

# More Savant

In November of 1996 I was a contestant on the first five episodes of the now-cancelled MTV game show *Idiot Savants*. I answered an ad on the back of the *Village Voice*, passed a 20-question phone quiz and got to come in and compete in a mock game for a chance to be on the show. I did very well at the tryout, finishing with 2000 points to 600 for one contestant and 400 for the other. From the time of the in-person game to the end of the last game, I got the impression that there were literally dozens of people who were on the show just to write stories about it. Months after the last episode aired, the only account of the experience I have seen was written by Joel Stein, a contestant on the shows that I was on. He was the only person who really embarrassed himself during the show with totally bizarre mistakes and strange behavior. He was (and still is) the sports reporter for *Time Out NY*, a guide to what's going on in New York City. His story was very short, and basically described how he felt humiliated by his appearance. I liked his story, and wrote a letter to him and *Time Out* that was published as well. Since I never saw any other stories, and thought my story was AT LEAST as interesting as Joel's, I figured I should publish my own account. I originally wrote it to send to family members, just so I wouldn't have to tell the same story on the phone to each person individually. I have cut it down substantially just to make it more readable, added this introduction and an afterword about what happened after the whole thing was over. I think the people at MTV were almost uniformly smug and annoying, but that's what you get when you spend your days trying to entertain braid-dead jerkoffs.

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After weeks of waiting, I finally got the call

from Sean, the contestant coordinator at MTV, saying that he had some good news and some bad news. The bad news was that I didn't make it on to the show, for reasons he chose not to go into (loser! too short! too Jewish! too weird! too ugly! too smart!). The good news was that they liked me, but there weren't enough slots (oh, sure!). They wanted me to be an alternate in case someone they did like couldn't make it. They also felt that my savant category wasn't going to work. At first I wanted to do *The Simpsons*, since I have every single episode on tape. They said that was no good, so I suggested "serial killers," since that category had brought me luck during the tryout. Also no good. "Howard Stern?" Nope. "*X-Files*?" Nope. "*Blade Runner*?" "No, but who directed that movie?" "Ridley Scott," I said. "How about Ridley Scott films?" "Uh, I guess so."

They told me that I should be at the studio at 10AM on Thursday, and if one person didn't show, I would go on. If everyone was there, I was supposed to go away and come back the next week, and so on, until I got on the show.

I had a feeling that I wasn't going get on for at least a few weeks, so I didn't kill myself getting all the movies. On Wednesday, Sean called me and said that they thought someone might flake out and I should be prepared to go on the next day. It was way too tense for me, because I wanted to know for sure that it was going to happen, just so I could sleep. I returned to watching *Alien*, and tried not to think about it. Sean called an hour later and said someone had dropped out and that I was definitely on (though he never said anything about getting an alternate in case I didn't show up... how odd). I called most of my friends to see if anyone could come by and watch me on TV, but no one,

not even Juli, could make it. I was kind of sad that no one would come, but I figured that it would be on TV soon enough, since I was going to be featured on the first five episodes ever made.

I got to the studio on November 21 at about 9:45AM and met up with Alyssa, the other contestant coordinator. The next person to show up was Scott, a production manager for *Elle* magazine. Then came Sarah, a fashion student at F.I.T. and a few minutes later the last contestant, Joel, arrived.

Once assembled we met Ben, a production assistant, and he took us out for breakfast. They said we could get anything we wanted, so I got a Coke. Everyone else got food, but I hate seeming like schnorrer the Jew looking for free junk. I am not a freeloader. The only thing I wanted them to pay for was a big prize, dig? After breakfast we went back to the studios, they took us up to the green room, and left us there. They told us that the show would tape at 3PM, which was still four hours away. We all sat around talking, reading magazines, and got to know each other.

Some time later Jason, one of the writers, came in to interview us, so they could write some jokes. That took five minutes. After Jason left we had a walk through of the set then back to the green room to sit around for a while. They said that they had only moved in the previous Saturday and had built the set in two days, which is amazing to say the least. At about 2:30 they brought us down to get equipped with wireless microphones. We did some audio checks and went out on to the set. We didn't really get a chance to go over our notes, so I just ran down what I could remember in my head (I had some notes on Ridley Scott movies for my savant category. Scott brought the *Encyclopedia Madonnica*,

# Than Idiot

since his category was simply “Madonna.” Joel didn’t bring anything since his category was *Taxi*, and Sarah brought four books about the American Revolution to study).

