A cup of coffee next to a calculator

Description automatically generated

**EATING PI**

“We cannot reason ourselves out of our basic irrationality. All we can do is to learn the art of being irrational in a reasonable way.”

- Aldous Huxley

February was often a turbulent month for Abraham. Around that time of year, he transformed into a time traveler in the worst ways. Josephine could tell you. She had the hardest time settling him those days. With his release from the hospital and the anniversary later in the month, it was harder to help guide Abe to the present. You never knew what year he'd wandered off into. Some days were easy reminders of why Abe constantly needed Josephine around. It'd been two hours since he started searching relentlessly for Stephen Hawking's book, *A Brief History of Tim*e. He had loaned it to Gabriel, one of his students, a week ago, but at that moment, Abe had absolutely no recollection of even meeting anyone named Gabriel.

"He said something about the increase in disorder…giving rise to the flow of time," Abe mumbled to himself, tossing his disheveled astronomy textbooks to the floor. "Something about entropy…and giving way to singularities." He rubbed the scruffy grays on his face and rushed into his living room. The apartment felt familiar to Abe like he had been here before, but it had been two weeks ago with a friend or two for drinks. He was quickly forgetting, for the third time that month, that this was his new home. His eyes shifted from corner to corner. Towers of books were stacked everywhere, spilling out of his office onto all the furniture. Lined up across the TV stand was nothing but textbooks in order of publishing dates. Every room in the apartment was his unofficial library, a space to file away the discombobulated order of literature, topics, and subjects he most admired. He and Josephine had developed a special system for keeping track of the chaos. In the armchair was Calculus. Beside the refrigerator was Topology and Geometry. Under his office desk was Number Theory and in the cabinet was, of course, his favorite… Logic.

"Josephine? Where is Book 79?" The question barely made it past his lips on its way to her in the next room. He bent down to look under the stool tables. She was too busy sorting through his mail at the breakfast table to pay attention to his usual frantic pacing. Josephine knew the intricate order of Abe's seemingly disordered library. She had to. For many years, she studied his code, knowing where every book he owned could be. Abraham needed books the way people need air to breathe, and not just any books—Mathematics books.

It was her job to know everything her patient needed to survive another day of trying to make sense of his scrambled memories. It was her duty to know every detail about Abe’s life, to unburden his mind from holding one more detail. Abe may have studied Mathematics his entire life, but Josephine had studied Abe for over a decade. There wasn’t a thing she didn’t know about him. From his allergies to his precise medication dosages to his favorite pattern on his socks, to the style in which he kept his teaching notes, to the way he liked his hair cut. How difficult a job it must have been to get this forgetful yet brilliant professor to remember his left shoe from his right. If you ask me, it was Josephine who was the true genius here. Yet, any time I chatted with her, she never complained, not once.

"Josephine! For fuck’s sake, woman! Where is Hawking?" He slams the kitchen cabinet above her head.

She never even lifts her gaze. Fixated on reading through a letter from Abe's physician, she calmly responded:

 "**Seventy-Nine**? Or **Eighty-Nine**?"

"The first one!"

Josephine peered over her silver reading glasses, noticing Abe's agitation. She took a deep breath, got up, and closed each cupboard behind him as he stormed off into the living room. She followed behind slowly.

"Did you check the right side of the top shelf in your office? It should be there."

Her voice remained even and assuring. She tried to mask the uneasiness in her voice as she anticipated the inevitable. Watching Abe flit from one heap to the next, tossing hard-covered books and loose sheets to the floor, she suspected he was slipping through time again. Quietly, she trailed behind and picked up all the stray papers.

The restlessness is usually how it started. Abe needed an anchor, something to pull him out of his piteous chase for the present. Sudden movements and abrupt interruptions only forced him to close off from her. She knew what she had to do. Remain still and wait. She leaned against the door frame with her favorite mug and slowly inhaled the bold fragrance of black tea and uncertainty.

*"*God said something about giving way to a singularity…"

In all the years Josephine had worked for the old man, he had never mentioned a single thing about God. Abe was aggressively atheist and found it to be a waste of human breath to start conversations and wars about who made the universe. He worshiped the mathematicians and the astronomers of the twentieth century and may only have ever said a prayer once, at his wife's graveside. The only time he had set foot in a church was the day of his daughter's wedding, which he called a “circus in a crystal castle.”

*What was he on about now? He must be slipping much further today…*Before she could question his blabbering, her smart-watch alarm went off, reminding her to take Abe's lunch out of the oven and to promptly prepare his blood pressure pills. She sat her tea on the marble kitchen counter and silenced the ringing.

"I'll help you look for the book in a minute, but it's lunchtime." She announced, "I made Chicken Parm."

