

Brief Confrontations With the Momentous:

A collection of short fiction

by

Samuel Saperstein

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Readers: Cody Walker and Gabe Habash

For Miriam and Birch

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Abstract

This is a collection of stories about people, mostly boys and men, who come face-to-face with something bigger than themselves and struggle with what to do about it.

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My First Dead Dog

I didn't know what to do with one so I went for a walk in the rain. It was more a drizzle than a rain, and the sidewalk was more ice than sidewalk. At one point, I slipped, fell, broke my tailbone, and rolled onto a stranger's snowy lawn. The stranger came out in a brown bathrobe and holding a brown tobacco pipe.

"You doing alright down there, son?" he asked.

"My dog died," I said.

He took a puff from the pipe. The smoke dissipated into the clouds, grey as gauze.

"Lay as long as you need," he said.

"Thank you," I said.

One time, when I was nine, the dog ran at me full force and knocked me onto my back. It was the first time we met. He outweighed me by about five pounds at the time, though eventually I got bigger while he stayed the same. I remember feeling disoriented, lying on the grass at the public park where we'd met up with the people from the shelter. Over the following years, I did my best to mold that disorientation into love.

I tried to get up from the stranger's lawn, but a bolt of pain shot out of my tailbone. I lay back down. It was a beautiful day for it. The clouds, the cold, all of it, really.

Bear Story

At the trailhead, the ranger told him that, while there was water access along the trail, the park was in the middle of the worst drought in fifty years so he should fill up whenever he gets the chance. The drought, she explained, meant the black bears were getting desperate, even crawling into town on occasion, searching in vain for water. It's a shame, isn't it? My buddy saw one claw open a tank of gasoline outside his toolshed, then lap up the spill like a dog at a water bowl. He yelled and clapped his hands something fierce (that's what you should do if you see one, by the way—and make yourself big while you're at it), and the bear stumble-ran into the woods like it was drunk. Poor thing. Too smart for its own good. I'm not telling you this to scare you off, but stay on your toes and don't do anything stupid. Drought can make a black bear bold.

They talked about other things too—Migrating birds passing through, and emergency evacuation points. His trip would last twelve days, one big loop. He had everything he'd need on his back.

The woods were dry, and the not all of the creeks marked on his map existed. When he reached the trail's halfway point, a spot that he had circled on his map six days prior, he took a few steps off trail, took off his pack, and lay in the brush. His hip bones were bruised. A blister was beginning to form on his left big toe. This was the fullest depth of the backcountry, the thing he had come for, and it was wonderful. He used his pack as a pillow. The wind cracked through beech leaves overhead.

Then, he heard the snapping of branches down the trail in front of him. He rolled over to face the noise and saw an enormous black bear plod slowly out of from the trees. The bear stopped, got up on its hind legs, and sniffed the air. It looked around for a moment, surveying

the scene, then returned to all fours and moved its matted head in the man's direction. On its back balanced a branch with a single, dried beech leaf attached to the end. It rocked back and forth without falling.

They both had green eyes. The bear's were dull, with a drooped left eyelid. If there was ever a time to die, it was now. Not that he hoped to die, of course. But what terrifying beauty he had found, on this marked path, what a terrifying coincidence that this was all aligning here.

It pawed at the ground. While maintaining eye contact, it lumbered forward, slowly but picking up speed with each step. The man remembered that he should be standing with his hands in the air, yelling guttural sounds, per the ranger's instructions. The bear had closed most of the gap between the two, now only fifty yards away. It kept running. It was twenty yards away, then ten, then five. A whip-poor-will began its call. Then, as suddenly as it had started, the bear stopped. It sniffed around a moment longer, then veered off to the left and back into the woods, leaving behind the smell of pine needles and must.

The whip-poor-will finished its call. The man lay in place, staring at where the bear had just been. The man realized he never saw the branch fall off of the bear's back. It must have, impossibly, been carried back into the woods.

When his heartrate settled, he got up, brushed himself off, and put his pack back on. Inevitably, he continued forward.

Days later, the same ranger sat behind her dark wood desk, and asked over the sound of an old fan whirring in the corner how his trip went. He told her the story of the bear, of course, ending on the note about the smell. When he was done, the ranger asked him what sites he was between when this occurred, both of which she wrote down.

The next morning, before driving home, he got breakfast at a local diner. Each table had a small stack of pamphlets which contained local news, gossip, and puzzles, with the day's date handwritten at the top of the front page. The cover story was about a man who had been attacked by a black bear. The ranger he had spoken to was quoted, and the attack had occurred at the same spot as his encounter. The park was sending a team to the site of the incident to kill the bear for the safety of itself and the community.

Reaching for memories of the scene was like trying to make out whispered words in TV static. There were the eyes, of course, and the dryness.. It felt urgent to try, however, so he kept reaching. He continued, for years and years, to fail to imagine the real thing, as it was.

Noah's Ark

"I hear you climb," said Frenchie over the phone.

After he won the lottery (rumors of the size of the pot ranged from fifty thousand to fifty million), he dropped out of school and started climbing full time.

"Just the once," I lied. There was a gym just off campus, one of the first in the Midwest with an actual sign and logo. When I first learned about it, I thought of Frenchie and how he fell off the face of the earth three months before graduation. A steady trickle of Frenchie gossip steadily made its way through the school for those last three months. It was all anyone could talk about. Apparently his goal was to climb in all fifty states, including Alaska and Hawai'i. Apparently he got stuck on a wall in a storm and had to get helicoptered out. Apparently he was living out of a Mitsubishi Delica, the kind imported from Japan with the steering on the right side. Apparently he had been beaten, robbed, and the van was stolen. The source of these rumors was never clear.

This was 2001: Before *Free Solo*, before Planet Granite, before sport climbing was an Olympic sport.

"What park?"

"Indoor. A gym near school."

I described it: the dark blue, carpeted walls, the way it looked like an old barn from the outside.

"By home? I was there a couple times last summer. I'm buddies with Brent, the guy who started it up. Crazy fucker. The place is quaint."

I didn't like that he said, "by home." Campus was only a twenty-minute drive from our old high school, sure, but I was a college student now.

“That’s the one.”

He paused for a beat. On that old phone, my first ever personal, it was hard to tell if the line had gone dead or if he was just thinking through what to say.

“Come climb with me,” he said, answering that question. “It’s almost summer. I can’t imagine you have anything more interesting going on.”

My current summer plans consisted of working as many hours as I possibly could at a bottling plant and staying at my parents’ to save up as much money as possible for after graduation.

“Red River Gorge. The best pocketed sandstone in the country. I’ll pay for everything.”

“I’ll think about it,” I said, and hung up the phone.

Frenchie was only really wrong about one thing. The semester was already over, and I was already almost done moving out. I took my feet off of my newly blank wall. The room depressed me in this state. Stark white and nothing to show for it. My dad was coming by this afternoon to pick up my futon, but I still had a few days before I was obligated to leave. Though I didn’t know what pocketed sandstone was, Frenchie’s proposal rattled around my head.

Once, when we were in kindergarten, Frenchie made me eat a frog whole. It’s my first memory of him. These little frogs congregated behind a patch of trees between the playground and the track that looped around it. One day, a group of us were back there, pushing each other into the mud, when Frenchie picked a frog up by the leg and brought it over to me.

“Eat it! Eat it!” he said.

“No! No!” I said, but he grabbed my wrist with the non-frog hand.

“You have to!” he said, and pushed the frog against my cheek.

It felt like sweaty sliced cheese. He pushed the frog against my lips and when I finally opened up my lips, it slid right down. From that point forward I was unsettled by Frenchie and drawn to him, in equal parts.

That Friday, I went to the climbing gym to try and send this one route on the back wall. I wore a grey athletic shirt and grey athletic shorts. I didn't have work until Monday evening, and I planned to spend the ensuing time spamming the route. The place was damp, without mats on the floor.

To my surprise, I saw a red Mitsubishi Delica parked in the driveway. It was taller than I expected, but not as long. The back bumper was covered in various park stickers.

I walked in and just caught Frenchie ringing the bell at the top of my coveted route.

"Hell yeah, brother!" shouted Brent, a legend in the community with long, black hair. Apparently, this place wasn't even registered with the city. Apparently, Brent sleeps on the floor and spends every morning tinkering with the holds to get them just right.

Frenchie bunny-hopped down the wall, gave Brent a high-five, then said something too quietly for me to hear from across the room and pointed at me.

"Mikey! Just the man I was looking for," he said, walking over. "We going or what?"

When I started college, I started introducing myself as Michael. It was a way to grasp at a new beginning, if in a small way.

"I told you I'd think about it," I said. He hadn't broken a sweat from the climb. He was jacked compared to when he left high school.

"Well, think about it. But I'm going down to Kentucky in," he checked his watch, "fifteen minutes, and I told Brent that if you dipped out I'd bring him. I'd take you both, but the Delica only seats two."

My cheeks burned, which signaled to me that this was not an opportunity I could afford to miss.

“I have an 8 p.m. shift on Monday I need to be back for.”

Frenchie clapped his hand on my shoulder.

“We can work with that.”

Thousands of dollars’ worth of carabiners, rope, and other climbing gear hung neatly organized on every wall but the door of the van. There was even some hanging from the ceiling. a sink full of cans of black beans, a poster of Mount Fitz Roy on the door, a twin-sized mattress that had been cut in half, balanced on a set of 2x4s, and pushed into the corner, and, lying on the bed, a life-sized cardboard cutout of George W. Bush, who was in the middle of a fierce run for the presidency.

“Big fan of the Bushinator?” I asked.

“George W. Bush is the epitome of evil in this society,” he said, adjusting the mirrors.

“His win was the final nail in the coffin of so-called American ‘democracy.’”

I had to take a step up to get into the van.

“So why’s he coming with?”

“I was going to burn it in effigy the night of the election to doom his campaign. I was staying at a national forest outside McCall, Idaho, and locked my keys in the van.” said Frenchie. “It was freezing that night. I kept switching between sleeping on my flannel and using it as a blanket. I got incredibly lucky, though, and a group of oldheads pulled up the next morning for the same reason as me: world-class basalt. They had a glass breaker in their van, a gorgeous old TN with a squashed front like a pug. I asked them who won and they said they had no idea, they were from Canada. We smashed the window and I wriggled in to grab the keys. They were in the fucking cup holder. I could see them the whole time.”

We were driving now. Frenchie adjusted the rearview mirror.

“Those guys may just have saved my life. Great climbing partners, too. If I’m ever in Alberta, they said they’ll show me all the good spots. I would’ve stayed longer, but I was too preoccupied with the election results so I dipped the next day. Bought a little window puncher of my own, which I keep on my person.”

He patted his pocket.

“Kept Ol’ Georgie around as a reminder. I could have done something about all *this*,” he said, briefly taking both hands off the wheel and gesturing out in front of him.

“You don’t really believe that, right?” I asked.

“Don’t ask stupid questions.”

I realized I had left two bags in my room, one with my toiletries and one with clothes to last through Sunday when my lease ended. I also still had my room keys on my person. Each of those would leave me liable for up to \$50 worth of fines from the school.

“Think we could come back Sunday instead?” I asked.

“You said Monday.”

Frenchie drove the whole way, without stopping. At one point I tried to nap, but every time my eyes fluttered open I was shaken by how close I was to opposing traffic.

We slept in the van at the parking lot of the visitor’s center: Frenchie on the bed, Bush on the floor, me in the passenger seat. The next morning, before the sun rose, Frenchie woke me up by rubbing a climbing harness over my face.

“Up and at ‘em, Mikey boy.”