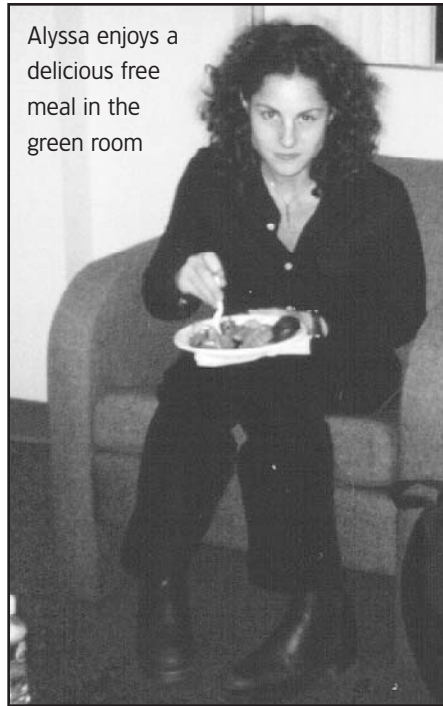
Once on set we saw the Mentalists, the band that plays during the breaks. The set itself features all kinds of models of atoms, a huge double-helix DNA strand, lights that say  $E=mc^2$  and a periodic table that’s labeled “The Idiotic Table.” There is also an eight foot foam brain with a TV monitor built into the front of it. The set looks high-tech, but upon close examination you can see the shoddy workmanship and cheap methods they used to make the set look cool on TV. There were stacks of books that had holes drilled into them which were stacked on poles around the set. If you are sitting in the audience, the band is on the immediate left. Also on the left, but more forward is the Dunce Corner, where the dunce goes (more on that later). In the dunce corner is a stuffed snake housed in a glass bell, a stack of books, a stool, and a screen to keep score for the dunce. A little further downstage is the brain, then, to the right of the brain is the host’s podium, where they keep the question cards. Then, on the right side, on four platforms of different heights, are the seats for the contestants. Above the seats are little black boards where they tack a sign with your savant category, and move it when you change places at the end of each round.

Once on the set, we were all pretty calm. All the teamsters, producers and writers were constantly telling us how glad they were that we were there (I think they were feeling much more pressure than any of us, since really, after a few days, it would be over for us. They would have to try to make it work for months, and besides, if we suck, they get fired). I think we all knew we could do whatever the hell we wanted.

The host, Greg Fitzsimmons, introduced himself to us before the show. We asked about what he had done before, and he mumbled something about stand up comedy. He seemed to have the arrogance and smug attitude befitting a game show host (just above clown, but below modern rock DJ on the Entertainment Evolution Chart).

For the game, each one of us had a buzzer that made a different wacky noise. For the first show, mine was the sound of a little kid shrieking, “Pick Me!” The first question is a toss-up and is not worth any points, but the first person to get it right gets to choose the first category. The toss-up category for day one was *Barney Miller*. The question was, “On this comedy show, set in New York City, the main character is a police captain who jokes around with the other guys in the station

Alyssa enjoys a delicious free meal in the green room



house in the 12th precinct. Name the show.” We all looked at each other, wondering what the fuck the deal was. So I buzzed in and said, sort of confused, “*Barney Miller*?” and Greg said, “That’s correct! Choose the first category!”

I chose “Steve Martin Movies” and the first question was answered, before Greg finished reading it, by Joel, who said something totally wrong. The question was something like, “These two wild and crazy guys....” and Joel buzzed in, looked confused and asked “Somewhere near Romania?” It got a big laugh, Greg made a joke, and we moved on. In the first round, Greg asks a question, the first person to buzz in and get it right gets 100 points. Then they get a bonus question, only to them, worth 200. If they get that one wrong, someone else can jump in and guess, and also earn 200 points, but on the first 2 questions, no points are lost for wrong answers. If you get question two right, you can optionally take the “big gamble” question, which is only to you, and worth 300 if you get it right, and -300 if you get it wrong. The 300 point questions were usually way too hard, and mostly we got them wrong. If you got the first and second questions right, then fucked up the big gamble, you would have a net gain of zero points.

At the end of round one Scott was in first, Sarah was in second, I was in third, and Joel was last, so Joel was escorted to the dunce corner for the remainder of the game. He would wait there, and if there were any questions throughout the rest of the game that no one could answer, Joel would be asked the question. Round two is the same as one, except the brain picks the categories and the points are doubled. After that round, I

was still in third, so I was escorted off the show. The two remaining people compete in the Brainstorm round, where the host gives a rapid series of questions, each worth 200 if right, and -200 if wrong. For the first game, Greg said the name of the book, and you had to name the author. Greg made a number of factual and pronunciation errors, but as I said, he wasn’t too bright. He even said before the show, “I hope I can learn a lot on this show, because right now, I know almost nothing.”

