

Boy Genius to Angry Embittered Hermit

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Too smart for his own good, he would eventually acknowledge.

Three decades later, living alone in a Montana cabin with two tiny windows, Kaczynski would write a plaintive letter lamenting his childhood as “a genius in a kid’s body.”

By then, he had turned into a kid in a genius’ body. A warped, bitter, malevolent kid, say federal investigators who are convinced he is the Unabomber.

And one who had lost his last spark of humanity along the way, said a woman who tried to reach out to him only months before he abandoned his efforts to build a life at the University of California-Berkeley.

Graduate student Harriet Hungate took Kaczynski’s topology class. He impressed her.

“He was this young guy, tall and good looking, and had all the outward manifestations of someone who would be very sociable,” she said.

Hungate needed someone to talk to. She was in crisis, thinking of dropping out, “hanging in there by the skin of my teeth.”

She went to Kaczynski’s office for a conference. She asked questions about the course, but then her emotions took over. She spilled out her fears and doubts, looking to her professor for warmth and reassurance.

His response chilled her. Kaczynski didn’t acknowledge she had spoken.

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Contrary to some accounts, there were no clear signs of his eventual fate in Ted’s early life.

Yes, he was hospitalized with a drug reaction at 6 months old, and came home listless. Yes, he was smarter than his peers, and didn’t mix with everyone.

But in his early days in the Chicago suburbs, he was no embittered loner.

His father, Theodore R. Kaczynski, was a gregarious, happy man who loved the outdoors, camping and canoeing, and taught his sons to do the same. Friends said the sausage factory owner was also an atheist who liked to consider the big questions of life.

Ted's mother, Wanda Kaczynski, was no overbearing tyrant driving her son beyond his capacity. Counselors and teachers — not his parents — suggested Ted skip his junior year in high school, according to his chemistry, math and physics instructor, Robert Rippey.

The parents “just wanted him to have a good time, to do the things that interested him and not be bored,” Rippey said.

Years later, from Montana, Kaczynski would write raging letters blaming his mother for his social incompetence, calling her a “dog.”

That's not the way neighbors in Evergreen Park remember it.

“They were a happy family, a productive family, civic-minded, extremely intellectual,” said Dorothy O'Connell, who lived beside them from 1952 to 1958.

Once, as the Kaczynskis packed for a vacation in Wisconsin, Ted ran to O'Connell's house, asking that she care for his pet bird.

She noticed a book under his arm.

“I said, ‘What are you doing with a book when you're going on vacation?’ I thought it would be a storybook.”

It wasn't. Ted was carrying “Romping Through Mathematics, From Addition to Calculus.”

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Ted reveled in his intelligence.

He sometimes joined the neighborhood women playing Scrabble.

“Within minutes, he had all of us beaten,” O'Connell said. “We were not dumb. Teddy was brighter. At 12, he had a better vocabulary than we did.”

The Kaczynskis were terrific neighbors, bringing groceries when the O'Connell home was quarantined after her daughter contracted polio. Dorothy O'Connell remembered Ted and his brother, David, buying Good Humor ice cream bars — then sharing them with the younger neighborhood children.

Although his father taught him how to hunt, Ted was no casual killer. Once, David found a lame rabbit. Together, the father and two sons built a cage, nursed it back to health and let it go.

While some neighbors remember Ted walking home alone from school day after day, others remember a different boy.

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“Ted and I were friendly enough to say hello despite the fact that we were different,” Tripton said.

Ted was proud of his intellect and studies at a time when such kids were picked on, teased, and occasionally beaten up just for fun, Tripton said.

But as Ted's peers grew older, he somehow didn't. A gap began to grow. No one ever saw him with a girlfriend or on a date.

Patrick Morris was president of the Math Club at Evergreen Park, in the band with Ted and took classes with him. He remembers a spindly, skinny kid who seemed vulnerable, certainly not dangerous.

“The thing that runs through my mind is how young he was, how juvenile he was in the best sense and worst sense of the word,” Morris said. “At a social level, he was not traveling at the same rate as the rest of us.”

Classmate James Baker, who later joined the Marines, put it simply.

“He was a boy among men,” Baker said.

Ted’s humor, especially, seemed childish and insecure. If someone spilled something at the lunch table, everybody would tease the spiller, then drop it. Not Ted.

“Ted wouldn’t let it go,” Morris recalled. “He would zero in.”

Pranks were common at Evergreen High. Kids carried firecrackers and threw them in the street. Frogs were stuck in desks.

Ted’s were more complicated. He pulled the ammonia-iodine trick several times. He, Morris and other chemistry students manufactured a chemical that exploded when thrown on the ground, flashing and leaving a smoke trail.

“It never entered Ted’s mind that this was a dangerous thing,” Morris said.

