



THE STATISTICIAN

Bev Jafek

YOU MUST KNOW ME: I'm the man who proved that the percentage of rodent hair and excrement in the average candy bar is .00152. If you've never heard that one, you've undoubtedly come across another of my little firecrackers, that the average annual income of a San Francisco prostitute is \$74,189, and her age, 23.4; that 302.9 acres of forest are expended for one average Sunday issue of a major metropolitan newspaper; that 272,154 children are employed annually in pornography; that the national tonnage of cats and dogs killed each year by the A.S.P.C.A. is 39.8. Statistics should be called the study of the morbid and bizarre.

I run, in short, one of those number-crunchers that supplies all your newspapers, TV schedules, best sellers, business seminars and science symposia, not to mention

BEV JAFEK

those hard-working gamblers of our body politic who use numbers to control everything from your svelte nuclear warheads to the grubby contents of your wallet. Don't think so? Try stumbling through life without a dozen kinds of insurance; try spending your childhood years without the bell curve shaping you more boldly than your body could ever attempt; try receiving any form of medical care—toothpaste to open heart surgery—without someone appraising the odds of your pleasure and payment for the outcome.

Only saints and the brain-damaged escape being polled and sampled throughout every moment of life—by your friendly politician, scientist, salesperson. It's the only issue upon which they all agree. They must count your favorite innocuous activities, your pocket money, your blood, your genes, your ballot. You are a flesh container of this primordial soup of numbers that feeds all industry, science, premeditated violence—clearly our most important activities. We live as specks within interlocking webs of measurement that make us all mad relatives, number-obsessed kinsmen who eternally count one another and never utter a word. Remember the dream in which you are standing naked in a well-dressed crowd, unable to find your clothes or control your anxiety? Numbers have stripped us in just this way, while we mumble them over and over and imagine we control the world.

Do I sound bitter, miserable, full of hate? Not at all—it's just more number-crunching, business as usual. After all, I'm a statistician, the only one who is paid for counting. The rest of you lambs are just counted in your sleep. I run a relatively unimpressive, medium-sized business consisting of a small analytical chem lab and a minicomputer with CADD and graphics, all run by

The Statistician

operators and programmers whose work makes them personify random numbers over any other state of living substance. Do I sound as though I hate them? Why? they do just as I ask—carry out statistical analyses for marketing studies, scientists, bureaucratic snoops of various kinds—largely means, correlations, spread sheets and verifications of statistical significance, producing, in other words, nameless, faceless, numbered exhibitionism over all other means of identification.

At times I am strangely moved by numbered quantity and feel there is a mysterious fitness to it: 17 milligrams of shattered bone clinging to the blueberry bushes beside D.B. Cooper's unopened knapsack of cash; the fractal structure of coastlines, clouds and Gregorian chants; the positive correlation between violent crime and the full moon; the quantitative perfection of fish bodies for movement in water, birds' wings for air currents. Numbers bear witness and no more, and so doing may occasionally lie in the silent, beautiful domain of angels. There is even a coarse beauty to sheer number without measure—the myriad of dead creatures humming in our auto gas tanks, the elements in our bodies that once glowed in stars that died long before the sun's birth. How can creation and destruction commingle so in quantity itself? Here the multi-colored, endlessly various world of life and death passes beneath my keyboard and ritually I acknowledge it without judgment—the godlike Observer whose glance caused time and space to erupt into being and explode a universe. Too much? Hardly; the random has always been regarded as the sign of God's presence, that which is beyond our control. And I suppose we can't forget the input of the 15th-century street gamblers, who needed a convoluted Renaissance rationale for their cheap thrills. Who can

BEV JAFEK

blame them? If we didn't have our means and correlations, we would be naked as cavemen, afraid to come out into that chill, unsparing light we moderns have let fall on us.

All right, I am bitter, and I do hate my co-workers. But I'm the company president, and I can do it with abandon. What is this frustrated anger that has unleashed my small, pathetic torrent of numbers and words? As I look out my window, I know it is this hatefully beautiful autumn day with its frail, blackened boughs and riotous colors hovering in air—so perfect a mingling of randomness, beauty, life and death that I can never separate them—something meant to seduce me before I even touch my keyboard. Strangely, it is less frustration than a devouring loneliness—I who produce the nothing that is, in other hands, the essence of everything. I have an inconsolable desire to see and touch one of my products. How bizarre: I actually want to talk to a mean.

