

A Life in the Day of Eric

Seemingly from nowhere, Eric stepped in front of the oncoming Pontiac convertible (he made it a habit to step in front of cars seemingly from nowhere so that they would have as little chance to brake as possible). The Pontiac swerved sharply to the left, but Eric was there first and was caught fully on the hip by the right headlight and then dragged under the wheels for about sixty feet. A woman on the sidewalk screamed and fainted; she wasn't Eric's mother as one would suppose. She didn't even know Eric. It was always unfortunate that these incidents should involve bystanders who had to appear as witnesses later on (those that couldn't get away in time). In any case, Eric dragged himself from under the car and angrily shook the dust and grease from his clothes; he had failed again, and this time it was right after a bad breakfast. Death is hard.

As one descends from the nearest star, let us assume that the landing point on our earth would be the brightest point, the most desirable point. There is such a point, so they say . . . as one descends . . .

The student is smuggled into reality occasionally — leaves the brightest point for dull points and comes back full of new life and energy and worshipping of science as a concept. He may have gone and come back for three years but he never learns and the hope is always there when the dull points of the earth are left behind.

Eric crossed California Street and turned to go back to Arms 155 where he was in the middle of a geology final. He had just caused a brand new Thunderbird to go completely out of control and swerve onto the sidewalk between two palms. Of course, Eric's pencil wasn't even broken. Just three weeks before, on a field trip, he had walked into a poison oak patch and then thrown himself into the Arroyo, hoping to die of exposure. This, he felt, would leave an indelible stain on the geology department's record; however, he had survived. His last attempt before the final was also a failure . . . and the one before the math final . . . and before the physics. Eric even failed to fail the finals; no matter how low his score, the average was lower. Death is hard.

And why doesn't he leave . . . and stop coming back to be beaten and kicked and lifted and kicked again and allowed to survive in order to face it again? Prestige . . . prestige . . . prestige . . . and into the

night of society the same name echoes and beckons to its side the innocents . . . unknowingly ushered into a world of numbers from zero to four that determine their glorious fate . . . Oh, but you will look back on those years with a smile; those are the best years — you'll wish for them when you're thirty . . .

The drug store door pushed open and Eric wearily followed the opening into the cold outside air. He stood for a moment contemplating a large Imperial sedan, but decided rather to return to his room. He had just bought, by pleading extreme insomnia, twelve sleeping pills, which he would take immediately. (There was ham on the menu that night, and horrified at the thought of going through that again, Eric was going to try something radically different.)

Man molds himself in the light of other value systems . . . the brightest light may destroy the fastest . . . and then there is nothing left . . . the path is wrong . . . the systems have failed . . . all that remains is stagnation . . . lethargy . . . fatalism . . . survival from zero to four . . .

Seemingly from nowhere, Eric stepped into his small room on the top floor of the physical plant. He quickly removed his ordinary workaday clothes, revealing a blue uniform underneath. Without the slightest hesitation, he swallowed four of the sleeping pills and fell on to his bed, No ham . . . no ham . . . no turnips, he thought, as he was overcome with heavy sleep . . . Everytime he had gone home they had been so happy to see him; they commended him on his grades even though they didn't exactly know what they meant as far as standing in the class, and so on. And whenever they had friends over, everybody would ooh and ahh at the fact that he was in such a tough school and so famous, and he would feel good for awhile and when he came back he would think that this was a great place after all and he would be happy for a few days and then it would start all over again and he would start stepping in front of cars and throwing himself into the Arroyo and now the sleeping pills.

But Eric knew he couldn't find death . . . it avoided him to prolong the torture; the end never came any nearer . . . zero to four . . . zero to four . . . nothing but survival from zero to four . . . Eric only slept through the ham.

— Martin Carnoy '60