

**T**his time old Garbutz had pushed somebody too far. He didn't realize it of course. I didn't know it; even Lyle Stewart, clumping up the aisle with a deathlike mask of embarrassment, didn't know that anything in particular was going to upset the tyrannical grip Garbutz had on the class. But you push a creature just so far and something snaps. Your basic fact of biology.

It's late in the year. Too damn late; an insult to humanity to keep kids sitting in algebra classrooms with sweat soaked seats and dustballs careering around the floor. It's almost like the whole thing's staged, a plot so that a moment like this will freeze into place, hard and fast in the mind's eye, a critical, breathless epiphanic needlepoint in an otherwise washed out and colourless continuum of highschool time. It's almost like we had to stay in school late enough in the year so that we could see the dismal, ruthless control that school, the system, the real world, had over our lives, our summers, our all-too brief utopic encounters with the unregimented months of heat and free life. It's almost like we were there plastered to our plastic chairs with sweat lacking even the ability to open a single window thanks to modern architecture; the post-manual window era, just so that Garbutz could roll up his white shirt sleeves far enough to make the bicep bulge hideously, straining at the tension of cloth and reveal an honest to God tattoo of a fish and the word NAVY in a corrupt purplish blue certain to be the very colour of the blood in his veins. Garbutz, who had farted profoundly in front of the class during a lecture on unreal numbers and never lost a beat, never winced, never apologized as the scent wafted to the farthest corners of the perfectly unventilated room like some sinister pollutant. Garbutz, who still broke the occasional pointer stick over his slate grey metal desk in anger over a kid's inability to find the cube root of some impossible number. Garbutz, the vigilante at lunch hour who would scour the woods in search of restless adolescents copping a feel or smoking cigarettes or futilely attempting to destroy a few brain cells with marijuana that more often than not turned out to be oregano, fresh from the supermarket and repackaged in tightly rolled sandwich bags.

Garbutz, who had made the best of us cower in embarrassment at one time or another by calling on us and verbally leading us down some windowless hallway of knowledge to the inevitable slaughter. Up to now he had never toyed, not even once with Lyle Stewart, the most genuine criminal we had to offer there at Howard W. Innis Memorial High School.

Lyle was a likeable guy. He'd give you a ride in his '63 Buick Electra if he saw you wending a weary path to school in the winter. Lyle was older, maybe by five years. He had been held back through a string of sessions in grade school and now seemed like a father figure to many of us, years younger and still a year away from driving. I forget his actual birthdate, but I remember once when we were all asked for the information while some teacher was filling out government forms Lyle's year of birth sounded strange and exotic to all of us, a year so close to the tail end of World War Two that I envisioned Lyle's conception in the back of some B52 high in the air over Hiroshima or Nagasaki.

Lyle wasn't very smart but wise enough to hardly ever speak a sentence over three or four words. Lacking even the basic fundamentals of grammar perhaps, he kept to the straight and narrow—one verb splice with a pair of nouns. Never an adjective or adverb, the rare preposition. Usually anything said to Lyle just brought a nod and a cursory, "Shit," said with fondness or cynicism, whatever the situation called for. But Lyle was nobody's fool. In his grammarless vacuum he had styled a charisma rarely seen among the rabble of highschool football heroes and child prodigies.

Lyle had accidentally shot his brother when he was fourteen. They were in their bedroom; he was fooling with a gun he used

# MARGIN OF ERROR

A story by Lesley Choyce



to shoot rabbits. Lyle pointed it at his brother said "Kapow" and pulled the trigger. He didn't know it was loaded. The whole affair was pretty sticky for Lyle and his mother. Lyle's father was out working in a uranium mine in Colorado and mysteriously never returned after that. Lyle missed a lot of school and got set back another year but eventually returned and became the grand old man of yet another younger class of neurotic fear stricken worriers. And somewhere along the line, Mr. Alphonso, our guidance counsellor decided that Lyle Stewart couldn't possibly go through life without mastering two years of algebra, as taught by G.D. Garbutz, one of the few, if not the only teacher in the school who didn't fear that Lyle Stewart would murder rape and/or mutilate them when their backs were turned on the class.

All through Algebra One Garbutz had toyed with Lyle, never actually coming to the point of calling on him for an answer to some surreal word problem and never once sending him to the board to sort out the malevolent hieroglyphics of an equation. But time was getting late for Garbutz. It was the last week of Algebra Two. The last week of the last class of mathematics that Lyle would endure for the remainder of his life. And G.D. Garbutz, ex Navy captain, ex amateur middleweight boxing champ, former Brinks driver and rentacop for rock concerts, next in line vice principal, and all round most detested teacher at Innis was not about to let Lyle Stewart walk off into the free world without a few mental scars.

