

Claire Massey

A Formula for Entropy

No one else could do it. They're all gone now. So I stepped up to the proverbial, virtual plate of BookItQuick.com, half hoping there wouldn't be a seat. There was. Now I'm stuck, for a few days at least, breathing leftover air in Drunk Uncle's dilapidated little house in Bemidji, Minnesota. Yep, that's what we called him, lingo courtesy of an SNL sketch.

Drunk Uncle was the youngest of Dad's siblings, a scheme hatching, hand-out seeking, blame bestowing, ne'er-do-well. Except for Uncle, they all managed to escape the frozen tundra by the age of consent, fleeing a tyrannical father and a milquetoast mother, opting for life in warmer climes, where the blood flowed easy and sun warmed inhalations expanded minds as well as lungs. Like a sticky papered fly, Uncle's buzzing grew fainter over time, frozen as he was in place. Until a week ago, when his spirit, immobile as his body, catapulted to Someplace Else.

This chilly dawn, I've been tracking a kitchen stink to its epicenter. My flashlight illuminates a half-eaten can of tuna wedged in a narrow space between the stove and a lopsided dishwasher with a sagging door. I fish it out with the broken off trailer from an old wooden snowshoe I found in Unc's closet. I Clorox the trashcan, then return to the closet.

My daughter wants pictures. She's enamored with sepia tones, bamboozled by the fictions she reads on Forefathers.com. There's no family photos here. Excavating floor bound debris, I unearth an old algebra text, its cover cold to the touch. Dad said his number crunching, bookkeeping father railed when Unc couldn't solve equations. Funny that Unc, no keeper of books, kept this one. A stained exam falls out, Unc's name written in his loopy hand just below the F. A plethora of red ink covers the page. Unc left blank the space demanding the definition of entropy (or one could substitute a formula). The teacher wrote in: The gradual decline of a system, the measurement of its randomness. Synonym: decay.

Between the last page and the back cover is a postcard from Dad. Says he's sending Unc the sum needed to fund the second hand lunch truck (not a roach coach he hopes, ha-ha) but would Unc please consider a move, join us in Vero Beach? Dad promises to help with a job, an apartment and AA. The flipside of the card shows a tropical sunrise of the ilk I had come to expect as my birthright; Apollo rising for his opening act in a sky marked with the same energetic red wielded by Unc's exasperated instructor. In the limited margin left to him below the photo, Dad signed off with *Carpe Diem*.

Grateful to have found a memento for my daughter, I put the postcard in my carry-on. On second thought, I add Unc's paper with all its errors. Maybe my daughter can solve for X, when the knowns are a long-lost invite to paradise and a long ago flunked algebra test.