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STAR**

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D O N D E L I L L O

RATNER'S STAR

V i n t a g e C o n t e m p o r a r i e s

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DON DELILLO'S RATNER'S STAR

"Mr. DeLillo's latest and best meditation on the excesses of contemporary thought. . . . Neither outline nor message begins to intimate the cosmic nuttiness of *Ratner's Star*. . . . Nor do plot and meaning convey Mr. DeLillo's dazzling capacity to make funhouse mazes of the most abstruse passage of scientific theory. . . . Nor the lyric poetry that Mr. DeLillo seems to write as easily as breathing."—Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, *The New York Times*

"Prodigious, accomplished, undoubtedly brilliant."

—Joe David Bellamy, *Chicago Daily News*

"DeLillo's amazing skill with the language lets him move from satiric renderings of intellectual jargon to the lyrical flow of interior monologues. He has a chillingly persuasive view of who we are in the Twentieth Century and where we might be going."

—Bruce Allen, *Chicago Tribune Book World*

"Brilliant. . . . *Ratner's Star* (1976) plays with science and science fiction. . . . The wit, elegance, and economy of Don DeLillo's art are equal to the bitter clarity of his perceptions."

—Diane Johnson, in *Terrorists and Novelists*

"Eerie and intriguing. . . . funny as well as instructive. . . . DeLillo's aim is to show how the codification of phenomena as practiced by scientists leads to absurdity and madness."

—Paul Gray, *Time*

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—John O'Brien, *Chicago Sun-Times*

Also by Don DeLillo

Americana

End Zone

Great Jones Street

Players

Running Dog

The Names

White Noise

Libra

To Marc and Claudia

A D V E N T U R E S

Field Experiment Number One

1

SUBSTRATUM

Little Billy Twillig stepped aboard a Sony 747 bound for a distant land. This much is known for certain. He boarded the plane. The plane was a Sony 747, labeled as such, and it was scheduled to arrive at a designated point exactly so many hours after takeoff. This much is subject to verification, pebble-rubbed (*khalix*, *calculus*), real as the number one. But ahead was the somnolent horizon, pulsing in the dust and fumes, a fiction whose limits were determined by one's perspective, not unlike those imaginary quantities (the square root of minus-one, for instance) that lead to fresh dimensions.

The plane taxied to a remote runway. Billy was strapped into a window seat. Next to him in the aircraft's five-two-three-two-five seating pattern was a man reading a boating magazine and next to the man were one, two, three little girls. This was as much nextness as Billy cared to explore for the moment. He was fourteen years old, smaller than most people that age. Examined at close range he might be said to feature an uncanny sense of concentration, a fixed intensity that countervailed his noncommittal brown eyes and generally listless manner. Viewed from a distance he gave the impression that he wasn't entirely at peace with his present surroundings, cagily slouched in his seat, someone newly arrived in this pocket of technology and stale light. The sound of the miniaturized propulsion system grew louder and soon the plane was in the air. Its angle of ascent was severe enough to frighten the boy, who had never been on an airplane before. With Sweden at war, he had received his Nobel Prize in a brief ceremony on a lawn in Pennyfellow, Connecticut, traveling to and from that locale in the back seat of his father's little Ford.

It was the first Nobel Prize ever given in mathematics. The work that led to the award was understood by only three or four people, all mathematicians, of course, and it was at their confidential urging that the Nobel committee, traditionally at a total loss in this field, finally settled on Twillig, born Terwilliger, William Denis Jr., premature every inch of him, a snug fit in a quart mug.