Now, my Mean would be the average of various attributes of men my age, 42, with exactly the proportions, personality, interests and financial health I am so efficient at measuring. So why couldn't I just pick him out of a crowd? I know more about him than his wife does. Isn't he, in a sense, my "better half"? Isn't he "truer" to life, the inhabitant of that blank surface I am always reaching toward? Why wouldn't I, of all people, take the greatest pleasure in capturing him?

A fantasy life is particularly dangerous for a man in my profession. For all the phantasms of probability, I at least can be counted the empiricist. I am, therefore, anxiously delighted to be ducking out of my office so suddenly, then walking in a random direction on a random street. Here I am, trying to find him, all the while

The Statistician

making certain my motions are only those of chance, for how else would I find him? We are on the saint's only pathway together.

My imaginary adventure is making me giddy. Yet why couldn't there be another world superimposed on this one? The street is a plane over which my means and correlations are gliding with secret, ambient life—as real as anything else. The route to them lies not, ultimately, in a step-by-step direction but in the larger pattern of diffusely random motion. If I accept the limitations of total randomness, I move in all directions at once. As I passed crowds of people on the street, I was pleased to think that they saw a human being as real as themselves, yet this one had left their universe entirely.

I remembered my first vivid impression as an adult—the one that signalled, beyond a doubt, the end of childhood. It was the sense of an invisible pane of glass secretly separating me from all others. Now the pane has merely hardened, become another way of life, and all that lies beyond is cast into a kaleidoscope of shifting, random shapes.

I also recalled a thought that once frightened me: the dead continue as they are. They congregate on the other side of the glass, ready to divulge their great secret, only to realize it is too disappointing for belief. Perhaps I was now hovering with the dead, the absence of life unspeakably mundane. What words, after all, could describe my adventure? "The president went out for lunch and disappeared." Or, "the president pushed an invisible button and snuffed out the world." That was truer, for I sensed my adventure had an element of hatred. Why should anyone contemplate with ease this man passing on the street, myself—the taciturn man with lifeless eyes? He lives in another world, he thinks.

BEV JAFEK

Doesn't this make him an assassin of life rather than another of the pathetic, silent dead?

I never answered my question, yet I walked for hours, the streets turning blander, my mind deadly in its emptiness. Slowly, I began to discern signs that I had passed into another world. In some elliptical way, my experience began to show different patterns and dimensions; whole constellations of events that had never been significant before were now of the greatest importance. I was losing my constant "where," a great roving "eye" of perception that opened vantages, discerned processes, assigned beginnings and endings. Rather, the world was becoming the "how" of its assembly and packaging. It pressed upon me with weight, density, more like touch than sight. It bore me away where I had always stood apart. There were no processes beyond fluctuations of a serial. Totally unpredictable things, therefore, said *life, here, now*—an elevator, for example.

It was as though I had never experienced an elevator. How amazing, I thought, this is just what I was looking for, each floor a compartment numbered with lights. We stand in our little block of space, watching the floor numbers while the chain of occupants fluctuates randomly. Here for one-two was a gaunt man of fifty with flaring, gristling sideburns and jowls of resignation, meticulously lined, as though he had carved them tenderly himself; followed on three-four by a young Hispanic messenger whose clear, olive skin glistened and challenged the world, the skin of Indians and Orientals alike, patches of a race going up or down in power's own probabilities. At five-six everything changed since we reached the advertising agencies: the softest, widest-eyed girls in the world, girls who seemed to nestle when they were still; and young men in light suits carrying

The Statistician

coffee, whose thin, ironic smiles seemed humiliation spoken in another language. When I came down, nine-eight was a chaotically stained technician, overweight and dripping, thinking of something and someone else as he smiled in his distraction, and a hard-on rose indelicately in the grimy folds of his pants. Then, at two-one again, I stepped out with a bustling queue of middle-aged secretaries—the shortest strides, the varied hues of tinted hair—I, the great leader of randomness with my followers, whose identities shifted like the senseless code of their tiny, tapping heels.

