

Bruce H. Hinrichs

The Elements

On the northwest corner of the intersection of 19th and Jordan Avenues stands a neighborhood grocery store. The corner is busy. It is a popular neighborhood in the large city, one that is both middle-class residential and service-oriented. There are plenty of coffee shops (of course), video stores, beauty salons, adult bookstores, tattoo parlors, and specialty stores selling condoms, S&M paraphernalia, and other goodies. There are several psychics who will read your palm or feel the bumps on your head. Pedestrians, car traffic, bicycles, even skateboarders and rollerbladers populate the area day and night.

Although the grocery store has been called Peterson's for many years, the current proprietor is Mr. Blaine. Right now Mr. Blaine, wearing his usual fresh, crisp, white apron, is standing in aisle 4, meticulously aligning the soup cans. Mr. Blaine spends a great deal of time aligning and straightening things. He enjoys it. It soothes and occupies his body and his mind. His doctor, Rosemary Rongley, says that he has some sort of psychological disorder known by some silly initials, something like OCD. Mr. Blaine thinks that Dr. Rongley gets some wild, esoteric ideas. She analyzes too much. There's nothing wrong with aligning things. It's better when things are neat and straight. Instead of me, perhaps it's other people, people who don't like things nice and aligned, people who live in a dirty, messy world; perhaps it's they who have some fancy, initialed psychological disorder, like maybe DCO, Mr. Blaine thinks. Mr. Blaine smiles a wry smile to himself, then turns a chicken noodle soup can ever so slightly, just a hair, counterclockwise.

Directly across the street from Peterson's grocery store stands a large brown duplex with a small attic window at the very top. Right now, just as Mr. Blaine is busy aligning his cans and smiling wry smiles, a balding middle-aged man, Mr. Peter Dunlap, is gingerly crawling out of that small attic window and carefully shinnying out onto a narrow ledge at the top of the second floor of the brown duplex. His hands tightly grip the edge of the eaves while he moves to a position directly above a multi-cracked, wide, gray sidewalk, a position from which he will shortly jump.

Rrrriinnnggg. Rrrriinnnggg.

At this moment the telephone rings at the house just next door to the duplex from which Mr. Dunlap is about to jump.

"Hello?"

That's Mrs. Ethyl O'Hare, who has lived with her husband Matthew in this same house for nearly 23 years. The house is painted a dull yellow and has pretty lilacs, hydrangeas, geraniums, hyacinths, and pimpernels blooming just inside the somewhat dilapi-

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dated white picket fence surrounding the house. If you look closely, you will see a bumblebee buzzing from stamen to stamen collecting pollen. Precious butterflies and delicate, ruby-throated hummingbirds sometimes visit the O'Hare's yard. Today there is a sticky, bloodstained hypodermic syringe lying partially hidden in the soil beneath the bushes.

The O'Hares have two children. Right now, 14-year-old Eric is in the upstairs bathroom masturbating. Tiffany, 19, is institutionalized with depression and an eating disorder. Right at this instant Tiffany O'Hare is in a tiny white room in a large brick building across town, repeatedly cutting the inside of her forearm with a razor blade, experiencing what her therapist calls a dissociative state.

"Did you get the money? Can you bring it this afternoon?" inquires the voice on the other end of the telephone speaking to Mrs. Ethyl O'Hare.

At that precise moment, a young woman, Miss Margaret Chaps, enters Mr. Blaine's grocery store (Peterson's), smiling and carrying a fashionable brown purse with some carefully inscribed designer initials on it, even on the inside, where no one will see them, save Miss Chaps. The initials are something like YSL or YLS, but certainly not OCD. Miss Chaps is a bit anxious and panicky because of the PTSD she now experiences ever since the sexual assault some months ago.

Ting...tinkle...ting. Mr. Blaine has attached a small bell to the upper inside part of the front door of the grocery store. Mr. Blaine loves to hear the gentle tinkling sound.

"Margaret! Hello, how are you?"

"Just fine, Mr. Blaine. I need some pans for baking cupcakes. Do you have any?"

"Yes, yes, of course. Right over here."