His father (to backtrack briefly) was a third-rail inspector in the New York subway system. When the boy was seven the elder Terwilliger (known to most as Babe) took him into the subways for the sheer scary fun of it, a sort of Theban initiation. This was, after all, the place where Babe spent nearly half his conscious life. It seemed to him perfectly natural that a father should introduce his lone son to the idea that existence tends to be nourished from below, from the fear level, the plane of obsession, the starkest tract of awareness. In Babe's mind there was also a notion that the boy would show him increased respect, having seen the region where he toiled, smelled the dankness and felt the steel. They rode the local for a while, standing at the very front of the first car to get the motorman's viewpoint. Then they got off and went along a

platform in a deserted station in the South Bronx and into a small tool room and down some steps and along a passageway and through a door and onto the tracks, where they walked in silence toward the next station. It was a Sunday and therefore reasonably safe; these were express tracks and no such trains ran on Sunday along this particular line. A local went by, however, one track over, shooting slow blue sparks. In this incandescent shower Billy thought he saw a rat. Wide bend ahead. For comic shock effect, Babe made a series of crazy people's faces—tongue hanging out, eyes bulging, neck twisted and stiff. Within ten yards of the next station he singled out a key from the ring of many keys he carried and then opened a small door in the blackened wall and led his son into another tool room and then onto the platform. And that was all or almost all. A walk down a stretch of dark track. On the way home they sat in the next-to-last car. A tripping device failed to work and their train, braking late, ran into the rear of a stalled work train. Billy found himself on the floor of the car. Ahead was stunned metal, a buckled frame for bodies intersecting in thick smoke. Then there was a moment of superlunar calm. In this interval, just before he started crying, he realized there is at least one prime between a given number and its double.

The stewardess arrived, driving a motorized food cart. Billy preferred looking out the window to eating. There was nothing to see, just faded space, but the sense of an environment somewhere beyond this pressurized chunk of tubing, a distant whisper of the biosphere, made him feel less constricted. He tried to think in a context of Sumerian *gesh*-time, hoping to convince himself this would make the journey seem one fourth as long as it really was. That wedge system they used. Powers of sixty. Sixty a vertical wedge. Sixty shekels to a mina. Sixty minas to a talent. Gods numbered one to sixty. He'd recently read (handwriting cunning and urgent) that the sixty-system was about four thousand years old, obviously far from extinct. More clever than most, those Mesopotamians. Natural algebraic capacity. Beady-eyed men in ziggurats predicting eclipse.

He squeezed past the man and his little girl tribe and went back to find the toilet. There were eleven, all in use. As he waited in the

passageway between doors he was approached by a large rosy man nearly palpitating with the kind of relentless affability that the experience of travel never fails to induce in some people.

"My mouth says hello."

"H'o."

"I'm Eberhard Fearing," the man said. "Haven't I seen you in the media?"

"I was on television a couple of times."

"I was duly impressed. You demonstrated an absolute mastery as I recall. 'Brilliant' doesn't begin to say it. Loved your technical phraseology in particular. Mathematicians are a weird breed. I know because I use them in my work. Planning and procedures. Let's hear you say a thing or two."

"I'm not brilliant in person."

"I want to assure you that I admire your kind of intellect. Hard, cold and cutting, sir. What's your destination?"

"Not allowed to say."

"Flying right on through or deplaning along the way?"

"I do not comment."

"Where's your spirit of adventure?"

"First time in the air."

"Nervous, is it? Let's hear some mathematics then. Seriously, what say?"

"I don't think so for the time being."

"No room for cunctation in any line of work. But yours especially. Gifts can vanish without warning. Reach sixteen and it's all gone. Nothing ahead but a completely normative life. Shouldn't you be smiling?"

"Why?"

"We're strangers on a plane," Fearing said. "We're having a friendly talk about this and that. Calls for smiles, don't you think? That's what travel's all about. Supposed to release all that pent-up friendliness."

A door opened and from one of the toilets limped an elderly woman with a plum-colored growth behind her left ear. He hesitated before entering the same toilet, afraid she had left behind some unnamable

horror, the result of a runaway gland. Old people's shitpiss. Diseased in this case. Discolored ~~beyond~~ recognition. Possibly unflushed. Finally he stepped in, determined to escape Eberhard Fearing, bolting himself into the stainless-steel compartment and noting in the mirror how unlike himself he looked, neat enough in sport coat and tie but unusually pale and somehow tired, as though this manufactured air were threatening his very flesh, drawing out needed chemicals and replacing them with evil solvents made in New Jersey. Around him at varying heights were slots, nozzles, vents and cantilevered receptacles; issuing from some of these was a lubricated hum that suggested elaborate recycling and a stingy purity, this local sound merely part of a more pervasive vibration, the remote systaltic throb of the aircraft itself.

