

HIGH SCHOOL CONFIDENTIAL

An imposter story

By [illegible] Staff Writer

As a former high school student, I can attest to the fact that the school is a place of many secrets. One of the most recent secrets to be revealed is the identity of the person who has been impersonating the school's principal for the past several years. The person in question is a former student who has been living in the shadows of the school's history.

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10,300 words

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Preamble

Imposter Syndrome is pervasive in almost every walk of life, but it seems particularly prevalent in academia. Maybe it's because much of our careers are built on proving yourself. We write a thesis or two and defend it to show we really know our stuff. We write papers to get our ideas out there, but sometimes suffer through the gauntlet of peer review that is less than complimentary. We write grants... and more grants... and sometimes we are rewarded with funds, but most times we are not. With such misaligned incentives, it's no wonder that academics face Imposter Syndrome a lot.

I still do, even after more than 25 years as a principal investigator. I have this nagging Imposter Syndrome cloud obscuring my vision that comes from my own fears about who I am. Sometimes this forms while preparing talks or classes, sometime after I read a review for my grant or manuscript and think maybe reviewer #2 is right.

Sometimes it comes as a dream. I've had a few conversations with other colleagues about this and we've shared that 'yes' we all do have dreams about being an imposter. One of my recurring dreams is having to go back to high school because I missed or failed a final exam. Sometimes the details change, like for instance whether I am wearing pants, but the basic theme is the same. I am an imposter because I really don't have the qualifications to do my job.

Don't get me wrong. I absolutely adore the career I have, and have been blessed with healthy combination of great mentors, supportive colleagues and friends, a loving and patient spouse, and a good dose of luck. But despite all that, the imposter clouds do occasionally form.

Very early one morning I awoke from yet another imposter dream that motivated this blog and what follows. The dream was incredibly lucid and had scenes and dialogue that made me think I was watching a bad Netflix pilot.

So, I followed my Vomit Technique¹ and ran downstairs to write it down. Over the

1. <https://www.armcintosh.com/blog/category/Write+Now>

course of about three hours, I had most of the text for a short story, because there is no better way to combat Imposter Syndrome than to do something where I feel like even more of an imposter: writing fiction.

About two weeks later, the short story was done. I thought it would be fun to share this story with you. It has pictures even! I pulled together the key scenes from my dream and supplemented them with scenes I made up to keep the story flow. I won't tell you which scenes were from the dream because you'll think I am weird (hey, stop rolling your eyes!).

If nothing else, I hope the story will help build some solidarity between all of us who face the imposter cloud, which includes many others such as artists, musicians, writers, actors, etc. While I still grapple with Imposter Syndrome, I also have come to appreciate the fact that I've done a pretty good job so far, and to be honest, sometimes that's all that matters.

Letter

The concept of high school had changed a lot over the decades. In fact, the whole schooling system had. Rather than having students all move through together in “grades”, each was allowed to move at their own pace. Everyone started around the same age, but after a couple of years, the different aptitudes became evident and students started moving into their own streams, focused on enhancing the skills they came by naturally, but also boosting areas where they had problems.

The system worked very well. But as it became more successful, the administrators began to look over old records to determine whether those who had achieved success in the previous system were really deserving. The recently elected government made it part of their mandate to ensure that public sector employees were truly qualified for their positions.

You can imagine my surprise when I got the message that I needed go back to school.

“Dear Professor Chattan,

As part of the new evaluation process for your position, we reviewed the records of your education. There seems to have been a deficit in your calculus training. By our reckoning, you did not finish the final level. Although you were registered in the course, it seems you did not complete the final exam.”

The message went on to explain that I needed to go back to school and finish the course or else my job would be in jeopardy. The cover letter was followed by a form that I needed to fill out to indicate whether I was going to take the course or forfeit my position.

I thought back to those high school days and especially my senior year when I would have taken this class. I wasn’t a well-behaved student by any measure. The group I hung out with were more interested in sex, drugs and rock ‘n roll than classes, so we tended to coast through the days and party hard at night.

This wasn’t a big deal as my closest friends and I were quick studies and learned

material very fast. We were able to bluff our way through most of our final year classes, just squeaking by with passing grades.

My high-school advisor was quite disappointed since I was on the path to a scholarship, but the attraction of the partying lifestyle was more important to my teenage self than some nebulous scholarship.

I walked down the hall, re-reading the message to make sure I hadn't missed anything and stopped in front of the open door of my colleague Paula.

She looked up from her desk, "Hey Terry, you look perplexed. Did you get another one of those impenetrable papers to review on dimensional embedding?"

I laughed. I remembered the last time she and I talked that I was complaining about a paper I was review on a new theory on brain function that tried to use the idea of dimensional embedding to argue how we do mental time travel.

"No, no. Thankfully no," I paused to carefully choose my next words, "It seems that I may not be qualified to do my job."



"What?"

"I said it seems..."

"I heard you, I just don't understand you," She rose and walked to the door.

I showed her the letter, "You remember there's a review of job qualifications? Looks like I'm missing one."

She was silent as she read the message and looked up.

"This is crazy bureaucracy. You've been doing this job for almost twenty years and been incredibly successful by any measure. Who cares if you flunked high school algebra?"

"Calculus."

"Huh?"

"Calculus, I failed calculus, well I didn't finish it. Algebra is not the same," I realized as I said it that I shouldn't have.

"You can be such a dork sometimes," she shook her head, "Okay so you're not going to do this right? We have the conference starting next month and you are the keynote speaker and my main co-organizer. You need to be there."

"Yeah, I hear you. I just got this message so let me follow up and see if I can get out of it. Surely they can't be serious that they are going to send me back to high school."

Bureaucracy

"We don't call it high school anymore," the bureaucrat said as he leaned towards me, "We dispensed with that arcane idea a decade ago."

"Okay, sorry. So you're sending me back for more training?" I was trying to be polite despite my obvious negative tone.

"That's up to you," he relaxed a bit, "you can either finish the calculus course, or we can find you a new position that is more in line with your qualifications."

That hurt. All these years I'd had a lingering feeling that I really may not be cut out for my job. That I'd been lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time. My ability to navigate through tough situations served me well up until now. But there it was on paper. I did not have the qualifications to do my job. I was an *imposter*.

I wasn't going to give up. I needed to prove myself.

"I'll finish the course," I tried to sound confident, "I guess I can do this as a night class or something? I do have obligations at the university."

