the semi-circle of berms separating the softball diamonds from the neighboring subdivision. There was Lew, who at fifteen was two years older than us, but still in the eighth grade because he had been held back twice, and Screwy, which just about sums him up, and me, who they called Sleeves because I always wore long-sleeve shirts. Norms and mods never hung out together, but my friends and I were different despite the fact that I worked on trigonometry and the orbit of a gas giant circling Vega while they struggled with  $x^2 - 20x + 35$ . They didn't seem to much care if I had been engineered to a 190+IQ; I didn't care if Lew had been held back, or if Screwy

had a row of five studs implanted along the side of his nose. Sometimes you can only care about another person if you don't care.

Screwy said, "You think the mods really messed up that car?"

Lew shrugged his shoulders and tipped back the brim of his Stetson. "One day there's a car and the next day something blows away every solar cell in the whole damn thing. Who else would be smart enough to do that? Right, Sleeves?" He glanced over Screwy's shoulder at me and grinned his lopsided grin, the one that turned his mouth into a lightning bolt. I said, "Whoever did it should get a medal."

Screwy wrinkled his clay-colored face, stuck a finger in his ear and fished for ear wax. "All Bobby Preston did was spray paint some wall."

"Not just graffiti," I said. "He and his pals painted swastikas all over the university genetic research building. If you let that kind of hate crap go unchallenged it'll get worse. There's already a move in congress to outlaw genetic modifications. Most norms would support it, wouldn't blink if they put us in concentration camps. Pretty soon the real brown shirts will be goose-stepping down the streets."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Screwy said.

"It's called politics. It's not my fault if I can read."

Screwy said, "Yeah, that's why we hate mods."

I shoved a handful of grass down the back of his T-shirt and he took a swipe at me with his backpack and was about to leap when Lew tackled him and called him a pin dick.

"Your mother," Screwy said as he squirmed away from Lew.

"Least my mother's not a guy in drag," Lew laughed.

We killed time that way, clowning beneath the fiery circle of the sun until we heard voices coming from behind the back stop. A gang of norms marched onto the pitcher's mound led by Bobby Preston. Bobby had once tried to play a prank on the principal by ordering ten pizzas and having them delivered to the principal's house; unfortunately he gave the pizzeria his own phone number. People like Bobby give norms a bad name.

For about ten minutes the norms milled around the pitcher's mound until a group of my mod classmates left the school. Even at a distance I recognized most of them: Liz was there, whose nylons swished when she crossed her legs, and Justin Moore, engineered for flawless skin as well as brains, and others from the far end of the bell-shaped curve.

They walked toward the subdivision and as I recognized more faces, my gut went rigid. On the diamond, backpacks hit the dirt, baseball bats fanned the air. “This isn’t a fight. They’re going to attack them.”

“How do you know?” Screwy said.

“That’s the Greek club. No one over there could defend themselves against a flea.”

Sure enough the cat calls and the jeers from the norms rang out and the mob started toward my classmates, Bobby Preston in the lead with a Louisville Slugger in his hands and moronic hate etched into his blubbery face. The mods tried to ignore them, but the norms had a good angle and cut them off before they could reach the subdivision.

“You know,” Lew said, “I hate Bobby Preston. Maybe I’ll go make him give me back the five dollars he owes me.” With that, Lew cocked his Stetson and sauntered toward the norms like the hero of a western. That was Lew; not stupid by any means, just living out his personal rebellion fantasy, using failure as a weapon. His father was a drunk, no one knew where his mother lived. My own father walked out on us when I was five. I haven’t seen him since. I can’t remember what he looked like.

“Hey pin dick,” Lew yelled.

The crowd of norms parted for him.

“This ain’t your fight,” Bobby Preston said and backed away.

The norms closed in around Lew.

“You owe me five bucks,” Lew said. “Pay up or get off my playground.”

“This ain’t your .... “

“Want to prove me wrong?”

“They messed up my dad’s car!”

“Prove it.”

More bodies crowded Lew.

Screwy and I stared at each other and I knew we both felt the same disgrace at our cowardice. We charged down the hill toward our friend who was about to

stand up to fifteen angry norms.

When we got there, Lew had already shoved Bobby Preston to the ground. The mods stood nervously by. Tension charged the hot air like heat lightning.

“Take a hike.” Lew laughed.

A big kid leapt from the crowd and pinned Lew’s arms behind his back. Bobby Preston Scrambled to his feet, his arms swinging backward, the Louisville Slugger tracing an arc through the air, the upswing of which would have caught Lew in the side of the head.

I’m not sure what happened next. People told me about it, but I don’t remember. It was like when you’re in an accident, one moment you’re driving along and the next moment your car is a mangled heap only your brain has mercifully blocked out the actual crash.

Bobby Preston lay on the ground screaming, holding his face. The kid still held Lew, both of them too stunned to move. Everyone froze. And I wasn’t where I thought I was.

Screwy and I had been ten feet away when Bobby swung the bat, separated from them by the mob of norms. Now I stood between Bobby and Lew. Pain throbbled through my right hand. Everyone stared at me.