He took a Coleman stove outside the van to boil water for oatmeal and told me to pack two of everything—Ropes, harnesses, sets of stoppers, climbing shoes, chalk bags—in his oversized backpack.

“Like Noah’s ark,” he said.

He ate his oatmeal plain. I considered asking for brown sugar, but decided against it.

“There’s a spot that shouldn’t be too busy at the park’s south side,” he said. It’s a three-mile approach, nothing too bad. You carry the gear on the way there and I’ll carry it on the way back.”

The rock looked like baklava: Brown and layered

“It’s perfect for beginners,” said Frenchie when we arrived. “No harder than climbing a ladder.”

I let the pack fall onto the ground. It was still April and I was able to see my breath when we woke up, but the backpack straps had already caused sweat stains to form on my back and shoulders.

“Watch it!” Frenchie snapped.

“Yes, sir,” I mocked back, but he brushed past me and started carefully taking each piece of gear out and setting it on the ground.

“Climbing outside isn’t like the gym,” he said, organizing the stoppers my size. “It’s much more immersive. You have to be ready for that.”

I was willing to play along. I had been climbing at the gym for a few years, and considered myself more than a beginner. I knew how to belay. I knew how to tie a figure-eight. I knew the theory behind using protection: Find a stopper that’s the right size for the crack, put it in the rock, yank on it a couple of times, then clip in. It wasn’t complicated.

Frenchie still explained each piece of gear as if I had never seen one before. I regretted telling him over the phone that I'd only been climbing once, but I didn't want him to suspect me of copying him. The truth is I was already obsessed, and every time I went out he was somewhere in the back of my mind, or at least the idea of him that I had was.

It wasn't like we were ever close. We were half-friends for years, both listless and discontent but in what I thought were different ways. When I went to the gym for the first time and slammed into the wall after my arms pumped and my grip slipped on what I'd now consider an absurdly easy hold, I realized that maybe I was wrong about that last part.

Him calling was a surprise. He must have gotten my number from Brent, who I'd been shyly, desperately, and unsuccessfully trying to become friends with since I started climbing. Frenchie and I had made small talk for a minute, when he led into the conversation that ultimately became this moment right here.

Frenchie was explaining all the details I already knew.

"Put in a piece of protection every fifteen feet or so. You won't feel as much of an upward tug as you do top roping at the gym. Do you know how to tie a figure-eight?"

I nodded.

"Show me."

I did.

We went through the song and dance for a bit longer. He made me put a stopper in the rock and make sure it was secure. He made me go over the safety checks, though we weren't wearing helmets like Brent insisted upon at the gym. Finally, he felt that we were ready to climb. It was still late morning, and we had nowhere else to be.

"I'll go first. Watch my technique, how I maintain my triangle positioning as much as possible."

“Belay on,” I said. I’d seen Brent people kick people out of the gym for refusing to go through their safety checks.

“Cut the shit,” said Frenchie, and he got onto the rock.

I had to shield my eyes from the sun to watch him climb, his long limbs splayed out like a starfish, shirtless back already pink. He was graceful on the rock, never needing to pause for too long to figure out his next move. When he topped out, he looked down at me and raised both middle fingers.

“Fuck you, bro,” I yelled up.

He spent a minute tying an anchor to a huge tree then threw the rope down to me.

In climbing, he first move is always the hardest. It’s the phase shift from one mode of being to another needing an extra burst of energy like that required to bring water to boil. Outside, though, in the open air, this shift was even more pronounced. My stoppers clanked around from my harness, hitting my knees. But I was up and I was in it. I felt like I had been collapsed into a single point. From below, Frenchie gave me beta.

“There’s a solid foothold six inches up by your left foot. Hold that. Keep your ass in!”

Ten feet up, I looked down and saw Frenchie waving at me. I could tell, intellectually, that I wasn’t that high up, given that I was only on my second foothold, but the distance felt exaggerated.

“Keep your eyes on the prize!”

Twenty feet up my arms started pumping something fierce.

Forty feet up my core was on fire and I yelled into the rock.

“That’s what I like to hear!”

There was no time, no space, just me and the rock and the wind rippling the back of my shirt. Finally, I saw Frenchie standing over me with an outstretched arm, his head blocking

the sun. I grabbed it, pulled myself, up, and looked down. It was the longest route I'd ever climbed by at least a factor of two. I touched the back of my neck which had started to burn, then threw up over the edge of the crag.

“Nothing like this in the world, huh?”

On Monday, when Frenchie dropped me off at the dorm, the building was locked and the lights were off. He had already left by the time I made my way down the long walkway to the front door, so I called my dad to pick me up. I had work in a few hours and needed to change.

“Jesus, Michael, where have you been?”

“I'm at the dorm. Could you come pick me up?”

“Where were you Friday? Why didn't you answer my calls?”

The futon. Another \$50 owed to the university.

I started to explain about Frenchie and the trip and how I must have been out of cell range, but he said we'd talk about it later. A little while later, he arrived in his little sedan.

“Sorry about the smell,” I said as I got into the car.

“What happened with the futon?”

“I took care of it.”

The plant mainly bottled honey, though some days we'd have to work with agave or molasses jars. My roles were to keep the fill levels of the jars at their specified weights and make sure the jar lids were tightened to specified tolerances. I made extra working the night shift and weekends, both of which I told my manager he could count on me for the summer. The idea was to save enough money to cover rent in a big city, maybe New York or Chicago,

for a few months while I looked for work there. I had one year left for my graphic design degree, and was confident enough in this plan to see it through.

Leaving the shift was worse in the summer than during the school year, since the sun was already starting to rise. My feet hurt from standing, my neck hurt from craning over, and now my core hurt from climbing for a weekend straight. Luckily, my parents were still asleep when I got home and out of the house when I left the next day. With that, I was back in the factory. On the trip, even though it was only a few days, each hour felt like an object I could hold. The vacations I went on growing up, usually to visit family in various suburbs across the U.S., never felt like that. This certainly didn't feel like that.

The next day, after my shift, I went straight to the gym. Before I could try the door, Brent opened up, already covered in chalk.

"I saw your headlights pull in," he said.

"Belay me?"

"You're down bad, man," and we went inside.

Thus began my new routine: Work for 10-12 hours, gym for 2-4, home to sleep for the rest. Eating happened whenever, wherever. I rarely saw my parents, but I felt a drive toward climbing and could already tell that I was improving.

This was obviously unsustainable, but I never got to find out how long it could have lasted. Instead, about two weeks later, I got another call from Frenchie.

"Yosemite. Well, outside Yosemite."

"You're going to have to be more specific."

"Let's tear up our hands on some granite! I'll teach you how to make a tape glove."

"I still work. That wasn't a one-time thing."

"If that's what this is about, I'll cover it. How much do you make in a week?"

“\$600, pre-tax,” which was only a small exaggeration.

“Done. I have more money than I know what to do with. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

So I told my boss and that my aunt died and I’d be in California for the rest of the week. I told my parents a post-grad job opportunity was flying me out to California and that it was all clear with work. Then I was back in the van with Frenchie.

This is how it went for the rest of the summer. Frenchie would tell me where we were going, I’d make up an excuse, and we’d go. He covered food, gas. He said it’d be easier pay me at the end of the summer for all the missed work, which didn’t bother me since I wasn’t paying rent. He’d drop me off at home and I’d work for a week or two, going to the gym as much as I possibly could, then I’d get another call and be off. I was on thin ice at work and my parents were starting to ask more questions about where I was for such long stretches of time, but I was finding it harder and harder to care.

“Why do you bring me along?” I asked him once, lying on our backs looking up at the stars in southern Nevada.

“I need someone to belay,” he said.

“Don’t come out and clog up the routes if you don’t mean it,” he said while we waited for AAA to tow the van out of a sandbank on the side of a road in Montana. “Type 2 fun, my ass. If you want to do something that feels terrible in the moment and makes you feel good after, eat some boiled broccoli.”

“I know what you mean,” I said.

Frenchie talked a lot about immersion, about how the key to climbing was being immersed in the rock and how a climber and belayer had to be immersed within each other.

“School just wasn’t immersive enough, you know?” he told me once as I flayed and coiled a rope at the end of a day in central Colorado.

Frenchie always had us pack up his stuff at the end of the day, and few of us had any gear of our own so we did what he said.

“What do you mean by that?” I asked.

“It’s just, like... Oh, fuck you, man, you’re still deep in it.”

It was true, to an extent. I admired Frenchie’s lifestyle, but could only see myself following in his footsteps out of the corner of my eye. Sometimes, though, sitting at home, or on the line at work, I had moments where it felt like the sky was caving in and I knew, truly knew, that I was pissing away each day I wasn’t out there with him, and that the graphic design degree I was working toward was worthless and my life was worthless and society was churning me out in its image, not my own, that I was being meat ground in real time. But there was another trip on the horizon to reset me.

Meanwhile, I was getting better at climbing. I could barn door. I could set an anchor on my own. My grip strength was bomber. Frenchie still didn’t let me drive the van, but I knew that the differential between us was smaller than it was at the beginning of the summer.

This shrinking skill difference tracked well with the changing season, and as summer drooped into August it was clear that our dynamic would end soon. The official end came in Arizona, down in the Dragoons, and specifically on a route with a juggy start that transitioned into a two-finger crack running northwest. I hated crack climbing, how it rubbed my knuckles raw, but Frenchie was obsessed with it and kept dragging us to different meccas across the country. The Dragoons were his latest mark, and the heat made me irritable.

“Let me lead,” I said. For a while he hadn’t let me lead for him at all, saying that he didn’t trust anyone but himself to put in gear that he’d climb on, but he’d been slowly letting up over the last few weeks.

“No chance. The rock’s too crumbly and you don’t know what to look for.”

“Bullshit.”

I positioned myself by the rock and looked back at him.

“On belay,” he said, which I ignored.

The familiar jerk of adrenaline arrived, and I was off. Trad climbing involves placing your own stoppers into the rock and clipping into those as protection. There are no bolts to baby you. I was trying to put them in every fifteen feet, just like Frenchie told me. The route was all strength and no skill, so it was relieving to reach the top. I lay down on my stomach with my head hanging over the route. When Frenchie met my eyes, I shot a loogie toward him. It landed on his shoe.

“I’ll fucking kill you, dude, I swear to fucking god,” he said as he pulled his harness on.

I spit down toward him again, but he didn’t notice. This frustrated me, but I had to belay. Like me, he scampered up the first half. When he got to the crack, he jammed his fingers in and twisted them slightly to get a hold. Once they were secure, he reached up with his other hand to try and clip into a piece of gear just above his head. When he released, the rope still had some slack in it, which caused him to bounce and rip the stopper right out of the wall. The fall was about thirty feet: Fifteen to the next piece of protection, then fifteen more past it. He swung to the right and crashed into the wall, then scraped against it for another second. He dangled in the air, clutching his right knee.

“What the *fuck* was that?” he said.

“I’m going to lower you down.”

I didn’t want to look at him. My heart was racing now, but I had to remember the fundamentals. Webbing at the correct angles. Redundancy. Collect the gear as you go down, slowly.

“Leave it! We don’t have time for that,” he snapped when he saw what I was doing.

It was his gear, so I obliged. When I was down, I saw the damage. The fingers he’d used to get a hold were ripped up and bloody. His patella was noticeably out of place.

“Let me help you relocate that,” I said. “I took a first aid class.”

“I’ll do it myself,” he said, and slowly began stretching his leg out. I watched as he coaxed the bone, slowly but surely, back into place.

When he was done, he turned to face at me. There were small tears in his eyes, which he blinked away.

“That was your placement. That was on you.”

This made me mad.