Mr. Blaine, followed by Margaret Chaps, begins to move sprightly to aisle 6, the last aisle, where he has neatly stacked the pots and pans. However, before they even reach aisle 5, they hear a car's brakes screech just outside the store. They both stop, frozen in time, pupils dilated, mouths gaping. Then immediately, there is a very loud, horrifying,

metal-crunching CRASH!

The sound of the crash is heard by everyone nearby. As a consequence, at the very same moment Mr. Blaine and Miss Chaps stare wide-eyed at each other, Mr. Dunlap, in a state of bewilderment, grips the eaves even tighter while he peers down at the waiting sidewalk, Eric O'Hare turns his head slightly toward the bathroom window (but is in no position to stop what he's doing just now), and Mrs. O'Hare pauses in mid-sentence on the phone. Of course, Tiffany O'Hare is completely across town and couldn't possibly hear the loud crash, so she simply continues her cutting, looking impassively at the jagged lines on her arm and the bubbly red blood emerging from them in oozing, runny modules.

Mr. Blaine and Miss Chaps now hurry out the grocery store front door, where they see a small, red car neatly crunched and wedged beneath a large black truck. Both vehicles are smoking profusely and blocking the intersection. Traffic is tangled and horns are honking. The bumblebee merely visits another anther while a stickworm inches up a sycamore branch, each oblivious to the commotion.

"...How do I know that this will be the end? How do I know you won't just ask for more and more money? How do I know you won't tell my husband, anyway? You know it would kill him, it would just kill him!" Mrs. O'Hare has continued her conversation after the brief pause caused by the crash. She's thinking that if the ladies at the church find out about this messy affair she will have to leave the Guild for sure.

Mr. Dunlap had just decided that this would be as good a time as any to jump from his overlooking ledge at the top of the brown duplex when the car crash interrupted his thoughts and momentarily captured his attention. Holding tenaciously to the eaves and scrunching his size 11 shoes onto the narrow ledge, he notices a small crowd forming at the scene of the accident. Chagrined, he concludes that his suicide must wait a few minutes.

The driver of the red car seems pinned, even squashed, behind his steering wheel. He is quite still. Probably dead. The crowd is talking fast and loud, saying things such as, "What kind of car is that? It looks like a Porsche. Boy, I wish I had a Porsche!" and "God, did you see that? Can you believe a car could squeeze under there? That is way cool!" and "Like, ohmygod, like, that's literally like what I just actually saw on TV like just yesterday, like, I mean, ohmygod, so..." and "Bitching, man, bitching."

The driver of the truck is now emerging from the bent door of the truck. A bloody gash on his forehead is leaking. His face is pure white, in high contrast to his tanned body and dark, dirty clothes, and, of course, to the bright-red leaking blood. His rolled up T-shirt sleeves reveal a large, prominent tattoo on his upper left bicep. It says JESUS SAVES in blue letters that are surrounded by a swirling red ribbon. It looks as if there's an arrow passing through the words diagonally from lower left to upper right, but it could be a

poorly drawn cross.

One of the observers in the crowd is Mr. Steve Clay, who was wandering the neighborhood on his way home from a doctor's appointment. His doctor—coincidentally, Mr. Blaine's doctor, Rosemary Rongley—had just told him that a second test had verified that he is HIV-positive. More initials. Mr. Clay, of course, is in a state of shock and confusion. He hasn't even been able to tell his wife that he is gay, now how will he tell her this? He is staring, unblinking, at the blood on the forehead of the truck driver and thinking about four-and-one-half years of lying, of nervous sneaking around, of clandestine assignations, of certain, well, acts. And he is thinking about AIDS. Even more initials.

Now 10-year-old Jimmy Swenson, milling amongst the crowd—excited, hyper, a sufferer of ADHD—has spotted Mr. Dunlap standing precariously on the narrow ledge of his duplex. The attic window is still open. The wind is blowing dust, leaves, and bits of nature into the attic to join the memories that have accumulated there over many years, memories that include a red, loose-leaf notebook full of poems written by Mr. Dunlap many years ago, poems that now sit forlorn and unattended—unwanted. His friends had often warned him that he was too sensitive.

