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Rondo pulled on his insulated jean jacket. Mind clenched tight enough to make diamonds, he blew through his stepmom's screen door, which was too duct-taped and ancient to provide a satisfactory slam. His Pontiac opened with a defiant, dirt-rusty grouse but relented on the return and delivered the ba-boom he needed. Fuck it. Rondo Comegno did not give a spinning rotisserie fuck, and if anybody saw that faithless twunt, Stacie, they could absolutely give her that 411 right upside her dishonorable ass. The very ass baseball captain and greasy graduating senior, Todd Hardwick, was probably hangin' on and bangin' on in his family's ginormous pillared pool house.

Almost *ten*, (the second discrete semiprime number) but really closer to *nine*, (the only square prime number with an aliquot sum of the same form) yes, nine incredible months with Stacie straight down the devil's shit pipe. And it was Rondo's fault.

She had been in a furor about something he did at Craig Spanner's Labor Day bash when he was trashed. She had *needed some time to herself*. A fistful of weeks later in the cafeteria, he was mid-chicken finger when he saw her perfect lips cemented to Todd's while their jammed-up faces tilted left and right, over and over, a frantic, dirty carnival ride that nearly made his stomach fall out of his face.

That was yesterday. Rondo shoved his AP Calculus and Number Theory books onto the passenger floor, pushed his lank, brown hair behind his ears, and flexed his muscular shoulders. He was still the Jesus of pussy. It was *eight* (the first number which is neither prime nor semiprime) yes, eight empty seconds of staring at the neighboring crap shacks later when he erupted, punching his steering wheel in time with his bellowed *Fucks* until his fist slipped and the old horn split the cold morning. He jammed the Firebird into gear leaving a heaving blue ghost.

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Metallica endangering the lives of his speakers, he burned down Old York Road, boxed in by relentless cornfields full and tall for harvest and for next week's Corn Blitzkrieg, an annual Florence Township tradition. During the 'Krieg, a throng of young barbarians from the South Jersey high school, the absolute worst of the student body, twisted on every illicit substance they could wangle, descended on some poor random bastard's field, charging into the loaded, head-high stalks of corn to do battle throwing the plump, sweet cobs of ammunition. Every asshole for himself. There were no rules and no winning. The best anyone could hope for was to survive, and it went on until it was over.

Rondo finger-steered the squealing teal beast into Fountain Gardens, Stacie's up-tight housing development, where homeowners chose a board-approved color to paint their homes. He hadn't necessarily meant to come here.

He rumbled in front of her family's place, house number *seven*, (the only Mersenne safe prime number) meticulous and palatial, the lawn like fat carpet. Saturday morning and they were definitely home. He had no idea how many dinners he had eaten with them. They had treated him like family. So rich and yet so nice, he never would've believed it.

But all that and the part-time job at the family's flagship tire shop, the connections for next year's college applications, and Stacie's steady push to at last buckle down and make the most of his math gifts, had been destroyed after a dumb, drunk, laundry-room handy. Like torching his winning lottery ticket to light a cigarette stub.

He revved. Never loved anyone before her. Not ever. Couldn't understand why she wouldn't forgive him. He had been shit-faced. Choked, he remembered the summer fair,

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her tan calves, her musical, cackling laugh at the top of the ferris wheel with all the little yellow lights. He had told her everything about him and she had loved him anyway.

All gone.

And now she was with that slick, khaki fuck-grunt, Todd Hardwick.

A low, hard moan came through Rondo's parted teeth. He threw the aging Firebird in first, scurching the tires, racing, and then slamming the brakes at the edge of her neighbor's property. Whipping the car around, a wheel up and down the curb, he did it again the other way, desperate for her to look out her bedroom window, for her to hear. The pavement was immaculate, all speckled grays like someone had steamrolled a wolf. He turned the wheel all the way to chase his tail in several tight rotations, tires wailing through the sedate neighborhood, before howling off from the burnt ring of black.

At the perimeter of the dump where they used to leave their bikes when it wasn't called a Resource Recovery Facility, Rondo parked behind the lifted *F-150*. Angelo and Dicky Boy were standing under a nearly nude maple smoking *Winstons*, a wan sun reflecting on D.B.'s freshly shaved head, a style he believed made girls subconsciously think of a penis.