“You get on the rock, you accept the risk. If you want to cry about that, do it with someone else.”

“Coil that rope and we’re getting out of here.”

He tried to stand up, but sat back down when he put weight on his leg. He tried again, and did my best to support his weight while making as little physical contact as possible. It was a silent drive back across the country, one in which, due to his injury, I had to drive the whole way.

When I moved back into my room at the beginning of the semester, I put up the same posters in the same positions. My bags and futon were where I left them, covered in dust.

After 9/11, I went to a sequence of vigils on campus and wore an American flag pin on my backpack. Things would never be the same, we were assured. I was surprised, to say

the least, when that week I saw the Delica parked outside the dorm. Frenchie was leaning against the railing by the door, chewing gum.

“The Gunks. Upstate New York. The park shines in the fall.”

I was surprised to see him, of course. Both because I thought of my life with him as separate from my life here, and because I hadn’t heard from him since his injury and assumed that he was still mad at me.

Frenchie blew a bubble. He was wearing sandals with a split front, and his white t-shirt was streaked with dirt. I didn’t want anyone to see me talking to him.

“You’re crazy if you think I’m leaving,” I said and moved past him to get to the door.

As I did, he noticed the pin.

“Funny,” he said, pointing.

“They were giving them out in front of the dining hall.”

He made this tutting noise, the one he used when someone messed up just beyond the limits he deemed acceptable.

“Anyone who thinks the CIA didn’t know what was going to happen is kidding themselves.”

I stopped halfway through the doorway.

“Frenchie, what the hell are you talking about?”

“The Shawangunk Mountains. The routes are totally cleared out right now. This is the best opportunity we’ll ever have to actually get on some world-class quartz. There are these horizontal cracks that make for epic traverses. Here, I’ll show you the guidebook,” he said, reaching into his backpack.

This is how it was with Frenchie. He was the counternarrative. Going from my day-to-day life to a trip was like jumping into another dimension, where everything was askew.

Mostly, and more and more so as I spent time with him, that skewness was a type of clarity. The mushier Frenchie made my brain, the more I felt like I could understand the way things really were. It all came down to being up on the rock. Faced with the absurd reality that my perspective down there was fleeting and mutable, given the immersive difference between watching someone climb and climbing myself, everything was reframed.

Still, this was too much. I'd hardly been leaving my house. I'd been too on edge to go to the gym, if it was even open. And if I went with him now, I don't know how I would have been able to desensitize myself back to doing schoolwork once that resumed, the small taste of which I had gotten before everything shut down was bland and unmoving.

"I have school," I said. "The summer was one thing, but I'm not putting everything on hold for another climbing trip."

"Everything? Everything what?" he said, gesturing outward. "I thought you would have realized by now that this is all nothing."

I took another step and closed the door. He jiggled the doorknob, but it locked automatically.

"I just can't right now!" I yelled across the glass. He looked like he was about to respond, but instead went back to the van. I tried to see if he was limping, but I couldn't tell.

Back in the room, I sat down on my futon and turned on the TV. George W. Bush was being interviewed by CNN, talking about resilience in his Texas drawl. Listening to this gave me a sense of vertigo, so I muted the TV and watched the President's mouth open and close. I never even got the money from Frenchie. He and his silent, flattened version of the man on TV were already off to New York. I put my head in my hands. What did I possibly expect to happen next?

At eighth-grade prom, Frenchie was the only kid in the gym wearing a tuxedo. He was also the only one who danced. I had a big group of friends then, unlike him. I remember huddling at a table in a corner of the gym with them, making fun of everyone who cared enough to actually get up as the lights from the disco ball passed over our foreheads. As we ate, I stole glances at Frenchie on the dance floor. Me, picking at a plate of cold French fries. Him, shaking his elbows and bobbing his head, sweating through that starched white button-down.

Ribbons

The sun's going down so we bolt out of the house and yell at the purple sky and in each other's faces and dash into the woods behind the backyard until we get to the part of the stream where the yellow shiners gather and we plunge our hands into the cold wet to try and catch them. The fish are slippery and look like ribbons. The best we can do is graze our fingertips against their backs.

We hear plodding and the crushing of dry leaves so we bolt in four different directions like the spokes of a rake and pretend not to hear mom yelling her freaking head off all BOYS and STOP GROPING AT THE DAMN FISH! Our ten-foot shadows wriggle behind us like ribbons and we run until we don't want to anymore. We mope around and poke at moss and look up at the sky until the goosebumps come on. One by one we meet back up at the spot. Mom's gone. We brush our hands back and forth over the top of the water but the fish are gone, too.

We tiptoe inside to avoid the creakiest floorboards, but Mom still hears us over the hum of the TV and tells us to wash our hands even though they're not even dirty and we couldn't even hold onto the shiners they just kept getting away even though we reached out again and again and again. At the table, we fling peas at each other until Mom yells KNOCK IT OFF so instead we stare down at our feet. Dad said he'd teach us how to build rabbit traps. The last time we saw him it was windy so we flicked dried bits of lip onto the hospital floor and mom said tell your dad you love him so we formed a line and did, one by one.

Mom goes to bed and tells us to clean up but instead we make a big tower of peas that collapses onto the floor. We don't sweep them up and we wrestle and give each other rug burns.

When we're too tired to keep going we put on pajamas and tumble into bed and dream of being fish. The sun comes up and the yellow light glints off our yellow scales as we slip underneath the bedroom door and out the back and navigate through the dewy grass like a corn maze. When we reach the spot, we slip into the stream and flex our gills. We wriggle out beyond the horizon and make a pack of four and eat up anyone who gets in our way.

Lockjaw Elliot

Lockjaw Elliot is five years old and experiences embarrassment for the first time. He climbed onto the kitchen counter to grab a plastic cup from the cupboard, the first time doing so without his parents help, and his pajamaed knee slipped on the laminate, causing him to slide forward and smash his chin on the counter's edge. His chin split open, leaving a small spot of blood behind, and while driving to the ER his mother tells him Don't touch that or it could get infected. This makes him feel hot and confused, though he doesn't yet have a name for this sensation. He receives six stiches straight up his chin, too small to see from far away, though he knows very well that they're there and rubs his finger over them at night.

Lockjaw Elliot is nine years old and bites into a habanero pepper for the first time. It's summer, the type of day where the birds don't move. Lockjaw's friend Benny waved the gnarled red in front of Lockjaw's face and dared him to eat it, said Lockjaw wouldn't be able to handle it. Lockjaw grabs the pepper out of Benny's hand, taken from a brown paper bag in Benny's fridge, and pops the whole thing in his mouth. For a second it's smooth and cool, like a grape, but then his teeth pierce through and he's experiencing a brand-new physical sensation, one that makes his head swell and his vision blurry and brown vomit churn up his throat and onto the black-and-white tile floor.

Lockjaw Elliot is ten years old and is about to be named Lockjaw Elliot. Up until this point he's been called and has responded to the Mason Elliot, though the new naming will override the old in his and other's understandings of himself. It's fall now, and the wind makes the back of Lockjaw-still-Mason's hands look like desert mudcracks. The boys play two-hand-touch football at recess, and whenever soon-to-be-Lockjaw catches the ball, he loses feeling in his palms. Two-hand-touch should be called two-hand-shove, and Lockjaw's will be the

most memorable injury of the year, it's far from the only. Two-hand-touch is a factory for dislocated fingers and forehead bruises. Benny Matthews plays quarterback for both teams, as he always does. He's mad at Lockjaw, or so it seems, sort of, though it's not clear if this is residually because of the vomit from last summer, or if it's something more recent, or if there's no root cause at all and is, instead, just the way these things go. The boys' social order is always in flux. Last year, Lockjaw experienced the perils and joys of being the "new kid," especially as a "new kid" who was fast at running, which made him a frequent first or second pick in the daily football draft. His being the "new kid" meant he was the subject of attention, and, given that this attention was largely positive or at least neutral, meant that he was relatively popular within the boys. The boys should not be confused with the "popular boys," the recess activities of which are unclear. This year, Lockjaw has slid down the draft boards despite being just as fast. Today, Benny chooses him fourth overall, out of ten or so. This has become normal. The two-hand-touch field is bordered by a scraggly chain-link fence on the left and the leftmost out-of-bounds line of the soccer field on the right. A touchdown is scored when the runner gets too far ahead of any pursuers to be reasonably caught. This has been, historically, a source of controversy, which generally manifest as physical scums, scratches on combatants arms and legs, elbows in the stomach. Authorities have not yet intervened, and it's not clear whether they do not notice or do not care when these scums occur, though the boys don't necessarily think of it in these terms. Benny lines up in the pocket. Lockjaw is on defense. The boys only play man-to-man. This is a game without set plays, football in name only. His opponent lines up in front of him. Benny calls hike and Lockjaw is all arms and legs, his torso contorted into non-existence. He's lost sight of his man. They all do, every time. They run as fast as they possibly can, and will the next play and the one after that, and tomorrow and the day after that and the day after that. Benny lets the ball fly. It's a brown egg in front of the sun. Lockjaw

sees the release and looks up, and he converges with the group of boys on both sides of the line of scrimmage to the approximate point where the ball is going to land, acting out the same roles as every other time the ball goes through the air. This time, it bounces off the head of one boy, arguably the intended receiver, and Lockjaw stretches out an arm to the new trajectory, and the ball makes contact with his hand, and then he's running with it in the other direction. An interception. The boys, a frothing mass, run after him, but Lockjaw is fast and soon it's just him and Benny Matthews, the humiliated, it would seem, thrower. For the last time, Mason jukes out of Benny's way, humiliating him for the second time in thirty seconds, but Benny quickly recovers and makes chase. It's too close to call a touchdown. The fence curls around and continues for a few feet in the perpendicular direction to the rest of itself in the back, something that has never until now been a problem. But since Benny is fast too, and because the rules are what they are, Mason-for-the-last-time keeps running and running and then there are hands on his back, Benny's hands, Benny's hands pushing him into the fence, upon which he gets stuck.

Lockjaw Elliot is newly born and a stray bit of chain link mesh is embedded in his upper right arm, just underneath his t-shirt's cuff. He feels unsure of what to do with this metal in his arm, but when Benny Matthews stands over him and yells PULL IT OUT! he will.

Lockjaw Elliot looks at the new hole in his body. A bit of blood beads over the top, teeters, the drips down his arm. He looks up. The boys are looking at him. His arm stings. He's in the bathroom now, running the cut under cool water until it runs clear. When it does, a new bead forms, teeters, drips back down. This repeats. Class begins, so he asks for a band-aid. The teacher gives him one, without asking to see the cut. This makes him feel relieved. Every night before bed, he takes off the band-aid, checks the cut, and puts on a new band-aid,

retrieved from his mother's medicine cabinet. It grows and crackles down his arm and looks like a window shattered by a baseball. When he wakes up one morning, less than a week after removing the fence from his arm, and he can't move his jaw, he goes to his mother.

Benny Matthews is nine and a half years old when his father tells him that he heard from Mason's mother that Mason is hospitalized with tetanus, which causes Benny to think of the image of the man with tetanus in his copy of *Ripley's Believe it or Not*. He finds the book on the bottom shelf and the man is how Benny left him: naked, in bed, back like an archer's bow, curly hair pooled underneath scalp, knees locked, muscular legs sticking straight out. The book says that tetanus is highly associated with lockjaw, though the two are not the same.

Lockjaw Elliot's jaw keeps spasming and moving slowly closer together, as if his head is caught in a clamp. A 1.25-inch needle is inserted into his thigh. Back at school, some time later, clearly so because there is now snow on the ground, Lockjaw walks into the classroom and the sound dampens. Nobody looks at him as he walks to his desk. From the back, he hears Benny Matthews say welcome back, Lockjaw, and the teacher walks into the two of them tangled up on the ground, a desk overturned, a bloody scratch torn through Benny's cheek.