Abe felt the dark wooden floor swiftly circling underneath him, but his feet grew heavy and remained glued to the ground. Papers hoarded around his feet as he tried to look through the cabinet.

"I'm telling you, woman! He said something else about pies and I knew He... "

"Doc, come to the table… Do you want orange juice or lemonade?

Abe's favorite foods were always an effective tactic to ground him to the present or at least it was an easy way to gently push him into the last **five** years of his life. His wife had known this best. Each week she cooked the same foods.

"Routine," she had always said, "reminds Abe of who he is…"

Before the chemotherapy sessions started, Cassandra Silvers had taught Josephine everything she knew about Abe's condition and all the effective techniques to get him feeling like his regular old self again. She had known it would’ve been hard on him when she died and after **three** years of battling bone cancer, she had to put measures in place to keep her husband’s restless mind intact. It was nothing short of her dying wish.

Cassandra ensured his job, his home, and his caregivers were all ready to help him with the transition. At the university, she had spoken with the Dean about keeping Abe for another**five**years before his retirement. That rebellious mind of his would grow restless without the classroom. She spent the rest of her savings on a new apartment, and she handpicked his caretaker from the best homecare program in the State. After **twenty-six** interviews, she was satisfied with no one else but Josephine.

 Josephine checked her watch again. This time she insisted, "Doc, it's time to take your meds; it’s 2 o’clock."

"He told me how the world began…"Abe peeled open Einstein's book *Relativity: The Special and The General Theory* and rapidly flipped through the pages, desperate to find meaning in his vision,

"...with the firmaments and all those glossy forms of gravitational water."

He whispered a few lines from chapter **nine,** tracing his finger along the words. She knew better than to interrupt him for that could have very well been the moment where he found himself again. Averse to leaving him to roam, she quickly grabbed his medicines from the bathroom cabinet. His plate had already been sitting out for a few minutes and he hated cold chicken. She set his food in the microwave and set her timer for another **five** minutes.

"There!" He tapped the book like it had all suddenly clicked. Abe rummaged through yet another pile of textbooks, "Where is my thesaurus?" Possibly searching for the meaning of the word *gravity* yet again, he floated across the living room to the jagged pile closest to the mid-century sofa.

*Is there even a synonym for the word gravity?  What is he on about now?*

The frenzy was starting to get to her, but she easily masked her vexation. She snatched the thesaurus from the top of a pile on the coffee table and quickly walked back over to him. He flitted from the other end of the couch as she reached over to hand him the book and as he turned around, he tripped over the table's leg. Just before he could slip to the floor she caught him by his linen pajama pants, steadied him to his feet, and slowly placed the thesaurus in his hand.

A sharp exhale left them both. He was looking at her, but not really. She could see the gears turning. He was trying his best to piece something together, but he was nowhere to be found. The moment was one only she experienced there in that living room. He was caught in the antigravity. Out of her grasp. He was too distorted.

Worry spread through Josephine like wet concrete as she remembered the daunting moments when Abe was that far gone.

He had left the house without a shirt on a wet, rainy Wednesday, saying he needed to feed his neighbor's dog. Caught in an archaic memory of feeding his best friend's puppy when he had gone to summer camp without him, Abe left the house in pouring rain, knocked on several front doors, and slipped on the sidewalk right in front of my porch. He fractured his hip and had to be hospitalized for a few weeks. As strong as he may have seemed when walking about in his right mind, Abe was still an old, brittle man.

Josephine stuffed down her worry and reminded herself that Abe needed an anchor, but something else was brewing that she couldn't make sense of. She cross-checked her list.

*He took his tablets this morning*.

She double-checked to see if any medications could have caused delirium or hallucination.

*Sometimes his antidepressants clash with his morphine pills. He drank his diuretic water... ate breakfast...cornmeal porridge with a fruit cup...without grapes…*

Then a horrifying idea flashed in her mind. She pondered if this had anything to do with the doctor's note that had come in the mail that morning but quickly recalled it had still been sealed when she had opened it earlier.

Abe pressed the thesaurus to his chest while his caregiver stood there with her hands gently resting on her hips.

"What are you looking for now?"

“It was Pi! Josephine!” Abe, in his aggravation, pushed all the books off the center table. "It was Pi!"

“It was the concentric nature of His voice. I could hear it, the hollow music of the Universe. He told me how the whole Universe began...”

"Who? Stephen Hawking?" Josephine tried her best to understand his reasoning. She bent down to look through the spilled pile for *A Brief History Of Time*. She knew that the best thing to do right now was to follow him through the wormhole, to get swept up in the loops of remembrance and follow him across the dimensions of all the lives he had ever lived. As long as she kept her feet on the ground and allowed her own fears to stand at the gateway, she could step into his world of theories about who he had to be just then. Trying to trace the books he was interested in is a good strategy for taking the quantum leap. They were like breadcrumbs to track him in his mind's universe. But he was too unfocused this time to take her along. She thought the breathing exercises would work like they did last time.