With mock indignation Angelo held up a skinny, watch-less wrist. "You're late, shit-dick. What were you doin'?"

"Your mama in a clown wig."

Angelo smiled beneath dark, shaggy locks and Dicky Boy giggled as his pudgy hand held out the soft-pack of smokes that still held *six* (a unitary perfect number). Rondo felt his friends reading his face for news, for pain. He spat and moved to the chain-link fence. Dicky Boy pulled it up on the outside for Angelo and Rondo to roll under and then

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they bent it back inside and pulled it up higher for Dicky Boy's heft to trundle under. They covered their cigarettes when barreling through the dirt, cupping the fire close to their chest.

The dump's autumnal stench was a shifting kaleidoscope of sulfur, rot, and burning diapers. As the trio moved with purpose down the wide, machine-rutted muck, Rondo made a show of taking a deep breath. "Ah, fuckin' nature," he said, and they climbed their hill of rubble in the near middle of everything.

They demolished glass first. Mutely stooping and hurling fist-sized gravel, it was goodbye to windshields, storm windows, long fluorescent bulbs, televisions, mirrors, and a ceramic German angel wearing suspenders. For a long while, it sounded like desperadoes shooting up a lamp store.

Angelo Ferlinghetti called a timeout. "Don't wanna wear out our arms before the 'Krieg next weekend." He presented a burly joint from the leather jacket pocket where business cards go. "I can't wait. I just hope I don't get skull-jacked."

Getting whacked by a zooming two-pound ear of corn was no pony ride. People got knocked out all the time. Last year an unconscious Jeremy Espenshade had been vengefully stripped naked, his clothes set on fire.

A seagull flew overhead and Dicky Boy heaved several rocks at it in rapid succession. "Mother—fuck—er—." It screeched and flew off. "I hate those things."

"Why? They remind me of the beach—the sand," Angelo said, shaking his head.

Holding in the smoke, Dicky Boy squeezed out, "Fuck sand—those things are flying rats—they spread diseases."

Strong hands jammed in his thick denim, Rondo half smiled. "Yeah? What kinds,

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D.B.?”

“Like AIDS or malaria or somethin’.”

A lazy windmill, Angelo spun his spaghetti arms in slow circles. “Whatever, man. When I would go to my Aunt Marcella’s in Virginia Beach, they used to fly everywhere, and I used to like that noise they made. It relaxed me.”

Rondo squawked loud in Angelo’s ear.

“Ow—What the fuck is wrong with you?” Angelo swung around to punch him in the balls.

Rondo dodged him. “Whuuuut? Doesn’t it remind you of the ooohhhcean?”

He and Dicky-Boy laughed. Angelo muttered, rubbing his ear until the sound of tit-ters ebbed and all was still on their hilltop.

Dicky Boy picked up a rock and threw at nothing. “She did you wrong, Comegno.” It was cool and quiet. “I mean shit—and now she’s all of a sudden with fuckin’ Hardwick?”

Rondo cleared his throat and nodded at his boots, his brown hair a curtain for his face.

“I don’t understand why she wouldn’t let it go,” Angelo said, handing off the joint. “You were bombed. That’s like—automatic free pass.”

“Plus, you went apeshit with all the flowers and apologies,” Dicky Boy said. “Fuck her anyways. She always thought she was too good for us because of all that money.” His throw struck a seagull resting on an adjacent pile of detritus.

“Holy shit. You hit it,” Angelo said.

The bird tumbled screaming, flapping in a spasmed circle as they rushed down to meet it. Its head looked fine, but a wing was bent, the leg not moving.

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The boys stared down at it.

“Well, fuck me runnin’, I finally got one,” said Dicky Boy.

Rondo looked into the gull’s shiny, dark eyes as it cried out in heated rhythm.

Angelo said, “Man, that bird didn’t do shit to you, D.B.”

Dicky Boy said, “I told you guys I got good aim. I’d be playin’ for the baseball team ‘cept I don’t wanna prance around with a bunch of sport-os in striped fag pajamas.” The bird’s efforts to right itself and fly away made its sides heave. “We gotta put this flying disease bag out of its misery.”

