Well, you stayed up all night, but today came anyway. Your head aches, your stomach groans, and your palms are sweaty. In short, you're nervous. You are starting high school today even though you are far too ill to be out of bed.

There is no point in hoping the bus won't show. You can see it in the distance, surer than death and taxes. The yawning doors swallow you up and you pay your fare. On the way to school you make a pact with heaven that you will be good forever—at least, fairly good—in exchange for divine intervention in the horrors to come. Maybe high school can't be avoided, but with help from above, surely some of the blows can be softened.

You arrive at school to find that all those cutthroats who are seven feet tall are your fellow students. The only people who don't have beards are the girls, and even one of them has managed a creditable mustache. You wonder if the school crest depicts a lead pipe on a field of blood red.

Your first assignment is to find your locker, in which will be kept all your worldly possessions. This is far more difficult than it may seem, as all secondary school halls have been laid out as a maze. It's part of a biological experiment designed to discover if high school freshmen are as intelligent as white mice. If you learn to negotiate the halls, you have triumphed over the experiment; if you do not, a shoe box containing your remains will be sent home by third-class mail. It is not a place for the timid or the stupid, and since the most strenuous or intellectually challenging activity of your summer was heating up a TV dinner when the folks were at the country club, you are not in shape for a life-and-death struggle.

Once your locker has been located, you can concern yourself with the intricacies of the combination lock. Since you have a faulty memory for numbers, you have cleverly written your combination, along with all other vital information, on the waistband of your underwear. This system has one serious drawback: it is impossible to maintain your dignity while consulting your notes. Nevertheless, rooting around under your belt in public is infinitely preferable to being found sobbing in front of your unopened locker. 24—26—28. No, that is not your locker combination; that is your underwear size. Finally, the lock opens, and you stow your coat. You are the only one in sight with this particular style of coat. You wonder if, while you were hibernating in front of the television set all summer, fashion changed radically, leaving you a museum piece. Your hair is too short, or maybe a little too long, and—you look down. Your shoes are absurd! Why, there is nothing a peer group sinks its claws into faster than absurd shoes!

Taking a wrong turn on your way to your first class, you are very nearly recruited into a spirited touch football game, but you manage to escape to English class just a little late. The
only vacant seat is located right under the teacher's nose, and her hot breath and windmill arm motions begin to take the curl out of your hair. As she rambles on about the joyous learning experiences she has planned for this semester, you muse on something that has been bothering you subconsciously for some time--why is the school office so concerned with obtaining the name, address, and telephone number of your next of kin? Any well-rounded TV addict knows that next of kin are the people notified when the body washes up on the beach. Do they expect you to die? Exactly what is the mortality rate in this place?

The teacher then issues a textbook complete with dire warnings of what will happen to you if this book is lost and/or mutilated. She says that you will be charged "a reasonable sum of money" for replacement. The book weighs roughly thirty pounds and has an expensive look about it. You picture yourself washing dishes in the cafeteria for the rest of your life trying to raise the reasonable sum of money.

As you leave the class, it is your misfortune to stumble between two wild-eyed students who are having a ketchup fight. Red slop is flying everywhere. Your first impulse is to save the textbook at all costs. Dropping it to the floor, you fall upon it, shielding its precious pages with your body. Your left shoe is splashed, rendering it even more absurd than before.

Because of a short but perilous trip to the bathroom to clean up, you are late for your next class, which is instrumental music. You rush into the music room, your heart set on a saxophone. They are taken. Your second choice, trumpets, are all in other hands. Ditto, trombones and clarinets. Okay, sacrifice the macho and go for the flute or piccolo. All taken. As a matter of fact, there is only one vacant chair, one instrument at rest. Face it, you are stuck with the tuba.

As you strain to pick it up, you feel your innards drop. You make a mental note to ask your next of kin if your health insurance extends to hernia. The teacher explains how to blow into a tuba. You draw a mighty breath, put your mouth to the mouthpiece (did the guy in period one have pellagra?), and blow until you start to black out. Not a sound. A big cheer goes up from the class as you and the tuba clatter to the floor. The teacher then informs you that, for destruction of an instrument, you will be charged a reasonable sum---in the case of a tuba, about eight hundred dollars. He explains that the instruments may be borrowed for additional practice at home. You have a giddy vision of yourself hauling this brass behemoth onto the bus and being charged another fare for it. Does a tuba qualify for the student discount? Idly, you wonder how your next of kin will take to an evening of oom-pah-pah.

Your French class is right across the hall. Your teacher, who is Madame Something-or-other, hands you a textbook and probably tells you about the reasonable sum. You're not certain, however, because she says it in French. She might have been saying almost anything. Her stream of gibberish virtually uninterrupted, she strolls through the class, stopping directly in front of your desk-the one you had selected as the least noticeable spot in the room. You look up in alarm. Her monologue has ended on a questioning note, and she is looking at you
expectantly. You decide to take a stab at it.

"Oui."

She beams, thanks you profusely, and moves on.

A voice comes from behind you. "Pssst. Do you know that you just volunteered to make the decorations for our first French party?"

French party? What's a French party? How would you decorate one? When? Where?

You are then exempted from the homework because you have so much to do. As the period ends, you are confronted with a choice. You can stay and find out exactly what is going on, or you can obey your every instinct, which is to run for your life. Retreat wins out. After all, you should get a head start searching for the cafeteria.

You make for your locker but abort that plan to follow an intelligent-looking student who is walking purposefully down the hall carrying a paper bag. In this way you end up in the biology lab where your man rips open the bag, pulls out a dead frog, and begins to dissect it enthusiastically. You stagger out of the lab, no longer hungry.