So you see, I was spending my afternoon traveling up and down in elevators, then disappearing soundlessly. I had to admit that I was having a wonderful time. I should wander away from my work and into another universe more often, I thought. Yet nothing in my new world was as truly satisfying as a subway—a work of both random drama and art.

The subway car's center most intrigued me, since it held two long rows of seats facing one another. Perhaps a half-dozen to a dozen people were constantly lined up, side-by-side, opposite their partners in exact randomness. Here was an old man with hair thickly scooped up like an ancient president and such huge, attentively sensitive ears, a bit of a donkey thrown in, altogether the picture of energetic servility sitting beside a woman, obviously poor, whose face was a mass of wrinkles and ridges sloping downward, as though she had sucked the earth and found it rotten. A languid, young man of Thai-Cambodian origin had a face that was a study in curves—the startling, sheer roundness that can be eyes, the ears high, tapering orbs like the handles of coffee cups, a low bulge over cheekbones and a nose so round and low it almost slipped away—all was

dreamy, wave-like, unfulfilled. He sat beside a balding Italian man with huge, curving lips, drooping mustache and lumpily slanting eyes, somehow so seamy, meaty, sweaty he seemed to want a wall to pound his fists on. Close to him was a rumpled old woman with a huge bag of refuse, obviously her only possession—furry, glinting eyes beneath general filth—who every night must throw her old-rag's body on the ground, grin toothlessly and crawl into her bag. Beside her was a creature of ambiguous race and gender, like some young projection of the future where all contraries have been resolved, the confusion passing, even, to the jacket—denim with deerskin fringe.

Now I had quite a lumpy little Mulligan Stew concentrated into the two rows of seats, drawn together by their random appearance. Their isolation from the rest of the car immediately suggested a kind of tale or journey in action, with all seats filled by my protagonists. As some left and others arrived, I asked myself, what is my unfolding tale? The stew was presently dominated by the limp Southeast Asian, who would sink into some voluptuous shadow and resist any initiative; the seamy Italian, who would be enraged by any suggestion; the man with the president's ears, who would merely tremble with the pleasure of being told what to do; and the old bag lady, who would scoop up the journey's garbage and save it for posterity. The tale would therefore seek a presence to give it direction and inspiration, and we had only a moment before this influence arrived: a black girl of thirteen, already immense, with huge pink sunglasses and madly dripping curls, who cracked her gum as loud as creation—she would lead us all.

At some point in my long, playful monologue, an inexplicable terror began. As strange and vital as I found

The Statistician

this little compartment of humanity, of tales and adventures begun and never finished, it was not alive at all but frozen in some eerie way—rigid, fractured, dead. I was wrong to think that I saw an inner life in these people. They did not emote, but grimaced. Their vividness was a function of the severe pose into which they were incomprehensibly locked.

The woman sitting beside me became a mass of twisted lines, then a mask rent by terror and despair. The mask's contours crumbled into a chaotic paste or clay, then hardened into an expression of insane delight. She contorted into one emotional grimace or posture after another. How had I seen this as alive, even amusing, earlier? Or was there still another imaginary world into which I had stepped?

The man with the president's ears was now convulsed into an unmoving expression of horror; he resembled a ceramic mask of a Japanese actor far more than a human being. What was happening to them? To me? I was terrified and tried to bolt out of the car, yet my legs locked for no apparent reason, and I fell into the center instead. When I touched my legs, they registered no sensation at all. I tried to bolt again, but my legs only twitched on the floor in a strangely mechanical rhythm.

As I looked up, a world of tortured grotesques surrounded me. They hovered above, each face a mask. Real feeling did not exist in this world, but had been replaced by arbitrary contortions.

I did not want to touch my own face.