Lockjaw Elliot turns eleven, and, for the first time, nobody has come to his birthday party, because he did not invite anyone and because it is not a party at all, just dinner on the day that his birthday happens to be. It's no matter. He will move again soon, almost surely. He will once again be the "new kid," somewhere else this time. His mother will be transferred to a new city as she always has been, every summer.

Of course, this does not happen, and that fall, for the first time, Lockjaw returns to a school for the second year in a row. He can no longer play two-hand-touch. It's unclear if the games still happen at all. Instead, he goes to the library directly as lunch starts (he'll eat at home). This time, the first time, he migrates to the bean bag chair in the corner, and finds a

copy of *Ripley's Believe it or Not*, the same edition that Benny showed him last year. He reads stories of men who modify their bodies to look like lizards, giant water bugs that prey on fish, the Best-Preserved Mummy in the World, a woman who treats her fostered monkeys like children. He finds an old drawing of a man with tetanus. Their eyes meet. Lockjaw's pulse quickens. He rubs his chin, his thumb moving over the scar once left by the stitches, so faded it almost doesn't exist.

The Windmill

Dear Elise,

I hope you're doing well! If that's even possible. Just got to my grandparents' place up north. Haven't been up here in years(!) but everything is how I remember it. The house is bizarre, a four-story federal style with big white pillars out front that only goes back half as far as you'd expect. My grandpa says it was his dream façade, and they had the choice to go for it at half size or to compromise and build something normal and smaller. By god, he says, I never dreamed of compromising.

This means that all the rooms are smaller than they feel like they should be. The dining room table almost touches three different walls, which creeps me out. Even creepier, though, is the guest house aka my home for the next week(?)/month(?)/summer?(I hope not haha!))/however long it takes to install a new roof on the place—but more on that later). It's barely even a house at all—More a big shed with a bed and a tiny bathroom in the corner and one door that opens up to the woods. I feel completely alone when I'm there—You can't see or hear anything except when this one branch that scratches against the door when it's windy.

Did you ever meet my grandparents, by the way? You'd remember if you did. My grandma is like, six feet tall and barely talks. She always wears dark shiny dresses that go down to her ankles and pointy glasses. When we used to come up for Thanksgivings she would always disappear upstairs or outside then show up just in time for dinner. Will update if/when I gain new info.

My grandpa is the complete opposite—Short guy with a big beard, voice higher pitched than you'd expect. Talks alllllll the tiiiiiiiime. Always stories, always about himself and his many past lives in all the places he's lived, for better AND for worse. I've only been up for a few hours and I've already heard about his days as a “prominent member” of the Detroit drag racing scene in the 60's and The Time I Sold Acid to Hippies in San Francisco to Pay Rent and Ended Up Spending Three Days in Jail. He's from nowhere, Nebraska and ended up in nowhere, Michigan, but has (allegedly) lived this mosaic or a life in between. I do love him, though. I guess I love both of them.

So the main reason I'm here is to help my grandpa install a new roof on the guest house, and let me tell you, it needs it. Grandpa built it himself when they moved up here (maybe fifteen years ago?) and apparently I'm only the second person to stay in it. Don't think it's been maintained since whenever that was, since the roof is falling apart. Rotted wood and nails sticking up. No gutters, even(!). My grandpa has big plans for it—He rattled off all the technical specs that he's envisioning for it (asphalt shingles, waterproof wrap, a down system that will handle snow? I don't really know anything about roofs but he said he'll teach me). And when the roof is done I'll go back home and do something else. He says it's a “one day job,” which can't possibly be right, but we will see. Hence the week/month/summer. Basically, the trip will be over when it's over.

For a while, the thought of spending the summer without you felt... Well I tried not to think about it much. So that's the other reason why I'm here instead of at camp or getting a job or

something. I don't think I'd be able to think of anything else. Hopefully roof-building will be a distraction, plus I like the idea of seeing something like that through.

I hope wherever you are is treating you well. I wish I could be there with you right now! Not really, I don't think. But I do wish I could see you again. If you're reading this, let me know however you can. Talk soon, hopefully.

-Rudy

P.S. I'm not sure what to do with this letter... For now I will keep it in my backpack until I figure out the best way to get it to you.

P.P.S. One last note about the guest house: It's covered in buttons? This was my first time going inside, when my grandpa was giving me the roof-spiel and showing me where to put my stuff. When I was younger, the guest house repelled me so I stayed as far away as possible. It's always been this run-down, at least that's how I remember it, which may or may not be true. But it's scary, like I said! Alone in the woods like that. But anyway, the buttons: Every square inch on the inside (walls and ceiling!) is covered with buttons, the kind you'd pin on a jacket. Seemingly no rhyme or reason to their design. There's a cluster of three directly in my line of sight when lying on the bed, for example: MCCARTHY '76 in red, white, and blue with a picture of a stern-faced old guy (probably McCarthy), old Burger King pin in green with a big hamburger on it, and one that's tie-dyed looking with the words "Save the seals" over top and "Tacoma, Washington" on the bottom. It's like my grandpa's life (presumably?) collaged as décor. Do what you will with this information. I'm still figuring out how I feel about it.

Dear Elise,

Schedule of my day (day 2)

Morning: Woke up to sound of the branch scratching at the door. I did not like waking up to a face full of buttons, so I left the house as quickly as I could and went on a walk. Considered breaking the branch off the tree for quiet but it's pretty thick and that seemed potentially disrespectful. Considered going straight to the house but instead kept going (too early to start working and/or be interrogated about how I slept and/or hear weird story and/or have to navigate how to interact with my grandma like a normal person). Instead, walked down the driveway (long—close to half a mile with these beautiful overhanging elm trees) and when I got to the end of the driveway I turned left, for no particular reason, and walked and walked and all of a sudden the semi-paved road I'd been walking along ends abruptly at a field of blueberries! I mean, rows and rows of neatly arranged blueberry plants, literally stretching to the horizon. It was like a whole blueberry farm. My grandparent's house has always been this bubble that exists outside of time and space, so it was weird to see evidence of... I'm not quite sure.

At the far end of the blueberries I could just make out a windmill. It made me think of when we had to slog through the abridged *Don Quixote* in ninth grade and that line about being born free and finding solitude in the fields... And how here I was, solitary in a field, free. Or at least freeish, since I don't have a car so I can't really go anywhere. I stood and stared at the windmill for a while. It wasn't windy, so it wasn't moving. Eventually turned back. Way back felt longer than the way there—Maybe because I had a destination in mind?

Afternoon: Started on the roof. Tore down the old one entirely. Lots of rotted wood and twisted nails and when I asked my grandpa for gloves he laughed and said ah, nah, you should be fine. Scratched up my fingers a little bit but doing okay. As we went, my grandpa threw all

the old wood into a big pile by the side of the house. Each plank was covered in buttons and I asked him didn't he want to keep them? He said no, those buttons are old news, old stories no one wants to hear. I told him I wanted to hear the stories so we stopped the work and he said go on, pick one, I'll tell you. I pointed to a bright blue button with a hot dog on it and the words "Twice as good!" on top and "Half the price" on the bottom.

Well, he started out, the thing you've gotta understand about this one is that it's a damn lie from a place called Dinky's Dogs in Salt Lake, worst hot dogs I've had in my life and let me tell you, that's saying something. When I was living there back in the late 70's Salt Lake was hardly a city at all, more a road trip stop for ski bums than a place to live and build a life, but that wasn't going to stop me, or at least that's what I told myself and my group of buds who went down there to buy a house, which we did, one that looked remarkably like the one back there with the pillars, but that one had a leaky roof, too, the first one I had to fix on my own.

How'd you learn, then? I asked and he said, well, my own father taught me back in Nebraska we had to replace the roof in the middle of a winter storm when I was just ten years old, younger than you but things were different in those days, and it was starting to fall in and my ma was pregnant with my baby sister at the time otherwise she would've been the one helping him out but no, it was just the two of us over the course of three days, as quickly as we could, it was the biggest blizzard I've ever seen and the snow just piled up in our living room. But we had to keep going my daddy said, and we did, and I just had to learn as we went, I was building the roof underneath my own knees. It was so important to do it quickly both because the storm and the snow were threatening to cave the whole thing in and because of my baby sister who would need a warm place to live when she finally came into this world. But if we could

get that done in three days, we can get this one done in one if we put our backs into it. Two, tops.

And what about the hot dogs? I asked but he said Enough about the damn hot dogs! And went back to ripping out pieces of wood.

He has the shortest attention span of maybe anyone I've ever met. When we finished, the guest house was barely a house at all. Four walls, covered in dusty buttons, and a bed. Grandpa said I could move to the couch in the main house if I wanted, but I told him I'd rather brave it out here and he said good man and patted me on the back.

When he left, I brushed the dust off my bed as best I could and tried to take a nap but couldn't stop thinking of you, so I started this letter.

Evening: Grandpa cooked a big dinner to celebrate me coming up and also to celebrate tearing down the old roof—Brisket, roasted potatoes, red wine(!). He started talking as soon as we sat down, more rapid-fire anecdotes about his day and about his life growing up on a farm and being the only Jew in Nebraska (being the only Jew wherever he lived seems to be a theme—Now he's apparently the only Jew in northern Michigan) and about how much harder everything was back then. He started talking about drag racing again until I told him I'd heard that one already. He'll intersperse like, buying eggs this morning and how it took him four tries to find a carton without a broken one. The stories switch back and forth too much to really have plots, but he's always the hero and there's always some outside force trying to thwart him. Usually a boss or a neighbor but sometimes its god. This time it was the grocery

story, I guess. He uses character voices and hand gestures and bits of dialogue that I think he's just making up. I don't know how he gets from any point A to any other point B, but it never feels disconnected.

So he asked if I wanted to hear about working construction in Raleigh or working as an under-the-table park ranger in south Texas instead and I say Raleigh and he says good choice. The story went something like this:

My boss hated my guts, and, to be fair, I hated his back, sneaky bastard wouldn't pay you on time unless you demanded it and you *know* I demanded what I was owed, so anyway, I always measured twice cut once unlike some of those other sloppy sons of bitches on the crew, but that didn't matter to him, what mattered was that I was the only Jew there as far he knew and that he liked pinching pennies more than he liked quality work, anyways, one day from across the yard I hear him yell, 'Abraham, get your Jew ass down here' so I get my Jew ass down there as slowly as I please because I knew he wouldn't fire me if he knew what was best for him and he points down at some sloppy support that had gone in the week prior and says "I know you fucked up this I-beam alignment you good-for-nothing hook-nosed bastard," so I stick my good-for-nothing hook nose in his face and say "I've been working with structural gaskets since Tuesday, sir, that was Willy's job last week, sir, and Willy's a Jesus-fearing, boot-stomping Methodist like you, sir," to which he shrieks back "Keep the Lord's name out of your dirty mouth, you're fired and if I see you again I'll kick your knees in" so I leave and call the city inspectors, tell them the project on 19th and Antwerp has structural support issues that are certainly not up to code and that the fine folk at the site have no plans to fix it so they send a guy down and turns out there was even more shady "business practices" that damn boss of

mine was running that I didn't even know about, building would've collapsed with a stiff breeze if they continued so he's investigated and eventually blackballed by Raleigh's city commissioner. Never got another contract again, at least as long as I lived there at least. People like that. Too many of 'em. Reminds me of the Wilson's son, Oliver. You meet the Wilson's any of your visits here? Nice folks, built the windmill a few miles down the way, but with a son meaner than you or me, boy visited here one time and it'll stay that way if I have anything to say about it, comes in during a visit from somewhere on the East Coast where he does who knows what, some consulting mumbo jumbo and walks right into the guest house which we were showing off on account that we'd just finished it and wanted the world to see, and without taking his shoes off, puts his feet up on that same bed you're sleeping on and goes "Ooh, lord, it smells *interesting* in here." Damn near ran him out with the broom but the Wilsons are so kind and your grandma would've given me that death glare of hers, you know the one. Haven't seen the boy since, thank the lord for that let me tell you, must have been, oh, who knows, some number of years ago.