A small insect has alighted on Mr. Dunlap's forearm, irritating him. He is unable to shoo it away because his hands are still tightly gripping the eaves. Mr. Dunlap is squirming and twisting his upper body and blowing at the insect in hopes of motivating it to leave him in peace. At this very moment, Jimmy Swenson begins pointing at Mr. Dunlap and shouting things like, "Look up there, a man's gonna jump!" Possibly as a result of the simultaneity of hearing the shouting while staring at the insect, a disturbing image pops into Mr. Dunlap's head. It is an image of Gregor Samsa, Franz Kafka's cockroach-man. Inexplicably, this makes Mr. Dunlap feel very brave and determined—he is going to jump.

Meanwhile, Mr. Blaine and Miss Chaps have arrived at the accident scene from the grocery store, naturally without the cupcake pans. Someone in the crowd is yelling to call 911. Miss Chaps suggests to Mr. Blaine that they return to the grocery store and place the call. Mr. Blaine knows this is a problem because Mr. Blaine knows a secret. He stands quiet, staring, thinking (if only he had a quick, nimble mind instead of an OCD mind). Mr. Blaine is hesitant and troubled because Mr. Blaine knows that his telephone is in the kitchen and that right now his wife, Mrs. Blaine, is lying dead on the kitchen floor in the tidy apartment in the back of Peterson's grocery store.

The voice on the other end of the telephone says to bring the money today, or else he will certainly tell Mr. O'Hare all the gory details of the affair and its gruesome, criminal denouement. Mrs. O'Hare is dumbfounded as to how anyone could possibly know what happened between her and Mr. Fitzgerald or how she had arranged for his death to look like an accident. How could anyone know? But one thing she knows for sure: she must not allow Matthew or anyone else to find out.



Matthew O'Hare is at work this morning, even though it is a Saturday. Mr. O'Hare is planning another Boy Scout outing. Mrs. O'Hare thinks of her husband Matthew as a kind, giving person—a respectable businessman who happens to like children. She doesn't know the real reason for the Boy Scout outings. She doesn't know about Mr. O'Hare's "problem." But soon she will know. Soon everyone will know.

As it happens, little Jimmy Swenson has been on some of Mr. O'Hare's Boy Scout outings, and only two weeks from now little Jimmy Swenson, suffering from ADHD, will blurt out the secret of the outings during a tense interrogation that he will receive after being caught attempting to rape six-year-old Anna Cokato, who lives next door. Jimmy Swenson knows the secret because on one particular Boy Scout outing, Jimmy only pretended to swallow the sleeping pills. Therefore he was not unconscious during the... well, "acts." While small forest animals scurried outside the tents, Jimmy remained quiet, embarrassed, and feigned sleep. Hence, Mr. O'Hare's secret was revealed to little Jimmy Swenson, who will, in just two weeks' time, reveal the secret to the local police.

One of the first people to arrive at the scene of the accident is Mr. George Rivers, who teaches mathematics at the nearby high school. Mr. Rivers is just on his way to hear a lecture in Emerson Hall, the auditorium at the local private college, Starks University. The lecture is being given by the eminent physicist Dr. Murray Gell-Mann, who is best known for his theories about quarks. In fact, he coined the term—or, rather, borrowed it from literature.

Mr. George Rivers read in the local newspaper that scientists recently discovered the last of the theorized six quarks, the so-called "top" quark. Quarks are supposedly what everything is made of. What we are made of. Murray Gell-Mann is one of the few people on earth who knows what this means and why it is important. Mr. Rivers has always been curious about such things. Ever since he was in junior high school, Mr. Rivers has carried in his pocket a small, folded copy (now quite ragged and worn) of the Periodic Table, listing all of the known elements. The universe in his pocket. And all very neatly aligned.

Mrs. Amelia Rivers, his wife, often asks George why he bothers to carry such a thing with him all the time. Does it have some religious or spiritual meaning, she wonders? Is it sentimental? Or is it practical in some way that she can't fathom? Mr. Rivers chuckles explosively to himself, quickly cupping his hands to his mouth. He remembers one such occasion when, feeling especially witty, he had replied to her, "It's elementary, my dear Mary, I carry it in order to be universally understood."