After the Brainstorm Round, Scott was in the lead, so he was escorted to this rinky-dink looking clear plastic cone, called the “Cylinder of Shush” (I think that the reason is the name “Cone of Silence” is trademarked, or it was a brilliant idea from one of “writers”). The brain puts 60 seconds on the clock and you have to answer 10 questions in your savant category. None of us thought that the savant questions were all that hard, though many were obscure. Scott did very well and won himself a telescope, which I think we all agreed was a lame prize, especially for someone who lives in New York City. We watched Scott win from up in the makeup room, where they have a TV rigged into the live feed from the studio below. We were all excited for Scott, but worried that he was going to kick our asses for the rest of the week, and if he didn’t, that we would win prizes as lame as his. Then we had to change clothes, to make it appear as if it were a new day, and return to the set.

Before the second game began everyone from the show came by to help us get pumped up. Even though it may not have come through to the folks at home, everyone was really smart. There were many times in the first game where we all knew the answer, but the buzzers didn’t always work right, and even when they did, sometimes someone else was just faster. I think, from the conversations that we had during breaks, that we all knew most of the answers, we just weren’t fast enough. There are few notable exceptions, and those were obvious.

The second game started out slowly, and to be honest, the whole thing is a blur. I was really frustrated that I wasn’t killing, I really thought I was going to win by a landslide all five days, and the tension and pressure were building up in my head. Joel really struggled, and Sarah maintained her cool. Scott never even cracked a little bit, he was really good under pressure, but I guess that is to be expected since his whole life is making deadlines. The parts of day two that I remember are in no particular order. I know that Joel made some jokes, Greg was annoying all of us, and I was much faster on



the buzzer. At the end of round one, Joel was in last place again, and was escorted over to the dunce corner. Sarah started to come alive in round two, and by the end had come into second place behind me. At that point I was getting really tense, I could feel it in my head and I was sweating and feeling really spaced-out. I hardly ever drink, but right then I wanted a drink.

The Brainstorm Round was really easy. They named the *Saturday Night Live* character, we had to name the actor that played them. I hadn't seen an episode in a while, but I still remembered seeing most of them on cable in reruns. The best moment on the whole show came when Greg said "Father Guido Sarducci?" The guy that played him is named Don Novello and he has written two really funny books where he writes letters to famous people (as Lazlo Toth) and asks them goofy questions, to trade ties, or to express his bizarre support. I have one of the books and I love that guy. I knew the answer as soon as he said "Father," and I buzzed in. Then, the name just slipped me, and it was so frustrating that I said, "Oh, fuck!" I didn't mean to, I was just so rattled by forgetting, because I felt like I was on such a roll. Because the round was going so well, I knew they couldn't ask us to redo it, so I figured that they would just bleep me. I have always wanted to swear on TV, and I really can't believe that my dream has finally come true, and by accident. No one on the set mentioned it, because I think no one realized, except Greg, who said something like, "Jøsh, watch the language!"



The lovely and talented Ben Donner prays that the make-up whore will die of cancer sooner, rather than later

At the end of the round, it was obvious that I had won. As soon as Greg said, "Jøsh is the winner of that round," Sarah turned to me, and as genuinely as is humanly possible, said, "Congratulations" and shook my hand. I was just completely shocked and terrified. I had no idea what kind of questions they might ask me. I had twelve pages of notes on Ridley Scott movies up in the green room, and no way to get to them. I started thinking of all the things I could remember: the name of the ship in *Alien* is the Nostromo, Thelma's husband is Darryl, Louise's boyfriend is Jimmy, played by Michael Madsen, the boat in *White Squall* is the Albatross, Jeff Bridges, 1979, born in England, etc. All these numbers and facts and dates and names were flying around in my head and I remember wishing the whole thing was over.

I walked offstage and everyone came running up to me saying really nice things. It was like nothing else I have ever experienced. It made me uncomfortable getting all that attention and I thought that it would have been much easier for me if I could have done the final round on a closed set. The audio guy found me and had me fitted for an ear piece. Then we ran some audio tests to make sure I could hear. I needed the earpiece because in the Cylinder of Shush it is hard to hear, but that is a good thing. Having the questions read into my ear was much easier than anything I could have thought of. After the levels were checked, they put me on my mark on the floor and lowered the cylinder onto my upper half. As the camera guys were joking around I just looked around me, trying to find something comforting to stare at. There was nothing. I looked at the band, who were doing the Macarena. I looked at all the weird writing on the floor. I looked at the giant brain. I looked at the cone, trying to figure out how they made it. I finally just thought about Juli and what she would say to me at a time like this. She would say, "Aww, poor animal.. Just relax, you are gonna kill. You studied everything you could, read the FAQs and watched the movies. In two minutes it will be over and you will be fine." As usual, she was right, so I took a deep breath and cleared my mind.