"We no longer offer night classes," he leaned closer towards me. I really hate it when they try to strike this authoritative posture. I'm not a kid anymore!

"We believe it's important for all students to intermingle. It enriches the learning environment and benefits the student and the teachers," he tried to sound more encouraging, but he failed.



I felt myself getting a bit angry, "Or is it that with these new requirements you're sending too many people back and it's overwhelmed the system?"

The bureaucrat was silent, staring at me. I'd like to think that I spoke the truth and that put him on his heels.

But I didn't, "Actually, we haven't sent many people back, sir," he replied, "You're only the second one we've identified."

"Oh c'mon!" my frustration was rising to the top, "you mean no one else bluffed their way through school? No one else cheated the system?"

"Oh no, you misunderstand. The cheaters tend to get weeded out and end up in the place they should be. It's the ones like you that we are most concerned about. The ones who enter their job thinking they can do it, all the while knowing in the back of their mind that they really don't have what it takes. Our records indicate that you're exactly this type. What we're doing is giving you the chance to prove yourself once and for all."

I wasn't sure if he was trying to comfort me or put me in my place. I breathed deeply, resigned to what was coming next, "Okay, when do I start?"

"Monday. It's the start of the new term. Calculus runs in the mornings from eight-thirty to noon for five weeks."

So much for lead time. That gave me the weekend to brush up on high-school calculus.

Pizza

When I got home, I was glad to see that my wife hadn't yet arrived. I managed to sneak past the cats without causing too much commotion and down to my home office to sift through the boxes of books in my closet. Like many of my academic friends, I tended to keep my old textbooks, partly as a memento and partly because of the suspicion that I may need them again. Turns out that suspicion was correct in this case. My filing system for old books was not what one may call efficient, so I had to go through practically every box. One contained my textbook from "Nonlinear Systems Analysis" and "Principles of Urban Growth" stuffed on top of old "Mad" magazines and a cover from "The Rolling Stone". Another, which seem to be a testament to my uncertain first year in university had a book on "Cell Biology", "History of Religion", and "Classic Italian Recipes". I was glad I found the last one, because I'd been dying for a good lasagna lately. I went through the last box, which included a book on "Botany for Carnivores" that I inherited from the previous tenant in my office at the university, and my high-school calculus textbook lodged in the middle of a bunch of KISS records.

The book seemed like it was brand new. When I opened it, the spine gave that familiar crackle that new books do. This bothered me because it probably meant that I actually never opened the book. Maybe they were right after all. I didn't have my calculus credit because I never actually went to class!!

I heard the front door open and close and the cats announcing they were hungry.

"Hi," I heard my wife's voice as she put her bags on the floor, "did you get stuff for dinner? I was swamped today and didn't have time to go shopping."

I walked upstairs carrying the textbook, "No, I got some, uh, bad news so I rushed home to check on a few things. Maybe we can order in or something."

She was scratching one of the cat's heads when she looked up at me, "Bad news?"

"Yeah, it seems that I am not qualified for my job. The government says there is no record of me passing calculus in high school, which by the new regulations is

mandatory for a person to be a university professor.”

She stood slowly and sighed a little, “So what does that mean? Did you get fired?”

“No, no. They want me to go back and take the course so I have the qualifications. I start on Monday,” I smiled and held up the textbook.

She glanced at it, “It looks brand new. Did you just buy it?”

“I got it from my boxes in my office downstairs. It was next to my KISS records.”

She chuckled, “I think I understand now why you didn’t finish calculus.

“If you need a tutor, I’m happy to help,” she took her coat off and hung it in the closet, “I aced calculus in high school and university.”

I know she didn’t mean it, but that comment struck deeply, like I really didn’t have what it takes to be in my job.

“Thanks, let’s see how it goes next week,” I put the book on the counter and grabbed my phone, “Shall I call for pizza?”

Getting ready for school

On Saturday morning, I started reading through my calculus textbook while sipping coffee. The first few chapters looked pretty basic, which I guess shouldn't have surprised me. I flipped back to the table of contents: "Introduction to Calculus; Derivatives & Applications; Integrals; Exponentials and Logarithms; Techniques and Applications of the Integral." I went to the section on 'Applications of the Integral' to see if I recognized anything. I didn't. It was like I had never seen any of it!

"You looked worried," my wife walked into the breakfast room with the morning newspaper and a coffee.

"I think it's going to be a busy weekend. I don't remember any of this stuff!" I resisted looking up to see her reaction.

"Well, you learn fast so I'm sure you'll get it back in no time. I have a bunch of errands to do so I'll be out of the house most of the day so you can study."

I didn't think I would hear the word *study* again, but these were different times.

"Okay. I think I'll go down to my office and get started on this. So much for seeing the new Avenger's movie this weekend."



Monday came far too soon. I woke up at four-thirty AM, unlike my high-school self when it would have been about fifteen minutes before class started. I went to my office and grabbed the notes I made from the textbook, reading them over as I made coffee. I felt pretty confident that I at least got the gist of most of the material in the book, but it was definitely going to take some time before I would be ready for the final exam. I read the email suggesting I should be at the school by eight o'clock to meet with the Vice Principal and the course instructor. I felt a small twinge of dread when I realized the Vice Principal used to be my advisor, Misses Walker.

My wife walked into the kitchen around seven o'clock acknowledging my presence nonverbally. It was an unwritten rule that there was to be no conversation before coffee on weekdays. I am certain this is partly responsible for our successful marriage over the years.

I passed her a clean coffee cup, "I'm gonna leave in about a half an hour. I'll take transit as I hear the traffic around the school is bad and parking is a nightmare."

"Uh, huh," she muttered walking over to the coffee decanter.

Our news video-stream was covering an update on the new government education policy.

"The government has had the new *Imposters* policy in place for six months now, and I have the Minister of Qualifications in the studio now to update us on the policy's roll out," the announcer began, "Welcome, Minister Bloodstone."

"Thank you, good morning," the Minister sounded bored.

"Minister, let's start with a recap. This policy was put in place to ensure that professionals in the public sector had the appropriate qualifications. What motivated this?"

"Well, as you know our party members spoke with a lot of their constituents during the election campaign, and one message we heard clearly is that they felt there were a lot of people in the public sector who were not competent at their jobs. The kids in schools were performing badly, so it's clear that some teachers were probably not

qualified to teach. The students in university were complaining that there were no jobs, so obviously the professors were not trained well enough to prepare students for the real world. We even had examples of people in the health care sector who were obviously not well-trained, especially when you see the waitlists. We considered this a crisis, so decided to set up my Ministry to fix this problem.”



