

Putting the X back into Christ's Mass

"Jesus, will you shut up!"

Sage advice from little Bobby on Big Daddy's Biology Show

Though much of the East coast of the United States is dreaming of a white Christmas in loo* of the unseasonable weather they've been experiencing, the holiday spirit is definitely in the air. As early as mid-October, businesses tentatively began placing holiday bric-a-brac in remote corners, as though sensing that consumers could openly rebel at the sight of a set of three-foot-tall plastic reindeer meant to be placed on one's lawn. Once the carcasses of Turkeys Present disappear into landfills, any inhibition that might have held businesses back disappears. Meme infections reach epidemic proportions as "Jingle Bells" spreads from one host to another, using the insidious vectors of whistling and humming^α. No matter where you turn, the duality of Red and Green^β (the animal and the vegetable^χ) confront us and demand that we buy. "Drive the economy!," whispers aisle after aisle of merchandise trapped behind plastic and cardboard...sealed for our protection.^δ

Inevitably, the voices of the dissenters can barely be heard against the maddening cacophony of carols on the radio. "Christmas has become too commercial," They™ say, with genuine concern in their voice, ready to go tharn if the headlights



of consumerism should swing around the corner and pin them out in the open without their credit card. "We've forgotten that Christmas is about the birth of Christ."

Give me a fucking break.^ε

Christmas hasn't been about Jesus since AD 335 when Pope Julius I decided the Christian churches, crawling out from under the toppling colossus of the disintegrating Roman Empire, would celebrate

* Yes, we mean loo. X-Mas is in the shitter!

^α Both of which have speed and direction.

^β Sworn enemies since the Blue-Yellow wars of ought-eight!

^χ Both of which have speed and direction. And get it on with the lamb.

^δ Like bagging a 12point caroler up at your uncle's hunting lodge.

^ε Break me off a piece of that Christ Kat Bar™



DRAMATIS PERSONAE

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the birth of their god. Instead, Christmas represents the Christians' greatest marketing scheme in history, paralleled only by DeBeer's "Diamonds or Eternal Damnation" brainwashing.

Prior to AD 335, mainstream Christians didn't celebrate the birth of Jesus.^φ In fact, the date of his actual birth is unknown. Assuming the accounts of his birth in the Gospel are accurate^γ, Jesus could not have been born in the winter. The Gospel of Luke talks about shepherds out in the fields watching over their flocks when they had the be-jeebers scared out of them by an angel telling them the King of Israel had been born in Bethlehem.^η As far as historical records indicate, the flocks in the area of Jerusalem to Bethlehem were reserved for temple sacrifices at the Jewish Passover and the sexual gratification of the shepherds. The sheep were brought out to the fields in late February or early March and sodomized, since the lambs had to be loosened up 30 days before the Passover meal. From November to February, the sheep were not out in the fields, but in the barn nursing their torn anuses. Thus, no shepherds would have heard the word in December over the "baa-ing" of a virgin sheep being violated.[†]

We get the magic date of December 25th from a convergence of several traditions and bad mathematics. For humans who exist with the world rather than in it, December 22nd is significant in the northern hemisphere; it represents the shortest day of the year. On the 22nd there is the least amount of sunlight in the year and the chill of winter surrounds the homes of people who wonder if they stored enough food to last until the spring. Predictably, several traditions arose around this idea, all of them symbolically welcoming back the returning sun.

In the Roman Empire, around the time Christians were fighting a political guerrilla war for supremacy, there were two main celebrations in December, both falling on the winter solstice: Saturnalia, in honor of Saturn, the god

^φ They didn't even care. Poor, poor Jesus. No presents for the Jes-Man.

^γ Jupiter, Mars and Kevin Bacon came together in a triple conjunction the like of which was not be seen until Salior Moon.

^η "Do you see what I see?" "A bunch of shepherds, freezing in the snow, hiding in their sheep..."

[†] Virgin sheep are kosher sheep.

of the harvest, and a celebration of Mithra^φ, a sun god from the Holy Land introduced into the Roman Empire by mystery religion loving Roman soldiers.

