

How convenient to reduce your
marital difficulties to a mathematical formula!
How convenient—and how dangerous!

THE GEOMETRY OF LOVE

BY JOHN CHEEVER

It was one of those rainy late afternoons when the toy department of Woolworth's on Fifth Avenue is full of women who appear to have been taken in adultery and who are now shopping for a present to carry home to their youngest child. On this particular afternoon there were eight or ten of them—comely, fragrant, and well dressed—but with the pained air of women who have recently been undone by some cad in a midtown hotel room and who are now on their way home to the embraces of a tender child. It was Charlie Mallory, walking away from the hardware department, where he had bought a screwdriver, who reached this conclusion. There was no morality involved. He hit on this generalization mostly to give the lassitude of a rainy afternoon some intentness and color. Things were slow at his office. He had spent the time since lunch repairing a filing cabinet. Thus the screwdriver. Having settled on this conjecture, he looked more closely into the faces of the women and seemed to find there some affirmation of his fantasy. What but the engorgements and chagrins of adultery could have left them all looking so spiritual, so tearful? Why should they sigh so deeply as they fingered the playthings of innocence? One of the women wore a fur coat that looked like a coat he had bought his wife, Mathilda, for Christmas. Looking more closely, he saw that it was not only Mathilda's coat, it was Mathilda. "Why, Mathilda," he cried, "what in the world are you doing here?"

She raised her head from the wooden duck she had been studying. Slowly, slowly, the look of chagrin on her face shaded into anger and scorn. "I detest being spied upon," she said. Her voice was strong, and the other women shoppers looked up, ready for anything.

Mallory was at a loss. "But I'm not spying on you, darling," he said. "I only —"

"I can't think of anything more despicable," she said, "than following people through the streets." Her mien and her voice were operatic, and her audience was attentive and rapidly being enlarged by shoppers from the hardware and garden-furniture sections. "To hound an innocent woman through the streets is the lowest, sickest, and most vile of occupations."

"But, darling, I just happened to be here."

Her laughter was pitiless. "You just happened to be hanging around the toy department at Woolworth's? Do

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ILLUSTRATED BY MARK ENGLISH

you expect me to believe that?"

"I was in the hardware department," he said, "but it doesn't really matter. Why don't we have a drink together and take an early train?"

"I wouldn't drink or travel with a spy," she said. "I am going to leave this store now, and if you follow or harass me in any way, I shall have you arrested by the police and thrown into jail." She picked up and paid for the wooden duck and regally ascended the stairs. Mallory waited a few minutes and then walked back to his office.

Mallory was a free-lance engineer, and his office was empty that afternoon—his secretary had gone to Capri. The telephone-answering service had no messages for him. There was no mail. He was alone. He seemed not so much unhappy as stunned. It was not that he had lost his sense of reality but that the reality he observed had lost its fitness and symmetry. How could he apply reason to the slapstick encounter in Woolworth's, and yet how could he settle for unreason? Forgetfulness was a course of action he had tried before, but he could not forget Mathilda's ringing voice and the bizarre scenery of the toy department. Dramatic misunderstandings with Mathilda were common, and he usually tackled them willingly, trying to decipher the chain of contingencies that had detonated the scene. This afternoon he was discouraged. The encounter seemed to resist diagnosis. What could he do? Should he consult a psychiatrist, a marriage counselor, a minister? Should he jump

out of the window? He went to the window with this in mind.

It was still overcast and rainy, but not yet dark. Traffic was slow. He watched below him as a station wagon passed, then a convertible, a moving van, and a small truck advertising EUCLID'S DRY CLEANING AND DYEING. The great name reminded him of the right-angled triangle, the principles of geometric analysis, and the doctrine of proportion for both commensurables and incommensurables. What he needed was a new form of ratiocination, and Euclid might do. If he could make a geometric analysis of his problems, mightn't he solve them, or at least create an atmosphere of solution? He got a slide rule and took the simple theorem that if two sides of a triangle are equal, the angles opposite these sides are equal; and the converse theorem that if two angles of a triangle are equal, the sides opposite them will be equal. He drew a line to represent Mathilda and what he knew about her to be relevant. The base of the triangle would be his two children, Randy and Priscilla. He, of course, would make up the third side. The most critical element in Mathilda's line—that which would threaten to make her angle unequal to Randy and Priscilla's—was the fact that she had recently taken a phantom lover.

