

## Five Minutes of Fame

“You really wanna know, don’t you?”

“Now, Rick, we didn’t bring you on just to have you bait us—I think we’re all anxious to hear what it is!” The studio crowd burst out in cheering and applause once more and Rick looked out over them with a grin.

“Alright, alright, alright,” he chuckled as his eyes rolled back up to the ceiling and he considered how to deliver the big reveal. The audience held their breath and silently remembered the wagers they had made as to what it would be. A handful of them had dreamed of this moment for years and now that it was here they could hardly contain themselves. Many more of them had never really considered it or even considered considering it until just a month ago.

Rick looked at the ground and then out over the audience once more. The lead cameraman was no longer looking into his screen but right into Rick’s eyes—he had wagered \$500 in the office bet and he was set on his number. Ten thousand dollars would pay the first two years of his kid’s college, give or take. Sixteen million viewers were tuned in to a morning show that had only ever reached two million once before. Of course those are just numbers, and just the TV numbers at that, because after all how can you count all the people on their tablets and smartphones and Twitters and Facebooks and Instagrams? Is there a statistic for the total number of thumbs poised across the world at any one given moment to comment on important events such as this? We may never know. At any rate, this particular morning show was very lucky that Rick Nathan happened to be from Cleveland.

“It’s two!” he declared.

The crowd erupted in cheering, clapping, hooping, and hollering. We say “erupted” but it was more like a spasm. It was terribly exciting, of course, that the number was two. But the

crowd—and here we must speak of them as a crowd because they were nothing more or less than just that—would have acted the same way had the number been three, four, six, or seven. The reaction was inevitable and, in fact, as soon as the audience had been comfortably seated fifty minutes before, each one of them knew that, whatever the outcome, they were all going to stand and cheer. It's just what crowds do for something like this.

Cheering could be heard all around the world, for the language of numbers, as we know, is universal. Few people appreciated or even considered the miracle of guarding the long-awaited answer and preserving it till the big reveal. Pundits conjectured that Rick Nathan's team of mathematicians must have been paid off to keep quiet until Rick could make the announcement himself. They may have been right. Rick had been approached by all the major news networks and even by the White House—he could have appeared on the highest of stages and in the greatest of cities, but he felt a special affinity towards his home town of Cleveland and anyways wasn't very comfortable with flying.

The blonde interviewer clapped along with the audience and then stood up along with Rick, shook his hand and thanked him (they had locked down this sequence just before going live and played it through just right), and then flashed a smile right at the camera. “There you have it folks, the last digit of pi is two! Allison Bagley here with Rick Nathan, straight out of Cleveland... we'll be right back with more, right after this commercial break!”

The show cut to commercial and the audience began to buzz with excitement. Many of them had taken part in some sort of pool and one out of ten of them had just become a little bit richer. Some poor souls, whose names have been omitted out of respect, had actually put money on the final digit being zero. For the most part, their family members and co-workers didn't feel the need to make clear to them why this was an unwise guess. The lead cameraman was sullen

because he had picked his lucky number seven. All he could think of now was what \$500, better spent, *could* have gotten him. Grumbling to himself, he made sure that the camera was ready for when they came back on the air, although he wondered what more there could possibly be to say about pi. 3.14, right? What more is there to it?

One audience member was heard to say, “I told you! I told you! I’ve been saying it this whole time!” He had, in fact, put his money on five in his office pool, but his wife didn’t know that, and anyways he was one of those people who had to be right about everything.

Public schools across the country had all been instructed to tune in to the program, and most did. The excitement in the schools had been especially contagious (perhaps because the schools are the only place where anyone actually uses pi). The elementary schools had “pi parties” where the students brought their favorite kind of pie and held a raffle where students could guess the correct last digit (or some variation on that theme). Local bakeries could barely handle the demand and Marie Callender’s enjoyed a record-breaking two months of business. The middle schools held competitions to see who could memorize the most digits of pi. One sixth-grader in Texas, Michael, had memorized one hundred and fifty digits. Oddly enough, he had memorized all that even before the craze began a month ago, simply for fun. The high school competitions were even more intense and there were scholarships at stake. Some of the winning students went on to change the world, and all thanks to a desperately needed “Discovering Pi” scholarship.

Allison leaned in closer to Rick and made some excited small talk. “I never thought anyone was ever going to actually reach the last digit! I thought for sure it was just one of those numbers that keeps on going forever and ever!” The truth is that it had been a surprise to her when she had been told a month ago that pi’s last digit had not, in fact, already been discovered

(or that you could “discover” a digit for that matter) and that people actually cared about that kind of stuff. Her co-host had tried to explain a little to her beforehand so that she would at least have some idea of what she would be talking about on the show. She was in her late 20s and as little as she cared about pi and its last digit, she would come to always remember this day as the day she was discovered by NBC and then propelled to the big time.

“We’re back in five, four, three...”

The audience didn’t really know why they were still listening at this point. Viewership had dropped by fourteen million during the commercial break. People were less interested in what more Rick could have to say and more interested in what pi jokes the late night talk show hosts would be working into their monologues later on. It was widely guessed that some variation on the euphemism “number two” would steal the night—and the fact that the joke was so predictable didn’t make it any less funny when it was featured later that night.

“I’m told that you had to go through over forty *trillion* digits of pi to get to the last one, is that correct?”