“Jesus,” Lew said.

The norm released him and jumped back.

“Sleeves, how the hell did you do that?”

“Do what?” I said. Fear scurried up my chest. Bobby staggered to his feet and for a moment dropped his hands from his face. A crimson splotch discolored the side of his face like a massive sunburn in the shape of a hand print. For a moment he stared wild-eyed at me, then turned and bolted, the other norms fleeing with him.

“I didn’t do anything,” I protested.

Lew studied me, the mods in a semi-circle watching me as if I was a science experiment. I caught a glimpse of Bobby Preston, intercepted halfway across the playground by Mr. Dalton, who had left after tutoring the Greek Club.

“I’ve never seen you move that fast,” Lew said. “I’ve never seen anyone move that fast. And you stuck your hand in Preston’s face and — what did you do to him?”

I looked down; my palm and my fingertips were red, a mirror image of the burn on Bobby Preston's face. Something was very wrong.

"I didn't do anything," I said again, lamely.

"The hell you didn't," Lew said. "You saved my life." Lew extended his hand, but as I reached out to shake it he suddenly yanked his hand back. I had never seen Lew frightened before. Behind him the mods still watched me, then looked beyond me.

I turned to face smiling Mr. Dalton, his hands behind his back, head bobbing on his pipe cleaner neck. He studied me, peered at my hand, let his smile become a grin. "We need to talk, Eric. Perhaps tomorrow after school. I may be able to help you."

His jaw trembled from the effort of holding his smile.

THAT NIGHT I SAT at the dinner table, numb, mindlessly rolling olives through the spaghetti sauce. Twice the phone rang and twice I flinched, knowing it signaled my arrest for disfiguring Bobby Preston. The first call was a survey on laundry detergent, the second a wrong number for someone named Dawn Anne. The world went on. Didn't they know I was in anguish? Didn't they know something monstrous had happened today? The phone rang; my heart beat a rhythm like firecrackers. I answered the phone and again it was the guy trying to find Dawn Anne.

Apparently the world did not care about my anguish.

I shrugged my shoulders and went to my room. At one point I actually thought of confessing to my mother. She, however, was working late at the board meeting of Franklyn National Life and Casualty. My stepfather Darryl was somewhere, probably cheating on my mother, or perhaps getting another treatment for his acne scars.

I did not sleep that night; every time I closed my eyes I saw Bobby Preston's burned face, felt bile rise in my throat. I had no idea what I had done, or how I could control it. There wasn't even a name I could use to impale it and neutralize it like a butterfly pinned to a specimen board. At times the whole scene on the playground seemed like some terrible television show, an actor burning another actor's face through the latest computerized special effects. Only it wasn't television. I might do it again and really hurt someone this time. So I did not sleep.

In the morning I met Lew and Screwy in the parking lot and we sat near the day lilies and pitched gravel at the NORTH POINTE MIDDLE SCHOOL —HOME OF THE PATRIOTS sign. When he wasn't eyeing the seventh grade girls, Lew glanced at me, looking like he wanted to ask about the day before, but saying

nothing.

Screwy, however, had no hesitation. “Jesus, Sleeves,” he blurted out, “that was great. How did you do it? The look on Preston’s face! How’d you do it?”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“Do it again. There’s that Milton kid. Go and ...”

Lew cuffed him on the ear.

“Hey!”

“Shut up.”

“That hurt!”

“Now you can’t hear the answer so don’t ask the question.”

Screwy looked to me for sympathy; I flicked a pebble at him.

Lew said, “Look out. Here it comes.”

Bobby Preston and his friends wandered across the parking lot, stopped ten feet away from us and glared. There were times when I actually felt sorry for Bobby Preston; the youngest of four brothers, each meaner than the next, with a father who never hesitated slapping his son and calling him stupid in front of the whole world, Bobby had no choice but to develop the personality of a slow-witted pit bull.

“That’s a nasty sunburn you got there, Bobby,” Lew said.

The rest of Bobby’s face turned the color of the hand print.

“You’re dead meat,” he said, staring at me.

I wanted a smart-ass comeback, but all I could manage was, “Oh yeah?” Fear numbed my mind, fear not of Bobby Preston but of myself.

Apparently, smart-ass comebacks were also beyond Bobby. He stuttered, turned the color of a tomato, then marched off, his goons in tow.

Now at this point, Screwy gave us a demonstration of how he earned his nickname. Rather than leave well enough alone, he pranced after Bobby Preston, doing a monkey imitation, chattering, “Hey Preston, want some suntan lotion?”

It took about ten seconds for Bobby to whirl and charge after him. Screwy

turned to flee back to us, found his escape route blocked by Bobby's pals, then ran for his life across the parking lot, the gang in pursuit.

Lew and I watched him disappear behind the school buses, Lew shaking his head and saying, "What an idiot."

"Yeah, but he's our idiot."

For a few minutes we sat silently, then Lew asked, "Sleeves, what the hell did happen yesterday?"