This was a common imposture among the housewives of Remsen Park, where they lived. Once or twice a week, Mathilda would dress in her best, put on some French perfume and a fur coat, and take a late-morning train to the city. She sometimes lunched with a friend, but she lunched more often

alone in one of those French restaurants in the sixties that accommodate single women. She usually drank a cocktail or had a half-bottle of wine. Her intention was to appear dissipated, mysterious—a victim of love's bitter riddle—but should a stranger give her the eye, she would go into a paroxysm of shyness, recalling, with something like panic, her lovely home, her fresh-faced children, and the begonias in her flower bed. In the afternoon, she went either to a matinee or a foreign movie. She preferred strenuous themes that would leave her emotionally exhausted—or, as she put it to herself, "emptied." Coming home on a late train, she would appear peaceful and sad. She often wept while she cooked the supper, and if Mallory asked what her trouble was, she would merely sigh. He was briefly suspicious, but walking up Madison Avenue one afternoon he saw her, in her furs, eating a sandwich at a lunch counter, and concluded that the pupils of her eyes were dilated not by amorousness but by the darkness of a movie theater. It was a harmless and a common imposture, and might even, with some forced charity, be thought of as useful.

The line formed by these elements, then, made an angle with the line representing his children, and the single fact *here* was that he loved them. He loved them! No amount of ignominy or venom could make parting from them imaginable. As he thought of them, they seemed to be the furniture of his soul, its lintel and roof-tree.

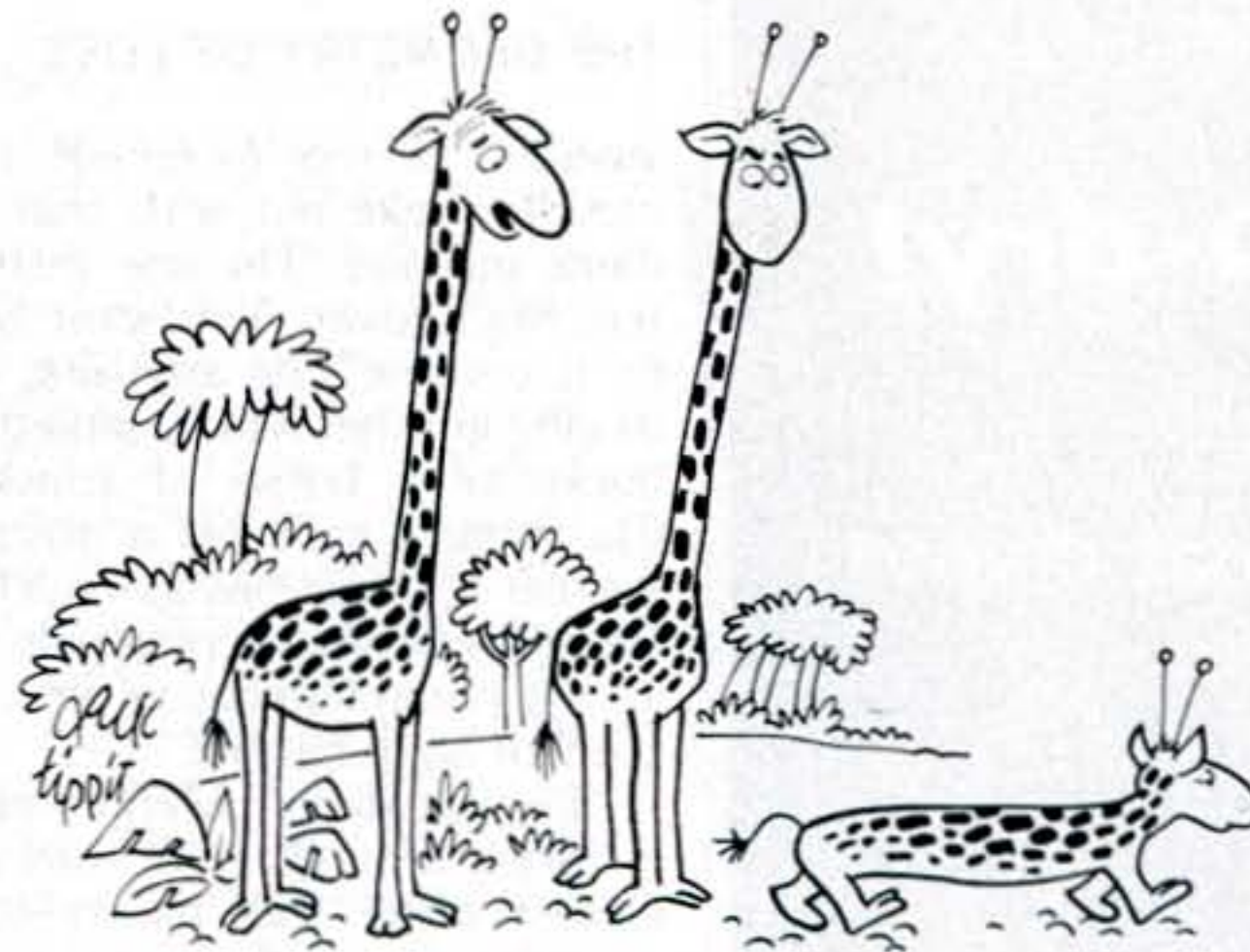
The line representing himself, he knew, would be most prone to miscalculations. He thought himself candid,

