

Heisenberg Elementary by Wil Mccarthy

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"Nine Nine Two!" shouts JimmyTim Exxon in the middle of literacy block. "Five Eight! Four Nine Nine One Seven!" Everyone looks up at the clock but otherwise ignores him. That's his social security number, and everyone knows it by heart already. After hearing it every fifteen minutes all week long, we're not even giggling anymore.

"Let's talk about ticware," Miss Solarbad had said on Monday morning, "and the various ways to avoid infection." Yeah, yeah, don't lick the flag pole don't inload from strangers don't execute neurops no matter *what* survival traits they seem to offer. Like everyone doesn't know JimmyDim caught the bug *at school*, from a badly formatted toilet seat. And the week has only gone downhill from there.

Literacy block is a hundred hours long. Fortunately, it takes place in a virtual universe, with minimal leakage. Boy, I feel sorry for *that* me! Our time, our real time, is spent taking standardized tests, like always.

"Real education costs real money," Miss Solarbad says cryptically. "But by measuring the outcome we can change it at the elementary level. When every chair contains a thousand children, the statistics are universal."

They're just getting ready to blow lunch in through the vents--I catch a whiff of hot-dog vapor--when the Chronarchists show up again.

"Again?" says their sergeant recluse. "What do you mean again?"

"You've been here five times today and it's barely lunch," answers Miss Solarbad.

"Oh," he says unhappily. "Great. Would you hit me with a chair to break the loop? Please?"

Guardedly: "That depends on why you're here."

"Can't say, ma'am. Prime directive."

But I'm tired of this loop, so I hit the sergeant recluse myself.

"Thanks, kid," he says, his hair shifting color from blond to brown. His voice is lower, too. Then it's down to business: he and his three priwates form a circle around Pammy TransAm, line up their funguns and turn her Happy. Ouch. That smile's got to hurt.

"Sorry, ma'am," says the sergeant recluse to a frowning Miss Solarbad. "We find it's the best way to neutralize inconvenient people."

"You always say that."

"Actually, ma'am, we never always said that until just now. The changes are retroactive."

"What changes? Who are you?"

"Chronarchists, ma'am. Just liberating the timeline."

Miss Solarbad frowns. "From a happy girl like Pammy TransAm? Why on Earth? Who was she going to be?"

"President of Bitchtopia, ma'am. Very destabilizing. Now she's Union of Unconcerned Citizens."

"Oh," says Miss Solarbad. "Well, uh. Thanks?"

"All in a day's work, ma'am," he says, and ceases to ever have existed. *Brother!*

Finally we get to breathe lunch, and after that a whiff of playground dust and fresh-cut grass. Then it's back to the CSAPSAT for another four hours.

"Don't bias the statistics," Miss Solarbad reminds us sternly. "Don't think about your answers."

Pretty soon the Chronarchists are back. This time they give Pammy a speech impediment, which her extreme happiness causes her to see as a positive growth experience.

"Tank oo vey much!" she says brightly.

"Unconcerned Citizens my foot," mutters the sergeant recluse before ceasing to ever have existed again.

Finally, finally, the school day is over and I can go play. Unfortunately my parents can't afford point-to-point, so of course I have to tunnel home as a quantum waveform, which is like completely unfair. And of course Mom is waiting for me at the collapse point, looking shrewish. Don't you love that word, shrewish?

"Your waveform shows a peak at the arcade again," says Mom.

"It's on the way," I remind her.

"It's on all possible ways," she says, like that's the end of that.

"Give me a break," I try, putting on a mature voice so she'll maybe listen for once. "It's only a 10 percent presence. I didn't even experience it at a Newtonian level."

But I get dish duty anyway, followed by more homework than there are hours to complete it. School doesn't care about the problems of working families; Mom and Dad can't afford a time compactor, so what am I supposed to do? I settle for an optic cram and dump, which utterly makes me ill, then wind down by kicking a virball around the page for half an hour in five parallel muscle groups. I think about inloading a season of TV, but I'm just too tired. I crawl into bed, utterly defeated.

There is of course something wrong with my pillow. All my dreams are in blue, and the audio is laggy. It figures.

In the morning, Mom and Dad and Janey have run the helium chiller dry, so I'm forced to superconduct in liquid nitrogen, like *that's* going to decohere. If they *actually loved me* they'd turn the dial down, and never mind the trillion bucks. But noooo. I hate my life.

Outside, the weather is cold and rainy. Yuck. My waveform clusters under trees and awnings, collapsing

only reluctantly into homeroom.

The Chronarchists of course are already there, playing some kind of scanner thing over Pammy TransAm.

"Highly effective in the third degree," says the sergeant recluse. "I was afraid of that. No amount of change is going to stop this girl. There's only one thing for it."

The privates all nod solemnly, pulling a uniform out of nowhere and holding it up against Pammy, who like instantly has always been wearing it.

"We're at your disposal, Kernel," says the sergeant recluse in a fawning kind of way.

"Let's get out of here," she says in the voice of a much older woman. "Far future lookback, full temprum. This line's not going to liberate itself."

I stick my hand up. "Pammy? Can I come, too?"

The Chronarchists turn, noticing me for the first time. The sergeant recluse holds out his scanner, whoob whoob whoob, and lights up with surprise.

"Kernel, this is BennyJam Wheelrut, the lingerie designer!"

"It is? Oh, yeah," says Pammy wistfully. Don't you love that word, wistfully? "I went to Heisenberg with him when we were kids." She turns to me. "Benny, people are like totally wrapped around your work. They love it. They'll edit me right out of the timeline if I so much as speak--"

Oops. I get the feeling there were Chronarchists here or something, but Mom says I've got to stop daydreaming in class.

"Today we'll be taking a standardized test," Miss Solarbad announces.

And then suddenly there are three Chronarchists in the room, looking dark and blurry and scared.

"Ignore us," implores the sergeant recluse. "Go on about your business."

Which is a strange thing to say, because they've been standing right there for as long as I can remember. But then--finally!--the Time Patrol shows up with funguns blazing, and for once school is, like, actually interesting.