"I don't know," I said. "I've heard of unexpected things happening to people who have been modified. It's like they switch on genes for intelligence and somehow accidentally switch on something else. I remember reading about this kid who was modified for super math abilities. He was fine until he turned twelve and then something went wrong. His brain stopped sending signals to his body. The kid's a vegetable now." I pitched a chunk of asphalt at the sign. "I'm scared," I said.

Lew studied his shoes. "Yeah. It's kind of like my old man. You never know when he's gonna go berserk and take a tire iron to your head."

Right, except Lew could run from his crazy father; my crazy guy was inside my head.

The bell rang and we headed for our lockers. Both norms and mods started school at eight, but mods finished in five hours, while norms stayed for six, the idea being that mods needed the extra time for all the wonderful advanced stuff they would certainly do. Which some kids did while many of us went home and watched television. The difference was just another source of friction between mods and norms.

The morning passed as always, only this time all the other mods in the advanced class were aware of me. They snuck glances at me. They asked me to sit at their table at lunch. Unthinkingly, I did and only later realized Lew and Screwy were by themselves, watching me.

Even we genetically engineered superstars are pack creatures at heart; the most popular mods and thus the alpha male and female of the pack were Liz and Justin Moore. As we left the cafeteria, Justin said, "I'm having a pool party on Saturday. I'd like you to come."

"Ah, sure," I said, then hesitated. Lew and Screwy and I had planned to go to the movies on Saturday night. "No, I don't think so. I've got plans."

"Hanging out with the retards?" Liz asked.

“My friends are my business.”

“Someday you’ll realize you’re one of us,” Justin said. “Those losers you hang around with just pull you down. Maybe it’s about time you live up to your potential.”

I had heard this lecture before from my mother. She thought Lew and Screw were a disease, infecting me with terminal normality.

Liz stepped in front of me and pulled a centaur-shaped pendant from around her neck. “Do you know what this is?” she asked. “It’s a signaling device. Press on it here and it sounds an alarm and your location across the Net to every terminal at every mod’s house. We made it ourselves.”

“Nice,” I said. “But you didn’t have to go to all the trouble. You can buy that kind of stuff at the mall.”

“You don’t understand,” she said. “We have to learn how to make this kind of device by ourselves because one day the norms will come after us. Norms hate us. They hate you, Eric. We need to stick together. We need people like you with your kind of talents.”

Somehow, the word “talent” seemed out of place. I felt more like a gargoyle.

“I like my friends,” I said.

“But you need us,” Justin said.

The afternoon went on and soon the bell rang. As I stood to leave, I realized the whole class had remained in their seats and now stared at me. Mr. Dalton circled my desk and smiled.

“That must have been a very frightening experience for you yesterday,” he said.

“I’m all right.”

“Unfortunately the rumor is spreading around the school. It would be very bad if news of this incident reached the news media.”

“I didn’t mean it,” I said.

“Of course not,” Mr. Dalton said. “But that won’t matter. Can you see the headlines now? Mod boy attacks normal child. Freak disfigures child. The media will have fun with that. And just think of our political leaders. Not to mention the police.” His smile stretched tight across his teeth.



I studied my shoes.

“You know, Eric, your classmates are very worried about you. You’ve always held yourself aloof. You’ve never joined in. I think you might want to change all of that. The day is coming when you will need each other.”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“Do you know how you did what you did?”

I shook my head.

“It’s not surprising. Very often new talents have a way of sneaking up on a person. It must be frightening.”

Liz said, “There’s nothing to be scared of with us.”

Justin said, “We can help you.”

“I’d like you to confide in me,” Mr. Dalton said. “Get over your fright. Look at things clearly.”

Since the fight on the playground I had been a nervous wreck, but suddenly all of this attention from people who had never before indicated that they knew I existed got on my nerves. The anxiety eased and my old smart-ass personality came back. “It’s not that frightening. It might come in handy when talking to teachers.”

Mr. Dalton went on smiling, head bobbing above his quivering adam’s apple. “You know, Eric, your classmates have been very tolerant of you. With no provocation you’ve rejected them, slighted them, some might say you even betrayed them. Instead of mixing with your own kind you insist on consorting with your intellectual inferiors.”

“Fuck off,” I said.

“Good vocabulary, Eric. Your classmates, on the other hand, are reading Plato in the original Greek. I could teach you something more than gutter talk.”

“What’s Greek for fuck off?”

“Very cute, Eric. You can bait me all you want, but it won’t work. We need to talk.”

“I need to go watch television.”

Liz said, "You've been in the same class with us for eight years and you have no idea what the rest of us are doing. You've never been part of us. Why?"

"Maybe," Justin said, "because it makes him feel superior being smarter than his imbecilic friends. If he was part of our group he'd have to compete on an equal footing with his intellectual equals."

I turned on him and snapped, "Keep it up and I'll knock your perfect teeth out."

"All right," Mr. Dalton yelled. "Cut it out. Now listen to me, Eric. You have a gift. You do not have the luxury of adolescent rebellion. Sit down."