healthy, and knowledgeable (Who else could remember so much Euclid?), but waking in the morning, feeling useful and innocent, he had only to speak to Mathilda to find his usefulness and his innocence squandered. Why should his ingenuous commitments to life seem to harass the best of him? Why should he wandering through the toy department, be calumniated as a Peeping Tom? His triangle might give him the answer, he thought, and in a sense it did. The sides of the triangle, determined by the relevant information, were equal, as were the angles opposite these sides. Suddenly he felt much less bewildered, happier, more hopeful and magnanimous. He thought, as one does two or three times a year, that he was beginning a new life.

Going home on the train, he wondered if he could make a geometrical analogy for the boredom of a commuters' local, the stupidities in the evening paper, the rush to the parking lot. Mathilda was in the small dining room, setting the table, when he returned. Her opening gun was meant to be disabling. "Pinkerton fink," she said. "Gumshoe." While he heard her words, he heard them without anger, anxiety or frustration. They seemed to fall short of where he stood. How calm he felt, how happy. Even Mathilda's angularity seemed touching and lovable; this wayward child in the family of man. "Why do you look so happy?" his children asked. "Why do you look so happy, Daddy?" Presently, almost everyone would say the same. "How Mallory has changed. How well Mallory looks. Lucky Mallory!"

The next night, Mallory found a geometry text in the attic and refreshed his knowledge. The study of Euclid put him into a compassionate and tranquil frame of mind, and illuminated, among other things, that his thinking and feeling had recently been crippled by confusion and despair. He knew that what he thought of as his discovery could be an illusion, but the practical advantages remained his. He felt much better. He felt that he had corrected the distance between his reality and those realities that pounded at his spirit. He might not, had he possessed any philosophy or religion, have needed geometry, but the religious observances in his neighborhood seemed to him boring and threadbare, and he had no disposition for philosophy. Geometry served him beautifully for the metaphysics of understood pain. The principal advantage was that he could regard, once he had put them into linear terms, Mathilda's moods and discontents with ardor and compassion. He was not a victor, but he was wonderfully safe from being victimized. As he continued with his study and his practice, he discovered that the rudenesses of headwaiters, the damp souls of clerks, and the scurrilities of traffic policemen could not touch his tranquillity, and that these oppressors, in turn, sensing his strength, were less rude, damp, and scurrilous. He was able to carry the conviction of innocence, with which he woke each morning, well into the day. He thought of writing a book about his discovery: *Euclidean Emotion: The Geometry of Sentiment*.