“Thanks for the background,” the announcer shuffled some papers, “in the six months of the program have you found any persons that seem unqualified?”

“Yes, we have found two of the so-called *Imposters*, as you media types like to call them. I consider that a pretty good start.”

“Correct me if I am wrong, Minister, but of the two, one was an economic advisor in your own portfolio and the other we have not heard about yet. That’s two out of about ten thousand public sector employees. That seems hardly like a crisis. Isn’t this just political grandstanding?”

The Minister paused, “Look, that means we’ve identified two percent of the employees so far. Two percent! That’s not an insignificant number.”

“Yeah, well, you may want check your calculations, Minister.”

My wife laughed out loud, “I still can’t believe these people got elected.”

First day of class

I stepped out of the subway and walked past a group of students who were sharing stories about their winter break. I heard one mention that they spent the one-month break studying the new calculus textbook so that they would be prepared. Another one laughed, "Ah, you worry too much. I spent the month on the beach. This calculus is going to be a breeze. Most of it's online, so we don't have to worry about the garbage in that textbook, I mean who cares about all the examples of integrals?"

I swallowed and put my head down, walking past them into the front door of the school.

The smell was familiar. It'd been thirty years since I last entered this building, and yet that smell of old wood and wet dog still permeated the air.

The place looked smaller than I remembered. I saw that there were some additions on the south wing that looked like new rooms. The north wing looked almost the same as I remember, except they painted the lockers a horrendous shade of orange. This made the hallway look even smaller. Although maybe the perspective doesn't come from physical size, but rather of age. When we come into these places as kids we see where we're going. Coming back as an adult, we see where we've been.

I spied the "ADMINISTRATION" sign ahead of me and, noting that my watch read seven fifty-five, I walked ahead to the reception desk trying to look like I belonged there.

"Hello, my name is Terry Chattan. I'm here to see the Vice-Principal," Wow, that phrase brought back a wave of memories, not all good.

The person at the reception desk didn't look up, "Yes, Mister Chattan. Please have a seat. Vice Principal Walker will see you in a moment."

I sat glancing down at the small table that held a tablet computer streaming a school video of sports highlights, and a stack of leaflets on the new education policies of the government: *The Right Training for the Right Job*. It sounded innocent enough.

"Good Morning, Mister Chattan," Vice Principal Walker walked from behind the reception counter extending her hand.

"Good morning," I shook her hand. Aside from seeming a bit shorter, she hadn't changed at all. It's like time stands still inside a school.

"I wished we could have met under better circumstances. I see you have done well in your academic career, but as usual there is that little bit missing because you took the easy road," she was able to say that without seeming condescending or punitive.

I sighed, "Well, I wouldn't call it an easy road, but I get your meaning. How do we proceed here?" I wanted to get out of the office.

Vice Principal Walker turned, "I want to introduce you to your course instructor Mister Crandell."

A tall thin man with enormous hair stepped out from behind the counter. He kept his hands behind his back and smiled thinly.

"Mister Chattan, I am pleased to meet you and also very pleased that you will be joining my calculus class. I think you will find it a valuable experience that will more than compensate for your deficiency," there was no expression on his face.

"Uh, thanks," I tried to match his expression or lack thereof, "I think I am pleased too."

"Excellent, let me show you where your locker is," Mister Crandell walked past me, expecting I would follow.

"I wish you well, Terry. I hope you do not squander this opportunity," Vice Principal Walker's final words fell like ice down my back.

Mister Crandell walked at a very fast pace down the corridor and then to the north hallway lined with orange lockers, "The colour schemes help with finding your way around."

He gestured to one locker, "This one is yours. You should have the locker app on your cellphone that you can use to scan the QR code on the door here," he pointed to the

locker door latch.

"Well, this certainly solves the problem of forgetting your combination lock," I tried to interject a bit of humour, which failed.

"Do you have the app on your phone?"

"Uh, no, but I can download it now."

Mister Crandell raised his eyes, "Very well. Your authentication code should be in the email you received the other day confirming your appointment, which you would have known if you had read the entire email."

"Sorry, this is all new to me, so I am a bit nervous," I tried again to diffuse the situation.

"I see," Mister Crandell looked up at the wall clock, "I need to go to my office to get a few things before class. Once you have finished here, I would suggest you make your way to classroom twelve. It is in the east hallway where the lockers are green."

The locker app downloaded very quickly and I was able to authenticate without much trouble. My locker seemed tiny inside and very banged up. The new paint on the outside hid the many years of battering. I took off my winter jacket, hat, and scarf, deciding to keep my satchel with my notes and textbook just in case. I closed the locker door and the subtle 'click', which alerted me that I had put my cellphone back in my jacket pocket, which was now imprisoned in my locker.

"Damn it!" I said aloud pulling on the locker door.

I continued to rattle it, hoping the door would magically open, when I heard someone behind me.

"Did you leave your phone in the locker?" A large boy stood behind me.

"Yeah, I am not used to this."

"Hey, no worries man," the boy held his phone to my locker's QR code. The door 'clicked' and opened.

“How did you know my access code?”

“They’re all the same,” the boy whispered putting his finger to his lips, “we’re not supposed to know that.” He winked and walked away.

I grabbed my phone, locked the door again, and hurried down the hall to find green lockers and classroom twelve.



I honestly expected the classroom to be tiny, with desks that I could barely sit in, and a ceiling that my head scrapped. What I saw instead was a large bright room with a series of tables and chairs with laptops and tablets scattered about. The students were all crowded around a table at the front of the room.

I gathered myself and walked up to the group, “Hi there, so what’s up here?” I instantly regretted what I said.

“Oh, are you the new teacher?” a teenage girl with her hair tucked beneath a hat walked up next to me.

“Uh, no, no,” I hadn’t considered how to answer the inevitable question, “I’m actually takin’ this course to sort of brush up, you know?”

There were muffled laughs in the group.

"How many times have you taken this class?" a boy looked up from the table.

"Probably about a hundred," another one called out followed by collective laughter.

I swallowed and gathered my thoughts, "Actually this is the first time. Well, at least officially. Seems that I missed this class when I first came through, so I need to finish it now or I won't be qualified for my job.