By AD 335, errors in the Roman calendar had caused the solstice celebrations to be held on the 25th of December. At the same time the Christians, realizing that their religion wasn't very sexy when compared to pagan traditions, decided it needed some holidays. Assuming Jesus was born and died on the same day of the month, fixed at the 25th of March (capitalizing on the return of spring and the symbolism of rebirth and resurrection), a nine month pregnancy would put Jesus' birth in December.

What a happy coincidence that there just happened to be other celebrations held in the same month and, wow, on the 25th. Neat.

This policy of shifting made-up holidays around on the calendar became the Christian's greatest weapon of subverting pagan traditions and Christian heresies (next to killing them, that is).^κ Spreading North through the activities of the missionaries,^λ the Christians carried Christmas to the Germanic tribes where it recombined with local traditions. There, evergreens were a powerful symbol used in the Solstice, as they were one of the few plants which stayed green and promised the return of the sun. Holly



was also used, and it became a powerful Christian symbol, the red berries representing the blood shed by Jesus at his crucifixion and the green being the promise of a bountiful marijuana crop in the spring.^μ

So Christmas was celebrated, but it didn't have quite the right spin yet. Enter a fourth century Turkish saint named Nicholas (c245-350AD). Depicted as a tall, dignified, and austere man, St. Nicholas was best known for his kindness to children,^ν but is also the patron saint of pawnbrokers.

Ok, kids. Can you see where I'm going with this?^ο

^φ Who also served as a template which Christians used to make their god more appealing, as Mithraism, was out-competing Christianity. If you can't beat them, steal their ideas (See "Gracies Dinnertime Theatre")

^κ Ayuh, them city folk come through here regular, jes' slaughtern' the kids an' messin' up the calendar.

^λ All the cool kids were missionaries.

^μ The green was also a reminder of the gangrene one gets after being stabbed by a Roman spear.

^ν Lewis Carroll type kindness. Catholic priest type kindness. Michael Collins type kindness.

^ο Uh... no.



on the symbolism of the Magi giving Jesus ridiculously expensive gifts that he couldn't possibly appreciate.^θ Besides, it makes more sense for the patron saint of pawnbrokers to leave material gifts rather than transient sucrose and oranges.

The final transformation needed to make Christmas what we see today started with Wal-Mart and "A Visit from St. Nicholas" by Clement C. Moore. When Sinter Klaas emigrated to the United States, his name was Americanized^ρ, but he

His feast day, held on the 6th of December, came to be celebrated throughout Europe until the 16th century. Thereafter, the Dutch still held him close to their hearts. By that time, St. Nicholas, AKA Sinter Klaas, and his sidekick Black Peter, would gallop from housetop to housetop on the 6th of December. Children would leave their stupid wooden shoes next to the fire and make sure a snack was left for Sinter Klaas' housetop hopping horse Dick. The saint and his sidekick would then kick into action. While the saint left candy for the wee ones, Black Peter left gifts. Though candy was good, gifts are better, and gifts came to be the dominant practice of the tradition. This tradition shifted dates from the 6th to the 25th^π and took

still looked the same: a skinny whippet of a man who seemed perfectly adapted to chimneys. Still, he was an ethnic figure and hadn't permeated the culture yet. The poem "A Visit from St. Nicholas" and the illustrations by Thomas Nast brought Santa to the masses. Oi.

Soon, the early marketing boys (read: "memetic engineers" or "wetware programmers", whichever you prefer) began to see potential in using this guy. The Coca-Cola Company, best known for its cocaine laden drinks, hired Haddon Sundblom (AKA Mr. Smith) to devise a way of using Santa to peddle their drinks. What Mr. Sundblom created in 1931 was a fat git in red and white, wearing suspenders and possessed of a friendly face.

^π Except in Germany, where they sing stupid drinking songs in Foreign.

^θ 4 out 5 doctors don't recommend smoking frankincense until the toddler stage.

^ρ "Name?"

"Ivan Zovanovitzch."

"Here you go Mr., ah, Smith."