Angelo held up his hand, “Just leave it alone, maybe it’ll heal itself or something. There’s plenty of nice garbage for it to eat.”

“It ain’t gonna heal itself, Ferlinghetti,” Dicky Boy said, rubbing his smooth head and watching it twist its neck, the whiteness growing muddy. “That thing’s a fuckin’ goner.”

“No, it’s not. Just don’t—y’know, just leave it, you guys. The earth can—”

Rondo pushed between them, and with a powerfully down-swung length of pipe, released the gull’s meat fireworks in a spray of bright red. He paused with a grunt, or a hard sob, before smashing the feathered body over and over, back into the earth, back into its composite atomic elements.

Dicky Boy stepped in to take the pipe from him, all *five* (a Fermat prime) fingers of his beefy hand up signaling for him to stop. “Ok—ok, Comegno.”

They marched back to their vehicles through a stiffening breeze, the crunch of debris under boots the only sound. A round of subdued backslaps, shoves, and mumbled *Later, shitheads* were then exchanged under a graying sky.

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Rondo drove numb and aimless for an hour before hitting a wooded turn-off and driving up the short dirt road that ended in a tree's day-glo orange "Private Property" sign. He parked and sat, his brawn hunched, as late-September rain dotted the windshield.

She had somehow circled from love to love in a month. Only *four* (the smallest squared prime) weeks. Four weeks to go full circle. (*Question*: What's four minus pi? Four minus 3.14592...etc? Pi's string of random numbers stretched out to infinity. *Answer*: .85408...etc. A complementary stream of never-ending, patternless digits.) That irregular stream, that mere decimal, his days, his life, and no matter how long it went, it would never become a whole number. He had ruined his chance. The rain falling heavy now, banging the car's roof, he leaned his seat all the way back and cried.

* * *

It was mid-Wednesday when Rondo returned to school in sunglasses, gull-blood spattered boots, and cologne by *Jack Daniels*. The number of things he gave a shit about was descending in elegant symmetry, like a negative, irrational number sequence named after some no-pussy-gettin' mathematician.

Lit like Christmas, he strode down the hallway's tapering waxed flat, framed by the lockers' tapering steel flats, plotting out to a point of origin that wasn't yet visible. The bell rang and the classroom doors vomited fuckers of every type at him, a boisterous, hormonal shit show. He watched Stacie walk down the hall, away from him.

Angelo saw him swaying in the melee, a sullen brown-haired island with mirrored lenses, and waved to meet at the Men's Room.

Dicky Boy's bulk was already inside, smoking by the cranked-out window. He greet-

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ed them with his terrible Irish accent. “Oh, aye-tee-tie, well bless me hairy clackers if it isn’t Showbiz Boozerton and the Ravioli Kid.” He handed out cigarettes.

Strapping and drunk, Rondo hung on the top of a stall door while he smoked and caught snatches of conversation.

“...this kid, Franco, y’know from that shitmo *Sandwich Bistro* place?”

“Yeah.”

“Comes by on his night off, finds his girlfriend bobbin’ like an oil derrick, blowin’ the assistant manager in her *PT Cruiser*.”

Shades still on, Rondo absently tried to pull and bend the cream-colored door down and off its hinges.

“...how many other dongs you figure she was gobblin’?”

Too drunk to speak, Rondo thought there were too many exogenous factors to be able to estimate something like dong quantity with statistical certainty.

“Prob’ly thousands.”

At this, he laugh-belched whiskey and old *Egg McMuffin* air and turned to look at his friends. These bastards. Since forever, no matter what, we *three*. (The first unique prime due to the properties of its reciprocal, the first lucky prime, the first super-prime.)

The bathroom door opened and he saw Angelo and Dicky Boy snap to alertness. Greasy Todd Hardwick and the baseball team’s squat catcher walked in with matching dark blue and yellow varsity jackets. Eye contact in a flash between both sides established a probable stalemate in the event of a fight, and nothing was said as the intruders moved to the urinals. While they pissed, the catcher mumbled something and Todd gave a short laugh. On their way out, as the stainless-steel door slowly pulled shut, the catch-

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er leaned back and screeched a high-pitched “Eeeeeee—eeeeee—eeeeee,” the involuntary sound Stacie sometimes made during sex. That dishonorable shit bag had mocked her to his shit bag friends.