At about this time he had to go to



"Strontium 90."

THE SATURDAY EVENING POST

Chicago. It was an overcast day, and he took the train. Waking a little after dawn, all usefulness and innocence, he looked out the window of his bedroom at a coffin factory, used-car dumps, shanties, weedy playing fields, pigs fattening on acorns, and in the distance the monumental gloom of Gary. The tedious and melancholy scene had the power over his spirit of a show of human stupidity. He had never applied his theorem to landscapes, but he discovered that, by translating the components of the moment into a parallelogram, he was able to put the discouraging countryside away from him until it seemed harmless, practical, and even charming. He ate a hearty breakfast and did a good day's work. It was a day that needed no geometry. One of his associates in

Chicago asked him to dinner. It was an invitation that he felt he could not refuse, and he showed up at half-past six at a little brick house in a part of the city with which he was unfamiliar. Even before the door opened, he felt that he was going to need Euclid.

His hostess, when she opened the door, had been crying. She held a drink in her hand. "He's in the cellar," she sobbed, and went into a small living room without telling Mallory where the cellar was or how to get there. He followed her into the living room. She had dropped to her hands and knees, and was tying a tag to the leg of a chair. Most of the furniture, Mallory noticed, was tagged. The tags were printed: CHICAGO STORAGE WAREHOUSE. Below this she had written:

"Property of Helen Fells McGowen." McGowen was his friend's name. "I'm not going to leave the s.o.b. a thing," she sobbed. "Not a stick."

"Hi, Mallory," said McGowen, coming through the kitchen. "Don't pay any attention to her. Once or twice a year she gets sore and puts tags on all the furniture, and claims she's going to put it in storage and take a furnished room and work at Marshall Field's."

"You don't know *anything*," she said.

"What's new?" McGowen asked.

"Lois Mitchell just telephoned. Harry got drunk and put the kitten in the blender."

"Is she coming over?"

"Of course."

The doorbell rang. A disheveled woman with wet cheeks came in. "Oh, it was awful," she said. "The children were watching. It was their little kitten and they loved it. I wouldn't have minded so much if the children hadn't been watching."

"Let's get out of here," McGowen said, turning back to the kitchen. Mallory followed him through the kitchen, where there were no signs of dinner, down some stairs into a cellar furnished with a ping-pong table, a television set and a bar. He got Mallory a drink. "You see, Helen used to be rich," McGowen said. "It's one of her difficulties. She came from very rich people. Her father had a chain of Laundromats that reached from here to Denver. He introduced live entertainment in Laundromats. Folk singers. Combos. Then the Musicians' Union ganged up on him, and he lost the whole thing overnight. And she knows that I fool around but if I wasn't promiscuous, Mallory, I

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wouldn't be true to myself. I mean, I used to make out with that Mitchell dame upstairs. The one with the kitten. She's great. You want her, I can fix it up. She'll do anything for me. I usually give her a little something. Ten bucks or a bottle of whiskey. One Christmas I gave her a bracelet. You see, her husband has this suicide thing. He keeps taking sleeping pills, but they always pump him out in time. Once, he tried to hang himself —"

"I've got to go," Mallory said.

"Stick around, stick around," McGowen said. "Let me sweeten your drink."

"I've really got to go," Mallory said. "I've got a lot of work to do."

"But you haven't had anything to eat," McGowen said. "Stick around and I'll heat up some gurry."

"There isn't time," Mallory said. "I've got a lot to do." He went upstairs without saying good-bye. Mrs. Mitchell had gone, but his hostess was still tying tags onto the furniture. He let himself out and took a cab back to his hotel.