My grandma, who up until this point had just sat up straight and cut her brisket very properly suddenly chimed her knife against her plate(!) at the table and said, "Enough about that boy!" which were I believe the first words after Hello that I've heard her say since I got there.

Grandpa rolled his eyes (literally! rolled his eyes! I can't imagine what it's like when I'm not here) and said something something let's just finish eating in peace and then it was silent after that.

No response from you yet, so I'm going to try leaving this one in the branch I talked about earlier. Good thing I didn't break it off haha! Love you lots. Send me a sign, please. I'll know it when I see it.

-Rudy

Dear Elise,

Last night was cooooooold without the roof but actually not that bad. Asked my grandpa what was next and he says the weather isn't right for it so we should do other tasks around the house in the meantime, while I'm here. I say what about Nebraska and the snow? and he says that was a different time. He talked slower today than yesterday, maybe still mad about dinner? Not a good sign. He points and goes see that pile of mulch over there? And yep there's this big pile of mulch. And he goes I need you to shovel it over to... and he sweeps his pointing arm over to a patch of green by the other side of the porch and says... about there. Think you can do that? And I say with what, my hands? And he starts laughing like, really really laughing to the point where I think he was coughing and I got worried but he composes himself and goes no, there's a shovel on the other side of the pile. So I walk over and pick up the shovel and start hauling mulch. I was worried he was going to sit and watch me the whole time but he went inside after a little bit, thank god. So that was my morning. Shoveling mulch. I was hungry when I finished, but I hadn't seen either of my grandparents leave the house and I didn't want to be questioned about how the shoveling went or find out that it was actually a big joke, so I went back down the driveway and made the same left turn and got back to the same blueberry field and tried to figure out if I liked shoveling mulch or if I just felt like I

should like it, or maybe I didn't like it but also maybe I just felt like I shouldn't like it. No conclusions yet.

Leaving this letter here, among the blue. Talk soon.

-Rudy

P.S. Yes I tried one of the blueberries and yes it was delicious!

Dear Elise,

Things I did today instead of working on the roof

- Got told that we will not be working on the roof today either.
- Cut some firewood and added it to the massive pile of firewood by the side of the house that I swear hasn't diminished since I've been here, then dusted the house. There are no buttons in the main house—Just the guest one. But I dusted all of my grandparents kitschy figurines and abstract art prints and whatever else my grandpa told me to. There barely seemed to be any dust, but I did it anyway.
- Washed the side of the guest house with a hose and a dish sponge.
- Heard yelling from the main house which made me turn back around but didn't look where I was going and stepped in the creek.
- Planned on going back to the field and eating blueberries and watching the sun set (which I will be doing right now!)

Letting this letter go down the creek. Hope this is effective.

-Rudy

Dear Elise,

Went to the beach today. My grandpa said I could have “the day off,” which maybe should be exciting but I think that means he’s not going to work on the roof again which is worrying because I keep waiting for it to rain and even though it hasn’t yet I’m not sure what I’m going to do, I guess gather up as much of my stuff as I can and go to the main house and put all my clothes in the dryer. I thought about asking if he wanted to come with me, but could not picture what that would be like, the two of us on the sand (actually it turned out, small pebbles—good for skipping, not good for laying on), rubbing sunscreen into each other’s backs. It would be more of the same, I guess. And the whole point of “the day off” was to have time to myself. He said I could take the truck and I told him I only just got my permit and needed an adult to be in the front seat but he said he wouldn’t tell if I didn’t. It was my first time driving alone. The truck is old and only has a cassette player and the radio. The only radio stations I could connect to were Christian rock and talk shows—Hard pass. I rooted around for cassettes for a minute at the end of the driveway (I didn’t want my grandpa to see me looking at try to help out) and I found a Best of the 70’s mix so that was the soundtrack of the day. Hotel California got me to the blueberry field/farm (I had to stop there, obviously). The windmill was actually turning this time. Really going at it, whirring whirring whirring I could tell even from far away. I wanted to walk toward it but I’m worried about trespassing and I’m scared of Oliver—He could have a gun. Also I don’t even know that it’s his farm. But I’m pretty sure. It has to be it fits together too well for it not to be. I wish you were here— You probably would have egged me on to go and I probably would have given in. You were

(are? I'm still getting used to it) always stupider than me. You would have said more fearless, but let's be real the thought of getting blown to bits by the local mysterycrazyman wouldn't have even crossed your mind like it did mine.

In retrospect, it has been quite windy the last couple of days maybe that's what my grandpa meant when he was talking about the weather being bad for roof building?

When I was driving, the wind made it feel like the car was going to tip over. Bennie and the Jets got me to the beach (long song + short drive). I brought an eighth-grade portrait of you—the one you traded me for one of mine, the stupid black-and-white ones with the soft lighting they made us all take with our hands underneath our chins, then our parents bought the photo packages for \$50. What a rip-off. I've carried it around with me in my wallet for a year now. First I forgot about it for a while, then I remembered, hard. Obviously. I didn't know what to do with it until today. Every time I brushed my thumb over the top sticking out and re-remembered it was there, I would get dizzy and sad but I couldn't throw it away! That would be so much worse. And it was so hard to ignore since I have like, four things in my wallet. But I was at the beach (Lake Michigan? Or Huron? You'd know) and I was having a hard time getting in the water because, you know, but I thought maybe this would make a nice tribute. So I went up to my shins and tore up the picture in a bunch of little pieces and let them go in the water. Maybe that's littering and maybe it's messed up to do something like that with the picture of someone who drowned but I thought you'd think that last part was funny, maybe. I miss you. Write back, someday. Please just show me something. Tearing up this letter and leaving them in the lake as well. Love you a lot.

-Rudy

Dear Elise,

I'm writing this late back at the guest house and... It's been a day. My last day up north? I don't know. My grandpa told me to take another "day off" and I said let's finish the roof instead and he said we'll get to it when it's time! Thought about going back to the beach but I didn't want to see if bits of the picture or letter had washed up on shore. Last night I saw the letter I put in the branch trapped in a bush and almost lost it.

Went back to the guest house. Tried reading, didn't work. Tried napping, didn't work. Tried watching the clouds move and figure out if I was having fun on my vacation. The clouds were moving quick, which made me nervous. Sure enough, rain just a little bit later. There was nothing and then VOOM all at once like someone dumping a bucket onto my bed. Everything got soaked and I didn't want to go back to the main house and I just wanted all the time in the world to pass as quickly and forcefully as possible, so I went on another walk. Back to the field—Where else at this point. Didn't see the letter where I'd left it which is a good sign.

By the time I got to there, the rain had stopped but my feet were wet. I was thinking rapid fire about the blueberries and the windmill and all the dumb tasks and the lack of roof and listening to my grandpa talk and watching my grandma not look at either of us and I did what I think you would have done and started walking toward the windmill.

The blueberry field was even bluer than it's been all week. Must be the season, or maybe the rain. It was beautiful but kind of eerie, the sky all big and grey and textured and stretching on and on and on... I wonder if that's how Nebraska looked like when my grandpa grew up. Something big enough to force him out. Walked and walked and picked blueberries as I went. No bird calls, just my socks going squish squash and little sticks breaking underneath my feet. It didn't smell like blueberries like you'd expect. It smelled like wet air.

For a while it didn't seem like the windmill was getting any closer and I thought I might literally be walking forever but that didn't sound like the worst thing in the world so I kept going. All of a sudden, for better and for worse, there it was, like something out of the Scottish countryside, big stones glued together in a rounded off cone shape. Probably twenty feet tall. Half of the slats that made up the blades had fallen off and I wondered what kind of people the Wilsons were and why they even built this in the first place. I wondered if it was ever functional or if it's always looked like this, dilapidated for aesthetic reasons.

As I stood and wondered, I heard a loud Hey! and I swear to god I almost pissed my pants. It was a middle-aged man with droopy cheeks and a grey flannel, maybe fifty feet away and walking toward me. A part of me wanted to run but instead I said are you Oliver and he said what are you doing on my property. I just looked down at my feet with that one and felt a swirling feeling in my stomach. Then he asked if I wanted a towel. I couldn't say no to that so I said nothing, and he said me why don't I come inside?

I wish I hadn't. Not that anything bad happened, don't worry. But I wish I had just said thank you have a good evening but I'll be on my way and walked back and that would have been the end of it.

Instead I followed him past the windmill, past a fenced in garden with tomato plants and broccoli and past a giant woodpile of his own and then into his house. The whole place was fish themed. I mean,

- Fishing themed wallpaper. I didn't even know they made fishing themed wallpaper. Or that either of my grandparents fished. But someone must because the wallpaper is this terrible baby blue pictures of bass and trout and fishing poles crossed in Xs. Whose decision was this!
- A bunch of different pictures of the same person fishing, framed (not Oliver)
- Three identical stuffed fish on a shelf above the dresser. I don't know what kind but they're blue and long and have some sort of speckles.

He asked me if I wanted any coffee and I said yes even though I don't drink it and he asked me again what I was doing there and I mostly told him the truth, that I was staying with my grandparents and was going for a walk and ended up at the windmill. When I mentioned my grandparents' last name he took a sip from his mug and told me that he stayed the night there once, at the guest house. He remembered all the buttons. Asked if they were still there, and I said they were. I asked him why he stayed there, but something dinged in the kitchen so he got up and said coffee's ready. In the kitchen, he got on his tiptoes and pulled a big bottle with brown liquid off a high shelf and asked if I wanted to make it Irish? My cheeks got hot and I

said no thanks I'm not interested. He said he wouldn't tell if I didn't, he didn't get company too often and wanted to mark the occasion, and it felt like each and every fish in the room was staring at me, watching whatever happened next. I told him no, thank you, and heard him say More for me followed by the sound of liquid pouring

I started feeling itchy. Asked him again why he'd stayed at the guest house. Thought it was the polite thing to do, or at least it would change the subject. Instead, he hits the kitchen counter and says, not even loudly, but curtly, I would appreciate if we talked about something else, you're just a kid who trespassed on my property you have no right to go probing like this.

I had nothing left to say to him so asked if I could use his phone and he said sure it's over there and pointed toward the corner where this old, cream-colored landline hung on the wall. I called my grandparents and my grandma answered(!). I told her I was at the Wilsons old place and could she pick me up? She paused for a second like she was thinking and then said yes but it'll be awhile. So I went back to the little kitchen table where Oliver was bringing out the coffee and said thank you for the hospitality but I was going to be on my way. He said do you want this coffee and I said I should really be going. He put the mugs down and looked out the window and said you could stay the night if you want, it's a long way back to the house, but it was still the afternoon and I didn't want to answer that so I just walked out the door and down his own driveway which looked a lot like my grandparents', same elm trees overhanging and same length give or take, which thank god for that because I did not want him to watch me as I waited.