“What the fuck was that?” Angelo said. “Supposed to be a seagull or somethin’?”

Rondo swore viciously and yanked down on the pair of bathroom stalls’ upper frame with powerful, cadenced tugs. Dicky Boy hooted and cheered. Anchoring bolts began to torque free from the bathroom walls, spilling white powder with each jerk. The whole metal structure buckled before finally popping free of the wall to stand unmoored and uncertain, as a couple of buttoned-down sophomores wandered in.

Angelo and Dicky Boy banged on the tiles and chanted, “Ron-do. Ron-do.”

He backed away to the far wall, roared out, “Blitzkrieg,” and then charged the broad side of the bathroom stalls, toppling them in a thunderous metallic and porcelain cacophony.

* * *

Late orange afternoon, the small, dried-out clearing was electric and full of milling denim and leather-clad degenerates kicking at the dirt, jackets covered in colored patches of bands, symbols, and profanity. Almost all were high-schoolers. A few had graduated years ago, but came anyway, drawing concerned glances. Bottles were passed and smashed, and the sweet stink of pot was everywhere. The aggro energy and sudden full-on yells from tight circles made it clear some fuckers were snorting crank.

Rondo, Dicky Boy, and Angelo stood with a pair of close-eyed brothers whose dad had a junkyard with a car crusher. They drank from a plastic jug of vodka and spat into the waiting cornfield for luck.

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“Fuckin-a,” said Angelo exhaling smoke and blowing the dark shag from his face.

“Fuckin-a, Ferlinghetti. Put on your big girl panties and get ready for the dance.”

Dicky Boy punched him in his arm.

Everyone was amped, and those who weren't completely ripped yet had the common sense to be scared. Rondo rocked back and forth, buzzing hard, big hands unconsciously grasping and releasing.

The mass got quiet, and he turned to see slickster Todd Hardwick, the squat catcher, and some other baseball shitter stumbling out of a new *Jeep Cherokee* and walking toward them. Their dark blue and yellow jackets entered the mix like an *IKEA* kiosk in a charnel house.

The unruly assembly was more puzzled than pissed at the interlopers who seemed oblivious to their peril. Dumbfounded at their good fortune, they didn't want to scare the sport-os away. The trio was loaded, drinking what was left of a bottle of *Glen*-something, which Rondo thought sounded like just the sort of bullshit name their liquor would have.

He looked with unbridled ferocity at Hardwick who was staring back with eyes glassy and malevolent. Todd gestured. *You and me*. A fight between *two* (the very first prime number).

A goateed alumnus in goggles held up his hand and yelled, “Everybody shut the fuck up,” which brought forth a loud load of curses and a lobbed bottle. “Welcome to the Corn Blitzkrieg, motherfuckers. Take a good look around. Anybody at school who tries to brag they were here and ain't, gets jacked. Every man for himself, so no pack attacks.” Everyone stubbed out smokes and chugged or dropped drinks. He raised his voice. “Oh

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yeah, and no helmets.” This brought laughter and backslaps for a big Puerto Rican guy known as Mar-Mar who put some little weasel boner in the ICU last year for sneaking in a helmet. “Alright, you assholes. Get ready—get set—Blitzkrieg!”

As the heathens scattered and trampled through acres of tall green, it surely looked from above like dozens of malfunctioning lawn mowers run amok. Once hunkered in a place of imagined safety, they ripped down cobs, tucking them in jacket pockets and waistbands, making uncalm, quick glances skyward for plummeting projectiles. The air grew full with violent laughs, the hard hiss of tasseled missiles, and war whoops. The wide leaves kept visibility in the verdant war zone to just a few yards so they could never relax their hyper-vigilance. For some the strategy was to fire random high arcing loopers from a distance, some glided through the rows hoping to brutally ambush and then melt away, while others just charged howling through the stalks, lone kernel berserkers.

Rondo bolted and crashed to a random spot in the endless leafy sprawl. Stooping over and moving at a steady pace along a row, he did a full, quick turn every few steps. He still didn’t see the ear of corn when it came, launched to whack his muscled back like a punch. It would leave a decent bruise. He cursed and took off in a different direction. The sky was beginning to darken. He was gonna beat the shit out of Todd Hardwick when he found him.