Cunctation.

Something about that word implied a threat. It wasn't like a foreign word as much as an extraterrestrial linguistic unit or a vibratory disturbance just over the line that ends this life. Some words frightened him slightly in their intimations of compressed menace. "Gout." "Ohm." "Ergot." "Pulp." These seemed organic sounds having little to do with language, meaning or the ordered contours of simple letters of the alphabet. Other words had a soothing effect. Long after he'd acquainted himself with curves of the seventh degree he came across a dictionary definition of the word "cosine," discovering there a beauty no less formal than he'd found in the garment-folds of graphed equations (although there were grounds for questioning the absolute correctness of the definition):

The abscissa of the endpoint of an arc of a unit circle centered at the origin of a two-dimensional coordinate system, the arc being of length x and measured counterclockwise from the point $(1, 0)$ if x is positive; or clockwise if x is negative.

He undid his zipper, bent his knees to rearrange a snarled section of underwear and then slipped his dangle (as he'd been taught to call it) out of his pants. Words and numbers. Writing and calculating. Tablet-houses between two rivers. *Dubshar nished*. Scribe of counting. How did it go? *Aš min eš limmu ia aš imin ussu ilimmu u*. Ever one more number, individual and distinct, fixed in place, absolutely whole. He tapped

the underside of his dangle in an effort to influence whatever membranous sac was storing his urine. Oldest known numerals. What had he read in the manuscript? Pre-cuneiform. Marked with tapered stylus on clay slabs. Number as primitive intuition. Number self-generated. Number developing in the child's mind spontaneously and nonverbally. Whole numbers viewed as the spark of all ancient mathematical ideas. How did it go? "The fact that such ideas consistently outlive the civilizations that give rise to them and the languages in which they are expressed might prompt a speculation or two concerning prehistoric man and *his* mathematics. What predated the base of sixty? Calendric notations on bone tools? Toes and fingers? Or something far too grand for the modern mind to imagine. Although the true excavation is just beginning, it's not too early to prepare ourselves for some startling reversals." Clockwise positive. Counterclockwise negative.

Eventually he managed to dispatch a few feeble drops of urine into what appeared to be a bottomless cistern. Then he washed his hands and combed his hair, using the large teeth of the comb because he believed wide furrows made him look older. A bandage covered a small cut on his thumb and he peeled it off now, sucking briefly at the crude wound and then flushing the bandage down the germless well, imagining for a moment an identical plastic strip floating to the surface of the water that filled a stainless-steel wash basin in a toilet on an airliner above an antipodal point. He double-checked his zipper. For the mirror he poured forth a stereotyped Oriental smile, an antismile really, one he'd learned from old movies on TV. He added a few formal nods and then unlocked the door and eased out of the tiny silver cubicle.

In his seat he rolled his tie carefully all the way up to the knotted part and then watched it drop down again, doing this over and over, using both hands to furl and then timing the release precisely, left and right hand opening at the same instant. After a long time the plane landed for a refueling stop. When they were in the air again he went sideways up the aisle past the toilets and into the rock garden. The area was crowded. He sat in a little sling, trying hard not to stare at this or that woman arranged in the odd deltoid chairs that were scattered about, ladies poised for worldly conversation, and he wondered what there was about high-altitude travel that made them seem so mysterious and avail-

able, two stages to contemplate, knees high and tight, bodies partly reclined and set back from the radiant legs. All around him people were solemnly embalmed in their own attitudes of conviviality. They drank and gestured, filling the paths of the rock garden. Occasionally a particular face would collapse toward a kind of wild intelligence so that within the larger block of features a shrunken head appeared, aflame with revelation. Inner levels. Subsets. Underlying layers. In a chair nearby was a woman in her fifties, wide-eyed and petite. She wore a bright frock and her hair was cut straight across the forehead at eyebrow level. For her age she was the *cutest* woman he'd ever seen. Glancing at the travel folder she was reading, he was able to make out the large type on the front cover.

