

spaces

michael dibernardo
mikedebo@gmail.com
department of computer science
university of british columbia, canada

I

I have arrived.

Everything in the house is new, sterile, and exquisitely arranged. I come from a small town, where this sort of sleek sparseness isn't really seen as being very wholesome and thus doesn't show up very often, but I've flipped through enough Ikea magazines to have some appreciation for it. If Mom could visit, she'd be throwing carpets over everything. Still, the price was right, and so was the effort involved. It never occurred to me that a company would arrange for housing like this. It makes a guy feel kinda special.

I ease the door closed as the cab pulls away, and I haul my luggage into the bedroom. I want to take some time to look around, to see what the drawers hold and how strong the water pressure is and all those other important details in which houses can differ, but I still have two days before I start work, and I am weary from the trip. So, I am going to sleep.

After some hurried preparations, I slip under the covers, idly wondering who made the bed. It is dark and dead quiet -- the thick silence of the suburbs. I have the sudden urge to play some music. When you live in a house with someone else that breathes, it feels like you are nestled in a warm support, like the walls and floors are simply there to frame your interactions. When you are in a house like this alone, though, the building feels like it is the thing that is alive, as if you have tumbled into the lungs of a giant and you have to make noise to drown out his ticks and inhalations. Otherwise, you're just left there, piqued, listening for those sounds. Holding your breath.

This is what it feels like, then, to follow your ambition.

Out of habit, I grab my phone from the bedside table to see who is concurrently joining me in slumber. But there are no blips: The map is dark. I can hear a light draft in the hall. I can feel the walls leaning inwards, resting on thick silence.

II

Day one complete. It went smashingly, all things considered. Mostly everyone has families here, so they all left long ago. I am free of these liabilities: This gives me ample time to show them up. That is my usual strategy when competing with people who are smarter than I. I leverage my tenacity.

The phone tells me it is 1:14am. Oh, my. Flick, flick: The night bus does not come for another 45 minutes. I can walk home in that time. The walk will not be stimulating, as I will be leaving an industrial park and entering a suburb. However, I've been sitting for almost 15 hours. The idea of moving around is quite appealing, and the night is comfortably warm.

The road is monotonous. There aren't any cars around, let alone any other pedestrians. After spending the last 8 hours of my day in an empty office, it is somewhat unnerving to be alone in an unoccupied space that is many orders of magnitude larger. I turn on the dots, in the hope that I'll trip over one and prove to my skittering nerves that other humans have actually trod this path and lived to write about it.

Sure enough, a handful of steps later the phone buzzes as I near a street corner. *On March 17th, 2018, my little Maya was struck by a car and killed while crossing the street here. Please, take a moment and say a prayer for her.*

I'm not a religious man, but I am compelled to at least lower my head for a twinkling. I am not really thinking about the tragedy of Maya's death. Rather, I am wondering if Maya was actually a small girl, or whether her mother was instinctively clinging to the adjective.

As I am doing this, a clucking sound emerges from the thick, tall bushes that abut the road, some fifteen feet away. I turn swiftly, trying to discern the source, and am confronted by a very curious creature. It is a bird that has the appearance of a miniature turkey, except that its head is colored a deep crimson -- or so it appears in the weak light cast by the street lamps. It turns and trots casually back into the trees, and I feel compelled to follow. As the green envelops me, I feel tranquility where I expected to feel apprehension. After pushing in quite a ways through it, I find myself in a small clearing, an oval of short grasses in the midst of the shrubbery. This is surreal, a snippet of Alice in Wonderland. In this context, the silence is a frame for my awe, an audience that is contemplating the moment with the same raptness that I am. I feel as if I have stumbled across some primeval altar that has never been perceived by a human before.

The phone beeps again. I am horribly disappointed -- someone has been here.

I fucked H.S. here. She loves the great outdoors

I flip the display in disgust. The brush now feels like it is invading my space, and I urgently feel like I have to get out. As I stumble out onto the sidewalk again, I see a moving light: The night bus is coming. I scurry quickly to the next stop and board it. As I take a seat, I turn off the dots. The display defaults back to the map.

No blips; just meandering lines that denote borders.

III

It is Saturday afternoon. I have been here just over a week. I am at work because my house is too empty to tolerate, and the idea of navigating the city was too stressful to act on. However, the office isn't much more comforting than the house. It is empty, but at least there is the potential that someone might stop in.