"But I get a chance to prove myself," I looked down at the table to see a collection of three-ringed binders of various colours.

The group was silent for several moments. I took the opportunity to look more closely at the binders, seeing that they contained names and class records of students.

The girl continued, "So, I guess you're the mature student we heard about," she held out her hand, "My name is Jenny. This probably seems pretty overwhelming to you. These binders tell us what working group each of us is in. I took a look already and you're with us at the table over there." She pointed to the table at the far end of the room.

"Take one of these and follow me," she handed me a tablet computer that was the same colour as our binder and table.

"Thanks, Jenny," I shook her hand and suppressed the impulse to introduce myself as a professor, "my name is Terry."

"Yes, I know," Jenny turned to the rest of the group, "Hey everyone, this is Terry!" .

"Hi Terry!" came the slightly out-of-sync response from the group.

"You're gonna hate this class," one student whispered as they walked past me.

I noted a few more people following us as we walked to our table. The rest of the students made their way to their tables, busy talking and showing each other pictures from their social media feeds.

I placed my satchel on the table and glanced back to see who else had followed us.

"Hi Jenny," a thin boy with an oversized sweater hanging off of him walked up, "is this the new guy?"

"Yeah, this is Terry," she pointed to me, "Terry, this is Thomas. He's planning on going to university in the fall." I nodded and smiled.

"Wow, you're old," a young girl walked up next. She was at least five years younger than Jenny.

Jenny laughed, "That's Heather. She's a wiz, but she's still a kid so doesn't filter herself very well. Heather, this is Terry."

"Hi Terry. I'm pretty good at calculus, so if you need help, you can count on me," I appreciated Heather's confidence, which also made me a bit worried.

"Thanks, Heather. And maybe you'll find my wisdom of years helpful," I sat.

Heather gave me a puzzled look.

A large boy was the last to come up. He was the one who helped me earlier with my locker.

He was heads above everyone else in the room and definitely a few years older. He had a lumbering gait that matched his huge frame. He dropped his bag on the table loudly and shuffled to the last chair, "Sorry I'm late," he fell heavily in his seat.

"You're not late, Leonard, for once," Jenny had adjusted her chair to accommodate his girth, "by the way this is Terry. He's the mature student we heard about and I figured he'd be a good addition to our work group."

Leonard's demeanour changed immediately, "Ah, hey Terry. Great to meet ya again! I guess I'm not the old guy anymore," he gave me a huge smile.

I forced a laugh.

Leonard continued, "This will be my fourth time in this class, so if you need any pointers, I'm happy to give 'em," he gave me a thumbs up.

"You mean pointers on what not to do, right Len?" Heather interjected.

Leonard frowned a bit, "Hey, advice is advice."

Mister Crandell walked in the door, "Good morning class and welcome back from your winter break," he made a beeline to the front of the room without looking around. When he got to the front table, he closed the binders and looked up.

"Okay, hopefully you have all had a chance to review the team assignments and are at your assigned tables. I want to make sure you still remember the material from the last section of the course, so we will start with a short quiz to get your calculus skills warmed up."

Oh no! I immediately felt a cold sweat forming. I didn't review the previous course material so had no idea what to expect. What a disaster this was going to be!

My anxiety quickly dissipated when it became clear that the quiz meant we would be given problems that we all solved in our group.

"This's cool," I said as I watched as our received the feed for the first problem on my tablet, "we used to do these quizzes by ourselves."

Thomas glanced over at me, "That must have been weird."

Heather was the first to move and started entering in a set of formulas in the workspace.

"You need to let us do some of the work, Heather," Jenny chuckled.

I sat back and watched for a moment as my group started talking through the problem. Heather would explain her interpretation of the problem and then Jenny or Thomas would suggest some solutions.

"We can use vector maths for this one," I interjected.

Heather turned to me, "We haven't learned that yet. We need to solve the problem using what we learned from the last class."

I'd forgotten the incremental part of education. You start with a foundation that serves you well for a little while and then are given problems that are just at the edge of your knowledge. This is supposed to motivate you to seek a better solution.

The next few hours flew by much faster than I could have imagined. I hadn't seen calculus taught this interactively, and found myself distracted by this learning method, sometimes missing a point.

A signal flashed on our tablets that the class was ending.

"Okay, I have to run to swim practice," Jenny put her hat on and dashed off.

My other team-mates took a bit longer to pack up. I was reviewing the day's lesson to make sure I hadn't missed anything.

"Hey, Terry, do you want to grab lunch with us?" Leonard stood lifting his huge book bag over his shoulder.

"Thanks, but no. I think I am going to go to the study room and review the lesson. I want to make sure I didn't miss anything," I tried to sound cheerful and not dismissive.

I arrived at the study room, which was placed in the west hall amongst a battery of yellow lockers. The room was long, narrow, spotless, and empty.

I took my textbook and notes from my satchel and spent the next several hours comparing them with the material from the day's class. Things had definitely changed, it was almost like calculus was reinvented. I nibbled on a cereal bar, mindful of the "NO FOOD OR DRINK ALLOWED" sign in the spotless room.

I continued to study my notes on the ride home, and didn't realize how exhausted I was until I stumbled off the streetcar and began walking down my street. The sun had just gone down and streetlights shimmered their light off the remnants of the last snow. I squinted into the distance seeing an eerie glow further down the street close to my house.

"Movie shoot?" I thought.

I slowed my pace when I saw the lights were from news crews that were parked in front of our house.

"I said he is not home now! Why don't you go away and I can have him call you when he gets here?" I could hear the anger in my wife's voice. One of the crew's vans was blocking our driveway, so she could not park her car.

"You're blocking our driveway. Please move your van or I will have it towed," I hoped to distract the attention from my wife, "what the hell are you doing here?"

"Ah, Professor Chattan you're finally home from school. Or I guess we can't call you Professor anymore!" the unmistakably annoying voice of the reporter Issac rose above the din.

"How can I help you, Issac?" I tried to remain calm, but felt the nervous jitter growing in my chest.

"Well, *Mister Chattan*, I just wanted you to tell our viewers how it feels to be outed as an imposter?" Issac was not known for tact.

"Professor Chattan, how does it feel knowing that you've been deceiving all your colleagues and students?" another somewhat more tactful reporter called out.

"I honestly was not aware that my qualifications were lacking," was the first thing out of my mouth.