“Yes, that’s cor...”

“Would you mind telling the world, for the first time, just how many digits of pi there are, Dr. Nathan?”

“Forty-one trillion, five hundred and seventy-two billion, three hundred and forty-two million, five hundred thousand, six hundred and eighty-three digits,” Rick replied smartly as Allison’s mouth dropped in fain shock. There was a 22-year-old kid holding a cue card with the long number on it but Rick didn’t need the help this time.

“I don’t think I’d even have the patience to remember a number that long,” said Allison, laughing. She was right—she didn’t even have the patience to listen to Rick say it.

“Well, it’s been sort of my life’s work. Ever since I was a kid, I’ve been fascinated by pi and I’m fortunate that I was able to make such a break-through and go where no one else has gone before.”

Allison made a nearly imperceptible gesture, a sort of smirk that seemed to signify, “who do you think you are?” Even she knew that he had unwittingly (or, perhaps, wittingly) referenced *Star Trek*, and though she had never seen the show herself she thought to herself that this man, Rick, was just the kind of person who would watch it.

“And just how were you able to compute all that information?”

“Well, that’s the thing, the hardest part of this whole endeavor was trying to perfect a very complex algorithm that would do the heavy lifting for us...” Anybody who hadn’t turned off their TV already at the commercial break did so after hearing him say “algorithm.” There is no word in the English language quite so boring and sleep-inducing as *algorithm*.

Rick Nathan’s five minutes of fame were over but the last digit of pi endured for another solid three weeks. *The New York Times* ran a front-page article entitled “The Life and Death of Pi,” an attempt at fully capturing Rick Nathan’s process in computing it to the last digit. Expert mathematicians weighed in, expressing doubt as to the legitimacy of Rick’s findings, although after working with his equipment most of them acquiesced. An online op-ed article came out that was shared all over Facebook called “The Last Piece of Pi: The Final Frontier and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” exploring the phenomenon of answering unanswerable questions and the negative effect this has had on society. One particularly bogus passage from the article read, “The eminent John Archibald Wheeler once said that, ‘as our island of knowledge grows, so does the shore of our ignorance.’ It seems that even this famous maxim no longer holds true in today’s world of instant answers. We are left to ask ourselves if the thrill of discovery is worth the loss of our

imagination.” *The Onion* didn’t do a story on pi’s last digit because they felt that the mainstream media was doing a good enough job on their own of releasing completely ridiculous content.

“Tell us how it felt when you finally reached the end. It must’ve been like reaching the bright light at the end of a tunnel, I imagine.”

“Well, you know, it’s funny, I certainly wasn’t looking for a last digit... no one was. We were on a roll with our algorithm (\*click\*) and, you know, quickly surpassing the previous record for digit count and, to be honest, none of us really knew what to expect. All of the sudden our machine just kind of stopped and we thought it was malfunctioning! We ran all sorts of tests, and I was the first one that started to think, you know, that maybe we had reached the end. It was like digging a very deep hole...”

“Forty trillion digits deep!” Allison chimed in and luckily no one seemed to mind that her interjection sounded completely ridiculous.

“Yes, precisely, like digging a very *very* deep hole and then all of the sudden you strike something hard and realize you’ve found the buried treasure.” Allison would have rolled her eyes if there weren’t cameras on her. “That’s what it felt like.”

Three weeks later, all that survived from the pi craze was the YouTube video of the interview, the debris on the blogosphere, and tens of thousands of shirts. One shirt read “Sweeter than Apple Pi” on the front and on the back was a picture of a hand holding up two fingers like the peace sign. Another said, “It is down to me and it is down to TWO,” with the pi symbol on the back. The best was the one that said “It’s the Final Countdown!” on the front and then on the back ran as many digits of pi as could fit, ending of course with the number two.

A very popular meme was created with a very sad-looking kitten as the background—on the top the meme read in white block letters, “They found the last digit of pi?” and on the

bottom, “MY LIFE IS OVER.” The meme was very popular and survived for years afterwards with infinite variations, although most people by then couldn’t say what it had originated from. In an embarrassing attempt to prolong the excitement over the discovery, Rick Nathan’s associates made a website where you could enter your birthday (082370, for example) and find where it landed in pi. Virtually any number could be found somewhere in the forty trillion digits of pi, and so the website was pretty frequently visited for a month as a matter of curiosity, after which it was rarely viewed again.

Rick Nathan had made a special treat for Allison of showing her where her birthday fell in pi—fifty-three different times, as it turned out, the earliest of which began on digit one hundred and thirty-nine thousand, two hundred and seventy-eight.

“That’s so fascinating! Thank you!” replied Allison, in effect re-defining the word “fascinating.” “I was actually curious, do you find any fun arrangements, like 123456789 in there?” This part, like everything else, was in her script, and she felt bound to say it.

“Oh yes, of course, multiple times!” The two shared a small laugh. Allison was good enough to avoid any awkward pause even at this point in the program, which is probably why the NBC executives noticed her. That or her blonde hair and winning smile.

“Well, we’ve been honored to have you here for this ground-breaking piece of news. You’ve really done what no one thought was possible before. I guess I only have one last question: what’s next for Rick Nathan?”

Rick was caught off guard and, frankly, embarrassed. This hadn’t been in the script. He didn’t know what was next. He didn’t know if anything was next.

“I… I don’t know, Allison.”