I decide that this is unhealthy and leave. I make my way to the bookstore in town, a largish affair that resembles a scaled-down Chapters. There are many people here, which is soothing in some ways and disquieting in others; I keep unconsciously expecting to run into someone I recognize, only to remind myself that this is impossible. I need to make some friends. However, I am not entirely sure how this is done. As an engineer, there is only one thing I can think to do. I must read about it.

A brief interaction with a store computer informs me that there are several books somewhat related to the topic. I choose the one with the plainest cover, in the hopes that it will offer me advice that is similarly reserved. There are several chapters on how to dress and how to make oneself more interesting, which bruises a few of my sensibilities, but I persevere. A suggestion is made to pursue your solitary interests in the company of other like-minded individuals, at a coffee shop or similar venue. This seems like something I can handle, and there is one just across the street. The free coffee at work has also edged me into an espresso kick, so this will work out well.

The place is small and elegantly decorated. There are several comfortable-looking armchairs, and the music is inoffensive and playing at a reasonable volume. I change my mind about the espresso and instead order an African tea of some sort. It is served on a white square plate in a small white teapot with an accompanying white mug. I carry the whole package over to a table and sit down. I pull out my book from my shoulder bag and flip through the pages, trying to remember where I left off. I only read a few pages at a time, on the bus or before falling asleep, so I don't quite recall how far I've made it.

There are only a couple of people here; I suppose most folks have children to look after or other sensible things that need doing. I reach forward to pour my tea, but the pot is overfull. Brilliant orange tea splatters all over the white plate, and I feel like a five year old that has just knocked his glass over at the dinner table. I do not have any napkins, so my slobbery will have to remain in plain sight. I look around again, and realize that no one is going to notice. I feel slightly uncomfortable, like something unidentifiable within me has become strained. I turn on the dots to see if someone has left a note about when this place gets busy or something like that. There are no beeps.

After a handful of minutes, I become restless. I rise to use the washroom, and am distracted by a painting that is opposite to the door. The canvas is a smattering of green chaos, and there is a whorl in the centre that I am fascinated by. I am on the verge of connecting the image of the whorl with some concept in my head when the phone beeps. There is a dot here.

This is a painting by local artist James DeBoer. The vague spiral in the centre is an abstract depiction of a snail that James once found crushed into the forest floor in the Trevor Nature Reserve.

This is not at all how I interpreted the scene when I first looked at it: There was something there, something more subtle that I hadn't quite had time to grasp. It is gone. All I can see now is a snail.

After a couple of more hours of reading, another pot of tea, and zero interactions with other humans, the sun sinks and it becomes dark. Also, I have finished my book. I cannot remember how it ended; I'll probably have to read it over again. I leave through the back door, curious about what lies behind the plaza. There is a parking lot here, and behind that is a small park with a hill in its center. The stars are bright and the evening is warm, as usual, so I climb the hill and sit atop it, gazing out at the sky. I sit here for hours, as the evening matures and becomes a full-fledged night.

I realize that I am in pain, but I cannot figure out what exactly is hurting or how to fix it. In my youth, my parents cared for several animals that had been struck by various things. I always felt such pity for them, because it was obvious that they were suffering but were confused as to what had happened, and could think of nothing to do except huddle in a corner and look miserable. There is no shortage of corners in this town.

Just as I am about to rise and brush myself off, the phone beeps. It is exactly midnight: the dot was time-triggered.

What upon the naked shore is this key? All briny, yes -- a haven for the briny things.

When you feel trapped, look for openings in the bulwarks.

www.mitigate

It is gibberish, but I am bored. A cursory search reveals that it is merely some lyrics, although the URL fragment intrigues me. Likely the scribbles of a teenager trying to seem profound. As I kill the dot display, the map springs up in its place. No blips. I have at least stopped expecting to see any.

IV

Sunday morning. I have taken the train up to the city, to explore a little and to increase the chances that I might run into someone that I can relate to. I have started to envision the process of meeting people as a chemical reaction. Perhaps if I physically rub up against enough bodies, there will be a loud noise and suddenly I will have a friend.

I am walking up Bazaar street in the general direction of the museum. I have had to turn off the dots, because they are laid thickly here in overwhelming numbers. I am pushing through the crowds of people that are slowing my progress, but this feels oddly therapeutic.

The current exhibit at the museum is about how immigrant and ethnic communities helped to found the city by doing all the dirty work, such as inhaling concrete dust, balancing precariously on hanging I-beams, and crawling through filthy passages, to name a few. A life-sized street from the 1950s has been assembled inside the museum, complete with buildings. I am not really engaged, and my surroundings flit by my

eyes without causing any discernable traction. I turn on the dots, but the messages aren't making things any more interesting.