As high school ended, Ted’s future seemed assured. Harvard accepted the math whiz, and off he went to Cambridge, Mass., in fall 1958.

That may have been a terrible mistake for the immature Ted, said Evergreen Park classmate Russell Mosny, one of his best friends.

“Here’s this kid, probably an emotional age of 12, 13 at best. He went on to a preppy, patrician, jock residential hall, I can’t think of anything more contrary,” Mosny said. “He had absolutely nothing in common with these people.”

The biggest blow at Harvard, says Richmond Campbell, who arrived at the same residence as Kaczynski in his freshman year, was the shock of learning you are no longer a shining star.

Ted was only 16 — but there were 10 other 16-year-olds admitted by Harvard the same year.

The group at 8 Prescott St. where he lived was especially impressive: The son of Welsh poet Dylan Thomas. A student published in the *Journal of Symbolic Logic* while in high school. A freshman taking advanced exchange courses at the nearby Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

At Harvard, the prankish behavior — and much of Kaczynski’s personality — seemed to disappear. Those who remember him didn’t call him Ted — it was Theodore.

He became the wraith described by those who knew him in later years, gliding through his classes and residences like a shadow.

Holed away in Room 2, a single on the first floor, Kaczynski befriended no one, said his freshman proctor, Francis Murphy.

“He was a lonely boy,” thin, quiet and with poor personal hygiene and a dirty room, Murphy said. “But he was very proud to have come to Harvard. He was always very busy and his energies were devoted to his work.”

In his sophomore year, Kaczynski moved to Eliot House, one of several upper-class residences that serve as combination dormitory, dining hall and social club. He took the smallest, cheapest room in the building.

His door was always shut, and even some who shared the suite can barely recall Kaczynski. He emerged only to eat, always alone. He was among only six of the 139 house residents from his class who left no record of involvement in extracurricular activities.

But typically, former suite-mate Michael Rohr, now a philosophy professor at Rutgers, said neither he nor his friends remember Kaczynski being there.

Increasingly isolated, Kaczynski took to bringing sandwiches from the dining room upstairs to his room, which soon began to smell of spoiled milk, rotting food and foot powder. Bieser said he caught a glimpse of the room once when the floor was two-feet-deep in trash.

When he left Harvard, Kaczynski's reputation for brilliance had suffered. He didn't graduate with honors. Math faculty members don't remember him.

For graduate school, Kaczynski chose another location known for its progressive politics and political fervor — the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. But once again, he seemed to ignore the call that so many of his academic contemporaries heard. As students were shifting to jeans and T-shirts, Kaczynski stuck with a white shirt and tie.

Math faculty classmate Alan Heezen said, "Other people had a life. This guy apparently didn't," he said. "At Michigan, it was accepted to be pathologically involved in mathematics... It's not extraordinary that I didn't know him. But I've talked to five other people. Nobody knew him. Now that is extraordinary."

While Kaczynski may have been a mystery to his classmates, he was certainly impressing his teachers.

"He was one of my best students, one of only four students who got A's in the class I taught," said Peter Duren, who sat on the committee that judged Kaczynski's doctoral thesis.

Kaczynski also took one other class that seemed a foretaste of his changing values — Human Evolution. He earned Professor Frank Livingstone's first A-plus in five years.

When Kaczynski got a job at the University of California-Berkeley, a temple for mathematicians, Duren hoped that his star student would tap into his colleagues and work on more exciting math principles. He didn't.

If Cambridge and Ann Arbor were in social and political ferment, Berkeley was close to revolution when Kaczynski arrived in fall 1967 to take a position in the math department.

At Sather Gate, the entrance to the Berkeley campus, Black Panthers sold Chairman Mao's little red book for a dollar a copy. Vietnam War protesters gathered frequently at Sproul Hall to hear David Harris and Joan Baez urge resistance to the military-industrial complex. Wes "Scoop" Nisker signed off his underground radio newscasts with his trademark, "If you don't like the news, go out and make some of your own."

All the ingredients for the Unabomber's philosophy were there, said Nisker, who still does radio commentary in San Francisco.

"A lot of what the spirit of the '60s rebellion was about was challenging the myth of progress — challenging the machine," Nisker said. "Part of the anti-war movement was an anti-technology movement, and you can still see that today with environmentalists."

But if the '60s was a giant party, Kaczynski was a wallflower.

On the surface, at least, he seemed oblivious to it all. Other math professors took votes among their students on canceling classes for anti-war teach-ins or Third World strikes. Kaczynski held every lecture.

He seemed equally oblivious to his students and fellow faculty members. Lecture hall questions were left unanswered. Invitations for beer and pizza after math seminars were spurned.

Instead, he walked home to his small apartment, where he apparently worked on some of the six mathematics papers he published. All dealt with boundary functions, the same closed-end, arcane backwater of mathematics he had explored at Michigan.