Mr. Rivers enjoys making puns, although he is quite aware that no one else seems to enjoy them. No one ever laughs or even smiles at his clever puns. In fact, no one seems to have much of a sense of humor at all, it suddenly dawns on Mr. Rivers. For humorous conversation, most people simply recount TV show plots, talk about celebrities, and, of course, go on and on about the weather. Mr. Rivers finds nothing funny in those things, nothing funny at all. "People," he whispers disdainfully under his breath, "what a bunch of humorless jerks."

Only a few feet from Mr. Rivers, oblivious to his disparaging remark, Mr. Blaine is now staring blankly at Miss Chaps, who continues to appeal to him to go back to the grocery store to call 911. In this frozen moment, Mr. Blaine suddenly recalls the unpleasant details of this morning, this morning in the kitchen. The events flash through his mind: Mr. Blaine remembers feeling the hard, gritty piece of metal pipe in his freshly cleaned hand. The grit on the metal was so nauseating to him, so filthy, that even now the memory makes him want to wash his hands again. If only she would have stopped nagging him. If only she would have kept quiet. If only the piece of metal pipe had not felt so cool in his hands, so cool in contrast to the kitchen's morning heat.

The truck driver is now staggering amongst the crowd, repeatedly mumbling something about God granting him a miracle. Upon hearing this, Mr. Rivers, the high school teacher with the table of elements in his pocket, smiles a sideways, smirking smile. He thinks that the word "miracle" is used only when there is a disaster. If someone says there has been a miracle, then you can safely assume that something bad has happened. No one says it's a miracle there wasn't an accident today, or it's a miracle a plane didn't crash, or it's a miracle I don't have cancer, or it's a miracle I didn't drop dead at the breakfast table this

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morning, or it's a miracle the earth didn't crash into the sun, and so on, Mr. George Rivers thinks. But if someone is injured... there's a miracle lurking for sure. Mr. Rivers tries hard to fit into society, but he feels progressively more and more left out.

Miss Chaps has already started, hurriedly, toward Peterson's grocery store with the intention of calling 911. She's forgotten all about the cupcake pans. Mr. Blaine is stammering at her, but his OCD brain has not yet created an excuse, so he trails behind her, his arms flailing wildly, his mind flailing wildly. A small brown bird is startled by the sudden movements and glides swiftly away from the scene, emitting a high-pitched tweet.

"Tweet."

Mr. Dunlap, still gripping the eaves tightly, yells at Jimmy Swenson to mind his own business, to shut up. Some people in the crowd, including HIV-positive Steve Clay, are now looking up at Mr. Dunlap and wondering if Jimmy is right—that Mr. Dunlap is planning to jump. Steve Clay is wondering if maybe that's a good idea for him, too. The thought now materializes in his mind: an image of crawling out on the ledge, joining Mr. Dunlap, peering birds-eye down on the chaotic scene below, and then bringing a swift, unequivocal end to his HIV nightmare. Then, suddenly, both the insect and the image

flutter swiftly away from their respective sites—Mr. Dunlap's arm and Mr. Clay's conscious mind.

Mrs. O'Hare is just now hanging up the phone after having agreed to bring the money to the designated location, as Eric O'Hare, apparently finished with his bathroom business, is bounding down the stairs, running out the front door to join the fun outside. Mrs. O'Hare's mind works faster than Mr. Blaine's, and she has already conjured up the crude outline of a plan that will bring an unpleasant but necessary end to the man on the phone. Mrs. O'Hare walks patiently but with cold determination to the bureau in the den, opens the hidden drawer, and firmly grasps and removes a gleaming, silver, steel pistol. Only need to load it and put it in her Gucci purse, then she's on her way to "pay off" that damn blackmailer.

At this moment, Miss Chaps has burst through the entrance into Peterson's grocery store with Mr. Blaine right behind her. He is yelling at her to wait, but her mind is not processing his protestations. She moves quickly past the neatly aligned cans to the back kitchen door and begins pulling it open. Mrs. Blaine's dead body is lying just inside the door; a stream of dull red blood, partially dried, lies in stark contrast atop the clean, white linoleum floor.