Issac pounced, "Spoken like a true imposter! Deny, deny, deny. Do you expect us to believe that you're so innocent?"

My wife stepped in front of me, "Issac, I am disappointed in you. The boy I trained in undergrad had much more intelligence and independence of thought than to be sucked into the party line by that rag news agency you work for. Now, I suggest you get your crew out of my driveway so I can park my car right this minute, or I will tell your audience what a *fantastic* student you really were."

She stared with a slightly frightening grin.

Issac frowned and waved to his crew to leave.

I felt the need to say something, "Look, I'm sure you can all appreciate what an awkward situation this is for my family and friends. Whether I am an imposter is one matter, but whether I can prove that I am not is quite another. I am in the midst of doing just that. If I fail, then we can have another discussion. In the meantime, please let my wife park her car, so we can have dinner."

I was surprised that the other press members seemed okay with that response.

I helped my wife unload the groceries from the car, "I didn't know you taught Issac."

"Maybe I did, maybe I didn't. The uncertainty was just enough to throw him off, though. Pretty effective, eh?"

At that point I was very glad she was on my side, "Let me cook tonight, okay?"



Learning as a team

The next morning, the interview was all over the internet. Issac used a heavily-edited video from our encounter to reinforce the government's policy. My wife and I chuckled when he repeated the two-percent figure, "If this represents just two percent of the problem, imagine how much worse this could be. We need a full outing here, folks!"

"Such an idiot," my wife said as she switched the feed.

On our usual newsfeed, the announcer was a bit more even-handed, but did use the now viral label: "We learned last night that another one of the so-called the *Imposter's* has been identified, Professor Terry Chattan. We caught up with his colleague this morning, Professor Paula Sanchez, who agreed to give us her views on this."

I was frozen in my seat but began to relax when I heard Paula call the new government policy regressive and bordering on fascism.

A few of the other newsfeeds had several images from the video the night before that showed me very clearly, so I decided to not take public transit and grab a taxi instead.

Of course, the driver immediately recognized me and spent most of the trip telling me how important a proper education is and that I should be thankful that I had this opportunity to redeem myself.

I asked the driver to drop me at the entrance in the back of the building so I could avoid any more press coverage at the main doors. I pulled my tuque down low and entered.

The door was heavy and old, announcing my entry into a large receiving area. At the opposite end was a janitor pushing his cart.

I studied him carefully. It took me a few moments, but it was clear that the janitor was the same person who was there when I was in high school.

"Mister Morgan?" I called out.

The old man looked over at me. He wore thick spectacles and had a scruffy gray beard that highlighted his shiny bald head. The odd thing was that he looked like that when I was a high school student.

"That you, Terry?" Morgan strained his eyes, "I recognize your voice. You've put on a bit of weight since I last saw you."

"Ha!" I felt a bit of nostalgic joy, "Mister Morgan I can't believe you're still here keeping this place clean!"

"Yeah, well, I ain't no spring chicken I tell ya. I don't really do much around here anymore, except scent duty."

"What?"

"Scent duty. You know that smell? I spray this stuff all around to make sure the scent stays," he held up a canister with the words "WET DOG ON AN OLD WOOD FLOOR" on the label.

I was impressed that there was a market for such an odour, but if you can sell "Fresh Cut Grass" as a room freshener, then I guess anything goes.

"Well, I'm glad to see you Mister Morgan," I walked towards him extending my hand.

Morgan looked down and grasped my hand.

"Good to see you too, Terry," he stared at me for a moment, "Damn you got old! Remember man, no matter how old you are, you're still you."

I smiled not knowing if he was being profound or if sniffing the scent spray had done something to him.

"Thanks," I released his hand, "thanks, I gotta go to class."

I tried to enter the classroom without too much commotion. Mister Crandell had arrived early and watched me as I walked over to my group's table. As usual, he was expressionless. I nodded his way with a slight grin, which seemed to soften the pierce of his stare. He looked down at the papers on his desk.

Heather, Leonard, and Thomas had already arrived and were unpacking their bags.

"Hey Professor," Leonard looked over as I put my satchel down, "I saw you on the news last night, Great interview!"

"Yeah, sure, thanks, Len," I managed another smile.

Leonard lowered his voice, "Um, hey, can you sign this for me?"

He pulled a vinyl record album from his bag. The cover was a sketch with the words *The Imposters* written on the bright red background. He held a silver pen out towards me.

"I didn't know you were one of The Imposters, man. I love this album!" his eyes glimmered with anticipation.

"Uh, it's... I'm not exactly..." I tried to muster a response.

"Oh, Len, you can be so dense sometimes! He's not that kind of imposter!" Heather rolled her eyes.

Leonard's eyes continued their glimmer.

I reached for the album and pen.

TO LEONARD, KEEP ROCKIN' BUDDY! I wrote ending it with my initials.

"Okay team! Let's get to work. I need to be out of here by noon sharp today for track practice," Jenny dropped her bag.



Over the coming weeks, our working group really seemed to come together. Jenny was a natural leader for the group and I was happy to follow her task assignments. Heather's skills were really evident in being able to program solutions, and Thomas had a great aptitude for abstraction and could identify a number of potential solutions for the same problem. Leonard turned out to have a surprising aptitude for probabilities.

"How did you manage to figure all this out?" I asked when he showed great enthusiasm for a Monte Carlo simulation we tried.

"Well, I play cards and stuff a lot, so I guess I learned by doing. I found out I could make better choices if I could track probabilities."

"So you must make a killing at poker."

"I wish. If I was so good at it, do you think I'd still be here?"

The team appreciated my knowledge of matrices and being able to work across multiple dimensions. I missed that reinforcement that comes from working together as

a team on problems. In my academic career, I was reinforced for my own accomplishments, the papers, the lectures, the grants, and not how well my research team did. It got to the point where there was no team, just me. I resolved that once this class was completed, that I would do my best to link up with my colleagues and try to set up our collaborations again.

The obstacles

With the final exam approaching, our team turned from problem solving to preparing ourselves to work independently. One of the carry-overs from the old system was that exams were still done individually, even if all the work up to that point was done as a team.

“The exam is scheduled for three hours,” Mister Crandell said as he concluded the class the week before the exam, “It will be focused on problem solving rather than theory, so expect to have to take some time to understand each problem.”