I glared at him, then finally sat, my fists clenched, a rock sitting in the pit of my stomach.

"Do you remember Corey Binkman?" Mr. Dalton said.

A vague image of red hair and acne appeared in my mind.

"Not long ago, he discovered he can bend metal without touching it. Once upon a time that was a sideshow attraction. Now, without quite understanding how, we've engineered that ability into a child. Corey is no longer here because I arranged to have him sent to the Advanced Genetic Investigations Institute at Harvard where they will study his gifts. He's quite happy there. He's with other children who have developed unusual talents. When he's old enough, he'll be assured of a scholarship to Harvard. All of the children there have been referred by teachers like myself who specialize in modified children. We form a close knit group and keep our eye out for promising children. Children like yourself. Tomorrow, representatives from the Institute will talk to your parents. They will want you to go with them so that they can study you and .... "

"No way," I blurted out.

Mr. Dalton smiled, the expression drawing his skin tight, outlining his cheekbones. "Eric, what you don't understand is that your classmates and I are truly concerned about you. The plain fact of the matter is that all of the ramifications of the genetic manipulation you underwent prenatally are not fully understood. There are long sequences of genetic code in all of us that are apparently useless. At one time perhaps they served a purpose that later was deselected by evolution, or perhaps they were accidents that never should have occurred. These redundant nucleotide sequences are still a mystery. However, in some children like yourself, sequences have been accidentally triggered. Unless we can understand what's going on inside of you, we can't control it. You can't control it. Think, Eric, it's not simply what happened yesterday on that playground. Other changes may have occurred. Do you want to gamble on your own well-being? Think of the stories I've

told you about the tragedies, the talented children who suddenly .... “

“I know the stories,” I snapped.

“Then pay attention to them. We can’t control this ability of yours, but if we study it, perhaps we can bring it under conscious volition for you and your classmates.”

“They don’t have the same abilities?”

“Not so far. Some may not have the same modifications. Some may have these abilities, but so far the talents are latent. And it is very important that we find out how to control these talents.”

Justin said, “Yesterday was just a sample of what the norms can do.”

Liz said, “It will get worse. We need to protect ourselves. You can help us.”

Mr. Dalton said, “I’ve dedicated my life to working with children of extraordinary talent. If there were no such thing as genetic modification, talented people would still be picked on. It’s always that way. The average always resent the superior and let their envy turn to hate. Only now it’s worse. There’s a reason, not just blind chance. Talent can be bought, superior intelligence can be manufactured if you have enough money. The ancient conflict between the haves and the have-nots will become genocidal because there is no way the average can win now. You and your kind will soon control the wealth and perhaps even the governments of the world because you are better than the rest. It’s unfair, but that’s the way it is. Sooner or later the average will turn on you to prevent that. So you must protect yourselves. You must take your rightful place and lead the world.”

By then, I had shut down, gone numb, heard the words, but understood nothing. I thought he was crazy, thought my mod classmates were creeps and yet something about his words intoxicated me like some drug- or alcohol-induced fantasy that makes luminous sense for a moment, then vanishes the moment you try to think clearly about it. Mostly, I wanted to run.

“I have to go now,” I said.

Mr. Dalton smiled. “You have time to think about it. Go have fun at Justin’s pool party. Get to know your own kind.”

“I don’t swim,” I said.

“I can teach you,” Liz said.

“I didn’t say I couldn’t swim. I said I don’t swim.”

“Eric, that’s not really the point,” Mr. Dalton said.

“Can I go now?”

He smiled again. “You’re not a prisoner.”

So I left, fled the room and the staring faces, waited for Lew and Screwy to be dismissed at our usual meeting place in the parking lot. They never came. I took off for the new housing development where we often killed time and found my two friends sitting on a knoll. I joined them and for a moment we were silent, watching a robotic grader creep across the scarred landscape like an arthritic spider.

“How’s your new friends?” Screwy said.

Lew elbowed him in the ribs.

“Hey!”

“Shut up.”

“They aren’t my friends,” I said.

“That’s your business,” Lew said and lit a cigarette. He passed it to both of us. I took a drag even though the smell sent my head reeling.

“I heard Bobby Preston say they’re going to get you,” Screwy said. “They say you threw something in Bobby’s face that burned him.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “He can do anything he wants.”

Lew craned his neck to peer around Screwy’s shoulders. “Just be careful. They’re stupid, but they’re smart enough to be dangerous.”

“I’m not scared,” I said.

“We still going to the movies Saturday night?” Screwy asked.

“For sure,” I said.

“Can you show me how to do that thing with your hand? That was awesome!”

“Shut up,” Lew said.

“I don’t know how I did it,” I said.

“God, if I had enough money I’d have them change me like that.” Lew said, “It’d take all the money in the world just to make you read without moving your lips.”

“Least I was never held back.”

“That’s because no one could ever stand having you in their class twice.”

“Your mother sucks.”

“Eat me.”

“There’s nothing much to eat.”

“Jerk.”

I was beginning to feel much better; I was back among friends.