Mr. Blaine is just behind her, shouting, "WAIT!" But Miss Chaps grasps the door handle and pulls on it hard; the door swings open wider and wider. Miss Chaps sticks her head into the kitchen, focusing her eyes on the wall, searching for the telephone. Her head turns from side to side, searching. She begins to step into the kitchen where the odor is a bit raw... the body is only a few feet away, lying still, quiet. Mr. Blaine stands paralyzed just behind, his heart racing, his body limp and shaking, his mind numb.

And then, quite unexpectedly, a series of loud screeching sirens pierces the air, penetrating ears everywhere, including the ears in Peterson's grocery store. Miss Chaps's brain promptly registers the loud, shrill clamoring, and consequently she spins away from the kitchen (and from Mrs. Blaine's dead body, which must remain to be found later by the police) and stares directly at Mr. Blaine, his chubby face now covered with sweat, his eyes opened wide, and his mouth gaping.

"Oh, they're here already," Miss Chaps says and instinctively releases her grip on the kitchen door handle, allowing the door to slowly swing closed behind her. She steps toward a still somewhat anesthetized Mr. Blaine.

"Yes," he gasps with a sigh of great, unexpected relief, but is then suddenly aware of an intense, sharp pain in his left chest, now spreading from his neck down his left arm. He instantly feels faint, recognizes an impending loss of consciousness, and begins to lose his balance. Miss Chaps stares at him in shock and disbelief, her face a picture-perfect look of pure inconceivability. Mr. Blaine glances quickly, anxiously, down at the floor, studying it, worrying about dirtying his clothes, and then falls directly, flatly, to the grocery store

floor. The impact creates an echoing thud, and the vibration causes a slight disruption in the alignment of the cans on the shelves. The chicken noodle soup can, the very one that Mr. Blaine recently aligned, now in response to the vibration rotates ever so slightly, just a hair, in a clockwise direction, and finally rests in the precise orientation it was in before Mr. Blaine aligned it. Meanwhile, Mr. Blaine is utterly, unflinchingly, instantly dead from a heart attack, his body lying not far from the body of his wife, Mrs. Blaine.

Several police cars and an emergency vehicle jockey for space at the busy intersection. A flycatcher suddenly darts from his perch in a nearby tree, snatches the very insect that just buzzed off of Mr. Dunlap's arm, and just as suddenly the flycatcher vanishes back into the dense branches overhanging the O'Hare's pale yellow house.

Despondent, HIV-positive Steve Clay has lost interest in the accident scene, having more pressing issues on his mind. He wanders aimlessly, bumping shoulders with this person or that, his thoughts a jumble of breakfast mush, the image of the red blood on the truck driver's forehead branded insidiously into his mind. Without purpose, he meanders away from the bustling *mélange* of people and sounds and takes refuge inside his own introspections. He is walking just now on the cracked, gray sidewalk directly below Mr. Dunlap, who is feeling a bit at ease now that the insect has left his arm and the image of Gregor Samsa has left his mind. Mr. Dunlap peers down and finds that he can stare straight onto the top of Mr. Clay's head. From this vantage point, Mr. Clay appears to be staggering in slow motion.

A local high school student, Bill Bagget, has recognized his former teacher, Mr. Rivers, and begins talking animatedly with him about the crash, with an occasional swat at a persistent horse fly that buzzes around their heads. The paramedics have emerged from their vehicle with their usual idiosyncratic metal and plastic equipment, stretchers, cases, and flexible tubes. They are carrying what appears to be a tank of oxygen.

"That's oxygen, isn't it Mr. Rivers?" asks Bill.

"Yes. That's oxygen."

"We studied that in chemistry class. I think oxygen has atomic number eight. Is that right, Mr. Rivers?"

"Yes. Atomic number eight, atomic weight 16." Mr. Rivers knows his elements.

Bill Bagget's curiosity continues: "That container they're carrying the oxygen in, it looks so shiny, what kind of metal do you think it is? Is it titanium? Uhhmm, what's the atomic number of titanium again, Mr. Rivers?" Bill Bagget looks anxiously, curiously at Mr. Rivers, a look that might be taken as one of respect, respect for Mr. Rivers's knowledge.