I don't know how he got to Lyle. It must've been the heat or the fact that Lyle was maybe coming down with a touch of the flu that was going around. And I really doubt that he knew Lyle's mother was in the hospital about to have a couple of yards of intestine torn out. But whatever it was, he had Lyle by the balls.

Garbutz is in rare form for it. Pounding on the blackboard, throughout his lecture, he raises a fine cloud of chalk dust from the trough that hasn't been cleaned this academic year. The minute white particles hang in the air and drift throughout, settling on glasses and desks and creating a dim white haze. He breaks two pointers and a yard stick while chastizing Calvin and Cheryl and even Roland Fishbein who can generally mutter something so hysterical that Garbutz feels sorry for him.

The armpits of the omnipresent white starched shirt are each damp wings of sweat, slightly yellow. The Navy tattoo seems to throb under the tourniquet of the rolled up sleeve. He pauses after a minor eruption of insults towards a class that still can't seem to get it straight that you can't apply rules about right angles to isosceles triangles. Somehow we can't get it through our heads.

Then he says, "I want a volunteer to go to the board and put up the first three problems from your homework." And he shouts out the slogan we've heard since day one. "Homework. That's what really counts. If you want to succeed you have to be able to perform. You gotta do your homework and

then be able to perform under pressure. If you can't cut it, you shouldn't be in school. And I'll be the first person to see you get booted if you can't cut it." He's said that so many times, I hear it in my sleep. The bastard. Every time he'll address himself to a particular person in the class by last name only. It'll be, "And I'll be the first person to see that you get booted. Right Chandler?" Or "Right, Kowalchuk?" And each time, you know you've been nailed to the cross and are about to be dissected in front of the class, at the board, like a trapped insect.

"And I'll be the first person to see that you get booted. Right Stewart?"

Lyle is sitting beside me. I can't believe that he appears visibly shaken. Everyone notices. Particularly Garbutz. I think he's going to laugh, he's going to chuckle into a sort of delirium of pleasure. But he holds it in. "Get up here Stewart and do number thirty seven from page three ninety one." Garbutz could have stopped right there but it was too sweet.

"Come on Stewart, don't drag your feet. All you've done all years is sit on your butt. You want to pass this class, you have to perform, boy. Get up here and show your stuff. You don't make it this year, maybe you won't make it at all. Whaddya think?"

Lyle is standing up but he has a hard time moving. He looks so shabby and under-dressed in the classroom of well groomed suburbanites. His old work boots shuffle up the aisle. Garbutz keeps prodding. He grabs Lyle's book, opens it to the right page, slaps the book. Says to get on with it. Lyle starts to copy the equation onto the chalkcaked blackboard with a miniscule piece of chalk, the only one in the trough. His movements are slow and jerky. Garbutz grabs his arms and starts to move it up and down on the board. "What's the matter, Stewart, can't work your arms? You gotta be treated like a baby? Here, like this. A plus B equals . . ."

It's very hard on us all. Lyle starts to turn round and shake his head. His face is red and turning ashen. Garbutz is going into a song and dance routine, insulting Lyle, mocking him. Lyle's right arm goes rigid and he drops the book. Garbutz doesn't seem to notice; he's flapping about the board doing the equation himself, stirring up more chalk dust until the front of the room looks like a cloud.

I raise my hand, I try to distract Garbutz, I'll ask him about why he divided X by Y instead of by A. Too late. Lyle's hand has evolved into a fist, the muscles in his arm have become stiff, so tense that there's no turning back the force about to be released. Garbutz pushes closer to Lyle as he bounces back to the left side of an equation that now takes up three quarters of the board. His tiny fragment of chalk is down to a few scant molecules. He wants to drive his point home. "See, Stewart this is just kid's stuff. If you can't manage this, you'll never . . ."

The expected words were unnecessary anyway. Lyle lets go. Garbutz doesn't move. The fist slices through the cloud but doesn't connect with the bridge of the great Garbutz beak. Instead it crashes like a brick into the blackboard. Full force with a loud whump and a long brittle scream from Lyle Stewart. Flesh and bone up against immobile rock backed by solid poured concrete. But the flesh is not weak. I swear we can feel the building shake. A tiny hairline crack appears down the board dissecting it perfectly in half, intersecting right across the equal sign in the now-solved equation. The class is silent. Lyle picks up the eraser and erases the board. He returns to his seat and sits down, his face still pale. Garbutz goes over to his own desk just as the bell rings. He's unrolling his sleeves and fiddling with the algebra text. "No homework for tomorrow," he says flatly as we file past the blackboard and make our way back out the door to crawl down the dark cavernous hallways and into the hot still summer afternoon. □

Lesley Choyce teaches English at Mount St. Vincent University. His latest novel is called *Downwind*. He also has a book of short stories due out this month called *Billy Botweiler's Last Dance*.