At length you locate the cafeteria and stare in horror at the chalk board which displays today's menu. Could anyone here know that your mother spearheaded the parents'-group campaign for more nutrition in the school lunches? That your mother, the formerly beloved fairer half of your next of kin, was responsible for today's entree, the alfalfa sloppy joe? You look at all the innocent people in the line behind you and feel a terrible guilt. As you pay the cashier, you notice that there is a big puddle of split-pea soup on the cover of your French book. Oh, no. Is this mutilation? Will you be charged a reasonable sum?

You eat a miserable lunch in the company of a few friends from elementary school. Everything is going along beautifully for them. They are waxing eloquent over the joys of high school, the freedom, the challenge. They don't have to make French decorations. They don't have to play the tuba. They don't already owe a reasonable sum. It's obvious that they are survivors and you are a casualty. What happened to your pact with heaven? Haven't they been paying attention up there? Your friends have obviously beengraced with help from above. Why are you the odd man out?

You check the timetable on your underwear and discover to your dismay that your next class is swimming. This is particularly disquieting, since the larger part of your lunch is still lodged in your upper digestive tract. You imagine the coroner's certificate: Cause of death--sloppy joe. Well, at least you know where to find the pool.

The water temperature is kept slightly below the tolerance level. This, the instructor informs you, is to keep you active. The only thing that is active, however, is your lunch, which is rising. You know a brief moment of panic as you realize that your clothes are unguarded in the change room. If you lose your underwear, and with it-your locker combination and all other vital data, you will never see home again.

"Ten lengths?" As you thrash wretchedly along, fighting off a paralyzing cramp, you
wonder if anyone will pull you out if you go under. Probably not. Who would risk hypothermia to save the life of a guy whose mother is a PTA activist responsible for fifteen hundred counts of first-degree heartburn? You sincerely hope that, if you die here, your next of kin will charge the school a reasonable sum.

As the class ends, you are just alive enough to listen as the instructor tells you that your crawl is pitiful and that you tread water like a Hovercraft. You would like to explain the extenuating circumstances, but you are hyperventilating.

Soggy but dressed, you move on to your science class, where you are immediately informed that you are far too wet to work with any electrical equipment. You look around the lab. There is the emergency eyewash and the emergency extinguisher for chemical fires. The radioactive material is kept in that locked cabinet. Everywhere there are signs and instructions on what to do until the doctor comes. This place is obviously a death trap.

A reasonable sum of money will be charged for the loss of an experiment booklet or the destruction of equipment. This is where you learn your first natural law of physics--glass beakers shatter when dropped on the floor. You are standing in the ruins of a whole tray of them. Your socks sparkle with glass slivers, forming regal crowns for your absurd shoes. The debt is mounting.

You decide to stash your books for safety's sake, and find your locker without too much wandering around. You are just about to pat yourself on the back for your powers of navigation when you see it. Someone has scratched an obscene word into the paint of your locker door. It is not just any obscene word, but one of that elite group of obscenities guaranteed to grow hair on the palm of your hand, rarefy the atmosphere, and make a lumberjack blush. Where are you going to find paint to cover up this crime against society before the principal or the morality squad sees it? Everyone knows school lockers are painted in a gray-beige so drab that it can never again be matched. How will you explain your innocence? And why you in the first place? There are rows of lockers in both directions as far as the eye can see, all of them immaculate, and yours is the only one that says -------. This is going to cost you.

You are a good ten minutes late for your last class of the day, Industrial Arts. As you slip into the wood shop and slink toward the nearest vacant seat, the voice of the teacher cuts the air like a razor:

"How considerate of you, young man, to take the time and trouble to appear before us in this humble classroom and gild our wretched selves with your exalted presence. Do sit down and add your genius to our unworthy efforts."

Well, this is the cherry on the bitter ice cream sundae. Heaven, which has seen fit to catapult you from disaster to catastrophe all day, has decided to top your afternoon with the meanest man in the world.

As he lectures on the various pieces of equipment in the shop, with an uncomfortable stress on the damage potential of each, you find it difficult to draw your attention from the
razor-sharp stiletto which he is absently using to pare his fingernails. It seems like only yesterday that your teacher marched the class two by two to the local shopping center to visit Santa Claus. Now you are trapped in a wood shop with a maniac with a knife. How time flies.

You are selected for the class demonstration of the wood lathe. The Maniac hands you a partially finished salad bowl, which you fit onto the spindle as per instructions. You flick the switch. The bowl begins to spin, picking up speed. There is an unpleasant screech, and the salad bowl, now a lethal projectile, shoots from the lathe, whizzes past the instructor's ear, and sails out the open window into the parking lot. The class breaks into admiring applause.

"You missed me," says the Maniac, following this up with a barrage of abuse and sarcasm aimed directly at you. The class laughs harder with each barb until you sink into your absurd shoes and contemplate a course change. Maybe a history of Teflon manufacturing in Sweden. It might be boring, but at least the teacher won't carry a knife.

As you make your weary way to the bus stop, you notice that the vice-principal's new car has a broken windshield and a salad bowl in the front seat. There is a faint chance that this will be blamed on equipment malfunction and not you, depending on whether the school can charge a reasonable sum for damages occurring outside the building. What if the damage starts inside the building and then leaves, say, by a window? Forget it. Go home. You are ill.

Your next of kin is at the door waiting for you. She asks "How was your first day at high school, dear?"

A long, elaborate sob story forms in your mind. "Fine," you reply. Next of kin wouldn't understand such things.

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