I was only inside the house for about five minutes, but it was a long time before my grandma arrived. I was standing and shivering by the time she got there, my t-shirt flapping behind me in the wind and my toes all pruney from the water. I saw the rusted blue of the pickup roll over a hill and felt a spasm in my stomach, like I wasn't supposed to be there. The thought of turning back to the blueberry field and running flashed across my mind, then my grandma was there with the window rolled down, looking down at me from the driver's seat. And besides, where would I have gone? Back to the house?

Where's Oliver, she asked me. Inside, I said. She just kind of grunted so I got in and buckled up. On the drive back, I saw why it had taken her so long to get there. My route, by foot, cut straight through, but the roads up here twist and turn so much it was a good hour before we pulled into the driveway. That hour was the most I've heard my grandma talk all trip. When she tells stories, she only ever has descriptions of people talking, you know, "he said this" and "she told me about that," etc. Almost journalistic. And she's never the main character like my grandpa. My grandpa's stories are like pictures of a forest fire. Hers are like watching embers smolder.

I've known Oliver since he was born, she said, and that's all there is to say about it. First of all, half of what your grandpa told you about him is a lie, no surprise there, but here's the truth. Oliver didn't have many friends growing up. Quiet kid, quick to anger. Something brewing inside. The Wilsons were neighbors of mine growing up, and I don't think they expected a kid like that. Hard to blame it on the kid, but his mother once told me in confidence that he sapped something from her. She didn't miss him when he went to college as far away as he could get from the house, something to do with nuclear engineering, if I recall. Intensity, that's

the word. He's always been an intense person. After that I'd hear updates every once in a while, hardly news but always worries. Oliver got a big job in a big city, worked long hours. He'd call late at night, in tears, gushing about overtime shifts and rent payments, then he'd hang up the phone. Call back in a week or six months. They never heard anything about a partner or a family, just the terrors of working life. For what it's worth, I don't think he ever did have anyone else in his life, and if he ever did at one point he certainly doesn't now. When the Wilsons died, a week apart as folks are wont to do, he showed up at the funeral and didn't talk to anyone. After the service we invited him over for dinner as a gesture and to my small surprise he accepted, but when he came he was silent and just watched us eat without touching his own food. When he left, I saw him go down the path toward the guest house, leaving his car in our driveway. Your grandpa got angry at that, said Oliver was disrespecting us by trespassing on our property but told him that he didn't know Oliver like she did and to let him grieve however he needed to and that was that.

I've only seen him a handful of times since, checking books out at the library, usually, or tending that blueberry patch. He does a hell of a job there, at least. He got totally obsessed with it after his parents passed, enough to stay up here for good. Once I saw him walking on the side of the road carrying a twelve pound bag of fertilizer. Must have been ten miles from the house.

When we got back, my grandpa was up on the roof, hammering like a maniac. But the work was done! The roof was just like he said it would be—Guess it really was a one-day job.

He got down from the latter when he saw me and said Hey kiddo! then asked How was your adventure? I didn't know what to do with that so I walked past him and closed the door in both of their faces. Plopped onto the bed and started crying and crying but I don't really know about what in particular. I guess about you and about Oliver and about the roof being done, which I didn't even get to see through and which means that this trip is over and the summer is only a week shorter than it would have been if I hadn't come at all.

I've mostly made peace with the fact that you're not going to respond. I still want to see you, and I hope you want to see me too. You feel like not-quite a person right now. It's hard sometimes to remember your face. I know it hasn't been that long. There was a largemouth bass-themed calendar on Oliver's wall. I want to be haunted by you but I don't really believe all that. Wouldn't that be the next best thing?

I just wish this wasn't such an active process. I wanted to see your face in the water at the beach but then felt silly for wanting that. I think I'm having a bit of a hard time right now. That's just the way it is. I don't want you to feel guilty about that, but I want you to know.

-Rudy

P.S. Miss you like usual.

Ten Step Plan to Finally Build Up the Courage to Kiss Maggie (If She Wants To) Before You Go to College and This Perfect Window of Opportunity Closes and You Regret Doing Nothing Forever

1. Meet up with Maggie to throw rocks off the cliffs like you two do every Friday because even though it's the last day of senior year and Alex invited both of you to get high in her garage, you don't mess with tradition.
2. Begin as usual. She will ask about the latest EPA report, since it's the first Friday of the month which means one just came out yesterday. Tell her the water level of the bay is 0.3 inches higher than it was at this time five years ago, indicating that the erosion of the cliffs' soft rock will likely continue to accelerate.
3. Ask her if she ever heard back from that outdoor interpretation job in Tucson. She will tell you no, it looks like she's been ghosted. Ask her about the administrative assistant gig in Miami. She will tell you that one flat out rejected her, but her backup plan of building a house in the woods upstate somewhere quiet where wild berries grow is still in the works.
4. Throw a rock in the water. Like usual, it will not whoosh like a rocket like you wish it would, but will instead cut through the air silently like an arrow and travel down, closer and closer to the water until it hits with a *crshk* like radio static.
5. Maggie will do the same, though hers, like usual, travels farther, as she is built like an upside-down triangle from playing rugby while you spend your time reading local EPA reports.
6. Tell Maggie that it's imperceptible, but the rising water level means that your rocks didn't have to travel as far as they did last week, which didn't have to travel as far as

the ones the week before that, which didn't have to travel as far as the ones the week before that. She will laugh-grunt at this then look out at the water.

7. Throw more rocks. After a while, she will retrieve her mom's tartan picnic blanket from her car parked on the shoulder, shake off any debris, and sit down. Sit down next to her and put your head on her shoulder. She will run her fingers through your hair.
8. Sit and talk about anything to stall for the sunset over the water.
9. The sunset, like always, will be orange and red before fuzzifying into dark purple. It won't look like melting. It won't look like a color wheel, either.
10. When it's dark, she'll ask if you want a ride. Tell her it's okay, you rode your bike. Go home. In a few months, start school somewhere landlocked. Text Maggie every day for a bit, then every week, then hardly at all.

The Geometry Teacher

Jack Cambledon spends his last day in Fairview, Minnesota demonstrating a proof of the reverse triangle inequality for his geometry class. Eighth graders naturally separate like oil and water—those uninterested sit in the back and look at their phones, those for whom the aforementioned prospect is intensely anxiety-producing sit in the front and copy down every word the teacher says.

Jack's chalk, imported from Japan, glides down the board. Two thin, vertical lines, followed by the letter "y," that starts with a small swash in the top left corner and ends with a looping tail, followed by two more thin, vertical lines. An old professor once told Jack that his "y's" were among the most beautiful he had ever seen. The notebooks of the students in the front of the class fill with bastardized versions of the same design: Two crooked lines, followed by "y's" with loops that go down two rows too far, followed by two more lines, slanted to the right.

"Note that the absolute value of 'y' is equal to the absolute value of '*y minus x plus x*,' Jack says as he writes, "which, by the triangle inequality, is less than or equal to the absolute value of '*y minus x*' plus the absolute value of '*x*.' Does anyone have any questions so far?"

He turns back to face the class. Doing so, like every other time he turns around, means battling to suppress the bursting feeling of being wasted from coming through to the surface. Once, he even had to leave the room. He had told the class he had to go to the bathroom. Nobody had reacted. It was the middle of the class period and the halls were empty. He spent fifteen minutes wandering, focusing on the sound of carpet underneath his feet. To calm himself, he reached for an old trick he picked up as an undergrad. Starting with the Peano axioms he built up a definition of the natural numbers from first principles in his head, the

most fundamental mathematical proof he knew. We name this function sigma, the successor function. We name the initial element “one,” and sigma of one “two.”

“The names we use to call the natural numbers are just that—names,” the same professor once told the class. “Don’t mistake them for something more.”

Every year, Jack told his class the same thing. It went over most of their heads, but he hoped that any *real* student of mathematics would pick up the trail of breadcrumbs he was leaving behind, and trace their journey back to Room 1729 at Fairview Preparatory Academy in Fairview, Minnesota.

There are only a few minutes left in class, so Jack tells the kids to work out the sum of the numbers between one and one hundred. The same professor, a seemingly ageless man named Sergio Otero once told Jack’s class of the legendary Gauss who, so the story goes, was given this prompt as a schoolboy as a means of keeping the class quiet for a while. Gauss, the savant, discovered a trick involving pairing up the numbers in a certain way that made the problem trivial. The anecdote was a means of introducing Professor Otero’s idea of the mathematical genius.

“There are, statistically speaking, zero to one such potential geniuses in this room,” Professor Otero had told the group of undergrads. “I see my role as cultivating that potential genius, to create the necessary and sufficient conditions for that genius to recognize itself and thrive.”

At the time, Jack knew Professor Otero was talking about him. He also knew that most if not all of his classmates knew the same about themselves. But Jack was sure that he could rise above, that there was something different about him. He knew it when the class dropped in size to forty then to thirty before resting at twenty. He knew as he finished his degree and

opted to stay at the same school to work with Professor Otero, who at this point Jack knew him as Sergio, to pursue a PhD.

A student in the second row raises their hand.

“Will this be on the test?”

Jack feels the bursting feeling begin to simmer. He takes the quickest, quietest, deepest breath he can muster.

“Give it a shot,” he says. “Don’t worry if you can’t finish.”

Another hand, this time from the back.

“When are we even gonna use this in the real world?”

Jack wants to talk about learning how to think, about how thinking logically is the greatest tool a student can have. He wants to talk about the deep roots of mathematics, how it’s an art, one whose practitioners are participating in a legacy that goes back thousands of years. He wants to talk about beauty. He wants to tip his hand, reveal that this is another breadcrumb for the genius in the class, if he’s blessed enough to be teaching one right now. He wants to talk about how mathematics is the most real thing there is.

Before he can respond, a deep whooping noise starts blaring from the corner of the room. Faculty is supposed to get an email alert before any drill, so this is a surprise to Jack. He squints his eyes. The alarm sound creates a new, thick silence in the air. He must get this next move right. The students are getting antsy, moving their heads close together and talking in low voices, stealing glances up at Jack.

Think now. If this was a drill, he would have received an email. He did not receive an email, so it must not be a drill. If it wasn’t a drill, anything could happen: There could be a bomb threat and the school could be evacuating, or World War III could have broken out and the alarm could be from a long dormant nuclear alert system. It could be as simple as a fire.

In any case, it's better to be prepared. But it would be easiest for Jack to gather intel on his own than to travel with a hoard of thirteen-year-olds, potentially exposing them to danger and him to chastisement. Ergo, the students should gather their supplies and remain in the room, ready for whatever happens next. Jack should leave and try to figure out what's going on. Quod erat demonstrandum.

Someone burps and people start laughing, breaking Jack's concentration. The sirens are still blaring. He must act.

"Everyone, get your stuff together. I'm going to go and figure out what's going on."

This seems to be enough, and the class tentatively crinkles pieces of loose-leaf paper into their bags. Jack leaves the room. In the hall, teachers and students from other classrooms kneel on the ground in front of the lockers, touching their foreheads to the carpet with their hands covering the back of their heads. He can't begin to imagine what's going on. He looks for an administrator for instruction. He sees the Vice Principal racewalking down the hall away from him.

"Bill, wait up!"

Jack takes off.

Bill pauses and turns on his heels.

"What was that?" he yells down the hall. "I can't hear you over the alarm!"

Jack stops, then thinks better and takes a few more steps toward him.

"I said, wait—What's going on?"

"There's a tornado warning for the county. Get your students in position then do the same." Bill turns back around and says something into a walkie talkie and racewalks away.

Back in the room, Jack is embarrassed to see his students as he left them, chatting and looking at their phones.

“Room 1729! Outside, now! Get in tornado positions!”