Happening upon a younger punk, Rondo bellowed out, scaring him into running without fighting back, and chased him, just missing his head with a few blistering cobs before the kid took an abrupt turn and disappeared into nothing. He pushed his hair behind his ears and was squatting down drunkenly to catch his breath when big Mar-Mar appeared, shirtless and carrying a ripped out stalk, complete with roots and dirt like

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some deranged God of War waving a cudgel made of nature. Mar-Mar screamed when he saw Rondo and then smashed off. Rondo liked him, but threw a couple of hard ears after him anyway.

There were loud yells, and he could smell something very bad burning. Black smoke flowed through the gaps slow like a spirit. He didn't think a green, growing cornfield could burn, but maybe with enough gasoline? He staggered, the air toxic. Beams of light from the fuckers who had brought headlamps bounced crazy through the stalks. With a lamp you could run through the dark better, but it made you a visible target.

Rondo was lobbing a frenzy of corn at a light when a couple of heavy cobs struck him hard in the shoulder and skull nearly simultaneously. Jarred, he turned in the dimness toward a wide patch of blue and yellow heading for him. They were fighting in a pack, the dishonorable shit bags. Rondo ran.

The dark and the harsh, stinking smoke made actual navigation at high velocity impossible, but he sprinted in a straight line away from them, stalks catching him hard in the arms and crotch. He turned sharply without losing them and continued at top speed before taking another quick corner and waiting. The air choked him—smelled like rubber and plastic. The burning was close.

Some fucker shot a flare gun illuminating the entire churning, screaming cornfield with a blazing beacon of red. Hell's North Star.

Todd's nasty, glassy eyes reflected the flare. The shitter stood paces from Rondo, the blade of his expensive buck knife flashing red. Rondo yanked the nearest ear and whipped it at Todd's head, stumbling backwards while Todd ducked and moved toward him. This cheating motherfucker. He lurched back, grabbing corn in each hand. He

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tossed an ear up high, and while Todd momentarily followed its launch, Rondo rocketed the other at his face, knocking him down, unconscious. Basic third grade snowball fight strategy. He walked over and kicked Todd hard in the ribs and then the head. Piece of shit was gonna kill him.

Rondo crouched and tried to focus. There was an equation to solve here with a correct answer, a right answer, just *one* (the constant and omnipresent divisor of all prime numbers).

Please Excuse My Dear Aunt Sally. Parentheticals first, then the exponents; numbers don't lie. Blood went to his right atrium. Todd tried to kill him; he might try again. Multiply. Blood went to his right ventricle. This shit bag would bring nothing but pain to Stacie; she deserved better. Blood went to his lungs. He took a breath of the burnt air and looked in the direction of the smoke's source. Divide. Tear them asunder. He could get another shot. Blood, oxygenated now, went to his left atrium. Addition. He would make up for everything. He would work hard; no more getting really drunk, no more mistakes. Blood went to his left ventricle. The final chamber. Subtraction. Never had it fair, always poor, no Dad, neck-deep bullshit since always. Blood moved out to the extremities of his body. The calculation complete. The answer was *zero* (neither negative nor positive, the ending and the beginning, the center point from which all functions, all possibilities can be plotted).

A final red flare ignited, climbing into the blackness, Rondo's shadow growing and stretching to envelop Todd.

Rondo had secured Hardwick's legs under his arms and was dragging him toward the source of the harsh smoke when the taller of the close-eyed brothers came tearing

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through wearing a headlamp. It shone into Rondo's face, blinding him, and then down at Todd in blue and yellow. The brother clicked off his light. Without a word, he took a leg and helped haul double-time to the edge of the field. There, the helper's stooped silhouette, black against the red glow, paused to face Rondo before returning to the fray.

Rondo saw no one through the black smoke. The air was loud and infernal and scorching hot; it billowed with furnace-like blasts. He grabbed Todd's belt and jacket collar and hoisted him overhead before heaving him into the raging flames that consumed the *Jeep Cherokee*. The resulting crash reverberated through Rondo, rising up and up, until it became the solid, shrill tone that screamed in his head and in his bones.