Breaking down a problem was where our team was starting to show difficulty. It wasn't an issue at first, but over the weeks no matter how clear a problem was, it always seemed that we could never really agree on the best solution. Part of this was a not-so-subtle competition between Jenny and Thomas, while other times it was Heather who would come up with a strategy that none of us understood. I tried to keep my distance on these group debates, offering to go with the consensus.

After Mister Crandell's announcement, he dismissed the class and we were free to either continue working or move on to other things.

Leonard and Heather opted to stay so that they could exchange notes on probabilities and coding. Jenny left in a hurry, saying that she needed to get to basketball practice.

Thomas and I walked down the hall together, “Terry, do you have a few minutes? There's something I wanna show you.”

“Sure,” I followed as Thomas pointed to his locker.

He opened the locker and took out a small package, “Let's go out there,” he nodded in the direction of the side door.

The door opened into an enclosed garden that was protected from the outside cold. It was used for agriculture classes. Today, it was empty.

Thomas sat on a concrete step, “I don't know about you, but I'm a bit nervous about

the exam.”

“I think that’s understandable,” I tried to sound more like a friend than an old adult,
“But we’ve done well on our assignments, so I think we’ll be okay.”

“Yeah, maybe. But why leave that to chance?” Thomas opened the package.

Inside were several USB sticks. He handed one to me.

“I got these from the exam lab,” he held one up, admiring it.

“What do you mean?”

“These have the final exam on it,” he looked at me like I should have known that.

“I can’t fail this class,” he continued, “There’s a big scholarship riding on this and if I miss it by one mark, I’m gonna end up in some shitty college.”

“I don’t get it. You should have no problem with the exam. Why cheat?”

“Why? Didn’t you do the same thing? Didn’t you and your buddies steal a bunch of exams? My Mum told me the stories about you.”

“Your Mum?”

“Yeah, my Mum was your advisor when you were in high school. She told me the stories about you and how they knew what you were doing but couldn’t prove it. You might say that you inspired me.”

“How did you get these?”

“I used her security card to get into the lab.”

I remembered how we had ‘borrowed’ the master keys from the Vice Principal at the time under the pretence of helping out with sports equipment. While two of my gang were in the gym organizing the equipment, I used the key to sneak into the exam lab and grab whatever I could.

“But the entries to the exam lab must be logged, Thomas. Isn’t someone going to

check if something is missing?"

Thomas rolled his eyes, "I'm not an idiot. I only took one of the USBs and copied the stuff on to a bunch of others, so there's only one missing. They'll never notice that. Her card also accesses the security system, so I wiped the entry record after I got the exam.

"Anyway, I thought that maybe you'd want to have one of these. I imagine you have as much to lose as I do. I'll give this one to you free."

"Free? Are you selling these?"

"Of course! This is a great business!"

This left me with the impression that he'd had been doing this for a while.

"Look, in a weird way, you are kinda my role model for how to beat the system, so I figure giving you this USB key is a way of saying thanks for the inspiration."

Thomas closed the box, stood and walked back into the school. I sat for a few more moments before pocketing the USB key and went out the back entrance of the garden.



My wife and I stared at the USB key on the table.

"I can't believe he's Misses Walker's kid. And to think that all the stuff I did in high school is like some sort of legend. Not the legacy I was hoping for." I pinged the USB key, sending it spinning.

She grabbed it, "Did you look at it yet?"

"No, not yet."

"Are you seriously considering it?" her voice was calm.

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't tempted. I really do think I'll do well on exam, but on the other hand, there's a lot at stake if I fail. I could be out of a job, and that's not going to

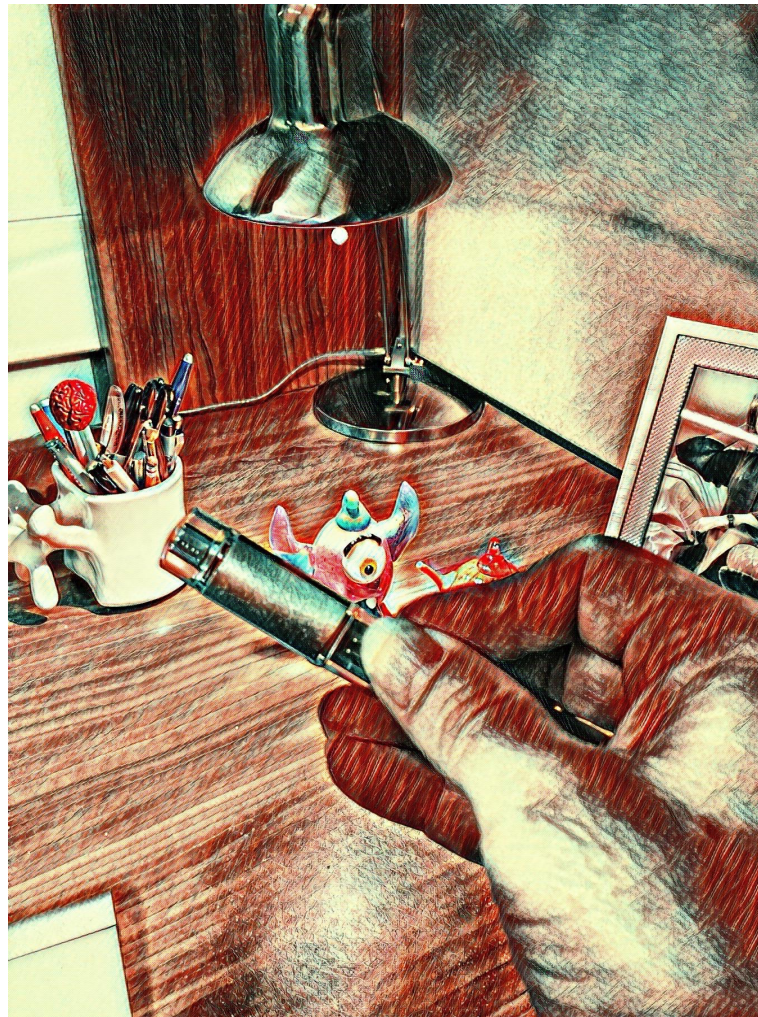
make it easy for us financially.”

“Look,” she placed the USB key back down, “I have all the faith in the world in you, and don’t doubt for a moment that you’ll ace the exam. What bothers me more is that if you take the easy way out, you may save your job, but you’ll never get over the feeling of being an imposter.

“Why don’t you go study a bit more in your office and then try to get some sleep, okay? I’m gonna head up now and do a bit of reading.”