He got out his slide rule and, working on the relation between the volume of a cone and that of its circumscribed prism, tried to put Mrs. McGowen's drunkenness and the destiny of the Mitchells' kitten into linear terms. Oh, Euclid, be with me now! What did Mallory want? He wanted radiance, beauty, and order, no less; he wanted to rationalize the image of Mr. Mitchell, hanging by the neck. Was Mallory's passionate detestation of squalor fastidious and unmanly? Was he wrong to look for definitions of good and evil, to believe in the inalienable power of remorse, the beauty of shame? There was a vast number of imponderables in the picture, but he tried to hold his equation to the facts of the evening, and this occupied him until past midnight, when he went to sleep. He slept well.

The Chicago trip had been a disaster as far as the McGowens went, but financially it had been profitable, and the Mallorys decided to take a trip, as they usually did whenever they were flush. They flew to Italy and stayed in a small hotel near Sperlonga where they had stayed before. Mallory was very happy and needed no Euclid for the ten days they spent on the coast. They went to Rome before flying home and, on their last day, went to the Piazza del Popolo for lunch. They or-

dered lobster, and were laughing, drinking, and cracking shells with their teeth when Mathilda became melancholy. She let out a sob, and Mallory realized that he was going to need Euclid.

Now Mathilda was moody, but that afternoon seemed to promise Mallory that he might, by way of groundwork and geometry, isolate the components of her moodiness. The restaurant seemed to present a splendid field for investigation. The place was fragrant and orderly. The other diners were decent Italians, all of them strangers, and he didn't imagine they had it in their power to make her as miserable as she plainly was. She had enjoyed her lobster. The linen was white, the silver polished, the waiter civil. Mallory examined the place—the flowers, the piles of fruit, the traffic in the square outside the window—and he could find in all of this no source for the sorrow and bitterness in her face. "Would you like an ice or some fruit?" he asked.

"If I want anything, I'll order it myself," she said, and she did. She summoned the waiter, ordered an ice and some coffee for herself, throwing Mallory a dark look. When Mallory had paid the check, he asked her if she wanted a cab. "What a stupid idea," she said, frowning with disgust, as if he had suggested squandering their savings account or putting their children on the stage.

They walked back to their hotel, Indian file. The light was brilliant, the heat was intense, and it seemed as if the streets of Rome had always been hot and would always be, world without end. Was it the heat that had changed her humor? "Does the heat bother you, dear?" he asked, and she turned and said, "You make me sick." He left her in the hotel lobby and went to a café.

He worked out his problems with a slide rule on the back of a menu. When he returned to the hotel, she had gone out, but she came in at seven and began to cry as soon as she entered the room. The afternoon's geometry had proved to him that her happiness, as well as his and that of his children, suffered from some capricious, unfathomable, and submarine course of emotion that wound mysteriously through her nature, erupting with turbulence at intervals that had no regularity and no discernible cause. "I'm sorry, my darling," he said. "What is the matter?"

"No one in this city understands English," she said, "absolutely no one."

I got lost and I must have asked fifteen people the way back to the hotel, but no one understood me." She went into the bathroom and slammed the door, and he sat at the window—calm and happy—watching the traverse of a cloud shaped exactly like a cloud, and then the appearance of that brassy light that sometimes fills up the skies of Rome just before dark.

Mallory had to go back to Chicago a few days after they returned from Italy. He finished his business in a day—he avoided McGowen—and got the four-o'clock train. At about four-thirty he went up to the club car for a drink, and seeing the mass of Gary in the distance, repeated that theorem that had corrected the angle of his relationship to the Indiana landscape. He ordered a drink and looked out of the window at Gary. There was nothing to be seen. He had, through some miscalculation, not only rendered Gary powerless; he had lost Gary. There was no rain, no fog, no sudden dark to account for the fact that, to his eyes, the windows of the club car were vacant. Indiana had disappeared. He turned to a woman on his left and asked, "That's Gary, isn't it?"

"Sure," she said. "What's the matter? Can't you see?"

