

His Spreadsheet Pimpled

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Starting today, fifteen minutes and seventeen seconds ago, when the front door shut and those assured, sinless footsteps trotted out - from their apartment, down the stairs, up the road to the bus - Carl would not see Clara for an entire month. A refuge of ferociously productive solitude awaited. Carl needed time, space to think.

Consider. *Reevaluate.*

Clara was headed south of town to care for her sister Monica. Monica was due to give birth to a brand spanking new baby. The baby, stiffly mentioned by Clara one night after tacos, was to be named none other than... Carl. This confused Carl terribly. Not baby Carl, but grown man Carl.

Grown man Carl had been dating Clara for three years, five months, two and a half weeks and several days now. He kept this tracked always. Clara was undoubtedly in love with Carl. Carl was *mostly* in love with Clara - but distracted elsewhere. Because Carl was in love with Monica too, from afar, as long as he had known her (two years, seven months, three weeks, and four days). His love for Monica exceeded his for Clara. These feelings were soberly assessed, itemized. Monica's hair, against Clara's, complimented the pattern of Carl's favorite turtleneck more modernly. Monica exercised once a week. Clara exercised thrice a week. Carl exercised every other fortnight. He didn't enjoy being one-upped. These feelings, however, which to Carl were deep as wells, were not reciprocal - even slightly. In fact, Carl believed Monica to be apathetic, even venomous towards him, for reasons undetermined. But various family outings and a few birthday dinners had, over the years, convinced Carl wholeheartedly. Yet, the cold shoulder of Monica did nothing to obstruct Carl's infatuations. He even suspected the loathing to had fortified them. Carl found his irrationality oppressive.

And so now, with Monica naming her brand spanking new baby Carl, despite years of treating grown man Carl like a fascist skin mole, Carl plunged headfirst in a rabbit hole of meticulous re-evaluations. He questioned all factors. "Carl" was not a

name that seemed likely to come from Monica. It was too antiquated. But "Carl" was even less likely to come from dimwit Henry, Monica's husband. Dimwit Henry was the type to name his child something dimwitted, Carl thought. Like Garth. Or Dax. So, was "Carl" a code? A conciliatory signal? Had Carl's pattern analysis failed to read Monica all these years? Was Monica in love with Carl? Carl, barefooted, without a shirt on, and pacing the backyard badlands, tormented himself with thoughts like these. The sun skinned his back into a raisin.

The situation was upsetting. Any solution or approach of action seemed to Carl doomed. If only, Carl thought, Clara loved somebody else, too. If only, Carl thought, Clara ran off with somebody. Anybody really. Like jealous Gerald down the street. Or greedy Jennifer on the second floor. This would solve problems. One less obstacle to Monica. But it was not realistic.

"How simple Clara is," Carl cursed under his breath. "I bet Monica is not this simple. And if she were this simple, it would be a tasteful, aesthetic decision of romantic minimalism-**OWWWW!**"

Carl lifted his left foot, looking under. Green shards of broken glass, hiding in a patch of weeds, had poked skin, inviting blood. In a panic, Carl hopped through the double mirror sliding door of his and Clara's apartment, leaving behind a trail of blood on a recently purchased peel and stick carpet. Carl entered the bathroom. It was here, with Carl applying rubbing alcohol to the soft gauze pad pressed against his foot, did he remember Emilio. *Emilio*. Yes! The body-building taco cart owner from my time in Fresno. Now there is "somebody"- charming, reliable, capable of sharp-as-thumbtack analysis. As intelligent as I, yet, *distanced* from all parties involved. Not one to be swept up by compassion. Prioritizes the *empirical*. Formulates *schemes*. This could be it! Strangled by joy, Carl dialed Emilio's number, wondering if Emilio even remembered him - his pasty friend from Fresno. At least Carl thought he was his

friend. Carl was never too sure. In Fresno, Emilio smiled at him. Quite often. But also, Emilio simply smiled at everybody.

Before the first ring finished, Emilio answered. He was chipper. He betrayed no tone of surprise to hear from Carl. He *had* remembered him. Briefly, they talked small. Carl was surprised to hear Emilio moved to town, months before.

"The rodents," Emilio said. "Twas too much, my friend."

Warmed up, Carl explained the situation and the players - Clara, Monica, baby Carl, dimwit Henry - as loudly, clearly, *empirically* as possible, fighting over the fiery roar of traffic on Emilio's end. Carl then began to offer his own analyses. Emilio heard no word of it.

"My little friend - be quiet. Now, this wretched, poor little love triangle... with the siblings... It is not well. You are not well, Carl." Carl nodded, observing the blood expanding atop the gauze wrapped loosely around his tootsie.

"Allow me to offer a proposal. *An Emilio proposal*. Would you?"

Carl allowed. He listened closely, carefully to Emilio's proposal. By its end, Carl was disappointed. He found it too complex for responsible implementation. Relying too much on body language cues and the impossible synchronizations of the departure times of trains. He then remembered how disorganized Emilio was in Fresno, and felt foolish. Without verbalizing any of this, Emilio sensed what Carl thought. With perfect pitch, Emilio hummed a lullaby. This was the chord progression:

D Am9 Gmaj9 C7

Like it was sonic valerian, the lullaby quelled Carl's nervousness, silencing his well-formulated apprehensions. And so, he agreed to the proposal. Emilio hung up quickly after. The rest of the day, Carl luxuriated on the brown, living room sofa, the single piece of furniture in the apartment Clara did not own. He contemplated different

shades of black that would look best on Monica's nails. He mused briefly on that bizarre lullaby. He cared for his foot poorly.