Mr. Rivers is delighted—absolutely thrilled—to have this opportunity to use his Periodic Table. He proudly smiles at Bill Bagget and reaches into his back trousers pocket saying, "Well, let's just have a look here..."

Mrs. Ethyl O'Hare has secured her shiny steel pistol, stowed it in her Gucci purse, and is now heading out the front door of the pale yellow house. Naturally, she is oblivious to Mr. Dunlap perched on the ledge next door, although she does see a number of teen-aged boys skateboarding on the sidewalk in front of her house. She puts her head down and walks stoically toward her car, which is parked at the curb. On the paved pathway leading from the house, she inadvertently stomps on a small black ant, squishing it and pasting it to the bottom of her red shoe.

Now as Mrs. Ethyl O'Hare exits the gate of the white picket fence, the teenaged skateboarders suddenly, purposefully, converge on her. Her mind on other matters, she is taken aback by the sudden swarm of young arms and legs. She back-pedals rapidly, flailing her arms in an attempt to catch her balance and to ward off the attackers. One of the many young arms grabs her Gucci purse and tugs it viciously from her grasp. Now several hands pull at the strap of the purse, and the purse abruptly flies open, and the silver, steel pistol tumbles into space, glistening in the morning sun. All eyes, very wide open, are on the pistol as it falls to the ground and comes to rest in a soft patch of grass. A blur of gnats rapidly disperses from the spot where the pistol lands.

"Titanium ... titanium ... uhhh," Mr. Rivers's finger moves conscientiously across the squares of the Periodic Table, "... uhhh, here it is, yes, titanium, atomic number..."

Just then, in the precise moment of Mr. Rivers's proud success, a gust of wind wrenches the worn, fold-marked piece of paper from his hand and carries it flying like a tiny tail-less kite, flapping and rippling through the air. "Oh, my!" blurts Mr. George Rivers, who immediately gives chase.

Meanwhile, the staggering, slow motion figure of Steve Clay, seen top-view, transfixes Mr. Dunlap, who, tired and drained, has momentarily loosened his grip on the eaves. He's thinking: it's now or never! Mr. Dunlap's size 11 shoes inch forward on the narrow ledge, and his arm muscles tense as he prepares to push away from the house. Mr. Dunlap has decided that now is a good time to jump.

On the street below, several young hands have snatched the prized silver pistol from its grassy haven and wrestle for it, lifting it high above their young heads. Voices yell garbled, macho sounds, and Mrs. O'Hare screams. Her screaming, quite naturally, is due in part to the surprise assault on her and also to the fact that the shiny pistol has been revealed, but in addition Mrs. O'Hare is screaming because she now recognizes that one of the young hands reaching for the gun is attached to her son, Eric, who, standing nearby when the foray began, has now joined the tumultuous struggle for possession of the shiny treasure. The bustling of young feet on the patch of lawn has disturbed a tiger beetle that now scurries, waddle-like, from his sanctuary in the tall bluegrass to a somewhat safer location near a clump of dandelions and thistle weeds a few feet away.

As luck would have it, the wind blows Mr. Rivers's piece of paper with the Periodic

Table directly into the face of Eric O'Hare, and expressly at the exact moment when he secures a solid grip on the shiny, steel gun. The paper, flapping wildly, lands precisely across his eyes, his left eye struck by the square marked "22, Ti, Titanium" and his right eye by the square bearing "47, Ag, Silver."

At the very moment when the struggle for the pistol proceeds on the street below, at the top of the brown duplex, Mr. Dunlap closes his eyes tight, bends his knees down low, takes one, last, deep breath, and then jumps from the narrow ledge, pushing his body up and away from the house, propelling himself helplessly into the empty space of the morning air. His arms are spread wide and flapping, as if he intends to fly, or perhaps to balance himself in space.

The sudden, unanticipated blindness created by the Periodic Table blown tightly against his eyes startles Eric O'Hare, causing him to reflexively contract his muscles. By a strange quirk of fate, his finger is just at that moment resting on the trigger of the pistol; the reflexive muscle contraction causes the gun to fire.