The band played us back from commercial and Greg came up behind me. He turned to the prize guy and said, "What is Jøsh playing for today, prize guy?" The prize guy replied, "Well, Greg, he could win a trip for two, airfare included, to the beautiful Bluebeard's Castle resort in the fabulous Virgin Islands..." Pictures of the hotel appeared on the monitor



Big Joe the stage manager joins us for conversation and a mouthful of chewing tobacco (YUM!)

next to me. Greg turned to the brain and said, "Put sixty seconds on the clock!" They put sixty seconds on the clock next to me and I looked away, thinking it might fuck with my concentration. Greg said, "Ready?" and started hurling questions at me. "What was Ridley Scott's first film?" *"The Duellists."* "What year does *Blade Runner* take place?" "2019." "What is the name of the ship in *Alien*?" "The Nostromo." "Who plays Queen Isabella in *1492: Conquest of*?" "Sigourney Weaver." "What company makes replicants?" "The Tyrell Corporation." "What disease does JF Sebastian have in *Blade Runner*?" "Methusala's Syndrome," which causes premature aging. Greg said I was wrong, because on the card it said, "premature aging" which as far as I know, IS NOT THE NAME OF A FUCKING DISEASE. After a second he said, "We can accept that." "What was the name of Brad Pitt's character in *Thelma & Louise*?" (I wasn't sure, it was the only movie I hadn't seen in years. I knew I had to rent it that night) I said, "JR" and the answer was JD. "Who played Pris in *Blade Runner*?" "Darryl Hannah." "What did *Thelma & Louise* win an Oscar for?" "Best original screenplay!" I said, Then the clock stopped, the Cylinder raised up off me and they said, "You did it!" I finished 10 questions with fifteen seconds to spare! Greg came over and shook my hand, and the bimbos came out of nowhere. Everyone started dancing around me, the girls were putting their arms around me, and the camera man was moving the camera all over the place. The girls were saying stuff like, "Say 'Hi' to your mom, and blow a kiss..." I felt like a bomb had hit, I



was completely numb. All that pressure suddenly released and I was so relieved that I had won. I didn't even care about the trip, I was just glad that I hadn't lost. As far as I was concerned, the whole thing was over, I had come to prove myself and I had, with style and wit. I was really happy. I wanted to just walk off, but the girls were manhandling me. Then it was all over, and I was ready to fall down. Alyssa and Ben came over and said they were thrilled for me, and asked me if I had someone to take, and I said, "Yeah, my girlfriend would LOVE to go to the Virgin Islands." I went up to the green room to collect my things and go home.

When I got there, Scott was upset, because he wanted a trip more than anything. He said, "Maybe I can sell the telescope and go on a trip." Sure, that's possible, I thought. The prize lady had me fill out some forms about the trip, tax papers and whatnot. I sat in the green room collecting my thoughts, letting all the tension drain from me. For the few days before the show, when I wasn't sure if I would get on or not, I was really nervous. I know I can play game shows when I am home, but I wasn't sure if I could do it under pressure. The night before the show, I couldn't sleep at all, I just tossed and turned, thinking of questions and trying to answer them. What is the name of the pilot episode of *Star Trek*? What is the fluid inside the eye? Who is Secretary of Agriculture? Who plays Jake on *Melrose Place*? What was Nixon's middle name? All these things kept creeping into my head. I had to take some pills to go to sleep because I was completely tense.

Now that I had won, more than anything, I felt really tired. I had planned to rent *Thelma & Louise* because I had only seen it once, many years before. I didn't remember important things, things I knew they could ask me. I realized that the category was good, because even though there is a lot to remember, it is a finite thing, a manageable

amount of information. Sarah's American Revolution subject could have gone ANYWHERE. Joel's *Taxi* category was good, but there are hundreds of episodes of that show, and they can ask anything.

I walked home with a giant grin on my face, not even feeling the cold. I had told Juli that if I won, I would take her out for dinner, and if I lost, she could take me out to cheer me up. I was glad to take her out. On the way home, I thought maybe I would try to pretend that I lost, just so I could say, "Surprise!" and show her the paper that said we were going to the Virgin Islands. It didn't last. As soon as I walked in the door, I couldn't contain my smile, and she said, "What happened?" I just said, "We won a trip! We are going to the Virgin Islands for seven days!" It was great. At that moment, it was worth all the torture of studying and watching movies. We decided to order in so I could watch *Thelma & Louise*. It had been a long day, I was up at 7:30AM, at the studio at 9:45, and finally left after the second show at like 7:45PM. They also told me that for the second day I wouldn't have to be there until noon, which was a relief.

The next day I wanted to relax and enjoy the atmosphere and soak up the experience. Juli was able to come for the taping, though I was worried that she wouldn't be able to get in. I sent Ben to go make sure that she got in, and when I came to my seat, I saw her sitting in the front row while a very large black man told that he'd "never gone red." She explained that her boyfriend was that guy sitting on the stage, so he asked if she had any red-headed sisters. Luckily, my girlfriend does not, and she brought his line of questioning to a halt.