I grabbed the USB stick and started walking to the basement, glancing back to see my wife giving me a look of concern.

Plopping into my office chair, I held the USB stick up to the desk lamp.



“Certainly having the exam in advance isn’t really cheating,” I thought, “you still have to produce the answers on the spot!”

I countered myself, “True, but the other students don’t have that advantage.”

I countered again, “Also true, but the other students aren’t facing a loss of a job. No one will know and you’ll be back at the university next week.”

I pulled the protective sleeve off the USB stick and inserted it into the USB hub connected to my laptop.

I typed a quick command on the keyboard, hit <enter>, and then sat back.

“This operation will reformat the drive. If there are data on the drive, it will be erased. Are you sure? Y/N”

I typed “Y”

“Any data that are on drive will be unrecoverable. Are you sure? Y/N”

I typed “Y” a bit more emphatically.

About ten seconds later a message came up: *“Formatting complete. Drive ready for use.”*

As an extra precaution I copied a folder full of our vacation photos from past five years on to the USB stick.

About thirty seconds later a message came up: *“Operation complete. How about a nice game of chess?”*

The operating system’s growing abilities at personalization were impressive. However, I opted to close the laptop and review a little more on probability theory, which still gave me heartburn. I wanted to do well on this test, not to prove anything to the rest of the world, but to prove to myself that I was where I belonged.

Final exam

The halls of the school were empty when I arrived for the final exam. It seemed like it may be a holiday were it not for the chatter in the administration offices. For a brief moment I thought I might be late for the exam and I ran to the classroom.

In the room all the students were sitting in separate desks rather than groups of tables. A few turned around to look at me, and then back to the tablets on their desk.

Thomas waved and pointed to the seat next to him. I approached and sat.

"Hey, why is everyone here so early? The exam doesn't start for another fifteen minutes."

Thomas shrugged, "It's a habit that we've sort of formed, I guess. It's supposed to help us relax."

He looked down at his tablet, "So, are you ready?" he raised his eyebrows.

I pulled my tablet from my satchel, "Yeah, I studied for several hours yesterday afternoon and got a good sleep. How about you?"

Thomas seemed puzzled, "You studied? But what about the, uh, notes I gave you?"

"Thomas, I threw them away. I need to do this for myself and all by myself."

"Wow! Who'd believe you grew a conscience now?" he shook his head, "Well, good luck, man."

"Thanks, you too."

Thomas winked, "I won't need it."

The clock sounded the hour but Mister Crandell had not yet arrived. A few whispers floated out of the back of the room and soon more conversations started.

"Has Crandell ever been late on exam day?" I asked Thomas.

“No, never. Something’s up.”

Leonard came running in and plopped himself in the desk beside me, “Whew, I hate it when I oversleep!”

I scanned the room for my other team-mates, and found Jenny in the front row and Heather in the seat next to her. They looked back at me and waved, both oozing confidence.

At ten minutes after the hour, Mister Crandell arrived with another teacher. They walked to the front of the room and plugged in a USB stick into the main computer.

He faced the class, “Apologies for being late everyone. Seems there is a USB stick missing from the exam room. While we cannot be sure the system was compromised, we are taking no risks. We have spent the last few hours pulling together a new exam, which we are loading on the system now. It will take a few more moments and then we can begin. And do not worry, the material is the same as we have covered in the class, so there shouldn’t be any surprises if you have studied.”

I glanced over to Thomas, who looked like he stopped breathing. He then looked down at his tablet, back to Mister Crandell and then over to me.

“I hope you didn’t share your *notes* with anyone else,” I whispered.

Thomas’s eyes widened and snapped back to his tablet.

“Okay everyone, we are ready to start,” Mister Crandell’s voice broke the waves of whispers in the room, “You should have the exam on your tablets now. Remember to read through all the problems and tackle the easy ones first so you have time for the harder ones. We need to keep the total time to three hours, so use it well.”

Following his advice, I skimmed over the ten problems on the exam. Two of them I dealt with as soon as I read. Then I came to a problem on permutation and combinations, which moved into deriving a probability distribution inspired by Conway’s *Game of Life*.

“Damn,” I thought, “this is going to be a rough one.”

I glanced over to Thomas, who seemed to have gotten over the initial shock and was diligently working away. My other team-mates at the front were similarly immersed. Leonard, on the other hand, had fallen asleep on his tablet. I tried to nudge him, but got a stern look from Mister Crandell.

Heather was the first to finish. She walked up and handed her tablet in and walked to the rear of the room. Soon a few more students did the same.

I had finished nine of the problems, leaving the nasty permutation to probability question for last. My problem is that I tend to read too fast, missing key points. I took my time and deliberately programmed in the key variables, moving between the code and the problem. Once I completed the code, I doubled checked it against the problem and, confident I had gotten it correct, hit <enter> to start the calculations.

"The answer is 42"

"Okay class, time is up! Please close your tablets and bring them to the front," Mister Crandell rapped his knuckles on the front desk to accentuate his words.

Leonard managed to wake up just enough time to do a few problems, but was obviously anxious that he hadn't finished.

Thomas was visibly angry or agitated as he walked to the front to hand in his table. There were a few other students who were eyeing him as well, probably the ones who purchased the USB sticks.

I met up with Jenny and Heather at the back of the room. Their exam results were compiled just after they handed in their tablets so they already knew their final grade, which were sent by SMS to their mobile phones.

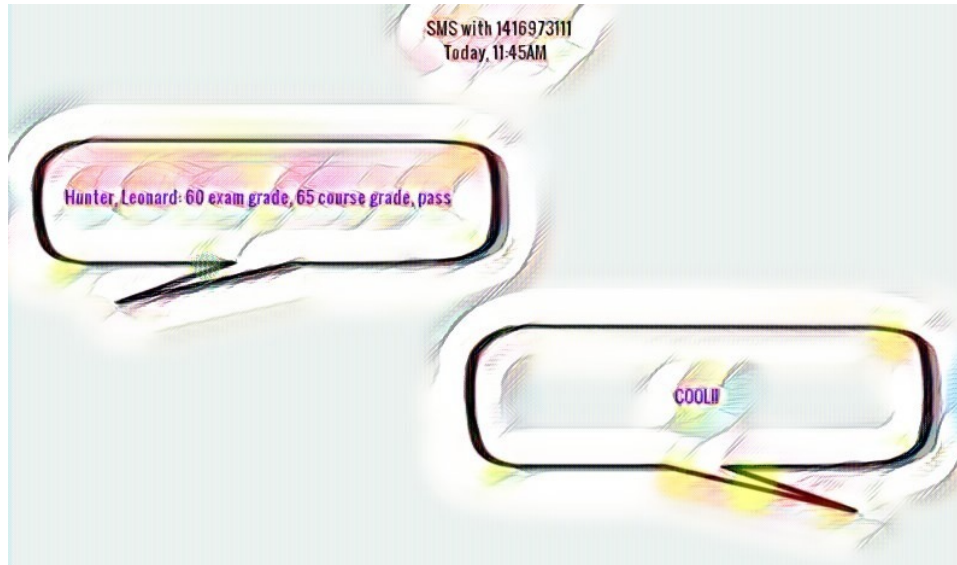
"I got ninety!" Jenny gushed, "I really didn't think it would be that high."