His students look at him sheepishly, then whisper to each other. They leave their backpacks by their chairs, head out of the room, and get onto their knees by the lockers outside the classroom doors. As Jack watches this occur, he feels his phone buzz. It’s Sergio. They haven’t had a conversation since Jack completed his thesis. He puts his head down and moves quickly back into the classroom, shutting the door.

“Hello? Sergio?”

“Jack Cambledon! It’s good to hear your voice.”

Drops of sweat form on the back of Jack’s hands.

“It’s good to hear yours as well. Listen, can I call you another time? I’m in the middle of something.”

Sergio laughs on the other side of the line.

“You’re not still at that school, are you?”

“I’m there right now.”

“Well, that explains it. Listen. This is more important than triangle congruences, if you can believe it.”

Jack mutes his phone to avoid the sound of the alarm coming through as he listens to his old advisor.

“I called to offer you your dream job.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m the new head of the Mathematics department at Quintin College. It’s a small school in San Francisco, but it’s up-and-coming. They want a rehaul of the department. New blood. And I want you.”

Jack looks around the room. On the walls: a poster with the Golden Spiral superimposed onto a picture of sunflower, an illustration demonstrating a solution to the Towers of Hanoi, a long, laminated piece of paper with the digits of pi wrapping around the room.

“You’re young. Still sharp, I’m sure. Let’s build something together.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Say yes, Jack. I need to know as soon as possible. They want faculty for spring term.”

“Look, Sergio—”

“Don’t miss this boat, Jack. I can’t guarantee this offer will be on the table forever.”

The bursting feeling comes back in full force, and Jack has to sit down in a small student chair to keep his head from spinning. He closes his eyes and sees kaleidoscopes, whirring in the dark.

“Fine. Okay. Yes. Let’s do this.”

“Fantastic. I knew you’d make the right decision.”

Jack’s head continues to spin.

“Come down this week. The school will put you up at a hotel. There’s money here, real money—not just private school money. We’ll find you a nice place to stay, I swear. I have to leave, but we’ll be in contact.”

Outside the classroom, the school’s three-hundred-and-fifteen students, twenty-four teachers, and various other faculty form a system of navy veins branching down the halls of Fairview. From above, with their hands over their heads, the students can hardly be told apart, each with their matching blue argyle sweaters over white button downs tucked into pleated khaki pants. Jack’s tweed blazer sets him apart. He thinks of how to most efficiently pack

students into an arbitrary space. Would it be any different in three dimensions? Sergio once told him he had the rigor of Bertrand Russell and the creativity of Paul Erdős.

Jack's room is at the end of the hall. He walks past the hundreds of people kneeling at the lockers. He can hear the crunch of his shoes on carpet over the sound of the alarm. With a quick push of the side door, a new, higher pitched ringing alarm joins the low rhythm of the tornado alarm. He would have liked for his inevitable exit to be more graceful, but the gears are turning now.

Outside, the sky is green. Jack's is the only car on the road. There hasn't been a tornado in Fairview in his five years in the town, though he doesn't know how common they are in general. All he knows are the basics: Get to low ground. Stay away from glass. EF-5 is stronger than EF-1.

Macy shouldn't need much convincing. They both know that Fairview is a dead end. Still, best to think this out, carefully. Start by stating the offer. Proofs should not contain surprises. Next, emphasize the need for quick action. She should not have a chance to reply before this point. Case one: She's enthusiastic. If so, begin packing. Their house is small. They rent, and their lease will be up in three months if they don't renew. Do not bring this up. Talk to Sergio about it later. Soon. See if the school can provide some financial support in order to make the move soon. But they must leave soon. There's no guarantee that the offer will still be there at the end of the school year. There's no guarantee that Jack can return to Fairview Prep. Anything without a guarantee should be avoided, if at all possible. Case two: She is tentative. Unsure. Brings up the three months' rent. Brings up rent prices in San Francisco. Then, emphasize that this is an opportunity for them to build something. Talk about the ocean. About culture. A concert every night. Emphasize, again, the need for quick action. There's no guarantee there will be a town of Fairview in the morning. *Quod erat demonstrandum.*

Jack thinks back to the last time he talked to Sergio. Sergio had invited him for dinner at his house to celebrate Jack's successful defense of his thesis. Jack had been there before, and, as always, the kitchen was perfectly clean when he arrived, as if no cooking had taken place, expensive appliances polished and in their respective positions. As always, Jack couldn't stop looking at the massive wood carving of grapevines that hung on the wall behind where Sergio sat at the table. Jack didn't know if Sergio had children, but there was no evidence that any had lived there. He knew Sergio didn't currently have a partner, but other than that his advisor's personal life was a blank canvas. This made Jack uneasy, but he wanted to respect his advisor's space and thus never asked.

Over scallops and white wine, the two talked research, mathematical happenings, philosophy. Never gossip.

"The problem with the mathematics community, you see, is that the mathematicians have this delusion that they exist, somehow, how to put it," Sergio took a sip of wine with one hand as he gestured with the other. "Somehow outside of society. Economic pressures. Biopolitics. The inevitable deterioration of their bodies. Even the purest of logic won't save you from that."

Jack was used to such proclamations. They gave working with Sergio a feeling of grandeur, as if the two were engaged in more fundamental meaning-making than even other mathematicians.

"Still," he continued. "That doesn't excuse one from, say, ignoring one's talents."

"The Minnesota job is temporary," Jack said. "And at least I'll be teaching geometry. The closest thing to algebraic topology that side of undergrad. What do you want me to do, pass up dental insurance and a school with resources for the roulette wheel of academia? It's economic pressures, as you said."

“I want you to do that which will bring you fulfillment,” said Sergio. “If Minnesota will do so, what else can I say?”

Sergio turned his focus to cutting a piece of asparagus in half. Jack gazed at the wood carving.

“You told my Intro to Analysis class, ages ago, that there were zero to one mathematical geniuses in the room,” said Jack. “Were you including yourself in that count?”

Sergio laughed, still looking at his plate.

“Oh, I said that to scare you!” He looked up at Jack. “I needed half the class to drop, and it worked. It works every year.”

Jack felt his heartrate increase.

“Those who are meant to stay, stay.” Sergio said. “Those who are meant to leave, leave.”

Jack arrives at his house. Hailstones plink off the hood of his car as he pulls into the driveway. This is one of the last times he’ll ever be here. He brushes his fingers over the begonias as he walks to the door. The petals feel like fabric.

Nostalgia isn’t a logical concept, and preemptive nostalgia even less so. All that’s real is the moment unit, the freeze frame of finger on pink petal, right leg outstretched, hailstone hanging off jacket collar. Thus, there is nothing to yearn for. That which we define as nostalgia is more an impossible desire than an emotion. Still, Jack feels a tug toward an imagined future. He’s in his apartment in north San Francisco. His chair is off-white, an inheritance from Macy’s grandfather with chipped legs. From his window he can see Treasure Island, off-white buildings poking out of the ocean. He's getting his off-white papers in order. He’s needling out the last details of a key lemma to a proof he hopes to publish by the end of the year. This

is an important step. A cloud, off-white, covers the sun. He feels a hand on his shoulder. He knocks on the door.

The wind ripples the back of his shirt. After a moment, Macy opens the door, breathing heavily.

“Jesus, Jack,” she says. “What are you doing here?”

Without waiting for a response, she turns around and starts walking toward the back of the house.

“Never mind, it doesn’t matter. I’m just glad you’re safe!”

He follows her.

“Work sent us home after the first alert,” Macy says as she hustles across the house and down the stairs to the basement. He notices, for the first time, a Matisse print on the stairway downward.

“Like it?” Macy asks when she notices him looking. “The basement was too emotionless. Why let any part of the home be empty? Never mind that. We can talk about it later.”

Downstairs, they each take a chair. Outside, it sounds like whistling.

“I’ve haven’t seen anything like this in Fairview my whole life. What’s the story at the school? Kids all go home?”

Jack looks into the middle distance. He tries to remember where best to start.

“Jack, is everything okay?”

He shifts in his seat.

“I got a job offer. Sergio Otero, my old thesis advisor. A school in San Francisco.”

Macy is silent for a moment. A bead of sweat drips down Jack's spine from the base of his neck until it's absorbed by the waistband of his underwear.

"So you left the kids? They're all still there, at the school?"

Case three: Macy is unpredictable, changes the topic, brings up something unrelated.

"I want you to come with me."

Macy looks at him, and the life Jack had built in Fairview becomes real before him, like LEGO blocks assembling themselves. The relationships and the house and the begonias out front are not separate from his true life, they are the makeup of it. He's back in the off-white apartment, and the work on the lemma makes him nostalgic for the mind-altering days of his PhD program when every proof was a terrifying door, and opening one produced an indescribable high.

They sit in silence. Jack starts again with the Peano axioms. 0 is a natural number. For every natural number x , $x = x$. For all natural numbers x and y , if $x = y$, then $y = x$. For all natural numbers x , y and z , if $x = y$ and $y = z$, then $x = z$. For all x and y , if x is a natural number and $x = y$, then y is also a natural number. He conjures the natural numbers, creating them from dust and mud. Every proof is something fundamentally new. What was to be demonstrated.

When he finishes, he turns to Macy, who he notices has started crying.

"I just wanted to build something real with you," he says.

She shakes her head.

"It's all just as real as it's ever been."

Outside, the tornado rips out trees by their roots. Twelve people are injured, none killed. Property damage is estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands. The town heals, grieves, tries to move on. A temporary geometry teacher is brought on for the remainder of

the school year. As Jack drives to San Francisco, he forms and destroys the natural numbers, again, and again, and again.

Car Crash

Whenever I walk somewhere important—to work, most often, or various other meetings—I think about how funny it would if I were, in that moment, struck by a car. Imagine the email! “Dear X, I apologize for failing to notify you sooner, but I was hit by an automobile just across the street from our building. Can we reschedule, perhaps next Wednesday sometime after 2? I should be out of the hospital by then. Let me know your availability.”

In these fantasies, the crash is never fatal. Perhaps a broken bone or two, something without complications or excessive physical therapy. I imagine myself with an extensive healthcare plan and a robust support network of friends and family to help me through the healing process.

Clearly, pain exists to me in the abstract, and I’m terrified of my inevitable collapse when tragedy finally strikes. When it comes, as I’m sure it will, I expect my fragile eggshell of a self to burst into smithereens. For all I know, pain only builds on itself. But perhaps being run over in a small way, a clean way, would guide me through that future terror.

Why do I not pee in the Arb?

Note: I am sitting on a bench in [the Arb] and I [have to]/[need to]/[want to] pee.

Definition: “I” refers to [myself], a twenty-one-year-old, barefooted [man].

Definition: “[The Arb]” refers to for a specific, designated area in [Ann Arbor], one that could arguably be referred to as a “park” or a “nature area.”

Definition: To “pee in [the Arb]” refers to a set of potential actions that, in a certain sense, I “could” take, likely involving getting up from the bench, walking over a tree, unzipping my pants, listening and watching for onlookers, then, assuming there are none, releasing urine onto the tree until I know longer [have to]/[need to]/[want to] pee.

Clarification: We refer to the above as “definitions” instead of “facts,” the difference being that a “definition” implies that a decision has been made, in this case by myself, and any emergent results should be understood in the context of this definition and its axiomatic system.

Assumption: If I were alone in the Arb and had some way to know that I would continue to be alone for the duration of the time it would take to pee, I would stand up from the bench and pee in the Arb.

Note: I [have to]/[need to]/[want to] pee.

Clarification: Specific “chemical signals” are moving between my bladder and my brain, resulting in an emergent “sensation” defined as [having to]/[needing to]/[wanting to] pee. All three terms in brackets are included here, separated by slashes, to indicate that any one term for this “sensation” is necessarily incomplete.