At that moment, like something in shadow at my vision's edge, he came to me. He was standing in the front of the car, holding one of the overhead reaches—a man with unusually regular features and a closely cropped beard. He was totally unlike the others. There was no

BEV JAFEK

convulsive motion on his face at all, only an intent stare ahead. He had a strange luminosity, something tenuous, only partially revealed, as though he were coming in and out of focus. Where the crowd was frozen and contorted, he was elastic, graceful, almost brimming, as though he possessed some spiritual force. He seemed totally oblivious to the repulsive human detritus collecting about him.

I had found a Mean, my original reason for conceiving and entering this world. He was beautiful, which filled me with horror. The last thing I expected to find here was something beautiful, lit up with an inner light. Strangely enough, something in my stare filled him with horror as well. He turned and looked at me with an expression of hate, as though I were something more horrible and distorted than the crowds. I looked away, frightened, and when I next looked up, he was gone.

My legs touched something solid, and I lurched out of the car. I tried to run after him, but my legs seemed frozen into a single position. Consequently, I weaved back and forth, as though held from below by a magnet. Sliding through the subway corridors, I saw one frozen face after another, a play of grotesques.

Finally I slid up the subway stairs and into a spare, rectangular green park. A dying tree provided me with a bench, and there I waited, gasping, for the Mean. I could either pursue him or wait for him—we were that close.

I sat for an indefinite period, watching the denizens of my new world come together in spasmodic groups, then shoot away from one another as though repelled. I sensed a strange order to their movements. They weaved and slid until they "arrived." Arrival was a moment in which they composed a random assembly, after which they had no more reason to bond and broke apart. At

The Statistician

each of these gatherings, a different emotion contorted their features and gave them a new, artificial pose, as though all they could become was a link in a random serial motivated, in turn, by nothing more than a desire to be counted.

Then it came to me: This world was identical to the one I had left, except for its lack of pretense, empathy or apology. Here we lived to count one another and for no other purpose. There were the inhabitants—most revealed and defined by the random movement of one to another and its brief pattern—an elevator, a subway. This was our version of identity, friendship, even love. Any and all emotions could be portrayed or summed up in these bizarre assemblies.

I saw a man walking a dog. Even in the dusky air, he had the fluid, shifting surface of the man I had seen earlier, the play of light and shadow so quick, he seemed effused, glowing. This almost spiritual quality seemed buoyed by its distance from the grotesques and their antics. Here was another Mean, yet how different from the previous. This man was much older and heavier, with a great, dark, brush-like beard, unkempt. He habitually looked at the ground, then back up to the scene at an angle. I could see no motive for this strange act; it was as though he didn't want to look fully at anything but rather to see a series of tightly angular distortions.

I approached him slowly and raised my hand. I didn't want to startle or repel him as I had the other Mean. If I recognized him as a Mean, he might know that I was virtually the reverse, a man. As I came closer, I saw that he was even coarser and filthier than I'd imagined. He stared with lightlessly dark, suspicious eyes. I had no idea what to say to him. Here we stood in

the remnants of light on the city's tiny island of green. I could say, "I am a statistician. I made you and then I had to come after you." Or, "I made you and then there was nothing but you." This was truer.

At that moment a rough, heavy fist hit my mouth, then the man seemed to fall away. I was lying on the ground, my lips throbbing, the hot, mineral taste of blood in my mouth. No one else saw what had happened. The people continued their spasmodic associations and darted away alone, oblivious.

I sat on the dead branch again, lightly touching my lips and chin. Still, I could think of nothing but the Mean. Why had he attacked me? And above all, what did he know about this world that I, as a man, did not? My obsession impelled me as forcefully as his fist. I had to find him again, that or another Mean. I couldn't rest with it.

It was now twilight, and the park began to empty. A parade of grotesques filed past me and into the street. Brisk shoes drummed along in perfectly regular rhythm, eyes bulged and mouths gaped, elbows bumped outward in what might have been chaotic but for an awful synchronization. What a twisting, lurching, drumming throng they were, held together by nothing but pantomime, amputation, repetition. How I despised them. Now a fat man was laughing beside me in great heaves more like sobs. His gaping mouth began to bend oddly and then purse itself into a bitter line while his eyes rolled upward.