Kaczynski shows all the signs of someone who had bottled up his fear and anger since childhood, perhaps because of trauma or depression, Schoenfeld said. Dr. Eugene Schoenfeld, a psychiatrist.

Schoenfeld believes that Kaczynski chose Berkeley to liberate himself — but instead withdrew totally when his unrealistic expectations failed.

Schoenfeld sees a strong echo of that pathology in the Unabomber's manifesto, where the author writes that "oversocialization can lead to low self-esteem, powerlessness, defeatism, guilt."

Those are the writings of a man who is describing himself, justifying his internal pain and the wall he has erected around him, Schoenfeld said.

As Kaczynski's academic life imploded, Berkeley's worst crisis climaxed a block from his apartment. In February 1969, demonstrations began as students tried to preserve a plot of university land they called People's Park. In May, authorities moved in amid clouds of tear gas, and shot a student to death. Then-Gov. Ronald Reagan vowed that if students wanted a bloodbath, he'd give them one.

A month later, Kaczynski packed his bags and left Berkeley. There was a rumor he wanted to pursue social work. Oddly, the same rumor had circulated at the University of Michigan when he left there.

But the last time anyone from Berkeley saw him, Kaczynski was hiking in Yosemite National Park. Alone.

The family has said Kaczynski spent the next year or two in Utah, but if so, he used an alias or didn't leave a trace. His name shows up nowhere. No one remembers him. Two people who thought they may have seen him now acknowledge their perceptions of those brief encounters are clouded by drugs and the passage of time.

In 1971, the Kaczynski brothers bought the now-famous 1.4-acre plot outside Lincoln, Mont. Kaczynski built his cabin and seemed to retreat further inside himself. Human contact virtually ended.

As children in Evergreen Park, he and his brother had once saved a rabbit's life. Now Kaczynski found himself hunting and killing rabbits to survive.

The emotions that built inside him came out in letters and acts directed against people at safe distances — just as the Unabomber would soon attack and kill at safe distances.

One letter called a service station owner who Kaczynski thought had cheated him a “fat con-man.” His mother was a “dog” in another letter.

But poverty, and perhaps loneliness, eventually drove Kaczynski out of his Montana cabin in 1978 and back to his family in Chicago.

The Unabomber's first crude device exploded in Chicago shortly afterward. In May 1978, a small bomb made from match heads slightly injured a Northwestern University police officer.

Authorities at the time dismissed it as a student prank — hardly more serious than the little devices Kaczynski and his chemistry class friends once built.

But if Kaczynski's attempt to live off the land was a failure, his return to civilization turned into an unmitigated disaster.

He took a job at the foam rubber plant where his brother worked, and dated a woman supervisor. She ended the casual relationship after two dates because they had nothing in common, but Kaczynski wouldn't let go.

Typically, his revenge for being spurned came not in a direct confrontation, but in nasty limericks posted on machines. His brother fired him because of the harassment.

After his firing, Kaczynski returned to Montana. His appearance deteriorated, his clothes and beard turning ragged and unkempt. He apparently never bathed.

The Unabomber, meanwhile, had begun his bloody work. Before he was finished, three would die. Twenty-three people were injured.

Like Kaczynski, the killer enjoyed writing disparaging letters.

He called the FBI “a joke.” Victim David Gelernter, a Yale computer scientist badly injured by a bomb, was later taunted for his supposed stupidity in opening the package.

The words “smart,” “dumb” and “brains” all appear in the first paragraph of the Gelernter letter — the sign of an author obsessed with his own brain, Schoenfeld said.

But in May 1994, just months before the Unabomber's last orgy of bombings and threats disrupted air travel and led to the publication of his manifesto, Kaczynski couldn't help wondering what might have been.

He wrote Juan Sanchez Arreola, a friend of his brother's he knew only through letters, to commiserate over a pension dispute.

And to look for a little commiseration himself, perhaps.

“Consider that your fortune is not all bad, because you have a wife and three children and all are healthy,” Kaczynski's letter said. “Your children will thrive, and some day they will have children of their own. I wish I had a wife and children!”

But when agents searched Kaczynski's cabin, his only offspring was a dangerous, carefully wrapped package, complete with everything but the address.

The package, like the little boy who was just too smart, was a bomb waiting to go off.

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"Wanda was very interested in reading to the children. She read Scientific American every month to Teddy. She was a born teacher. She was able to translate those difficult subject matters into understandable language for her son," Mrs. O'Connell said.

Given Ted's choice of reading matter, it does not appear his mother was forcing Scientific American on him.

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The Ted K Archive

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Roanoke Times. <www.archive.org/details/img-3864_202607> &
<www.scholar.lib.vt.edu>

www.thetedkarchive.com