ANCIENT TREASURES / MODERN PLEASURES

A LIFETIME OF NEW RELATIONSHIPS IN TWELVE FROLIC SOME DAYS
AND ONE DANGEROUSLY SENSUAL NIGHT

She looked up, smiled and pointed to a plaid shoulder bag that sat drooping between her feet. He tried to respond with an expression that would make her think he had misinterpreted her gesture as a simple greeting that required no further communication.

"Basenji," she said.

"Translate please."

"I smuggled him aboard in my bag. Such a good puppy. I'm sure he'd like to say hello to you. 'Hi, pally. Where ya headed?' "

"I make no reply."

"You're not an Amerasian, are you?"

"What's that?"

"What they used to call war kids," she said. "GI papa, native mama. They sold for five hundred dollars in Bangkok. 'And that's no phony baloney, bub.' You're about the right age for an Amerasian. My name's Mrs. Roger Laporte. 'Hi, I'm Barnaby Laporte. Whereabouts you go to school, good buddy?' "

She listened to every word of his reply with the eager obedience of someone about to undergo major surgery. When he finished telling her about the Center, she leaned toward the shoulder bag and patted it. In

addition to being cute, Mrs. Laporte had a distinct shimmer of kindness about her. It was amazing how often kind-looking people turned out to be crazy. He wondered gravely whether things had reached such a bad state that only crazy people attempted commonplace acts of kindness, that the crazy and the kind were one and the same. When she spoke on behalf of the dog, she tucked her head into her body and squeaked. It was the cutest thing about her.

"You must be very lonely," she said. "Spending all your time with grownups and doing all that research behind closed doors without the sunshine and exercise your body needs for someone your age. Mr. Laporte went to night school."

He hadn't clipped his toenails in a while and he realized that when he moved the toes of his right foot up and down, one particularly long nail scratched against the inside of his Orlon-acrylic sock. He passed the time allowing his toenail to catch and scrape, making a tiny growl. He wanted to sit somewhere else but was sure Mrs. Laporte would say something the moment he got to his feet. A man fell out of a hammock, his cocktail glass shattering on one of the rocks in the garden. If the dog's called Barnaby, did she name her kids Fido and Spot? Her large eyes blinked twice and then she hugged herself and shrugged, smiling in his direction—a series of gestures he readily interpreted as perkiness for its own sake. Of course that left him the problem of figuring out what to do in return.

"So that's a dog in there you sneaked aboard," he said. "What happens if it barks?"

"Basenji," she said.

He found a dark lounge and went inside. Two men sat at a table playing an Egyptian board game. Squares of equal size. Penalties levied. Element of chance. Billy recognized the game; he'd seen it played at the Center by colleagues of his. Numerous geometric pieces. Single bird-shaped piece. He thought of the "number beasts" of that time—animals used to symbolize various quantities. Tadpole equaled one hundred thousand because of the huge swarms that populated the mud when the waters of the Nile retreated after seasonal flooding. Men called rope-stretchers had surveyed the unplotted land, using knots to measure equal

units. Taxation and geometry. In the dimness Eberhard Fearing gradually assumed effective form. Legs walking left.

"Good to see you."

"Right."

"Absolutely correct."

"Good."

He had a passing knowledge of the mathematical texts of the period. Problem of seven people who each have seven cats which each consume seven mice which each had nibbled seven ears of barley from each of which would have grown seven measures of corn. Legs walking left were a plus sign on a papyrus scroll.

"How was the bathroom?" Fearing said.

"I liked it."

"Mine was first-rate."

"Pretty nice."

"Some plane."

"The size."

"Exactly," Fearing said. "You've hit on it. I was telling a gal back there all about you. She'd really like to hear you hold forth. What say I get her and make a threesome out of it."

"I may not be here later."

"Where will you be?"

"I may have to meet some people."

"Just tell me where. We'll have a get-together."

"I'm not sure they're aboard," he said. "See, the thing of it is I'm not sure they're aboard."

"In other words you made an appointment beforehand to see these people. Before you even got on the plane."

"Right."

"Certain section of the aircraft at a certain time."

"Near the toilets."

"And now you're not even sure they're aboard."

"Right."

"These people of yours."

"That's the thing."