So I don't want to hear any of this crap about Christmas becoming too commercial. Christmas has always been about commercialism, whether it's a religion that's being sold to pagans, soda being pushed on a populace, or businesses wondering if they can get away with starting to hang Christmas decorations around September in hopes of selling more. If anything, I think Christmas has become too Christian. Let's get rid of all this savior-being-born-on-this-holy-day crap that we both know isn't true. Don't get me wrong: I love Christmas. I just think it'd be better off without this Jesus guy. Some Jew gets nailed to a tree two thousand years ago and I need to celebrate his birth? Hell, I think it's enough that I have to use a calendar system based on his birth. Every time I write a date I'm forced to celebrate his birth. That's enough.

Bring on Xmas: the generic gift giving holiday. Justified by the solstice symbolism of the sun's rebirth, we can give as many gifts as we want. Happy birthday Sol! I'd even be willing to let businesses start pushing their Xmas w4r3z just after the summer solstice.

Santa would have to be revamped, however. He's just too jolly for a pawnbroker. I envision a return to the more traditional looking Santa, but imagine him with a furry clerks uniform making him look like a plush Bob Cratchet.[†] Instead of sitting on his lap and telling him what you wanted in malls, you'd enter his office. There, seated across from the Man with the Means, you'd wheel and deal for that NoFriendo game system you've been itching for.

Mr. Claus would look deep into your soul for a few minutes, his ice blue eyes looking like frigid Norwegian girls, and he would then write down a figure on a slip of paper and solemnly pass it to you. If you didn't like what would be required of you, you could negotiate to get the value down.

"I have to be nice for 283 days out of the year? Mr. Claus, this is unreasonable. I might be able to manage 180..."

"Too few. I suppose I could go down to 250 days if you left a whole plate of cookies out for me and my boy Pete."

The shadows of the office move of their own accord, taking on a shape for a moment, then returning to their prior state of lifelessness. A dry chuckle fills the room.

"It's a part of his way of psyching me out," you tell yourself, "be strong."

"250 days of niceness plus a plate of cookies? I'm sure your reindeer must get hungry. If there were a stack of carrots there I could see 200 days."

"Hmmm. Well, Santa gets awful thirsty delivering all those gifts—"

"225 days of niceness, a plate of cookies, stack of carrots, and a glass of Wild Turkey 101."

"Make that Johnny Walker Black Label and you've got a deal."

"Done."

"Ho, ho, ho. Just sign at the X, kiddy, and you'll have yourself a very merry Xmas."

[†] Or a Dostoevsky character.

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Pat Fleckenstein

I was driving home from work today and heard a story on NPR about a preacher in Louisiana who runs an unlicensed boarding home for orphaned children. To make a long story short, concerned relatives are unable to contact children in this home, but officials are powerless to do anything unless there are substantiated reports of specific abuses. I was caught. I still hold onto the “innocent until proven guilty” precept, but that precept keeps laws punitive where prevention would be much more useful.

I fought with this dilemma for a few moments and ran cortex-first into my favorite Nietzsche line: “Happy is the man with only one virtue for many have gone out onto the battlefields of virtues and lost.” So, I surrendered this skirmish and moved on.

I hit quantum mechanics next. I immediately saw a parallel between the legal system and quantum mechanics. The “innocent until proven guilty” concept was dripping “superposition”. If Schrodinger’s cat is both alive and dead until the box is opened, then the defendant is both guilty and not-guilty until the jury’s decision is made.

It may seem that the legal system would fall under classical physics. Someone is murdered. Evidence is collected. A suspect is detained. The case is formed. The jury is chosen. The case

is presented. The jury returns a verdict. One could easily think that, at the time of the murder, the suspect is either guilty or not-guilty. But, legal guilt is a far more slippery fellow.

Before a murder is discovered, the soon-to-be-defendant’s wave function is in a known state of not-guilt. Once the murder is discovered, the wave function begins to progress. As the evidence is collected, the case is formed, the jury is chosen, and the case is presented, the wave function continues to evolve. Through that whole time, the legal fate of the defendant is a superposition of probabilities of being found guilty and probabilities of being found not-guilty.

At the moment the jury’s decision is made, the defendant’s wave function collapses. Now, the defendant is either guilty or not-guilty. The “liablon” has hit the detecting device.

Then, the analogy breaks down a bit because an electron can’t file an appeal to a higher Stern-Gerlach device or ask that the second slit be stricken from the record. But, if you keep the wave function propagating until the whole legal system has reached a verdict, the analogy is pretty robust.