I was less focused on the game because I thought that it might help. Joel was making jokes the whole time about what a loser he was, saying he told his guests in the audience that the show had been cancelled and they

could go home. He kept saying he was going to have a massive comeback, and I kept telling him that no matter what happened, he was the funniest thing on the show. Greg, the audience and the hired help were all rooting for Joel, as was I. We all really wanted him to win. Sarah didn't really bother me, except that she was from the South and kept saying things like, "I got y'all's number, today I'm gonna win..." She did reasonably well in the game, but she talked more than she won.

When the third game started, it went much more smoothly. It was hard to maintain energy during the breaks between rounds though, because of all the preparation required. At the very beginning of the game, Greg said, "Hey Jøsh, yesterday you got a little out of control during the Brainstorm Round..." and he turned to the brain. "Let's see the clip..." They showed me on the second day, during the Brainstorm Round, cursing. Greg said, "To remind you that you are on TV, we want you to wear this swear hat." The bimbo came out and put this big gold cone on my head with "?!@%#!#" written on the front. It got a good reaction from the crowd, and was one of the funniest moments on the show, especially because I was not expecting it at all. During the game Joel ended up playing pretty much the same, and by the time he had to go to the dunce corner, he was ready. We all felt really bad for him because he was really smart, he just couldn't seem to handle the pressure. After round two, Sarah was out, and it was between me and Scott. I was pretty far behind, but thought I might be able to play well enough to catch up, if the category was as good as the "SNL" character category. It was musicians in the movies, they name the movie, you name the musician who was in it "*Boyz N the Hood*?" Ice Cube. "*Under the Cherry Moon*?" Prince. Scott knew a few, but I knew more, and got more right. It wasn't enough and Scott came out ahead. I was thinking, right at



that moment, that it didn't matter. I guess it might look like I was rationalizing, but Scott really was better at the game than me. I think I was smarter than him, smarter than everyone actually, but he was able to buzz in faster, and took fewer chances than the rest of us. I returned to the green room and watched Scott win the big prize again, this time it was a nice 32" television. To be honest, I have a great TV already, so it wasn't the end of the world.

While we were sitting there, waiting for the game to start, I got an idea. The toss-up question in the beginning was always about *Barney Miller*, and the answer was always "Barney Miller." I suggested to everyone that we should all keep quiet for that question and let Joel answer it, just to show that he could handle it. We also figured it was funnier than anything the writers had come up with. Then, right before the game started, I said, "Even if the question is different, let Joel get it." Scott and Sarah thought it was a good idea, and decided to play along (it should be noted here that we were all wearing mics at the time, and after the show they told us that they heard everything we were saying, about the host, the game, and especially about our conspiracy on Joel's behalf). The topic was *Barney Miller* again. Greg said, "On this cop show, the officers all worked out of the twelfth precinct. What is twelve squared?" We all stopped, looked at Joel and he buzzed in. Joel said, "144!" and we all laughed. From that moment on, Joel seemed to regain his confidence. He was buzzing in like crazy, and getting most of them right. They did this segment where the prize guy came out dressed like a sick little kid in pajamas with feet attached. They called him Hypochondriac Guy and he would go over a list of his



My fellow savants, from left to right: Sarah, H. Scott Jolley and Joel Stein.

symptoms, and we had to name the disease. Joel looked all excited, like he knew he could do it. Hypochondriac Guy said he had bleeding gums and tooth pain and a few other things, and I was sure it was gingivitis, but I hesitated. Joel buzzed in, got it right, and took the second question easily. Greg said, "Want to go for the bonus question?" and Joel said, "Yeah, bring it on, Greg." and then Joel nailed the bonus question and the crowd went nuts for him. They were behind him, even I was cheering for him. I really wanted him to win. As soon as he finished the disease thing he said, "Give me MC Grammar for \$500, Alex" like he was on *Jeopardy!* It was really funny, because Greg didn't get it at all. He was like, "OK, Joel, uh, make that 200 points." By the end of round two, Joel was ahead and I was so thrilled for him. I could see that he had changed, he was ready to do it. As soon as the round was over, I knew I was in third, but I was glad not to have the pressure on me again. I said to Joel, "If I had to lose to somebody, I wanted it to be you," and he thanked me for my support.

For Scott and Joel's Brainstorm Round, the host would say a number, and the players had to say how many times four goes into it. Neither of them could do math, so they guessed sometimes, but mostly they just stared blankly as Greg read numbers. In the end, Joel was still in first and the crowd went nuts for him.