THE NEXT EVENING, men in suits came after dinner and explained the Harvard program to my mother. Darryl was out someplace.

My mother nodded her head a lot, looked in awe as if the man was singing a psalm.

The man who did most of the talking folded his hands on the stomach that bulged over his belt and said, “And you have to consider that Eric would in effect be receiving an education all the time he was at the Institute. Depending upon the results of our study he might be automatically accepted at Harvard, tuition free.”

“Oh, this is so exciting,” my mother said.

“Screw it,” I said.

My mother tittered, but eyed me with her “you’ll pay for that later” look. “Kids,” she said and shrugged her shoulders.

“Indeed,” the man said. “Considering that incident the other day I’m sure Eric is still a bit confused.”

I cringed.

“What incident?” my mother asked.

“Just fooling around,” I said.

The man in the suit cocked his head, squished the fat rolls at his neck. "I'd hardly call it fooling around. He somehow generated enough heat through his hand to cause second degree burns."

"What?" my mother whispered.

"I'm sorry. I thought you knew." He explained the fight in the playground to my mother. She stared at me as if I had just stepped off a flying saucer.

"You did that?" she asked.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Fortunately we were able to arrange matters with the local police," the man said.

"The police?" I said and felt as if a giant had squeezed the air from my lungs.

"Well, Eric," the man said. "You assaulted a boy and burned his face. Naturally his parents informed the authorities." To my mother he said,

"So you see, it would be in everybody's best interests if Eric went to the Institute."

When he was gone, my mother said, "This is one incredible break."

"I'm not going," I said.

"If I say you are, then you're going. I paid a lot of money to give you those advantages. You're not going to waste them and make me look like a fool."

And that about summed up her point of view. I waited for her to ask me about the fight. She said nothing.

The next day I sat with Lew and Screwy at lunch and Screwy told me about the latest rumor.

"Bobby Preston says he's gonna get your ass, man. He says his brother Billy's gonna get his high-school friends and then they're gonna beat the shit out of you."

Lew gurgled Hawaiian Punch through the straw in his juice box.

"Looks like I'll have to have a talk with that boy."

"Forget it," I said. "I'm not afraid."

“Didn’t say you were. I just don’t like him.”

Justin and Liz came to the table and stood over me. “Mr. Dalton wants you to stay after school today. There’s something important you should know about.”

Screwy stuck a straw up his nose, then pulled it out and licked the tip.

Liz and Justin ignored him. “It’s important,” Justin said.

“Yeah, whatever,” I said.

I did stay that afternoon along with Justin and Liz while the rest of the advanced class went home. Mr. Dalton grinned and waved me over to his terminal and dialed into the Net. “This one,” he said.

The message from someone named Archimedes read, “Anyone hear about what happened in California? some gene freek burned a normal kid with some kind of weird new power!”

After that Mr. Dalton navigated through groups and boards and chat lines all humming with rumors and stories and vindictive debates, all circling back to the story of a mod kid who burned a normal.

“I got where I got because I’m smart daddy didn’t buy me a brain. If they’re going to start something then i say kill the bastards.”

“Nucleotide manipulation is not a hanging offense, last time I heard.”

“Screw you.”

“Anytime anyplace.”

“There’s a lot of reports coming out in the literature about unsuspected effects of the engineering, peptide transmutations seem very common, maybe we should shut up a minute and actually study some of these things.”

And so on until we arrived at another ominous note from Archimedes. “Apparently it really happened. My friend says it was at the North Pointe Middle School.”

My head swam, arms tingled.

Mr. Dalton swiveled in his chair. “It was only a matter of time. It will probably reach the network news by tonight, tomorrow at the latest.”

“You’re in danger,” Justin said.

“You’re putting us all in danger,” Liz said.

“Can I go now?” I said.

“Of course,” Mr. Dalton said. “Just remember that if anything happens the best place for you to be is at the Harvard Institute.”

I walked slowly from the room, but inside I fled, bolted and ran from the stupidity scrolling across the terminal. The sun warmed the spring day; people went about their business; I wanted desperately to be them, anyone but a little kid with doom following him like a cloud of gnats. But I was not normal and average and it seemed only a matter of time before the normal folks turned on me.

I waited in the parking lot for Lew and Screwy; I was too nervous to sit still so I compulsively paced circles around a stop sign. Finally the norms were released and we walked toward our subdivision.

When we reached my house, Lew stopped and I realized he wasn’t next to me. I turned, saw him gaping, staring upwards, followed his gaze and then whispered, “Shit.”

The windows in my house, the living room and dining room on the first floor and the bedrooms on the second were all shattered, empty frames like the empty sockets of a skull.

“Shit,” I said again. The sight was unreal; I wondered if it was the wrong house, wanted it to be someone else’s house. But it was mine.

Screwy danced around, muttering and pointing at the door. Yellow spray—painted letters read, “Death to Mods” and the graffiti was punctuated by a swastika.

“I’m going to kill that Preston,” Lew growled.