The following day, during his lunch break, Carl withdrew \$861.48 from an ATM downtown. The amount was Carl's life savings. It was also the amount, to the final cent, that Emilio asked for the day prior. Enough for the round trip, Emilio had said. Carl was joyous. Since morning, his critiques of Emilio's idea subsided to muteness. He now found the proposal ripe with several indicators of true, wild success. Walking back to his white van, Carl thought about Monica. Her hair, his turtleneck. Her cipher. Their new life. Hopefully dimwit Henry will look after Carl Jr., Carl speculated.

After work, Carl drove to the other other side of the city, where Emilio lived. Emilio's duplex shone like tin foil, and it appeared to Carl an egg underneath the giant, pulsating highway above, resembling somehow a breathing cement dragon. Limping to Emilio's front yard rock garden, Carl unearthed the savings from his waist, burying it where instructed: underneath bush, near left window. Crouching by, Carl heard cartoons from inside. Then, baritone laughter. On his way out, he plucked a purple flower and stuck the stem in his mouth to chew on. It tasted something dung.

The month of Carl's "ferociously productive solitude" blundered through his fingers, bruising them. He had not heard from Clara once. Ominously, Emilio had not returned any of Carl's eighty-eight voice mails. There was no news of Monica, dimwit Henry, or if the baby was named Carl after all. Carl, the grown man, spiraled. He anathematized in languages he did not know he knew. He felt terror. Grievance. He begun to hate Emilio's lullaby, condemning himself for that naive response to what was surely juvenile music theory. Clearly, something in Emilio's proposal was *flawed*. Clearly, both, despite their proclivities, had overlooked something *basic*. At night, in between nightmares, Carl considered each and every component of Emilio's proposal: backwards, forwards, sideways. The misstep, if there was one, was imperceptible.

Carl wondered if he had simply misheard some word. A basic term glanced over, ruining them both. Carl outlined possibilities:

Love... Glove? Baby... Blade clean? Bill... Spill?

Carl devoured his nails. Banged his head. Hallucinated a castritizing dragon hovering above him. His left foot purple. He no longer felt it.

And then came that searing afternoon when Clara called. Two weeks had passed from that initial, reclusive month. Carl answered dryly. He wore nothing but the blue boxer briefs he bought specifically for Clara's optics. Sometime after their first anniversary.

"I'm coming home in three days, Carl. Be prepared."

Breaking a sweat, Carl asked her to clarify. Silence. Awkwardly, Carl then asked about Monica. Then, the baby. Then, Henry. Clara said all three were fine, expounding no further. *Clearly, Emilio's plan has failed.* Carl shifted the weight between his feet. Gathering the courage to ask *the question*, Carl opened his mouth but realized Clara already hung up. As if she sensed it. Carl let go of the phone glacially. He swiveled on the bar stool, scanning the shambled apartment. Then, he wept.

Clara's homecoming arrived. In contortion, Carl sat across the front door on the brown sofa, in the blue boxer briefs, holding the chewed, purple dung flower from the rock garden. It was wilting - it was all he had. Waiting, Carl endured punishing sorrow. He regretted unfathomably ever calling that fake, rat, fraudster Emilio. Memories of previous experiences from Fresno came rushing back. *That damn cocktail party! The gazebo prank! Have I no self-worth? No ability to learn from previous mistakes?* Suddenly, Carl heard the assured, sinless footsteps of Clara approaching from outside - across the street, up the stairs, to the door. The key pushed in. Like a brick, there was Clara. Back home, staring straight through him. She is not taking notice of the blue boxer briefs, Carl thought. He regarded the brass knuckles on her right fist. Soon after, Clara gave Carl a black eye.

Hours later, slowly and with no help from Clara, Carl had the entirety of his belongings packed in a cotton duffel bag. He was to leave the brown sofa. They stood by the front door. It was here, quietly, that Carl asked Clara *the question*. The name of Monica's baby. *Was it Carl after all, dear?* Clara looked at him queerly. Carl could not decipher the meaning. Analysis failure. System down. He thought to ask the question louder, but before he cleared his throat Clara drop-kicked him out of the apartment. Without pause, Clara then slammed the door on his right foot, shattering bones Carl would miss for the rest of his short life. Carl rolled to the nearest greyhound, boiling on the cement.

He never saw Clara again. He rarely thought of Monica.

Years later, Carl called Emilio. After the third ring finished, a teenager answered. Carl held his breath. That familiar, basilisk roar of traffic on the other end of the call. The tremendous highway above the tin-foil duplex. The dragon, intruding between him and the teen. Him and life. Stuttering, Carl asked if he was speaking to Carl Jr. The teen laughed pleasantly. She said her name was Amelia. Kindly, Carl asked Amelia if he could speak to her father Emilio. The teen asked if he wanted to speak with her mom instead, as Emilio was not home. He was out somewhere, smiling at people. Before Carl asked anymore, he saw himself throwing a cell phone into the gentle sway of the green ocean before him. The phone sank. Waves crashed. Carl listened to his breath, a technique suggested recently by his new cardiologist Monique. The breeze on the shore felt cool on his metal toes - or so he assumed.

After a while, contemplating zilch, Carl shoved his head into the sand. His nostrils, ear canals, mouth and throat - now crammed with so many rocks of hate. Carl considered for a moment precisely how many of these microscopic pebbles he was touching, tasting, smelling - but tossed the thought aside. He recalled having forgotten to count long, long ago.