After a few minutes we sat down to have dinner in the green room and watch Joel on the little TV. The prize guy said the prize was a ski vacation in Colorado, including lessons and rentals. The game started and Joel ran down the answers as fast as Greg could ask the questions. For some reason, with forty-two seconds remaining, the clock stopped. The questions kept coming while the clock was stopped. At the end, he won and did a little victory dance. Then the whole thing was stopped because it had been screwed up. They lost count, the clock stopped, the audio failed. The whole take was a mess. They decided to give him the prize, because he had won it, but they wanted to redo it for the



Some nice dogs we met on a day trip to St. John, V.I.

cameras. They set it up again, asked Joel the same questions, got the same right answers, and let it ride. The second time it was sort of a bummer, because the first time had been so natural. I was sad for Joel because the real

win would not make it on the air. That's how it goes sometimes, I suppose, but when Joel won the first time, the whole crowd and crew erupted in applause, the second time, it was like, oh, okay.

Day five found Scott in first, me in second, Joel in a surprise third and Sarah in last. It was pretty obvious when we sat down that Scott was going to win. The big, giant, super grand prize was a trip to Africa. I sat in the make up chair before the last game, thinking about Africa. Ebola virus. Tutsis and Hutus killing thousands of each other as far as the eye can see. A fatal asthma attack from elephant allergies. Refugees. Starving people. Guns. That American guy getting his corpse dragged through the streets of Somalia. I don't even like to look at giraffes in a zoo, so why the hell would I want to see them in the wild? And even if I did want to, it wasn't going to happen. I was too far behind and I even told Scott before we went down. I said, "You deserve the trip to Africa and I am sure that you are going to win." He said, "Not necessarily. You could have a good comeback and take over during the Brainstorm Round..." On paper what he was saying made sense. For the final day, all the point values were doubled again, so that the first round it was 300, 500, 800 and then in the second round it was 500, 700, 1200. I thought the only way that I could do it would be if he got many wrong and I got many right, but really, my heart wasn't in it. I felt like I had done what I had come to do: win a prize, not make a fool of myself, and have a good time.

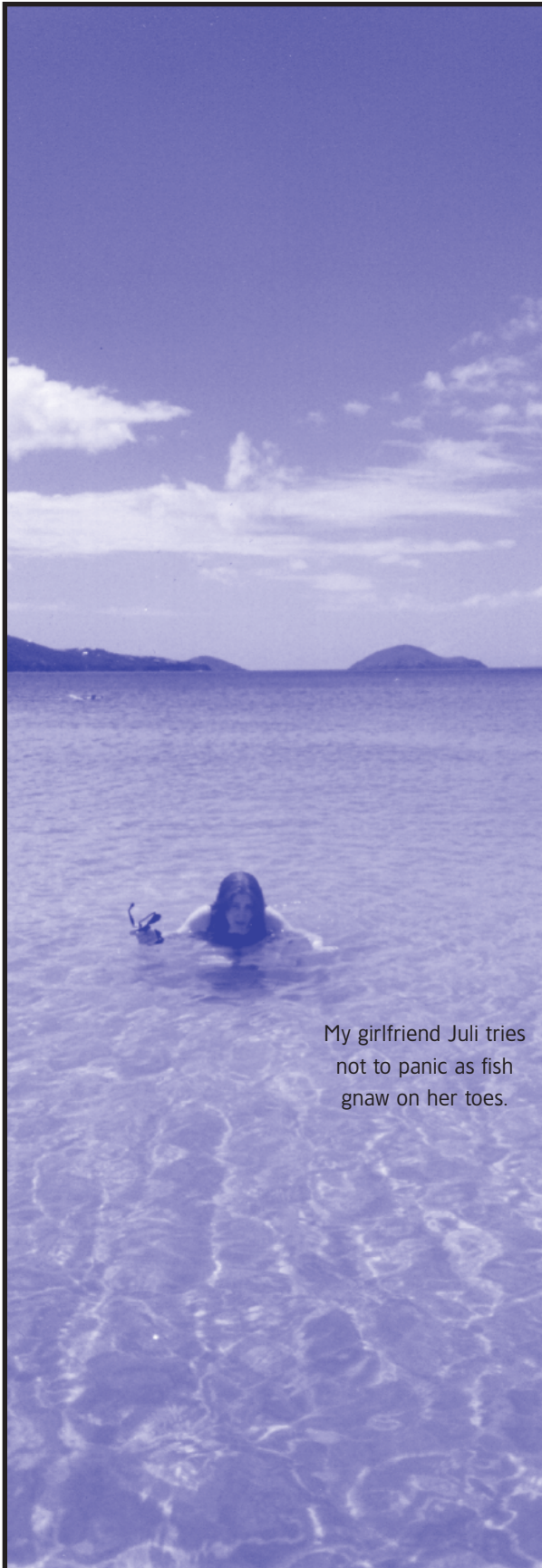
The last game went very much like the others, I was clearly the second place player. There were no dunces in game five, Sarah just left the set after round one. After the second round, Joel bid farewell to his many fans. I was about 7,000 points shy of Scott, a hurdle I knew I could

overcome in the Cylinder since the questions were worth 1,000 each.