Anger surged from my belly to force my hands into fists. As I stared at the vandalized house and the circular holes the rocks had made in the windows, I saw with terrible clarity that there would always be Bobby Prestons, always had been, people who could do anything they wanted to you whenever they liked. The unfairness of it all sickened me, angered me, forced a scream to my lips. But I was silent.

That night, after the police left, after Darryl nailed sheets over the windows and my mother had swept up the broken glass, I went to my room and locked the door and tried to summon the force, the whatever the thing was inside of me. Since



the day on the playground I had tried to forget it, lived in a kind of half-realized fear that it might overtake me at any moment. Now I welcomed it. I tried to concentrate, but mostly my mind wandered. I tried leaping and spinning, but I only stumbled about the room and stubbed my toe. I tried karate moves, but only ran out of breath. I tried focusing my mind, but summoned only chaos. At last I gave up.

And then the call came, Screwy on the other end, breathless, incoherent at first, finally spitting out the news. Lew had gone after Bobby Preston, only this time Preston's friends had got him and held him down while Bobby shattered Lew's shoulder with his Louisville Slugger.

"We gotta do something," Screwy wailed. "This sucks!"

"Yeah," I said. "I'll do something."

The rage exploded in me like a nova.

Of course we went to the emergency room, because who knew where Lew's father might be. We waited in hard plastic chairs until he finally emerged from the treatment rooms. Even at a distance I knew it was bad. His face was the color of a mushroom. He walked straight and yet seemed to list to the side of his damaged shoulder. I had the feeling that his shoulder would probably never heal right, like those football players who can no longer lift their arms higher than their shoulders.

We met him and walked him into the cool night air, silent, just being there. I carried his Stetson for him. Eventually he said, "Next time it's his ass," only he didn't say the words as Lew would have said them, but in the hollow voice of someone who knew they had failed yet again, a voice like the crackle of dry leaves.

"Sure you will," I said. The anger inside of me was like white hot metal.

I PASSED BOBBY PRESTON in the hall the next day. The hand print on his face was almost gone, replaced by flaking skin, the burn being no worse than a second degree sunburn. He refused to meet my eyes even though I knew he saw me. I fought back the urge to smash his head against the lockers.

At lunch I sat alone until Justin and Liz sat down opposite me. "We heard about your house," Justin said.

Liz said, "It's just the beginning you know. It'll get worse."

"Mr. Dalton was telling us about the elections next fall," Justin said. "He says already the candidates are making us an issue. We'll be in danger."

"Then I guess we ought to do something about it," I said. They both blinked at me with their perfectly formed eyes. I told them about Lew.

“See what we mean?” Justin said.

“So maybe if we put our advanced brains together we could think up a way to stop them.”

They glanced at each other, suddenly looking nervous. “What do you mean?” Liz said.

“If I come to your party, then everyone will think we’re there. If we were to sneak out for a while and then come back, we’d have an alibi.”

“And do What?” Justin asked.

“Make sure Bobby Preston never hurts anyone again,” I said. I was so cold I shivered, hugged myself to stop any visible trembling. Inside the rage had turned cold and reptilian.

“You mean kill him?” Liz gasped.

I yearned to say yes, but even at my most bitter I could not say it. “You guys did his old man’s car, didn’t you?”

Justin turned the color of the hand print on Bobby Preston’s face, finally nodded his head.

“Then this time we go after his house. Just a friendly warning.”

“But....”

“That’s the deal,” I said. “I join you, I go to the Institute and in return we fry his house. Agreed?”

They studied each other, more awkward than I had ever seen them, then both nodded their heads.

“Deal,” I said. And the cold was gone and I felt a rush of loneliness, a desperate urge to belong. I was one of them.

\* \* \* \*

By Saturday, a fit of nerves almost sent me to the movies with Lew and Screwy, but instead I rolled a bathing suit in a towel and headed for the party.

Justin lived in a mammoth colonial at the end of the subdivision with pillars before the main entrance, a pool in the back yard and a sauna in a greenhouse. It was

strange to see all of my classmates there in bathing suits, somersaulting off the diving board, behaving just like normal kids. I tried not to stare at Liz, but when I saw her on the diving board, her tall and slender body encased in a swim suit, I found it hard to breathe.

Justin slapped me on the back. “You can change in the house.”

Which I did, feeling skinny and foolish, emerging from the house and holding my breath.

All of the kids whom I had spent most of my life avoiding greeted me as if I had always been their friend. I sat with a circle of kids by the pool and drank Coke and found out who was going steady with whom and which couples were breaking up. Six-foot speakers blared the sounds of electric guitars and drums played as if they were weapons. A cooler of beer was opened. A joint was passed. Above us Ursa Major began its revolution through the night sky. Everything was normal.

Justin crooked a finger at me. I followed him behind the greenhouse where Liz was waiting. A small robotic spider, the kind electricians used to thread wire through walls, sat on an overturned garbage can. Justin grinned and held the metal insect beneath my nose as if he expected me to sniff the thing. “It’s been modified,” he said. “We can send it through the air conditioning, or anyplace there’s an opening. Once inside it’ll sniff out the breaker box, clamp onto a line and send a surge through the wiring. Something’s bound to short circuit and then poof — the house goes up like kindling.”