BOOM!

The sound of the pistol shot is loud and numbing to Mrs. O'Hare, Eric, and the boys nearby. Several people in the crowd turn their heads toward the noise. Some of them point. Several tiny sparrows burst from a nearby tree, fluttering their wings rapidly.

The bullet travels upward at an angle of approximately 75 degrees. Now, who would have guessed it, but just as Mr. Dunlap reaches the very peak, the apex, of his arcing suicidal plunge—his arms spread, his eyes open wide—the bullet from Mrs. O'Hare's pistol strikes Mr. Dunlap (while poised in midair, arms palpitating) straight through the left temple, killing him instantly. His body immediately goes limp, his muscles lose all tone. Then Mr. Dunlap's sad, lifeless body, lured by the cold certainty of gravity, plummets directly down, quickly gathering speed, toward the point on the wide sidewalk directly below precisely where Mr. Steve Clay has momentarily ceased his wandering and has paused, suspended by the sound of the gunshot.

THUMP!!

Mr. Dunlap's limp, dead body lands squarely on top of the unsuspecting head of Mr. Steve Clay. A splattering, thunk-like sound emanates from the collision, and the two intertwined bodies now lie sprawling on the cracked, gray sidewalk.

Meanwhile, the folded, worn, piece of paper with the Periodic Table on it has since flown from Eric O'Hare's face, has been whisked away by the wind, and is now gently wafting down avenues and alleys, flittering blocks from the bedlam of screaming and shouting near Peterson's grocery store.

Dr. Murray Gell-Mann has arrived for his lecture and is walking the short distance from the parking lot to Emerson Hall. The President of Starks University, Dr. Morris Champlin, a former chemistry professor who has just finished his phone conversation

with Mrs. Ethyl O'Hare, and who later this month will be taken into custody by the local police on suspicion of soliciting prostitution from teenaged boys, walks with him. They are discussing the recent laboratory discovery of the top quark. A small flock of grackles sit quietly on a nearby tree branch, placidly observing the two men. One of the grackles lets out a penetrating, "Caw."

Coincidentally, the piece of paper containing the Periodic Table of Elements has settled in a place on the walkway just ahead of where the two luminaries are now ambling. Unbeknownst to Dr. Gell-Mann, who, of course, has other, much more important matters on his mind, a small bit of chewing gum is stuck to the sole of his brown size 12 dress shoe, and now that very bit of gum on the bottom of Dr. Murray Gell-Mann's shoe comes down exactly on top of Mr. Rivers's piece of paper containing the Periodic Table. The paper is stuck to the bottom of Dr. Gell-Mann's left shoe. The two men continue into Emerson Hall, both oblivious to the piece of paper, which remains stuck to the brown dress shoe of Dr. Gell-Mann.

Following a wonderful introduction by Starks University President Morris Champlin, Dr. Gell-Mann stands at the podium staring out onto a sea of bright eager faces, including the bright, eager face of Mr. George Rivers. Still completely unaware that he is standing atop the very neatly aligned table of elements, Dr. Gell-Mann is about to begin his presentation. Members of the audience have already formulated their questions and are earnestly awaiting their turn to offer intricate inquiries about the makeup of the universe and the mysteries of quarks.

And so, with the Periodic Table firmly stuck to the sole of his shoe, Dr. Murray Gell-Mann begins his rather complicated explanations of muons, leptons, bosons, neutrinos, and other exotic subatomic particles.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Dr. Gell-Mann intones, "there is a principle which I like to call the Totalitarian Rule of Physics..."

Mr. Rivers settles comfortably into his seat, his lost Periodic Table temporarily gone from his thoughts, his attention riveted to the eminent man of science at the podium.

Dr. Gell-Mann, standing firmly atop the table of elements, continues, "The Totalitarian Rule of Physics states that anything that isn't forbidden is compulsory. That is," Murray Gell-Mann patiently explains, "if the laws of physics do not rule out an event, then that event not only *can* happen, it *must* happen!"

Mr. Rivers smiles a contented smile.