"Doc, let's count...Deep breath…Inhale."

The old man stubbornly remained in a miserable fit. His irritation skyrocketed through his chest and blasted off into the vast confusion swallowing the room. Even he could feel the hopelessness of returning to the ground. Rubbing his hands over his smooth, bald head, he searched for his anchor. He turned to lock eyes with her from across the living room. She slowly stepped towards him " **One...**" He repeated the number but something about that number felt wrong.

Ferociously shaking his head in dismissal, "It was Pi!"

“Calm down, Doc. There’s no reason to be getting all worked up, just tell me what you mean...”

He covered his face and shrugged at her. "…What was that thing?... He said something about an ontological war within mankind…with those fractal flowers, He showed me. It was in the perfect shape of the golden rule...I mean ratio. Beautiful."

“What do you mean?” Josephine is puzzled.  “Who’s *He*?”

“…astounding… you should have seen it. It was everywhere!" Abe paced back and forth. "Insects. Phyllotactic plants. In the Ocean. In our faces. On my fingertips!”

Josephine grabbed his hand and squeezed him firmly, “Who are you talking about, Doc?”

“God…”

Josephine vividly searched the contours of his bewildered face. She couldn’t make sense of him this time. The madness had finally come, like a promised comet. Feeling as though he was slipping through her fingers like grains of sand, she held him a little tighter. An overwhelming sense of loss washed over her. She had never been quite sure if the day would come when Abraham would travel in realms of consciousness that her mundane mind could not keep up with. He was outside the observable universe now, traveling a million light years away from the living room.

Her heart ached, for she knew he wouldn't suffer long with the burden of his memory. As good as she was at her job, it was hard for her to see him falling through the cracks like that. That was the first time Josephine had ever confronted the thought that maybe death was sweet and that tending to Abraham was finally coming to its closing chapter. The man sharply pulled his hands away and glared at her in disgust. Maybe he could tell she had failed him right then and there, or maybe he had forgotten her for a second. She was never quite sure. He trembled ever so slightly before her.

“Doc, it's me…”

Familiarity escaped the room for a moment but returned with his softened gaze. Abe stood there in shameful vulnerability, looking down at the ground in confusion with all the scattered books swarming his feet. The memory waves crashed down on him so heavily. Like the swift collapse of a sun, he crumbled to the floor. She softly got down on her knees and cradled him in her arms. She marked that day as the worst she had ever seen him.

His bones shook with a pain she couldn't comprehend, but she waited for the waves to settle.

“It's Pi, Josephine…I asked Him about Cassie...” Abe struggled to get the right words in order,

“God said...”

A wailing escaped from the pit of his stomach. The hot tears cascaded down his face as he remembered the very last thing he asked God about Cassie. He recalled how she was at peace and waiting for him at the end of the world. He was filled with both sorrow and joy. All he wanted was to be right next to her again, reading his Sunday paper while she watched her favorite sitcom. He longed for her embrace and wondered what took her away so soon. Cassie was waiting for him. That's all that he knew. That's all he could remember. His beloved wife was waiting for him. He was sure God said one more thing, but it was disintegrating right there, in the unreachable parts of his cosmic consciousness. The frustration bore down and crushed him.

“God said..?” Josephine prompted him to try again.

"...to eat the pie," he mumbled. "...like Cassie did."

He knew.

"It's Cassie's Birthday. March **fourteenth!"**Abe buried his face in Josephine's neck.  "It was pi..."

Josephine froze in dismay. Propping him up, she pulled Abe closer to her and squeezed him. The tears swiftly streamed down her face, as she finally found him, adrift in the galaxy of grief. She wept with him.

He already knew what she had only moments ago confirmed.

After Abe's labs came back abnormal, the doctors had decided to test his injured hip tissues for any cancerous growths. It hadn’t been long, but from that one accident in front of my house, Abe had grown small tumors from the damaged tissues. A black hole of anguish swallowed them both as they huddled on the floor.

How could he have known?

That was news she had told no one. Josephine wasn't even sure she could ever tell him. All feeling left her stubby legs as the old man bore down his whole weight on her. The truth was unbearable. He knew he was dying. All he could do was softly mutter:

" Three Point One Four….

…3.14

3.14…

…3.14…

…3.14"

God told him he was going to die, just like his wife.

"Cassie?" His soft amber eyes glazed, he looked up into his caregiver's face and caressed her softly.

"Is that you?"