“Won’t they find it — afterwards I mean. Can’t they trace it?”

“Nope. There’s a vial of acid set to detonate one hour after we trip the switch. It’ll look just like part of the wreckage. Neat, aye?”

“Neat,” I said.

He slapped me on the back and Liz smiled and took my arm and we rejoined the party. I gulped a beer to douse the anxiety singeing my nerves; anticipation threatened to lift me from my chair and send me into the night like some demented arsonist.

The latch on the gate clanked and I looked up to see Mr. Dalton walking toward me, smiling.

“Hello, Eric,” he said and sat next to me on a lawn chair.

“Don’t look so shocked,” Justin said and laughed. “He always comes. He’s not like a teacher at all.”

“I’m your friend,” Mr. Dalton said and smiled exposing his teeth.

“He buys the beer,” Justin said.

Mr. Dalton smiled; his eyes watched me, cold and bird-like, his head bobbed on his scrawny neck. “I can’t tell you how happy I am that you decided to accept the Institute. Next week we’ll talk about the details of your actual departure. Nice party.”

“Yeah,” I said. I wanted him miles away; if he saw us sneak away he might figure out we were the ones who torched the Preston house.

“I have many friends at the Institute,” he said. “They’ll see to it that you’re well treated. It never hurts to have friends in high places.”

Justin, beginning to sway from the beer and the joint, laughed a high-pitched hyena sound. “High places. Yeah, that’s it, high, high, high. High enough to get us the circuit diagrams.”

I flinched. “What circuit diagrams?”

“The circuits, dunce.” With an exaggerated wink, he stumbled to a group of mods at poolside.

A body hit the pool, spraying us, broke the surface, laughing. “I love you kids,” Mr. Dalton said and patted my arm.

I pulled my arm away from him. Dalton knew, was in on the plan. He had even given us the device we were about to use to destroy a person’s house. His corruption was like something tangible hanging over the back yard.

Suddenly the party wasn’t fun. The smell of chlorine gagged me. The music was like an assault.

No one else was bothered. Liz stood with a cocked hip and ran a hand through her thick hair while she talked to a group of boys. Justin laughed. More bodies hit the pool. The music blared.

I went to the cooler and helped myself to a beer. Already empties filled a bushel basket.

I tried to ignore Mr. Dalton, but he appeared next to me as I stood by the pool. “I’m glad you kids can have fun now,” he said. “Before you know it you’ll be grown and you’ll be running everything. It’s inevitable, you know.” He smiled and patted my shoulder. “You’re the next step in evolution. You’re as far above humans as humans are above apes. You’ll bring down the stupidity of human beings and out

of the rubble create a new Athens.”

“And of course we’ll remember our friends who protected us,” I said. I had no idea why I said it, the words simply materializing as if someone else had said them.

And it happens again. Only this time I am wide awake and conscious of every detail.

All of the chaotic movement around me slows while my brain functions at normal speed. Hours pass between the time a boy leaps from the diving board and his body hits the water.

I watch. His approach is a straight line. I know the angle of his descent. I see precisely the spot he will hit. He will hit the water flat. He does. The whack of his body on the water is a thunderclap. For ages he remains beneath the water. At last he breaks the surface, bubbles scatter along the water like storm clouds in some cyclonic vortex. The boy grimaces, holds his stomach. I watch each fold in his face reverberate off the next, driving the expression into his forehead, tectonic plates of skin carving a mountain range of a frown.

A girl tiptoes across the tiles. She heads for the diving board, but her gait lists to the left. She will turn from the diving board and instead go to the beer cooler. As if I had been watching her all night, I calculate that she will not return to the pool. Beyond my line of sight, a boy is coming to her, a boy I have known all night will couple with her without my ever once thinking that thought, irresistibly drawn to her, propelled by the surging of his blood.

The boy enters my line of sight, traveling a path I glimpse from the corner of my eye, joins the girl. They linger at the cooler. They walk arm in arm toward the house, in step, bodies flowing with each other in a soundless swaying tango.

It’s as if all the myriad details of life that I normally filter out of conscious perception now come to me in slow motion, giving me time to analyze them all, see the patterns, connect the dots. I know I have done this all along, only subconsciously, and now the process has become conscious, the boundary between the two vanishing, night entwined with day.

I watch the boy across the circle from me. I have paid no attention to him all night, but I somehow know he has drunk four beers and finished the joint. I know he will stand and lose his balance because his foot is deformed. I have known him for ten years and never noticed his limp, but all the same I know he walks with a slight limp. I have known it all along, but never consciously thought it.

The boy stands, loses his balance as he places his weight on his deformed foot, falls back into his chair, laughs, again stands. Behind the chair I see four empty

beer cans.

