

Scenes we'd like to see!

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The title for this post is lifted from a hilarious series of cartoons that used to be carried by (the erstwhile?) MAD magazine, which carried funny but sometimes sadistic, possibly even gross, depictions of scenes such, for instance, as a fat lady pinching and saying kichy-koo to a baby in a pram and having the baby throw up all over her hand.

Recently, I had gone out to Christmas lunch with an old mathematician friend of mine (whom I first met almost 35 years ago in Santa Barbara) who was visiting Chennai from Toronto. So I had reserved a table for three in a restaurant at one of the better class of hotels. And I had told them in advance, when I reserved the table, that I would be needing a wheel-chair, which they had said they would be glad to provide. All went well till we entered the restaurant, most of which was at an elevated level which necessitated climbing a step or two; providentially, a few tables were at 'ground level'. And they only had a buffet and no *à la carte* options, with all the food spread out on tables at the ground level. So unless we could be found a table at 'ground zero', that would mean my getting in and out of the wheelchair to climb up or down a step or two some four or six times by the time I paid what promised to be an over-priced and inflated bill. The manager was obviously not too pleased with having to redo his earlier arrangement of tables. My wife tried to avoid a scene by suggesting at least three times that 'it is only one step' but I was adamant and the final rearrangement that needed to be done turned out to be quite trivially implementable.

That got me thinking of this 'delightfully attractive' scenario of an almost Asimov-esque genre of science fiction. I would love to see these managers with the 'only one step' glibness to wake up one day in a world where the analogue of disability was ignorance of mathematics. Thus, when he tried to enter his house, he would be confronted, not by a few steps leading up to his door, but instead by an automated electronic screen which would say: in order to open the door, ***please state the area of the trapezium enclosed by the four lines described by the equations $x = 0, y = 0, x = 1$ and $2x + 3y = 7$*** ; and 'normal' people like me would stand by the side with encouraging noises like *it is a simple integral that any freshman in college can solve*.

And when he wanted to use the rest-room, he would be politely asked to ‘only’ ***compute the derivative of $\cosh(2\sin(x))$ and four other functions of an equally elementary nature*** (eg., $\exp(3x/\tanh x)$) before he could get to the more pressing task at hand. Just very occasionally, the odd thoughtful hotel would have ensured the existence of one room/toilet, in an entire hotel sprawling over several thousand square feet, which did not make such non-inclusive demands on a potential user who was a mathematical ignoramus. In all the others, you will have to ***define a Cauchy sequence in a metric space*** in order to access the wash-basin in a toilet - but, fortunately, *this is something everybody picks up in the very first analysis course.*