

Richard Herbst's Tales From the Rockaways:

The Algebra of the Curves

Summer came crashing in the classroom door, a one-morning spectacle that changed the orbit of the earth. The sudden ending of the school term; those last hours, minutes, and seconds of captivity when you felt your heart beating noticeably faster; when the trees and sky outside the big classroom windows got brighter and more hopeful... Thundering summer like an army of liberation chanting in the street... Giant summer filling the sky, filling your mind, filling your heart. Even the nights were different—you somehow reconnected to all living things in ways you hadn't exactly forgotten during the school year but just didn't exactly remember. The return trip was instantaneous, exciting, exulting.

At first the teachers didn't give up completely but you could see that they too sensed the end of the world as they knew it. When our class clown didn't raise one of Miss Bergler's thin eyebrows, you knew Public School Armageddon was near.

Etta Bergler was one of those middle-aged right-thinking ladies who wore correct shoes and had a pinched face and thin lips, a City College product of the Depression. She came in early before the bell and filled out a little square on the blackboard in perfect longhand script that proclaimed her name, class number, date and attendance figures.

We learned the first names of teachers we liked because we prized some little crumb of familiarity. But Etta Bergler remained on the B-list, forever quarantined as *Miss Bergler*.

We spent the Last Day's morning hours making short visits to friends in other rows to be sure of where they were spending summer. Some, of course, were going to camp to begin great Catskills or Adirondacks adventures their weary parents could hardly wait for. Others would visit relatives in strange places like Connecticut or Pennsylvania or New Jersey. Miss Bergler carefully placed her now meaningless papers in a neat stack on her desk. But all eyes were on the minute hand of the clock—and the coming apocalypse. Time is occasionally something you can touch, taste, feel in every atom of your muscles and bones.

The Great Clock struck Zero Hour. A roar arose from distant classrooms rushing through the halls like a herd of buffalo. The school year exploded in frenzied screams, papers lofted into the air as freedom took its throne. No more pencils; no more books... Ice-cream, the ocean, playing at 10 o'clock on a weekday morning, wearing jeans or shorts or whatever you liked. Ride your bike to the bay and walk through wet smelly weeds. Your world has been returned to you.

The real reason for summer was, of course, love. The reason it was so powerful, especially in the summer, was that it was totally unexpected—like an afternoon rainstorm, a sun-shower that amazingly didn't stop you from riding your bike. You weren't sitting there in the third seat of the second row pondering grooves cut by previous galley slaves; you weren't keeping watch for microscopic movements of Miss Bergler's



reptilian eyebrows. There was no expectation of love. It simply arrived like a mysterious stranger whose name you instinctively knew, and it thrilled and shivered your timbers.

Love and its dance act, sex, were like pirates who traveled the high seas and occasionally waded in on your beach. Sex was something mysterious and ominous that you suspected the existence of but had no hands-on experience with, at least not for another year or two. The high school-age kids who went to the beach and loitered slyly under the boardwalk, you knew, of course, were shipmates of sex, whatever that was. Those older girls wore bathing suits that couldn't conceal that their bodies had shifted gears along with the boisterous acts it caused in their boyfriends. It was all very mysterious especially for those of us who didn't have older brothers or sisters and had to rely on National Geographic to learn the algebra of the curves.

The older kids were almost a different species. Something had caused them to morph into another type creature that had sights, sounds, smells and feelings far beyond our visible and audible spectra. They were aliens that knew our names and used some of the same language, but there was a different gravity acting on them; dark, mysterious, hopeful and slightly terrifying all at the same time. Our time would come, we knew, but not this summer.

Both the girls and the boys had changed physically. The girls' had strange hips and fascinating breasts that were the first signs of this other country we hadn't imagined. The boys had grown Adam's apples and an added dimension to their groins. They were taller, stronger, deep-voiced and darkly intense as they congregated and indulged in secretive recognition of something that paid special tribute to this other-worldly female thermodynamic. It steamed from them like visible waves of heat coming from a run-out horse in winter. Yet there was an etiquette, a delicacy with all this power that we could sense and puzzle over but not begin to understand.

Oh well, we'd know soon enough what this organic magnetism was all about. A revolution was brewing in our bodies that we neither feared nor desired. Until then we had baseball cards, jet planes and summer days without end. □