



## IMAGINARY *i*

Claire Guyton

inspired by *Pulling Weeds*

*The morning sun was just beginning to soak into his shirt, caressing his sore back. Already his knees needed relief, so he eased into a kneeling position and reached for the nearest weed.*

**F**or the school carnival that Halloween before she graduated, she had dressed as imaginary *i*. Imaginary *i* as a Hollywood-style superhero in a cat suit, that is. Her body was long and sleek, her neckline lush, her face over-painted and carefully framed with an elaborate setting of her dark, springy hair. What was her mother thinking?

“Look, Mr. Charles!” she’d shouted, then flung her short cape over her shoulder. “I’m imaginary *i*! Now you see it”—she pointed at the glittering rhinestone “*i*” on

her chest—"now you don't!" She let the cape fall into place.

Shaking his head at the memory, he crouched in the damp soil and surveyed the tidy borders of his flower garden. He clocked a weed a row over, another just past it, a handful across the way. The morning sun was just beginning to soak into his shirt, caressing his sore back. Already his knees needed relief, so he eased into a kneeling position and reached for the nearest weed. It was a wispy, bright green strip, no roots to speak of, came up like he pulled it through butter. He twirled it in his fingers and pushed away thoughts of the next day, a Monday, when he would have to drag to the school and force himself on a series of students, crowding into and out of his classroom, not one of them the slightest bit interested in what he had to say.

Not entirely true. He had a few decent kids. But only because they wanted to get into good colleges, not because they were genuinely inspired by numbers. Anyway all he could think about these days was retirement retirement retirement. Not long now.

A spider with dancer's legs ran the stem of a daffodil. He admired its speed, its lightness. He reached past the spider to pull another weed. This one, too, came up with no effort. He stared at the exposed, tender roots, at the angles they made. That, right there, is how you appreciate math. In the lines and angles of this weed, in the leaves peeling away from the hyacinth, in the blunt, clustered petals of a crocus. But you can't teach that. Or he couldn't, anyway.

Rebecca, Imaginary *i* Herself, had felt the sacred mystery of numbers. He'd seen it in her flushed cheeks when she nailed a proof, when, later, she languished over equations. She had taken to visiting him at lunch a couple of times a week in her senior year and they would discuss the work of the latest mathematician she was reading about or he'd show her an advanced problem she'd catch on to right away. Sometimes

she'd bring him a puzzle that had stumped her, something beyond the reach of her engineer father.

"Dad says you should be at the University."

He kept his eyes on the board, where they had been working out a problem. "No, not me."

"But he said you were a math star and you got this great scholarship but you didn't . . . you didn't like it in the city?"

He knew what her father had said. That he, Boy Genius, couldn't handle a world of men. Boy Stunned. Boy Mute. "I didn't enjoy that kind of academic life. Really missed my home town." Boy Coward.

"Makes sense to me, Mr. Charles."

Never before, never since did he see that gluttony in a student. Just that once a kid who was greedy for numbers, stuffed with them, leaking them. He'd wanted to keep ladling them into her open mouth, see which she swallowed, which ran down the sides of her face.

He'd written a recommendation that practically levitated. She got in early decision, won a scholarship, gave him special props in her valedictory speech. And then it all came to nothing. She switched to psychology, married a dentist in the city. No call to wear rhinestones on her chest ever again, no doubt.

He had been too diligent in the yard this week, left himself nothing to do this morning. In a moment he would lean out, pull those last few weeds. And that would mean he was finished out here, today, and it was time to look over the paperwork for tomorrow. Tomorrow, the start of just a handful of remaining weeks. He sat back on

his heels. Let the sun sink further into his cotton shirt. Never before, never since.

*Makes sense to me, Mr. Charles.* He'd turned to her, then. He put a hand to her face, ran his thumb along her bottom lip. She didn't seem alarmed by it. She didn't seem anything. Just stood there, gazing at him, surrounded by chalk dust and the sound of students in the hall. Another teacher, a student, might have walked in on them. No one did and anyway they stood like that for only an instant. One limitless instant into infinity. The lip was soft, smooth, warm. Like a cat's ear.

Now you see it. Now you don't.

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