"You puppets! You horrors!" I yelled. "Are you alive or dead? Can't you tell me?" More heads rolling. And eyes. Oh, such eyes—glazed, terrified, rolling, slack, squinting, petrified. Eyes of extremity but lacking depth or light or feeling. Hands reached to touch

The Statistician

me—fingers splayed star-like, small pointing daggers. “What are you!” I yelled again.

There were tears in my eyes, on my cheeks. I reached out to the grotesques, either to hit or touch them—I didn’t know which. My face contorted into a ferocious grimace that closed my eyes and bared my teeth while tears streamed down. Rigidity was overcoming all attempt to communicate, and the sound from my throat was a whispering babble.

I heard a deeply discordant sound—irregular, shuffling footsteps in the street behind me. I turned and saw an indistinct, gray figure. The elasticity of its movement instantly identified it as a Mean, and I lurched after it, rapt. My own movements became more elastic as I approached the Mean.

It was a woman. She had that elusiveness, hidden life held apart from this ossified world. Her movement was slow, rhythmically unconscious, beautiful. I was astonished and relieved at once; I had not imagined a woman among the Means. As I followed her, I found that I could move spontaneously at a certain distance from her yet became even more contorted and rigid when I was close, suggesting another dimension to this world. I was entranced, even more compelled, than I had been with the others.

She turned toward me after the next corner, aware that she was being followed. The last dim fingers of twilight heightened the contrast between the tangled mass of her dark hair and luminously pale skin. Her eyes had force, solidity, tenacity. As I stood beside her, my limbs clenched and revolved mechanically into strange, warped angles. I struggled against the contortions but became even more distorted and monstrous; my slight inclination toward her convulsed, exaggerated itself,

BEV JAFEK

and at last I was a dark, predatory mass. As though we were both beneath a sudden rain, I had the most acute sense of my own skin: minute pinpricks of shock inundated me as she watched. She was seeing a man who had turned himself into a monster, a pulp of twisted reflexes hardly different from the grotesques. Her dark eyes absorbed what I had become, sharing with me the most perversely intimate moment of my life. I tried to ask, "Don't you know me?" yet my voice was nothing but horrible, whispered vowels, incomprehensible.

She walked away from me. I could do nothing but follow. Then, something even stranger began to happen. As I approached her and she turned, I no longer saw a woman at all, but many isolated vantages of one. I was close—to no more than her hands reaching out and her jewelry, faintly silver, falling against them. Or, I had a glimpse of her neck vanishing into her blouse and framed by tumbling hair. This happened again and again as I pursued her: graceful hands lighted by rings, somehow all the light and shadow on earth; hair that fell torrentially down her back and became a darkly frothy world; the line of her cheek and its secrets—this too was a world. What was she becoming? Something at once whole and fractured, beautiful and distant. When I had absorbed this, I returned to the jagged prison of my body, as repulsive as the grotesques.

This world began to grate horribly. I was constantly losing her, then regaining an image, a fragment I wanted all the more. She seemed wholly spontaneous, yet was her purpose not to allure and then frustrate, leaving me with nothing but my own monstrosity? I was struggling, grappling, yet with what? The most fragile, tentative, dream-like of materials. The strangest thought of all came to me: If I could complete one action, one effort to

The Statistician

communicate, with my feeling and thought entirely sensed, this world would come tumbling down. This world was a chain of masks and images.

I lost her again but went on, looking everywhere for what could be no more than a sign—a hand opening, the swell of a cheek, the fullness of her hair. Then I was against her and we were touching. I watched her hungrily, exploding—and at last I knew what would free me. I hit her. I did it again and felt a rush of pleasure. My contortions were gone, and I was in control of myself: that was what I truly wanted from this world. No, it would not come tumbling down, but here was something almost as satisfying. I picked her up and slammed her against the wall. When her dead weight fell back into my arms, she was mine. Then my dark joy filled the world. Her nose and lips were bloody as she lay with me, nothing but the loveliest, darkest weight.

Night enveloped me. It was darker and somehow deeper than I had ever known it. I searched the horizon for half-light, wind, motion, but sensed only this pure and even dark. At last I welcomed its dissolution and slept.