Heather was frowning, "I only got ninety-five! There must be a mistake. I am going to talk to Mister Crandell now!" she made her way to the front of the room.

A few moments later I felt my phone vibrate and took it out to see a text message:
"Chattan, Terrance: 90 exam grade, 85 course grade, pass"

Leonard was staring at his phone, "I, uh, I think I PASSED!!"

He showed me the message on his phone: "Hunter, Leonard, exam grade 65, 60 course grade, pass".



"Wow, Len, that's amazing. You've definitely put a new meaning to be able to do something in your sleep," I patted him on the shoulder. The big guy seemed to be on the verge of tears.

Heather came back to us visibly annoyed, "Mister Crandell said there was no mistake. Apparently, I used a nested loop structure in my code, when I should have done a vector operation. I guess it's not just about getting the right answer, but also how you get there that counts."

"Wise words, young Padawan," I said. Heather had no idea what I meant.

Thomas was walking quickly towards us.

"How'd you do?" Jenny stepped in front of him.

"Passed, barely. It probably messed up my scholarship chances. Uh, hey," he glanced back over his shoulder to the group of determined students walking towards him, "Len can I grab a ride home with you?"

New band

The next morning I watched the deep blue sky change to pink highlights as the rising sun's rays caught the clouds on the horizon. The warm coffee cup felt comfortably familiar in my hands.

"Beautiful sunrise this morning," my wife walked into the breakfast room.

"You're up early!" I turned to put my mug down and give her a hug.

"I wanted to treat you to a nice breakfast for your first day as a legitimate professor," she looked up into my eyes with a smile.

I returned the smile with a wink, "Let me pour you some coffee."

She made scrambled eggs atop of guacamole and toast, then covered in cheese.

"Oh this is good!" I was shuddering it was so delightful, "what do I get if I redo high-school English?"

"You'll be more articulate," she smiled, "I'll let you finish alone. I gotta run to a morning meeting."

She blew me a kiss and went on her way.

I savoured the last bite and then proceeded to clean up the kitchen before heading to the university.



As I walked down the hall to my office, it all seemed a little different, maybe because I felt a bit more confident of my place. Paula was standing outside my office reading a posting on the bulletin board.

"Hey, welcome back," she tapped her pen on the posting, "you see that the ads for summer students just got posted today?"

"Not yet," I looked at the ad.

"I got a message from someone who asked if you were in yet. She wants to know if you're taking any students this summer. She said that you'd remember her."

"What's her name?"

"Heather Jacoby. She said she learned something from you and thinks she'd be good in the lab."

I let out a surprising laugh, "She's probably right! This is one of the students I worked with in calculus. She's a programming wiz!"

"Well here's her contact information," she held up a slip of paper, "I'll give it to you if you promise to start working on your conference presentation."

"You have a deal," I bowed and turned to my office to get started on the presentation.

I arrived home earlier than I expected. My wife was not yet home and the cats seemed uninterested in my arrival. I decided to go down to my office and do a little more work on the presentation.

I opened my laptop and an automatic application began playing the latest news feeds. The sound from a video stream echoed in my basement office. It was a media scrum after a parliamentary debate.

"We're not closing the Imposter program, we're merely recalibrating," Minister Bloodstone spoke over the barrage of questions, "the people are smart and know an Imposter when they see one."

"So you're encouraging vigilantism?" A reporter's voice rose above the din.

"No, we've set up a hotline and website. If anyone sees or hears anything that they consider evidence of an Imposter, they can leave the information anonymously and we'll send a team to investigate."

"So you're expecting the public to find the Imposters now?"

"The people know best," Bloodstone then turned away from the reporters and towards to camera.

He glared directly into the lens, "If you're one of the Imposters, we *will* find you," and abruptly walked away.

I went over to my closet and moved my suits out of the way, seeing the old guitar case stuck in the back. I pulled it out and laid on the throw rug. With the faded colour of the case and the faint text of the old decals, it looked sort of like an artifact dug out of someone's basement, which I guess it was.

I undid the latches and opened the case. The room light caught the red sparkles in the finish and the chrome hardware of my old guitar. I carefully lifted it from the case and

sat down with it in my lap.

"Hello, Henry," like other guitarists, I gave my guitar a name. Maybe not the coolest one, but Henry could really scream in a lead solo.

I plucked a few strings, and they responded with a surprising crisp tone, despite being quite out of tune. My hand formed a G-chord and I touched the strings again.

Definitely out of tune. I tested the tuning pegs and started to adjust the tuning as best as my ear could pick up. The pegs creaked like my joints when I get out of bed in the morning.

In a few moments, I got old Henry in tune well enough to play a few licks from songs that were stuck somewhere in the back of my mind.

"Are you going to start playing again?" my wife was standing in the doorway, "it must be at least twenty years since you touched that thing."

I smiled and played a few more licks, "Yeah, maybe. It seems like a great time to resurrect my old band, *The Imposters*."



Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements:

I am grateful for the encouragement and support of the lab members who helped out with this: Sarah Faber, who both provided edits and modelled for one of the pictures; Ford Burles who also modelled for a picture; and Tanya Brown, who helped with the edits, took most of the photos, and performed her web-mastery to blogify the piece. My brother (@postaudioman) provided the photo that was the base for *The Imposters* album cover, and Adrian Owen (@comadork) snapped the photo of me with my guitar (her name is Priscilla, actually). All of the artwork is digitally altered photographs. I don't have the talent to actually draw anything useful.

Hi Mum.