

Ethics

“If man were immortal he could be perfectly sure of seeing the day when everything in which he had trusted should betray his trust, and, in short, of coming eventually to hopeless misery. He would break down, at last, as every good fortune, as every dynasty, as every civilization does. In place of this we have death.”

- Charles Sanders Peirce

Michael's Suicide

As his Audi Allroad soared off the two hundred foot cliff, Michael James' life didn't pass before his eyes. He didn't think about the failures in his businesses or his loss of faith in humanity. He wasn't angry with the wife who had left him or the children who had ruined his life. Instead, he asked himself whether he would crash into the deserted rocky beach or land in the ocean beyond.

He remembered the formula from his college physics classes. Distance equals one-half acceleration times time squared. His agile mind quickly did the calculation. Two hundred equals one-half times thirty-two feet per second per second times time squared. Combining terms and dividing he figured that time squared was equal to twelve and a half and the square root of twelve and a half was about three and a half seconds. At seventy miles per hour, he was traveling about one hundred feet per second (thanks Driver's Ed – no point in figuring out stopping distances this time), so he'd go well over three hundred feet, definitely into the ocean and he'd be going about eighty miles an hour when he hit the water.

The computations took less than two seconds and in the remaining instants, he panicked. Did anyone see him drive off the cliff? Would his body be found? Would the high-tech safety features of the Audi save his life? Would the letters go out? If not, it would all be a terrible waste.

The Pacific was calm and peaceful. Sunlight glistened off the lightly wind-rippled surface of the water. Two sea otters near a rocky formation munched on fresh crab legs, rolling and turning as a greedy seagull tried to steal their late lunches. A bomber-like 'V' formation of passing pelicans paid no heed as the Audi soared, then fell like one of them diving for a fish from a tremendous height. The ocean that he had loved crushed the life out of Michael James, finally giving him the peace he sought.

Newlyweds Drive up the Coast

Janey and George Gray were racing up Highway 1 towards San Francisco. Their wedding and reception had been a huge success. Since Janey was a graduate of the University of California at Santa Cruz, they had been able to hold the ceremony on a grassy campus hillside overlooking the Monterey Bay Sanctuary, one of the most beautiful places in Northern California.

The University only charged them two hundred dollars for the use of an empty dining hall for the reception. A local blues band charged three hundred, and family and friends had catered the potluck afternoon event. The gourmet chocolate cake for a hundred people set them back more than anything else, but the young couple was off to a fiscally conservative start after a memorable wedding they could afford.

A few weeks before, George had accepted a position as an entry-level correspondent for the New York Times' West Coast Office in San Francisco. Like most of his counterparts, George wanted to become a novelist and hoped to be filling his time and his pocketbook by writing colorful stories about eccentric characters in the San Francisco Bay Area. Unfortunately his first assignment was going to be a write up of some entrepreneur in the Silicon Valley who had just come up with a new product to help prevent cyber-attacks on the Internet. He suspected this was going to be a very boring assignment. Why couldn't he be writing about small winemakers in the Napa Valley battling the giants for sustainable market share, organic farmers trying to change the way people grew food, encouraging protection of the environment, or medical marijuana issues? Why couldn't he write something that would help the underdog looking out for public good battle corporate giants and government bureaucracy? Instead, he was going to be writing about some privileged Stanford graduate who had made millions creating computer products people didn't need. While he used a computer for his writing, George hated what Silicon Valley had become and what it had done to the economy several years before. His father was still unemployed after the High Tech Crash. George avoided anything remotely technical but he hoped he'd be able to do a decent job with his first assignment, even if his heart wasn't into it.

Thankfully, Janey was in high tech. She was a software engineer in Silicon Valley and at least could help him understand the significance of the technology as well as the jargon.

Looking over at her now, he couldn't believe she had actually married him. She was lost in thought, wind blowing her thick red hair back from her head like a raging torch, then swirling it into her face. Her freckled right arm floated up and down out the passenger side window as she cupped then flattened her hand. He knew she was doing some sort of aerodynamic analysis.

"Got the formula yet?" he asked.

"No, silly," she replied. "I just love the feel of the wind. I flatten my hand and it drops. I curve my fingers and it rises, actually flying. Bernoulli was a genius."

Seeing his puzzled look she said, "You know, Jacob Bernoulli? He showed how the differences in pressure and velocity allow things to fly. See how my hand rises when I curve my fingers and it falls when I flatten them? I'm imagining creating curves that would let me soar on the air currents like those pelicans over there."

Before he looked over at the birds, he couldn't help thinking that Janey was the most beautiful woman alive; a little crazy; maybe too smart, but her intelligence and imagination just made her more gorgeous. They'd lived together nearly a year after college while he searched fruitlessly for a job, and even after the non-stop time together, she was more beautiful now than when they'd first met. And that dress! The high lace collar almost touched her chin. And those buttons! Dozens of small pearlesque buttons ran from the nape of her neck well down her firm round bottom. He couldn't wait to start undoing those buttons one-at-a-time in the small boutique hotel on Nob Hill that Janey's mother had reserved for them – even if it took hours to get that dress off.

Suddenly the serene look on Janey's face turned to open-mouthed horror.

"Oh my God!"

George turned towards the soaring pelicans and saw a gray station wagon flying off the cliff. Its occupants would certainly be killed.