The snow fell from the roof onto the deck with a thud. It made a sound like a pillow being punched, soft but heavy. The old man lay in bed staring at the ceiling. It was 3 AM. He slept like a baby, which is to say he woke every 2 hours, although it was not hunger that woke him. Strange, really, how both ends of your life had such similarities. When you were a child you were small, so many things around you were puzzling, and grown-up conversations were incomprehensible, so you ignored them. You were not allowed to touch the grown-ups’ things, like irons and television sets—and they wouldn’t let you drive no matter how well you thought you could do it. Then you grew up and took your place among the other grown-up people.

At the other end of life, you grew down again. You shrank physically. The world was certainly a puzzling place, so different from the one you were used to. You did not understand half of what your grandchildren were talking about, so you ignored them. They wouldn’t let you touch their electronic toys because you might mess them up. As for driving—well! You were no longer a grown-up; you were a grown-down.

He tried to go back to sleep. He concentrated hard on thinking about nothing. He failed. The other thing about being young was that people were interested in who you were. You were the cute little blond kid who told grandma that she smelled funny. When you grew up, people were no longer interested in what you were. You were something important in the City; you were a secretary, a doctor, the chief of police, a janitor. You were destined to “make something of yourself,” as if you were incomplete without being molded into an object. If you arranged a meeting, he mused, you did not invite people, you invited images of people, things: “We had better have the chief of medicine, the senior resident, a couple of the faculty—oh, yes, and a medical student.”

He got a cramp in his calf and flexed his ankle experimentally to see if it would disappear. One thing did not change when you were a grown-down.

You were still a what, not a who. Ordinarily you were invisible to a passerby on the street. If, by some fluke of observation, a passerby actually saw you, you went into a little box they carried in their brain labeled “old codger.” They knew immediately what you were. You drove too slowly in the fast lane. Signaled left and then turned right. You were the one they had to stand behind at the supermarket while you tried to figure out the change, the one with the drippy nose who stood too close to them in the line at the post office. Sometimes, he wanted to shout his ability to play Mozart and his skill with colored pencils, but it wouldn’t have made any difference. They were still convinced you had a rubber sheet on your mattress.

He turned on his side, pulled his arm into a comfortable position, and closed his eyes. Which is when Tompkins minor popped into his head, erupting like a bubble of marsh gas from the swamp of his subconscious. Worm.

At the age of twelve, the old man had been sent away to boarding school. It was a cluster of lofty buildings. Conditions were monastic and devoid of anything that might have provided comfort to twelve-year-olds, or anybody else for that matter. Discipline was harsh, swift, and arbitrary. The teachers were called “masters.” Some were interested in education, others less so. The pedophiles usually only lasted a couple of years and then quietly disappeared. Then there was Tompkins minor.

Tompkins minor, of course, had an older brother, Tompkins major, who was a godlike creature with wavy golden hair. He was captain of the Cricket Eleven, president of the Sixth Form Debating Society, and could play chess with three people at the same time and beat them all. Tompkins major was everything that Tompkins minor was not. Tompkins minor had the agility and brain of a limpet, and in the pecking order that rapidly develops in a closed community of boys, he was plankton. When somebody needed to be beaten, tripped, or have his face ground in the mud of the rugby field, Tompkins minor, if not exactly a volunteer, was always available. Within three weeks of his arrival, Tompkins

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The Wimshurst Machine

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minor was given the name Worm. Almost nobody remembered that he was Tompkins. Even the masters called him Worm. The only exception was the Latin master who called him Tompkins the Lesser in the vain hope that his class might learn the meaning of at least one Latin word.

The Physics Master (the boys thought of him in capital letters) was a small birdlike man of keen eye and nasty disposition by the name of Sowerbuts. He carried a length of bamboo cane with which he corrected lapses in a student’s attention by a slash across the boy’s hand. Sometimes, when the whim took him, he would hold the cane horizontal about six inches above the level of the desks and run down the aisle between the desks shouting “Positive Charge!” Any boy not swift enough to duck suffered the consequences. Worm seldom had the necessary reflexes.