The code of Hammurabi (“an eye for an eye”) implies that justice is conserved. But, unfortunately, guilt is not conserved. If two people are suspected of the same murder, there is no guarantee that one being found guilty implies that the other will be found not-guilty. This



Judge Wapner, father of receipts

makes the prospect of transmitting information instantaneously through entangled legal superpositions even murkier than it is with their quantum counterparts.

So, what good is this correlation? It would be nice if we could map the findings of quantum mechanics into the legal system. Maybe we could produce small pockets of world peace in the lab with carefully coordinated judicial superconductors. Maybe we

could measure the bureaucratic mass of legal black holes by observing the guilt radiation at the event horizon. Maybe we could quantify the curvature of justice in semantic neighborhoods of F. Lee Bailey. I don't know.

It may be more useful to map the findings of the legal system into quantum mechanics. After all, law has been practiced for thousands of years. Quantum mechanics has been practiced for thousands of weeks. Quantum mechanics is often seen as non-intuitive, strange, bizarre, and difficult because the "objects" in quantum mechanics are significantly different than the "objects" we



Murray Gell-Mann, father of quarks

are used to seeing in daily life. But, this is misplaced frustration. The objects in quantum mechanics don't behave much like oranges and ocelots, but they do behave a great deal like social and legal constructs. The guilt/not-guilt analogy above is only scratching the surface.

Consider how intuitively one understand the Heisenberg uncertainty principle after one has spent 4.28 hours trying to wrest a three keystroke

shortcut from a customer service hotline. Consider how intuitively one understands the Many Worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics in light of the O.J. trials. Consider how intuitively one understands the particle/wave duality of light after Bill Clinton said, "I did not have sexual relations with that woman."

The mysteries of quantum mechanics are nothing new. We were just comparing neutrons to croutons. Instead, we should be comparing quarks to courts. Croutons are, mathematically, much simpler than juries. But, it's a price we'll have to pay.

alter, pat





Howard's Happy Hour

By Howard Hao

"A remender, statim vivus fierem per un baser."

(As a cure, I would be revived by a kiss)

Carl Orff, *"Carmina Burana: Cour D'Amours: Dies, nox, et omnia"*

Childhood Memories

Afternoon delights as the
Warm amber sun penetrates
Subcutaneous tissue, extending
Its dendrils into the deepest
Parts of the body. Laughter
And silly songs that are
All but forgotten the next
Minute. Days when you were
King or Queen, invincible and
Powerful, commanding your
Legion under blue blanket
Castles. Boxes became cars,
Cages, the universe. Tireless
Squabbles with playmates,
Cooties and dirty, muddy hands.
Times of insect collections,
Mud pies, and playing house
Treasured forever.

Sage Advice

-For Elmer

Away to the philosopher I sought
To solve my dilemma, this fire
So he hummed in a pleasant tune
And strummed his melancholy lyre:
The hurt, the disdain
Stings like blows to cranium
You stand alone, insane
Pondering what made it wrong
Reflecting on what is not to be
Wondering must you suffer
Before finally becoming free
Yet perseverance is vital
And to finally win her
You have to keep trying
And trying to make it occur

Those crazy Russians.

By Adam Fletcher

"Stripunsky". What a good, healthy Slavic name. Clearly the name of a chess player who will open up a can of whupass on players without Russian names.

A "poisoned pawn" is a pawn that looks like it's hanging (undefended), but really costs tempo, attack or, in this case, the game. The pawn may look tasty, but bad acid can, too.

Manhattan Chess Club 1997

Stripunsky vs. Cooke

1. e4 e6 2. d4 d5 3. Nc3 Bb4 4. e5 c5 5. a3 Bxc3+ 6. bxc3 Ne7 7. Qg4 Qc7
The French Defense, Winawer Variation.
8. Bd3 cxd4 9. Ne2 dxc3
10. Qxg7 Rg8

11. Qxh7 MCO-13 lists this in a footnote (b, Pg. 211)

11. ... Qxe5? Book is Nbc6. Take the pawn on e5 and...