An isosceles triangle took the sting out of her remark, but there was no trace of any of the other towns that followed. He went back to his bedroom, a lonely and a frightened man. He buried his face in his hands, and, when he raised it, he could clearly see the lights of the grade crossings and the little towns, but he had never applied his geometry to these.

It was perhaps a week later that Mallory was taken sick. His secretary—she had returned from Capri—found him unconscious on the floor of the office. She called an ambulance. He was operated on and listed as in critical condition. It was ten days after his operation before he could have a visitor, and the first, of course, was Mathilda. He had lost ten inches of his intestinal tract, and there were tubes attached to both his arms. "Why, you're looking marvelous," Mathilda exclaimed, turning the look of shock and dismay on her face inward and settling for an expression of absentmindedness. "And it's such a pleasant room. Those yellow walls. If you have to be sick, I guess it's best to be sick in New York. Remember that awful country hospital where I had the children?" She came to rest, not in a chair, but on the windowsill. He reminded himself that he had never known a love that could quite anneal the divisive power of pain; that could bridge the distance between the quick and the infirm. "Everything at the house is fine and dandy," she said. "Nobody seems to miss you."

Never having been gravely ill before, he had no way of anticipating the poverty of her gifts as a nurse. She seemed to resent the fact that he was ill, but her resentment was, he thought, a clumsy expression of love. She had never been adroit at concealment, and she could not conceal the fact that she considered his collapse to be selfish. "You're so lucky," she said. "I mean you're so lucky it happened in New

York. You have the best doctors and the best nurses, and this must be one of the best hospitals in the world. You've nothing to worry about, really. Everything's done for you. I just wish that once in my life I could get into bed for a week or two and be waited on."

It was his Mathilda speaking, his beloved Mathilda, unsparing of herself in displaying that angularity, that legitimate self-interest that no force of love could reason or soften. This was she, and he appreciated the absence of sentimentality with which she appeared. A nurse came in with a bowl of clear soup on a tray. She spread a napkin under his chin and prepared to feed him, since he could not move his arms. "Oh, let me do it, let me do it," Mathilda said. "It's the least I can do." It was the first hint of the fact that she was in any way involved in what was, in spite of the yellow walls, a tragic scene. She took the bowl of soup and the spoon from the nurse. "Oh, how good that smells," she said. "I have half a mind to eat it myself. Hospital food is supposed to be dreadful, but this place seems to be an exception." She held a spoonful of the broth up to his lips and then, through no fault of her own, spilled the bowl of broth over his chest and bedclothes.

She rang for the nurse and then vigorously rubbed at a spot on her skirt. When the nurse began the lengthy and complicated business of changing his bed linen, Mathilda looked at her watch and saw that it was time to go. "I'll stop in tomorrow," she said. "I'll tell the children how well you look."

It was his Mathilda, and this much he understood, but when she had gone he realized that understanding might not get him through another such visit. He definitely felt that the convalescence of his guts had suffered a setback. She might even hasten his death. When the nurse had finished changing him and had fed him a second bowl of soup, he asked her to get the slide rule and notebook out of the pocket of his suit. He worked out a simple, geometrical analogy between his love for Mathilda and his fear of death.

It seemed to work. When Mathilda came at eleven the next day, he could hear her and see her, but she had lost the power to confuse. He had corrected her angle. She was dressed for her phantom lover and she went on about how well he looked and how lucky he was. She did point out that he needed a shave. When she had left, he asked the nurse if he could have a barber. She explained that the barber came only on Wednesdays and Fridays, and that the male nurses were all out on strike. She brought him a mirror, a razor, and some soap, and he saw his face then for the first time since his collapse. His emaciation forced him back to geometry, and he tried to equate the voracity of his appetite, the boundlessness of his hopes, and the frailty of his carcass. He reasoned carefully, since he knew that a miscalculation, such as he had made for Gary, would end those events that had begun when Euclid's Dry Cleaning and Dyeing truck had passed under his window. Mathilda went from the hospital to a restaurant and then to a movie, and it was the cleaning woman who told her, when she got home, that he had passed away. □