

Fred sat in the University of Georgia classroom auditorium along with 73 Finance 3223 students, waiting for Professor Roth to arrive. Fred downed his morning Diet Coke and, as the professor strolled in with two books and an armload papers, he climbed atop his desk, pointed at the professor, and shouted at the top of his lungs, "Aachhh! It's the Hegemon!" Fred was little overweight, and his face had a natural boyish look. The impression he made standing on the desk, eyes wide open and mouth agape, was that of a small boy in fear of a flying orangutan.

Fred then proceeded to race across the row of desktops toward the exit, students aghast, a few of them rescuing books and papers from the one-man stampede. When he was four desks from the exit, Fred stepped on a half-eaten chocolate croissant. His foot slipped forward and Fred fell backwards, banging his head smartly on the edge of the desk. He saw stars.

The face of a beautiful girl with deep brown eyes peered down at him, looking as if she had just seen a dog vomit. As his vision improved, he noticed she was not quite so beautiful after all, but he also noted, with some relief, that she did not appear to foster any violent intentions. She pointed out, with a touch of sarcasm, "Sir, I believe you squashed my croissant."

Fred smiled, and as he clambered over the remaining students he yelled back, "My sincere apologies, ma'am. I'll make it up to you -- dinner at Chipotle's, 7:00 tonight."

Before she could reply, he was out the door.

Professor Roth stood at the lectern with a puzzled expression and asked, "Would anybody else prefer not to take the final?"

"Gert! You finally got a date!" her friend Amanda whispered as the exams were passed down the rows.

"Right. Number one, the guy is obviously insane..."

"I know! You two were made for each other!"

Gert rolled her eyes. "Number two, Chipotle's is not what..."

"No excuses. You got a date. Here's your exam."

Gert would ace the exam. Finance was easy for her, as were most of her other courses. She was a Civil Engineering senior, and took Finance as an elective. She had this final and one more, and then she was off for Christmas break.

While she considered the indirect effects of the M2 Money Supply on Treasury Security yields, she wondered about her new acquaintance. Who was he? She had never seen him in class. What was he doing, anyway? He must be some sort of spastic. Of course, she wouldn't meet him tonight. That would be absurd.

At 7:01 that evening, Gert was in Chipotle's, consciously refusing to scan the room for her "date," and mentally enumerating the ways that curiosity could kill a cat. At 7:15 she

was digging into a burrito, having satisfied herself that she had been stood up. She was a relieved. She mentally chastised herself for being played, vowing to stop being so gullible. Then Fred walked in the door and spotted her.

He said, "Oh no! You're already eating!"

She said, "I had a dinner invitation for 7:00."

"I know. I'm late. I'm sorry. Time got away from me, and I really didn't think you'd be here."

"You apologize a lot."

"And you bought your own food! Here, take this." He handed her a twenty-dollar bill for the food, hoping to make up for his poor behavior.

She looked at the bill and said, "And what's this for? The food was only seven bucks."

"Sex." Sometimes he just couldn't resist an opening.

She pocketed the twenty, raised her eyebrows, and said, "Was it good for you, too?"

"Fantastic. Uh... I think. Mind if I join you?"

"If you tell me what you were doing in Finance class this morning."

"Deal. I'm Fred, by the way."

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Fred," she said formally. "My name is Gert."

Fred laid down his backpack in the chair across from Gert, and came back a few minutes later with some indeterminate Mexican food. He wasn't a fan of the food, but he liked the fast, anonymous wifi. He knew this network was clear because he had designed and installed it himself on a consulting contract a year earlier.

Fred pulled out a laptop, loaded Tor (for anonymous web browsing), and brought up a web site. He passed the laptop over to Gert.

She watched a video of Fred shouting at the professor and running across the desks that morning. "How in the heck did you get this?" she demanded. There were three or four camera angles, all of them high def, showing the complete escape from Finance class, some of it in slow motion.

Fred said, "It's a video contest. This week's topic is 'Escape from Authority.' I planted some wireless cameras in the classroom last night. I've got to go pick them up later, after the building is closed. The bad thing is, after all that trouble I don't stand a chance of winning. A guy I know in San Diego made a video at the airport. He broke one of the full-body scanners, fell on the floor, and faked convulsions. They hauled him out to an ambulance. It was great -- he anticipated where they'd wheel him out of the airport and had cameras and people planted along the way. He made a point of smiling at the cameras while he was supposedly in agonizing pain."

"They'll come down on him pretty hard on him when that hits YouTube."

"No, we keep all these private. It's a close-knit group. When we do release a video, we're careful to sanitize it so it can't be traced back."

"Who's we? How many lunatics are there who do this?"

"Around 80. We get 30 to 40 entries per week, common voting, and the winner gets 90% of the \$100 entry fees. It's a little like the bass tournaments the rednecks have around here. It's not a formal club, but you might say it's an exclusive group. We call it the Turnip Club."

Gert thought about it for a minute or two while they ate. "Have you ever won?"

"I thought you'd never ask," Fred answered. "You are looking at the number one videographer in the Turnip Club, with 9 wins this year."

"Holy crap! You've made over \$25,000 doing prank videos?"

"Prank? Bite your tongue, insolent one! I am an artist."

"Yeah, you looked like an artist this morning when you were splattered across my desk."

"Color. I was adding color," he said in a not-too-convincing tone.

Gert asked, "So, what do you do for a living when you visit earth. Or are you a student?"

They spent a little time exchanging backgrounds and other small talk. Fred was from Montana, working on a PhD in Physics. His real name was David McClain, but his friends started calling him Fred in high school after he was arrested at Fred Meyers for shoplifting.

He had honestly forgotten to pay for a pair of pliers and a bottle of rust stain remover (a source of hydrofluoric acid for a chemistry project). His friends knew this was undoubtedly the truth, because Fred was well known for mentally spacing out from time to time, thinking about things that other people don't. This only made the name stick, though, perfectly appropriate in his friends' eyes.

Fred dated occasionally, but had never had a girlfriend for very long. Every time he began a serious relationship, the girl would inexplicably dump him after he forgot about her for a few days. Or weeks.

Gert, whose real name was Victoria Gertrude, grew up in Atlanta with her grandparents. She didn't mention her parents, and Fred thought it best not to ask. She took school very seriously, sacrificing her social life almost entirely for a 4.0 average, and she readily acknowledged as much. She didn't go out much, had never traveled outside Georgia except for a couple of trips to Panama City, and she spent most of her spare time reading. Gert was perfectly content with her boring lifestyle, as she called it, and was looking forward to settling down in a nice, sedate civil engineering career.

"So what's the next project?" Gert asked.

Fred's eyes lit up. Going into lecture mode, he said, "I'm looking at the average atomic weight of various boron samples taken from different locations and environments. While boron is normally considered to have an atomic weight of 10.811, its average atomic weight can actually vary from 10.806 to 10.821, depending on..."

"No, no, no. What's the next VIDEO project?" Gert corrected.

Fred froze for at least 30 seconds, looking out into hyperspace or cyberspace or some other intangible continuum. Then he jumped, looked at Gert as if he had just seen her for the first time, and said, "Hey! What are you doing next week?"

Gert didn't hesitate. "Forget it. Whatever it is, I'm not interested. I don't do things like this. Period. No. No. No."

A couple of hours later, Amanda was in her apartment, studying, when her phone buzzed. It was Amanda, asking about the hot date with the idiot from Finance class.

Amanda heard a rapid recount of the evening, and eventually broke in, "Victoria Gertrude Smith, have you gone completely bonkers? You don't even know who this guy is, other than a raving nut case! I cannot believe you're actually going to..."