

The First Midterm

Once again, not only had I managed to zip the ends of my scarf into my jacket, but a chunk of my hair was also ensnared. Swinging my backpack onto my shoulders, I focused on wrenching out my scarf, with some success, and enticing my hair out of the zipper, with far less success. After that ten-second pause in the Engineering Hall's main lobby, I could afford no more time. My destination was across campus, requiring an icy uphill climb that is best attempted with a grappling hook and spiked boots. Of course, in my fever to get to my lecture hall, I pushed on the hinged side of the doors, providing free entertainment for the several students behind me as I collided with the metal frame. I shook off the slight concussion and continued on my way.

I blame my clumsy mishaps on being nervous about my first college midterm. It was a big deal—a Calculus III test. So instead of focusing on the fact that I was the only pre-engineer who did not know how to operate a door, I focused my energies on some quick mental review. The binormal unit vector equals the normal unit vector multiplied by torsion... The derivative via implicit differentiation is the negative partial derivative with respect to x over y ... Remember the diamond method for differentiation of multiple variables... My brain was about to burst with thoughts of variables and derivatives and so much more.

Over the past few days I had been a hermit, living in a corner of College Library with my nose glued to my lecture notes and homework sets. I lived off of the Snickers Coffee of the Month (which, incidentally, had been Coffee of the

Month for the two-and-a-half months I had been in Madison) and whatever else I could scavenge from the vending machines. My friends and roommate chided me for over-studying, but I was determined to succeed on my first exam. If it required skipping out on a *West Wing* marathon or an ice cream night, I would have to miss.

My parents had always warned me that college was different, requiring much more studying than high school. I shrugged off their concerns with nonchalance, could college be so much harder? I had taken several Advanced Placement classes; I knew all about difficult material. However, I was quickly learning in Madison that my classes would require a large amount of effort. Most nights I was in the library until seven, just struggling to keep up with the weekly readings for my classes. I now look back fondly on the easier days of high school, back when I had an active social life and knew how good eight hours of sleep felt.

The walk passed quickly with my daydreaming, and I was in the math building within a record seven minutes. I settled myself on the floor outside the lecture hall and took out some notes to review hastily. Looking around the hall, I saw some others like me, studying a couple of notes last second. To my right I saw a girl with her fingers in her ears, quietly mumbling about the equations for the center of mass. On my other side, there was a guy sprawled on the floor, blaring R&B music on his iPod loud enough for everyone to hear. I guess everyone had his or her own pre-exam idiosyncrasies.

My anxiety heightened as students emptied from the lecture hall and we, the prisoners heading to the chopping block, began to file in. I took a seat in the middle and nervously organized my four pencils—God forbid I not have enough—and Pink Pearl eraser. The minutes passed slowly as more students entered the room, jostling each other to grab their seats. One by one, the chairs around me filled. Compared to the usual loud talking and laughing before lectures, there was only a quiet buzz before our exam. Either people were too engrossed in their last-minute studying, or they were just staring off blankly in a mini stress-induced coma.

Finally the clock struck five o'clock. The professor began yelling out instructions about exam-style seating and forming parallel columns. The previous scattered seating arrangement with pockets of people was transformed into neat little rows. I hastily sought out the right seat, dragging my backpack and jacket along. By the time I was resettled, the TAs began handing out test packets and the professor reminded us of our one-and-a-half-hour time constraint.

One of the TAs had reached my row and the packets were passed down. I took one and stretched to reach the next person down the line. Settling back in my seat, I flipped it open quickly and glanced at the first question. I had no clue how to solve it. A look at the next problem... no clue. Then the third, fourth, fifth. My mind was blank. My heart started racing and I began to panic. How do you take the partial derivative of a function? What are the equations for moments of inertia? I could not recall one thing.

I glanced at the clock in a panic, assuming at least twenty minutes had elapsed. In reality, it had been only three minutes. Trying to calm myself, I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and looked back to the first question. This time, I really read through the problem and everything clicked. My three-minute panic attack was rather silly and pointless. I raced through the rest of the test, encountering few difficulties. I glanced back and double-checked my solutions with twenty minutes to spare. As I turned in my answers and exited the building, I could not help but think that all my studying was worthwhile.

With good timing, I caught the bus and was back in my residence hall within ten minutes. I barged into my best friend's room and collapsed on her futon. "I am finished," I crowed happily to her. My first exam was done and I was mentally and physically exhausted. The time I spent tucked into a corner of the library was worth every second, but I look back and wish I had not been so stressed. Overall, a midterm is just a test. A really-hard-pull-your-hair-out test, but a test nonetheless.