Specifically: [Having to] pee implies that a mandate exists, that it is necessary for me to pee. This is arguably “true,” as eventually if I do not pee I will likely develop a urinary tract infection which could lead to my bladder atrophying and, eventually, to my death, but it is not the case that I have been given a mandate by an entity that holds power over me, and I doubt that I can truly give myself a mandate, and how can a mandate exist if it is not given/created? Similarly, [needing to] pee implies that this is a necessity of some kind, which falls victim to the same fallacies as [having to]. [Needing to] also implies a sense of urgency, which, given that I am still sitting on the bench and have not yet begun to pee, arguably does not exist. [Wanting to] may appear to be a “more accurate” descriptor, given that it is free of any connotations of a top-down power structure, though it again fails to be “true” given that I hold no desire for the act of peeing, now or ever, and instead would like the sensation here referred to as [having to]/[needing to]/[wanting to] pee to go away, and “know” that such a thing would, in all likelihood, come to pass after I pee.

Assumption: I will pee eventually, almost certainly in “my” [home], specifically in the [bathroom], specifically the one with multiple decorations featuring waterfowl, including a framed copy of Mary Oliver’s poem “Wild Geese” with drawings of geese in the background, facing the toilet, a small, wooden carving of a mallard duck sitting on top of the medicine

cabinet, a painting of two ducks in flight, also mallards, behind the toilet, and others. This is a designated area for peeing, at least in part, that exists in “my” [home], which implies that I “know” that I will be able to access to it. This “knowledge” is the primary reason that I believe that this will be the place in which I pee, the secondary being that it is the closest to the front door, the likeliest door that I will enter through assuming that I go [home] given that the side door was, when I left, and still likely is, blocked by a bright green, suede recliner, the tertiary being that I find pleasure in the waterfowl decorations. However, it is still possible that I instead pee in a different building, the likeliest scenario being, arguably, a building that I pass on my way “back” [home], specifically if the sensation of [having to]/[needing to]/[wanting to] pee intensifies and I [decide to] pee before arriving [home].

Note: This is all to say, peeing in [the Arb] will not occur, by me, today. However, it is not accurate to call this a decision, as I [am not]/[will not]/[was never going to] pee in [the Arb].

What is the nature of my not peeing in [the Arb] if not a decision?

Proposition: It may a result of coercion, specifically with respect to the public urination [laws] of [Ann Arbor] which state, to the best of my knowledge, that peeing in [the Arb] would be a [punishable offense]. While such a law would be, in its own way, an arbitrary definition of the kind that we started off this investigation with, this threat of punishment, arguably, [raises the stakes]. However, I do not “know” this to be the [law] in particular, thus I do not “know” whether or not a punishment of any kind would manifest, nor of what severity such a punishment would be, and so cannot state, in good faith, that this is [the answer] to our

question as I cannot weigh the knowns of my ever-growing sense of [having to]/[needing to]/[wanting to] pee against the unknowns of this theoretical [law].

Then: It may, instead, be a result of my belief that I am being coerced, i.e. my belief that such a law exists is enough to [keep me in check].

Definition: [Keeping me in check] refers to, in this moment, twisting my toes around and scratching at my week's worth of beard scruff, instead of, as discussed, peeing.

Complication: Asking this question (**What is the nature of my not peeing in [the Arb] if not a decision?**) is, arguably, logically equivalent to asking the previous question (**Why do I not pee in [the Arb]?**), given that investigating the previous question led us to this “new” question without uncovering/proving/defining any “new” “information.”

Note: If this “new” question is logically equivalent to the previous question, then it may be meaningful to define them as equivalent.

Why, then, did we not begin with the latter question?

Note: While the two questions being logically equivalent implies that they “contain” the same “information,” it is not necessarily accurate to say that they “give” us the same insight into the problem at hand. Rephrasing i.e. finding “synonyms” may be able to be “meaningful”, depending on how we define “meaningful.” Despite being logically equivalent, it is possible that the latter may not have been accessible without the former, to me, right now, on this

bench, in [the Arb], which is to say, ever at all. To post the latter without the former, then, would, arguably, be disingenuous and, worse, inaccurate. By losing the process that we took to arrive at the latter, “meaningful” “information” would, arguably, be “lost,” which would, arguably, imply that such a question would not be [the same question] as the one that we have asked. Therefore, doing so would not “mean” the same [thing] and would thus be “inaccurate.”

Assumption: We “mean” [something], or, arguably, we “mean to” “get at” [something].

Assumption: [Meaning] exists, given that “information” can be “meaningful.”

Then: Said [thing] i.e. the [something] that we “mean” may be able to be “understood” by us (ideally) or by the reader, through the medium of this text.

Note: If said “understanding” proves to be impossible, hopefully I and the reader can and, better, will, experience a “version” of a/the [meaning] synergistically i.e. emerging from the interactions between the words on the page in the order in which they are presented.

Note: If “understanding,” generally speaking, cannot be expected, then an [approach toward] “understanding” i.e. “toward” a/the [meaning] can/will/must suffice.

Assumption: A/the [meaning] “exists” and can be “approached.”

**What does it “mean” for a/the [meaning] to exist? What does it “mean”
to “understand” said [meaning]? What does it “mean” to “approach”
said [meaning]?**

Note: A/the [meaning] only has a logical value within a set of definitions/axioms.

Why is this urgent?

I rise from the bench and place my belongings in my backpack. I walk down the hill, away from the bench, toward the field at the bottom of [the Arb]. [The Arb] i.e. people who work “for” [the Arb] are doing “renovations,” and in this field there are large piles of upturned dirt that smell of grass and manure. It’s warm, the warmest day in [Ann Arbor] since last [summer], which was the primary reason that I came to [the Arb] in the first place. There are other people walking through the field, many of whom, I presume, are also here due to the “abnormal” warmth. I continue to walk through this field, “toward” the [Huron River], and, in flashes, some of these people appear in my line of sight. A child in a blue raincoat jumps into a pile of mud. To my right, shirtless person in swim trunks stands shin-deep in the [Huron River], trying to coax a large golden retriever, who is standing at the river’s edge, looking down at its feet and not at [the person in the swim trunks], into the water as well. Two people in matching gray, athletic shirts pass by me. In each case, I wish to [stop and stare], thus extending the moment of my passing indefinitely in order to experience the “full,” potential sensations that I am, arguably, missing out on by continuing to walk toward the border of [the Arb] and

“toward” [home] which will be, presumably, the quickest way that the sensation previously defined as [having to]/[needing to]/[wanting to] pee will end.

Why do I not [stop and stare]?

Assumption: If the people in [the Arb] could not perceive me doing so, I would, presumably, [stop and stare].

Assumption: [Stopping and staring] would, presumably, cause the people in [the Arb] some kind of distress, possibly manifested as annoyance, discomfort, self-consciousness, or anger.

Assumption: I do not wish to cause distress to another person, and, generally, attempt to avoid taking actions that would lead to this outcome.

Clarification: The previous Assumption is not demonstrative of and should not be confused with [knowledge] of any other entity, emotion, or [myself], as any such [knowledge] would require a/the [meaning] of said entity, emotion, or [myself] to “exist.”

Note: Causing distress to another person, or, at least, my perception of having done so, would, presumably cause [myself] distress, either physically through an altercation with the [stopped and stared] at party, or, in a more extreme case, a state-sanctioned police force, or mentally/emotionally as a result of a “rude” [gesture]/[facial expression]/[shouted phrase].

What would it “mean” to [stop and stare]?

To determine the material of [the child's] raincoat, to rub my finger over the back of their smooth hand, to determine the color of their eyes, to wipe the mud off of their boot, to put my hand in the mud imprint left by said boot, to grab a fistful of said mud, to wipe it on my face, to feel the dried mud on cuffs of their jeans and determine how, if at all, it was different, texturally, from the dried mud on the ground, to learn if they would be reprimanded for jumping into the mud, encouraged to continue doing so, or if their presumed parent would have a different reaction altogether. To run my hand's through the dog's fur, to attempt to coax it in the water myself in way of comparison to [the person in the swim trunks], to dive into the water and grab the legs of [the person in the swim trunks], to emerge and shake the [Huron River] from my hair. To join the run of [the people in the gray, athletic shirts], to watch and taste the sweat on their faces and observe how the accumulation and flavor changes over time. In essence, to [see what happens next].

Why did I not [stop and stare]?

Note: There was never, at any point, a decision to be made.

Clarification: The likelihood that I would, at any point, [stop and stare], was so miniscule that it can, arguably, be safely defined as being "non-existent."

Therefore: Despite my desire to [see what happened next], that my walk was composed of discrete, phantasmagoric flashes of images was never a decision.

What happens next?

I cross the border and am thus no longer “in” [the Arb]. Instead, I am in a [parking lot]. To my left, as I walk up the steep driveway that leads down into the [parking lot], various cars appear, for flashes, in my line of sight. Once, as I near the end of the end of the driveway, a skinny yellow sports car that looks like a cockroach does just this, and I wish to [stop and stare], thus extending the instant of this flash, the rush and blur of it all and the low ping of the motor and the contrast of the yellow against the asphalt. Instead, of course, I keep walking, in the direction of “my” [home]. Upon reaching what could be, arguably, safely defined as [my destination] i.e. “my” [home], I enter my key in the keyhole, unlock the door, enter “my” [home], take off my shoes, walk down the entryway, turn left, and enter the aforementioned [bathroom], and, once there, pee, as predicted. I no longer [have to]/[need to]/[want to] pee. I exit the [bathroom], turn right, walk down the entryway, put on my shoes, exit “my” [home], and sit on a chair on the porch. There, I watch as the yellow sign across the street, which depicts two figures on a seesaw and indicates that there is a playground nearby, swivels back and forth as it is pushed by the wind. I feel the wind on my face as well, which I feel I can safely define as a pleasurable sensation. Presumably, I will continue to live and further flashes of images will cross my line of sight, manifesting as [experiences], and I will write “about” some of these as well.

The Warbler

I was floating on my back in a pond in the woods when it flew overhead, wings fanned, blotting out the sun. This was spring, and starflowers were beginning to poke through the green. A pile of cedar leaves sat by my clothes, which I planned to bring back to my grandparents to make tea.

I could tell it was a warbler by the flash of yellow under its wing, an unmistakable color even in this shadow of its own creation. Of course, its most distinctive characteristic was its size, at least eight feet tall. Its legs were the same length as mine but the width of my pinky.

It landed, not too far from me, then ripped out a chunk of dirt the size of a basketball, rolled it a couple of times until it broke apart, then devoured every worm and insect that wriggled free. After it finished with the dirt clod, it darted its head side to side, passing its black eyes over mine.

I reached my hand out to see if it would be curious enough to approach. Instead, as songbirds do, it dove back into the air, weaving through then over the trees. The air displaced by its wings felt like a large door being closed in my face.

My grandparents listened to my description of the bird with interest, though their reactions were relatively muted, being locals. My grandma told me about seeing a family of deer the size of squirrels gallop across the back lawn. She's thinks about them every time she mows the grass. My grandpa sat and drank his tea, which he complimented for being so flavorful. I told him thank you, and that I was glad that I'd boiled the leaves for long enough.

The rest of the trip and large parts of the rest of my life continued as normal. My grandparents are dead now, the house sold, and I haven't been up to that part of the state in ages. If it weren't for that conversation over tea, I'm sure I'd have chalked up the warbler to a

dream long ago. In all likelihood, this would have meant eventually forgetting about it entirely. Instead, the details are vivid. The yellow, those eyes. Sometimes I think about quitting it all.