At the end of the game, I had one last chance to win, but even if I ended up ahead, Scott would still get one last chance in the Cylinder as well. They put me in, shot the questions at me, and I must have missed at least four. They were questions I had no idea how to answer, and when all was said and done, I was 3,000 points ahead of Scott. It was gratifying to really nail it again, to prove that it wasn't a fluke and that I had done all my homework. I couldn't wait to watch myself, away from all the pressure, with all the insight that only time can give. They led me back to my seat, put Scott in the booth, and without malice or fanfare, he won the trip. I was happy for him. A trip was all he really wanted, and the guy deserved it: he was smart, he was quick, and he aggressively went after what he wanted and got it. I respect that.

I knew that I would walk away from the show with my memories and my prizes, and in my heart, I was at peace. It was one of the most interesting, challenging, exciting and fun times I have ever had in my life and everyone I knew would get to watch my performance on TV. I didn't tell anyone but Juli about anything that happened, I wanted everyone to be as surprised by my performance as I was. I used to think that really good things and really bad things only happened to other people, but that isn't true. Everything happens to everybody. The people who take risks and rise to the occasion are the ones who are rewarded with all things spectacular. And finally, for once in my life, I felt like one of those people. Yeah, right.

My shows were scheduled to air the last week of the year, beginning Dec. 30, 1996. I told everyone I knew, and some people I didn't know, because I knew no one would watch MTV without some prodding. When the shows first aired, it was on at 7PM, then that same episode was repeated again at 11PM, which was perfect, because I could tape both and have two tapes of my week of shows. The show that I won on was supposed to air New Year's Eve, so I figured I could tape it, then, while I was at some cool party later that night, I could have the host put on the TV and the whole party could watch me win. That sounds pretty cool, right? Well, of course it didn't work out that way. For some reason, MTV decided to show the top 100 videos of the year, beginning at 6PM on New Year's Eve. This knocked my winning show off the air. On New Year's Day I got calls from everyone I knew asking what had happened to the show (I didn't tell them if I won or not, I only told them to watch the



My girlfriend Juli tries not to panic as fish gnaw on her toes.



