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Gooney Ducks and Naked Physicists

Part XLIX
Prisoners of Pi

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Abstract: An allegory of modern science.

Part XLIX

*She helped me with my suitcase, She stands before my eyes, Driving me to the airport
And to the friendly skies. Going through security, I held her for so long
She finally looked at me in love, And she was gone*

Been trying to slow my roll, but my friend and agent (whom Sharona has affectionately dubbed “Jerry the Rat”) just booked me for another gig. Can you believe it? I’m invited to be the keynote speaker at a conference for the newly formed Mathematical Society—the “first ever” *Math for Peace* rally! Sharona said she’d take a rain check this time—not quite up to climbing Philosopher’s Peak right now. But she dropped me off at the airport, wished me luck, and hoped that I summited. Ha, ha! Yeah, it’s gonna be a challenge—no trail, no cairns, no footsteps to follow from here on out. So far I’ve only got the title of my speech, “The Prisoners of Pi.” Hopefully I can come up with somethin’ more on the plane...

Man, talk about Murphy’s Law—“Anything that can go wrong”: The plane delayed, rerouted through Salt Lake, arrived late, I’m still wearing jeans, a T-shirt, and my favorite porkpie hat. Worst of all—I haven’t prepared my speech! As I enter through the back of the auditorium; the tumultuous crowd is on its feet, chanting “Speech! Speech!” How can I possibly address the cheering multitude? My mind races...such a momentous equation, ahem, I mean, occasion! (I’m so nervous I can’t even think straight!) I’m starting to have second thoughts... Am I up for this? Am I in over my head? But they’re insistent—the people are clamoring, urging, pushing me forward to speak! I’ll just have to wing it—borrow inspiration from lines I read long ago. As I step up to the podium, the crowd hushes...Okay! Take a deep breath... Get ready for the extemporaneous! Here goes nuthin’! (Wait...That’s Sharona in the front row! How’d she beat me here? She’s always two steps ahead of me!)

Greetings and salutations distinguished guests. Yes, gentlemen (and you too ladies), friends: I am deeply honored to be here this evening on such an auspicious occasion. What a privilege to be the very first to speak to the new Math for World Peace Society! I have to tell you, though, I wouldn’t be here tonight if it weren’t for the support of my fellow comrade in arms in the fight for truth. C’mon, Sharona, don’t be shy! Come on up here, gorgeous! (The crowd whistles and cheers approvingly!)

Alrighty then! As we all know, it’s only been recently that the bright rays of liberty have begun to peek through the gloomy clouds of darkness of mankind’s mathematical slavery. Yes, I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations.

For untold scores of years, men and women were unable to progress—shackled—their daily lives sadly crippled by the manacles of outdated textbooks and the chains of academic discrimination. And yes, those of us who opposed or questioned the status quo found ourselves searingly branded with a capital “D” for dissident, languishing in the corners of polite society, relegated to the lonely island of obscurity, exiles in our own native land!

But now, can you hear it? The bells of liberty are pealing! The clamor for change is deafening! There’s a bracing wind of change, a great beacon of hope streams ruddy streaks upon the horizon of the moral world that betoken the grateful dawning of a new era!

The wind has changed direction! And so, my friends, let us unfurl the mainsail, catch the blustery wind of Freedom, and sail to the harbor of mathematical truth and world peace!

(The crowd cheers! As it settles, I continue...)

Yes, my friends, it’s true: Four walls do not a prison make!

For so long we’ve been spellbound, held captive by an idea—prisoners of pi!

Now I can only wonder and ask: “Why?” Why did they do what they did when they did, when they didn’t have to do what they did—forever dividing the circumference by the diameter to find some transcendental number? Never a resolution, never a solution? Always determinedly, continually, perpetually chasing pi in the sky?...Why? I ask, Why pi?

But now, let us stand together to loose the shackles of the ball and chain of pi!

It’s high time to break free from cell block C/d! Time to pry open the locked doors of not only the universities but of the universe itself!

And let’s not forget peace! 50 years ago we had Woodstock. Today, we have a new counterculture revolution! Our mantra? World peace without pi! Yes, my friends, the days of driveling instruction are departing! Indeed, the dreams of the past shone as brightly as jewels sparkling in the hot summer sun, but those days are done! Now, the mathematicians of the past—Archimedes, Newton, Einstein—can only observe us in quiet envy and wish they were here to share in this glorious moment! From this day to the ending of the world...we in it shall be remembered—We few, we happy few, we band of brothers; we have achieved what they could only dream of—a scientific first—the first step toward world peace:

WE BROKE THE BARRIER OF PI!

(The crowd goes wild, surges forward, and lifting us high, carries Sharona and me off the stage chanting “Peace without pi! Peace without pi! Peace without pi!”)