I awoke in a strange rush of white light, alone. It was morning, but the familiar sounds of birds, insects and distant human voices were not around me. There was only a rhythmic rustling made by the grotesques as they passed. My skin was dry and hot, yet no strong impression—thirst, color, motion—came to me. Like the night before it, the day seemed curiously purified, dissipated and absolute. I scanned the horizon but found nothing but this palpable lack, the white light's blank network. I so anticipated physical sensation that the vacancy itself became a sound, high and whining, now pouring out of the sky.

BEV JAFEK

My limbs were so rigid that I could barely move. It took close to an hour to prop myself on my elbows and sit up. The process of standing was even more arduous, yet I welcomed the struggle as an alternative to the sky's utter blankness. As I finally stood upright, I saw a man standing directly before me. Or rather, a Mean.

He said nothing. An amused, bitter light danced in his eyes, and he grinned broadly at my discomfort. His face and hair had a soft, fragile glow; he seemed almost androgynous, which contrasted with the exultant, sadistic smile on his face. We both understood how complete my decimation was. In this world, I was almost a paralytic, even more amputated than the grotesques.

He reached out and very lightly tapped my chest. I collapsed like a shattered vase, and the sky was filled with his lithe, young perfection, a demon lit up with angelic light. I want to say that he attacked me, but that is not quite it. As I lie on the ground, I can see everything against its background, the great blankness, and my life is clarified, brutally. Rather, what I have become completes his violence, and from this moment on, I know exactly what will happen.

It unfolds like a serial I've seen before. It has both the explosive violence and the order of this world. It was, after all, an admirably impartial, amoral system of numbers that generated the Mean—and made me need him. Now I need his violence. He hurts me in every way—his agility, his laughter, freedom, truth—everything I have surrendered to him. How can I even curse him? His acts, at their roots, are numbers—the language of nature, the language of God.

I am completely frozen with my eyes closed. Any physical function surrendered in the world of numbers is irretrievably lost. Yet this world survives, becomes greater

The Statistician

for my paralysis. I do not need my sight for the serial composes the scene. Perhaps I see it more clearly now.

The light is pure and harsh and the day hot. The white metal of the sky shrieks. Its blankness is a godly lucidity. I feel the violent clarity, the utter simplicity, of this world like the moment of creation, the unalloyed dawn. The Mean is still standing over me, but I am more aware of what surrounds us. It is an edifice, perhaps a building. I have a sense of great antiquity, jaggedness, in its fine detail. As I follow every ridge and pore, frozen finger and declivity, I see the whole history of my life's distortion. It is all that has been erected beneath the sky and resists the brilliant white daylight. The grotesques shift before the door, but their antics no longer disturb me. I did not see, until this moment, their sacred awe. No one actually passes through the door. Rather, they contort to all that is probable, had they done so. It is a creation of meaning itself—necessary, human.

At the edge of my vision is a flower. I can no more tell you what flower it is than what it looks like. It is too simple and too complete. Even my motion through this world is flower-like, the peeling of one image from another like petals, until I come to the substratum of reality. I see myself at the start of my journey, staring at the twisted, ancient foliage dying outside my window. In its bursts of red and orange, it whispers to me of my need for violence. I am a man, utterly alien to this world. I am that handy, hollow thing, so clever at cutting the world in shares and counting them. And I end in the contradiction of numbers, the truth that severs all from its context, its nativity, until the sum is this pure, flower-like, violent world, without mercy or hope.

And its living things. Why should they treat me kindly? After all, the Mean is the ideal; I am the aberra-

BEV JAFEK

tion. He is the truth—I, the artifice. I am a man, the one whose feelings are no guide, no touchstone; but only vague, soft pressures, below sense, like numberless insect wings beating in the dark.

Something stirs in the doorway. A Mean is passing through it. I am awed by the whorled, rippling surface of its body: supple, genderless, complete. Seas, forests, continents are its flesh. They are hair, skin, force, contagion. It engenders a universe and thrives, as I cannot. It is beautiful, and even beauty is my intimate as I pass over the edge. I try to hold the moment when the Mean's cool, agile fingers first circle my throat.