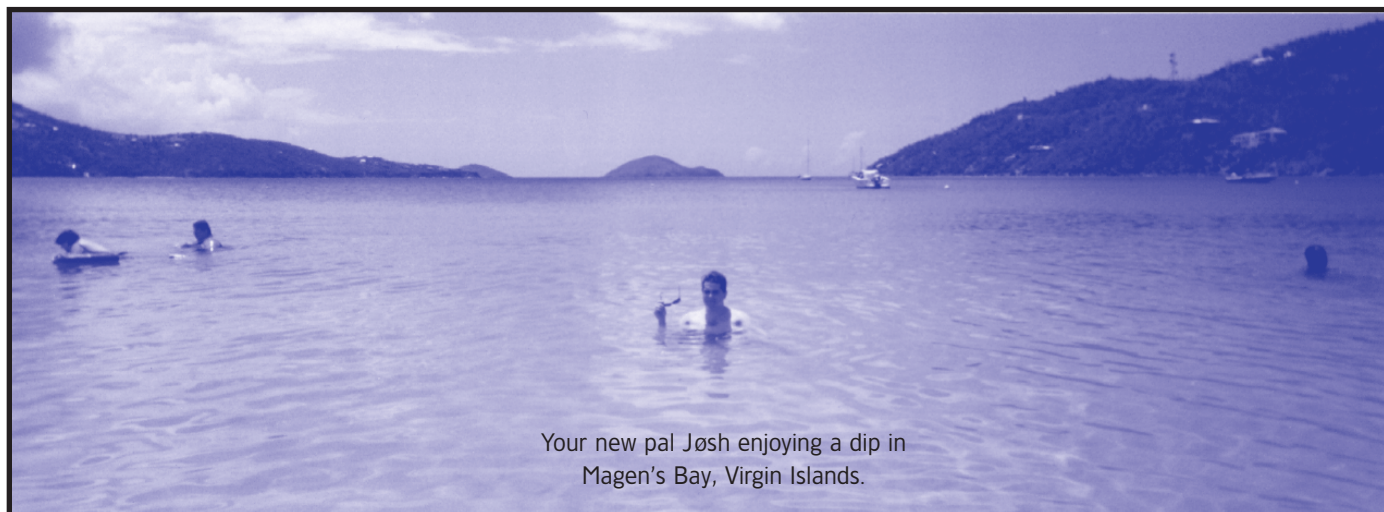


week of shows, so they could be surprised). Later that week I called MTV and they gave me the runaround. About three weeks and a hundred frustrated phone calls later I finally got someone to answer my question: When was that one stupid show going to air? They assured me that MTV repeats everything because they are cheap. The episodes were set to repeat the first week of April. That was more than three months away. Of course I told everyone to mark their calendars, and guess what those cocksuckers did? That's right, they didn't air them that week. I called again, and they said there was nothing they could do, but the episodes would be aired shortly. I sat by the TV every Monday night with a tape ready in the VCR for the next five weeks, hoping and praying that my smiling face might appear on the TV. On Monday of the sixth week, instead of *Idiot Savants* reruns, they were showing reruns of *Singled Out*. I was aghast. That was it. It was all over. They had shown all the episodes where I lost, but my cursing, my moment in the sun, my huge win, would never see the light of day.

charge of getting tapes for people. I left her a nice voicemail explaining what had happened and asking if she could please return my phone call. A week later, I called again, because she never called me back. Her message said that if I had a specific request (it wasn't directed at me personally, it was for everyone who was calling her voicemail) I should fax it in. I faxed in a letter politely asking for her help, telling her what had happened, and which episode I wanted. Still I got no response. I faxed again. And again. And again. My letters got angrier and more hostile. I tried begging. I offered to pay for a tape. I appealed to her humanity.

Then I got a better idea. I went to the MTV area on America Online and started posting my story. I asked anyone who saw my message to call Elizabeth and ask her to just, "Send Jøsh his tape." Two days later someone from MTV pulled my message. It was on the *Idiot Savants* message board, and there was no reason for it to be removed. So I posted it again, and again it was removed. I realized that I should stop pretending to be civil, and

me to stop, I started faxing again, this time even angrier than before. I never cursed, I never threatened and I never said anything even vaguely threatening. I just said things like, "How can you sleep at night knowing that I have only one wish in this world that you can make come true with ONE PHONE CALL?" I also said, "What if I was your brother or your son and they had been put through this?" It didn't matter, Elizabeth Van Pelt did not give a flying fuck about me. On the third day of my renewed attack, the girl I had spoken to called me again. She apologized for the delay and said that the tape was in the mail. She sounded scared. I was very polite, but I told her that if I didn't get it this time, I was going to take it to the next level. I didn't really have a new threat, but I figured I could call a newspaper or one of those consumer reporters who can get things done when companies turn into assholes. Two days later I got the tape. They had taped over some old show and left the old sticker on. It was recorded in EP mode, with horrible audio, a time code running across the bottom and fuzzy lines across the top. It didn't matter, I



When I complained about it to my friends, they said I be glad to have the prize. I kept picturing myself trying to explain to my kids how I was on TV once, I won a big prize, but it never aired. I wouldn't have believed me either. It wasn't even like I could remember any of that day clearly, because the whole thing went by so fast, I wasn't sure if I was remembering any of it correctly. I resolved to get a fucking tape of that show, even if it killed me. I made phone calls the next day to MTV, asking to speak to the producers. They had all been fired. That was some consolation to me. I asked to speak to someone who could get me a tape. I finally found Elizabeth Van Pelt (her real name, you can kill her for all I care, she's a TOTAL CUNT who deserves to die), who had a recorded voicemail message, which said that she was in

really give them a fucking war. I posted the same message on every board, *120 Minutes*, *Loveline*, you name it, I posted there. I faxed twenty times a day. I left a new voicemail message every day. About a month into my barrage, I started getting letters from AOL members who said that they had been calling and faxing on my behalf. I thanked them all personally and tried to keep them updated on my progress. After about six weeks of this, I got a message from someone in Elizabeth's office. She said that she had been reading my faxes and felt really bad for me. She had put in a request to get me a tape of the show and would be sending it out immediately, if only I would promise to stop faxing. No problem, I said. I was so excited I could barely contain myself. Two weeks later I still had no tape. Thinking that the person who called may have just been my old pal Liz trying to get

finally had the tape. I had won. And after it was all over, rather than feeling victorious, I felt empty. They had been so petty and so selfish. I couldn't believe what a bunch of cocksuckers they had turned out to be. So what's the moral of the story? Fuck if I know, I am just telling you what happened. If you want to do something for me, avoid anyone that sponsors MTV. If you get a Nielsen book and you get to tell them what shows you watch, make sure to never give MTV ratings. If they put on a concert or sell a CD, don't support it. If anyone asks you what you think of MTV, tell them that you personally think that it sucks, you can't stand watching it and that everyone on it is a fucking retarded asshole who should get cancer. That might make me feel better.