I turn and watch Justin push his way in slow motion through the group of boys circling Liz and put his arm around her and toss his beer can away. I watch the can arc through the air and descend and bounce in slow motion against the pool tiles. Without looking I know a glass has been set on the ground. I do not remember seeing it, or seeing someone put it down, but somewhere beneath the level of consciousness I must have registered the fact without ever once being aware of it. I know the can's trajectory will knock it against the glass. I hear the clink, turn and watch the glass topple over, shatter, chips of glass spinning across the tiles like gas clouds spewing from a supernova.

As I watch the glass I know I am calculating something, not knowing what, then suddenly thinking it.

Bobby Preston did not trash my house. The norms left school an hour after us. But my classmates had the time while I was detained by Mr. Dalton.

I look at Mr. Dalton. Our eyes meet. He smiles. I notice that his smile is made by his mouth alone and that the rest of his face takes no part in the expression. Above the smile his predatory bird eyes watch me, intense, malevolent.

He is not our friend. He is not our teacher. He has set the Net buzzing about me. The name Archimedes I saw on the Net makes sense now. He has used the Net and my classmates against me to scare me into accepting the Institute. Perhaps he really believes we will rule the world one day. Perhaps he feels important being associated with us, the way empty people always gain substance from the shadows of the mighty.

I do not care about his motives.

He has betrayed me. He has caused my friend to feel pain.

“You son of a bitch,” I say.

Mr. Dalton's smile falters.

“You're just as sick as Bobby Preston.”

“Eric, I...”

Mr. Dalton screams. His face so close to mine contorts like a death's head. The air fills with the stench of burning flesh. He twists away from me. I am heat. I am the fire of a sun.

Mr. Dalton stumbles away from me, stares wildly at the charred flesh of his

arm, then drops to his knees and shoves his burnt arm into the pool.

The mods back away from me, shocked, scared.

For a moment I yearn to go after them all.

Instead, I run. I run from the house, run in a circle, endlessly pass the same houses, the same streets, the same trees, or perhaps I stand still while the neighborhood revolves around me, endlessly orbits the fiery violence of a star that in reality is a scared shivering boy. Everywhere I go I think of circles and slowly I come to realize the circles are some communication from my brain and my cells in their manic hyperdrive and then I know the meaning of the circles and I collapse for a moment on a lawn and stare at the fabric of diamonds spread across the sky.

We are all trapped in our circles, norms and mods and Lew and Liz and me, mindlessly returning again and again to repeat the old patterns of our genes and our lives. I have been hurt by parents who could not love and so I have learned to hurt and in turn hurt Bobby Preston and smiling Mr. Dalton. Something deep within the root cellar of my soul has become manifest in the power to burn.

And beneath the learning, hardwired into our genes, is the never-ending circle of our pack with all its fear and hatred of the outsider, sitting within us like some squat and venomous toad.

I want out of my circle.

My mind slows down to catch up with the world, or perhaps the world speeds up. Eventually I stood and walked across the subdivision to Lew's house and sat on his porch and waited for him to return from the movies. Near midnight Lew and Screwy appeared on the walk. Lew flinched when he realized someone sat on his porch, instinctively turned his bandaged shoulder away from me, again hesitated when he realized it was me.

"Sleeves?" he said. "What the hell are you doing here? You're in a bathing suit and wet and..."

"And you call me Screwy," Screwy said.

They sat on either side of me and I told him about the party, about Mr. Dalton and the mods.

"You know what the awful part is?" Lew finally asked. I shook my head.

"I was really looking forward to beating the shit out of Bobby Preston for trashing your house."

I laughed, surprised at the sound of my own voice. “After what they did to you?”

“Sure, it’s personal now. Then your mod buddies will pay. Then we’ll get Mr. Dalton.”

“Don’t,” I said. “You’re better than they are. Leave it at that.”

Lew lit a cigarette. For a moment I felt dizzy watching the glowing ember, then the feeling passed. We shared the cigarette in the quiet and cool midnight.

At last I said, “I think I have to go to the Harvard Institute. I need to know about myself. I have to learn how to control this — whatever it is.”

Lew nodded. “So Dalton wins after all.”

“No,” I said. “It’s for my own sake. If I meet others like me then maybe we can learn from each other. I just know I have to try something different.”

He nodded again. We shared another cigarette and then it was time to leave.

Screwy said, “We would have split up anyways. Next fall’s high school. We’d go to the public and you’d go to the academy and we’d never see each other.”

Lew said, “Sometimes he makes sense.” We sat in silence for a while, then Lew said, “Take care.”

“You too,” I said.

I stand to leave, hesitate as again time slows down. Something is different. I do not know what, only feel the change. Then it makes sense.

Instinctively, I reach down and touch Lew’s damaged shoulder.

The healing begins.

\* \* \* \*

By Michael Thomas

Michael Thomas’s last appearance in these pages was also his first—”Nightwatch” back in March 1997. He lives in Michigan and works as the managing editor of the Detroit Medical News and the Bulletin of the Michigan Psychiatric Society. He says this new novelette was inspired by a paraphrased quotation from Thoreau: “What good is a telegraph line that stretches from New



York to California if New York has nothing to say to California?"