12. Bf4 Qf6 Get your queen chased around the board.

13. h4 Nbc6 Nbc6 is too little to late.

14. Bg5 Qe5 15. f4 Qc7 White gains tempo with an attack.

16. h5 e5 17. h6

Rf8 18. Qg7

Preventing 18. ... f6

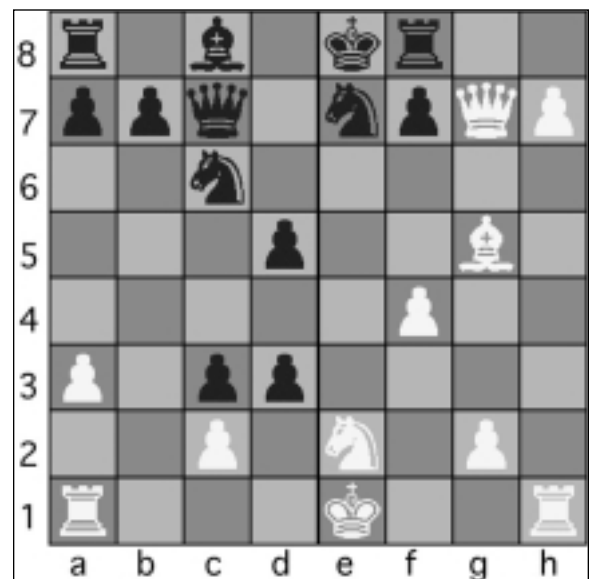
18. ... e4 19. h7 exd3

[diagrammed] Who needs bishops when you can promote?

20. Qxf8+ Kxf8 21.

h8=Q+ Ng8 22. Qxg8+ Kxg8

Who needs queens when you have...



23. Bf6 Bishops and rooks who can punish the insolent. Black resigns.

Teaching us: Don't eat all the free material, unless you're sure it's free; don't play chess against Russians, and mate is more important than material.

Intrepid Vorbei

Part 2: Reflections

By Eric Thomas

To Americans, tequila is an outlaw. It is reminiscent of a sad life, of saloons and poker games, gunfights and double-crosses, of dust and tumbleweeds. It is a fearsome drink, dangerous and foreign.

To Intrepid, tequila was the only liquor left in the house, but the outlaw beverage was appropriate for his situation. He sat in his living room, sunk into a large yellow armchair, with a highball glass filled with iced tequila in one hand and a cigarette burning between two yellowed fingertips of the other. The bottle and his pack of cigarettes lay on the cluttered coffee table, beside his slippered feet. A glass ashtray, stolen by Phil from an all-night diner, rested on his belly.

He hadn't cried at the hospital. He had run to the men's room and dry-heaved at the toilet for a while, but he hadn't cried. He hadn't cried while talking to the police, even when they had declared him a suspect and searched his car. He hadn't cried when a young doctor had told him that Chastity was comatose and in critical condition. He hadn't even cried during the ride to the hospital, when Vanno had asked him who the girl was, and he had tried to explain his relationship with Chastity without using the past tense.

At the time, he had considered lying to Vanno, saying that he had never seen Chastity before. Finally, though, he had told Vanno that the girl was from out of town, and he knew her through a mutual friend. That was all he could manage without breaking down.

So maybe he could try to hide it. If the housemates asked where he had gone tonight, he would tell them he had gone to the diner. If they asked where the tequila had gone, he would say he had given it to a friend.

No, that was ridiculous. This was going to be in the papers and on the local news. He would get phone calls, reporters at the house, police investigation, everything. He could not possibly keep it a secret.

So, what, then? Try to endure that dark celebrity status on campus until the whole thing blew over? Sit tight and answer questions, and hope his life didn't turn into a circus? He had no desire to be the centerpiece of a media feeding frenzy. He imagined a thousand students casually condemning him over undercooked pasta at the dining halls, and a thousand others saying, "No, no, Vorbei's just an accomplice to Chastity's suicide." The whole idea made Intrepid feel ill.

And that was the big issue. Whatever had happened to Chastity, he was a suspect. She was in a coma, and therefore unable to clear him of any suspicion. Furthermore, who knew if she would? Did she even remember what had happened? Could she say for sure that he hadn't been involved? There was no way to tell.