Mr. Sowerbuts was owner and proprietor of the Wimshurst machine that sat in one corner of the physics lab. An impressive thing, it consisted of two very large counter rotating plastic discs, twice the size of a man’s arm span in diameter. They were separated by a fraction of an inch and each was studded around the circumference with metal inserts. The discs were driven by a geared crank, which was itself operated by a mahogany handle, darkened by the sweat of generations. Thick wire leads with cloth insulation connected each of the discs to two glass jar capacitors which must have had a capacitance in the megaFarad range. Thence, more stout wires led to two metal globes. When the handle was cranked, enough static electricity was produced to light a small town. Every year, on a glorious spring day, the Wimshurst machine was wheeled out front and center of the class to demonstrate the dramatic effects of electrical charge.

Worm was a natural selection for such a demonstration. The old man remembered him being instructed to stand upon a rubber stool in front of the machine. It was explained to the class that this would insulate him from the ground and prevent his electrocution. Worm approached the task gingerly. The rest murmured uneasily but were grateful at having avoided Mr. S’s attention. A stouter and more powerful member of the class was selected to crank the machine. This he did while Worm was told to grasp the two metal spheres. When the handle was cranked, enough static electricity was produced to light a small town. Every year, on a glorious spring day, the Wimshurst machine was wheeled out front and center of the class to demonstrate the dramatic effects of electrical charge.

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To the delight and fascination of everyone except the unfortunate Worm, the lad’s red hair began to untangle itself and stand upright on his head. It looked like the fronds of some rosy sea anemone waving in the ocean. Mr. S. explained to the class, whose interest was now fading, all manner of things about static electricity, of electrons and repulsion and how each individual hair was trying to push itself away from its neighbor. It was probably a masterly explanation. At the end of this Mr. S strode to the quivering victim and commanded him to get down from the stool. This he did. It was a high stool and not easily dismounted. To help himself down, Worm reached for the only support that was available. One hand on the metal sphere and the other on the teacher’s shoulder, he stepped to the floor. That, at least, was the intention. Unfortunately, as soon as his hand neared the teacher’s shoulder there was a loud crack and the air filled with the smell of ozone. Mr. S uttered a fierce cry and, convulsing with a mighty twitch, sat down in a heap on the floor. The class, as a man, rose to its feet in noisy appreciation. When the tumult died down there was a stunned silence during which Mr. Sowerbuts staggered to his feet and shook himself off.

Now, in a boy’s boarding school majority rule is absolute. There were a few of the brighter lads who had understood what had happened, but the majority sensed that in some inexplicable way Worm had punished The Physics Master, he had exacted revenge and, even more remarkably, there were no instant reprisals.

Thenceforth, Worm was draped with a different mantle. True, he was still called Worm. Now, though, it was said conspiratorially, almost affectionately. Boys who were particularly persecuted came to him for comfort and advice. He was The Boy Who Wreaked Vengeance On The Physics Master. The story grew with every retelling and was embellished with exaggeration. The exploits of Tompkins major—his century against Wrekin, his chess prowess—were forgotten, crumbled into history. The story of Tompkins minor was durable and became so encrusted in hyperbole that it became legend.

The old man remembered he had revisited his old school some decades later in the hope that it had been converted into a warehouse for automobile parts or perhaps torn down and made into a national park. It still stood and he had been invited to have lunch with one of the school prefects. There he learned that the legend was still alive. He was told of the boy who killed an evil master by simply pointing a finger at him. “Yes,” had said the old man, “I was there. His head exploded.” The school prefect was thrilled to be able to report an actual eyewitness account.

The old man rolled over onto his back again and slowly lapsed into a half-waking miasma of dreams that passed for sleep these days.

Moral: Do not objectify your patients. If you do it often enough, they will point their fingers at you and your head will explode. Have a nice day.
The Wimshurst Machine
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