The fact that Intrepid had not actually been involved gave little comfort. He could see things from the police's point of view. This girl, who lives in Pennsylvania and goes to school in Ohio, shows up in New England, severely beaten and near death from blood loss. By astronomical coincidence, she is discovered, in the dead of night, by her only contact in the area. The contact, a romantically unattached male student, claims to know nothing of the incident. Not likely.

What did he have on his side? Well, there was Vanno. He wouldn't have gone to Yellow Lot at all if the punk Italian hadn't needed a ride. And Vanno was the one who had first spotted Chastity in the woods.

He had the postcard, too. She wasn't supposed to arrive until the first of

December. How could he have attacked her, if he wasn't expecting her until the following day?

He was dealing with purely circumstantial evidence, because he had nothing else to go on. He needed more information. He could go back to the woods, but that would further implicate him - returning to the scene of the crime, and all that. Or was that Hollywood bullshit? Intrepid shook himself. The tequila was clouding his thoughts; he was getting frantic. His head felt heavy and his eyes hurt. He shook another cigarette out of the crumpled pack, lit it with the butt of his last, and stamped the old one out in the ashtray on his belly.

He had to keep reminding himself that he had not done anything wrong. He had found Chastity in the woods, and they had taken her to the hospital. The doctors at the hospital would take care of her health, and the police would handle an investigation. Intrepid's place in the whole scheme was that of a concerned friend, and nothing more.

Intrepid swung his feet off the coffee table, knocking the tequila bottle over in the process. He jumped to save it from spilling, and the ashtray fell from his belly and onto the floor, clunking loudly and raising a cloud of black and gray dust.

Looking back to the fallen bottle, he found that it was capped, and the coffee table was safe. He fell back into the armchair. At least his cigarette was intact.

Intrepid looked over at the bottle of tequila, still lying prone on the coffee table. He looked down to the floor, at the pattern of squashed cigarette butts lying on a thin carpet of ash. He thought of Chastity, and of the blood, and of her swollen lips, and the men's underwear, and the nasty spot of brown filth stuck to her back. He could still see her, could still hear her telling him, so softly, that she might not be in such good shape. He remembered the way that her broken mouth had shaped his nickname, slurring the R and the P. He looked back at the tequila, and then at the ashtray, and then thought of Chastity. Tequila, ashtray, Chastity. Tequila, ashtray, Chastity.

Intrepid began to cry.

* * *

"Shit."

"What?"

"Nothing. I have to get up."

"No, don't get up."

"Honey, I have to teach a class."

"No, you don't. You have to stay here with me."

"I'm late. I'm getting up."



“You’re totally staying here with me.” Duke, eyes closed and tangled in a comforter, rolled over and threw his arm around Lucy.

“Darling, I don’t want to get fired.” Lucy disengaged herself from Duke’s sleepy hold and pulled herself out of bed. They did this every morning.

She opened the door to the room that she and Duke shared, and wandered, still asleep, through the living room and into the kitchen. The sun shone through the front windows, catching particles of dust on their way to the ancient linoleum floor. She took a pint glass from the drying rack, filled it with filtered tap water, and slowly sipped it as she stared out the window above the sink.

When the water was done, she started back to her bedroom to begin the morning routine. She stopped when she reached the living room. Intrepid was asleep, fully clothed and curled on the armchair in a tight, fetal ball. One of his hands was pressed against his forehead, and the other was buried under his body. His mouth hung open against the yellow cushion.

Lucy padded softly across the cold hardwood floor and tugged on his slipper.

“Trip?” Intrepid did not move. “Trip? Time to get up. The world’s on fire.” Intrepid stirred, then slowly lifted his head. He opened his swollen eyes and focused on Lucy. “What’s going on?” His voice rasped. “You fell asleep in the chair. Are you going to class today?” “I need to get to Paris.” “Okay, Trip. Paris is this way.” She helped him to his feet and led him by the arm to his bedroom. He collapsed on to his bed and immediately fell back asleep. Lucy slid his doors closed and went to get ready for her class.

* * *

When Intrepid awoke, nine and half-hour later, there was a large painting of a

nude woman hanging above his bed. The woman was fluorescent green and incredibly disproportioned - her hips were four times the size of her shoulders. She was holding a massive samurai sword. Behind her, statuettes of Hindu gods rested on a wooden table.

“Do you like it?”

Felix Shanks was sitting at Intrepid’s computer. He appeared to be looking at pornography on the Internet.

“It’s freaking me out. What time is it?”

“It’s quarter past five. You’ve been sleeping all day. Lucy said you passed out in a chair last night. Care to talk about it?”

“Not yet. I need some water.”

Felix stroked his full, black beard and regarded Intrepid with a cool gaze. He had a manner that was one part psychoanalyst, one part revolutionary, and one part European farmhand. His character was complemented by his image - he wore thick, round eyeglasses, a long overcoat (always buttoned, even indoors), and a brown cap. The hat tamed his dark, wavy hair, and always reminded Intrepid of Dostoevsky. He was a painter and a writer, smoked nonfiltered cigarettes, and thought of himself as Intrepid’s spiritual and intellectual counselor.

Intrepid got out of bed and found that his slippers were missing.

“Where are my shoes?”

“I took them off for you. They’re in the kitchen,” Felix replied, as if that were the most natural place in the world for them to be.

“Thanks.”

After fetching slippers and water, Intrepid went back to living room. Felix was on the couch, hunched over a battered copy of Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons* and smoking a cigarette. Intrepid sat beside him and sipped his water. He found his pack of cigarettes on the coffee table,

realized it was empty, and took one of Felix's.

"Got a light?"

Felix looked up from his book and fixed Intrepid with a long stare.

"I'll give you a light, and you tell me why all of campus is talking about you." He produced an untarnished silver Zippo lighter from his pocket and offered it to Intrepid.

Intrepid's heart sank. It had already started. He lit his cigarette.

"Campus is talking about me because I found a dying girl in the woods last night. Where did you find out about it?"

"I heard it from a friend, but Vanno's been telling everybody. What an asshole, right?"

"Whatever. If I were him, I'd probably be telling everybody I knew, too."

"So what did this girl look like? Word is you know her. That true?"

"I don't really want to talk about it just yet, Felix."

"Well, fine. I've got some information for you, though. You might find it useful. I'm assuming you don't know the girl's current condition, right?"

"She was in a coma last night. That's all I know."

"Well, Vanno called the hospital this morning. She's still in a coma. So she's going to be no help in solving this crime." Felix had shifted into Scotland Yard mode.

"What crime? Who says there was any crime?" Intrepid knew he could not escape that easily, but it was worth a try.

"Come on, Intrepid, don't play idiot with me. The girl was bleeding to death, from some serious wounds. We have to assume foul play was involved. So anyway, I'm also assuming that you'd like to get to the bottom of this."

"I don't know about that, man. I don't know if I want to be involved at all."

"Shut the fuck up. Of course you do. She's your friend."

"Where do you get this stuff from?"

Felix ignored him. "Even if you don't, I do, and you're going to help me figure it out."

"Why me?"

"Because you were there, you mother-fucking idiot! Not only that, but you know the girl! You're the star witness, pal!"

Intrepid did want to find out what had happened to Chastity, and he knew that if anyone could solve the mystery, it would be Felix. The boy had connections on campus, and a lot of people respected him.

"Okay, okay. So what's this information you have for me?"

"I'll tell you about that in a bit. First, we've got to get you out of here before the circus starts. Your phone's going to be ringing off the hook in a couple of hours, once the paper finds out who you are."

"Where are we going?"

"To the parking lot. There's a few things I need to show you there. Then, to Vanno's room. We need to talk to him. You're going to be the good cop, and I'm going to be the bad cop."

"We're going to interrogate him? What the hell is the point to that? He's not even involved."

"Yes, he is." Felix stared at him intently, and his face suddenly became grim. "I know you think Vanno's too dumb to have anything to do with this, but he knows more than he's letting on. To tell you the truth, I'm a little bit afraid to talk to him by myself, because he might react badly to what we're going to talk to him about."

Four hours later, Intrepid was on his way back to the hospital. This time, though, he got to ride in the ambulance.

Next... Vanno's Move