Suddenly, I am transfixed. I am on the third floor of a rickety building. Before me lies a tiny box of a room, furnished simply with a twin-sized bed and a chamber pot. The floorboards are scuffed and dirty, and the white walls are smeared. A square plaque identifies the room as the **Typical Quarters of a Ukranian Labourer**. The accompanying text discusses how many such men suffered from extreme depression and dementia as a result of their solitary lifestyle and the long hours they worked to send money back to their families. I imagine a rough, calloused man sitting on the cot with faraway eyes and smoke rising from the cigarette in his mouth that is dangling there as if it has been forgotten.

A dot fires.

Don't get choked up looking at this: If you can afford to be here, there is so much else you could be doing. Don't let yourself be walled in. If you feel lonely you have only yourself to blame.

I cannot stand to be here any longer. I feel like it is I that has been trapped in this tiny room for a decade, searching for some exit that I am too stupid to perceive. I need to see the sky.

V

Sunday afternoon. I am still in the city, wandering the streets. I feel calmer now. I am in an artist's neighborhood; all of the storefronts are occupied by galleries, bookstores, and coffee shops. Everything is grimy, but in a comforting and playful sort of way. The alleys are beautifully painted with murals, and it is sunny enough that they do not feel threatening.

As I make my way further into the network of alleys, the murals become stranger and the walls of the surrounding buildings grow closer together. I stop to admire a particularly strange work, in which pixelated unicorns are descending on a starfighter from a rainbow-striped sky, in the style of a 1980s arcade game. I notice someone approaching me from the way I just came. He is watching me in a way that I feel is menacing. I know that I should return to the streets, but I do not want to cross this man. I instead walk in the other direction, deeper into the maze.

I round a corner, and am confronted by a passage in which the walls are so close together that they touch my shoulders on each side. Old fire-escapes above me blot out the sun. About thirty feet ahead of me, the way stops at a dead end. There are no murals here. I nervously inch forwards, looking for an opening. Violent scenes from movies and videogames are playing through my head. I am expecting an ambush.

Suddenly, my right shoulder is freed from the wall. There is a passage to the side. I turn, and am forced to blink several times before I allow myself to believe what I am seeing.

Before me is a small nook. The floor is a square of unkempt grass, and in the center of the square is a small, sickly tree that is drooping over a surprisingly unblemished bench. It is almost noon, so the sun is directly overhead. A small sign beside the bench says "ELGIN WAY PARKETTE -- PART OF THE GREEN CITY INITIATIVE". I again have the feeling of having stumbled on a secret place. I approach the bench reverently and sit, and a feeling of peace washes over me. For long moments, there is only sunlight and silence.

The phone beeps. This time, I am not disappointed. I feel like I have discovered something.

I saw the shore expand on that joyous day -- breathed deeper, pulsed longer, sighed fuller.

Seek open spaces and vantage places. Let your eyes stretch from their sockets.

-and-flourish.com

At first, I am confused; then, shock pebbles my skin. Frantically, I connect the fragments and type them into my browser. All that appears is an austere white screen, with a simple snippet of text. "Sita Grinds, Sunday to Thursday, noon-9pm. Ask for J in the back."

A quick search, and then I am up and exploding out of the alleys. I do not even fully register the presence of the man that frightened me before as I push past him; he submits easily to one side.

Buses. I need a bus. My cells are humming as I wait for one to arrive. When I came to the city this morning, it felt as if the day would stretch on forever. Now I feel as if the entire world is careening recklessly towards dusk.

VI

I enter the shop and check my watch. It is 2:15pm. It is too easy to get lost in the city.

The place is cramped and full of character. There isn't a single chair available. I walk up to the counter and am confronted by a pair of painfully stylish people who are whirling about, venting liquids from a tangle of shrieking pipes.

"Excuse me," I say above the din. "Is there a 'J' working in the back?"

They look at me as if I am daft; however, I hear a clatter of dishware coming from behind a warped door to my left. It opens violently, and before me stands a woman who appears to be roughly my age. She is looking at me in disbelief. I imagine that I am doing the same to her.

After some moments of silence, she speaks. "Which ones did you find?" she asks haltingly.

I am confused by the question. "There were more than two?" I say; I am not sure, but I think my voice has cracked slightly.

She nods. "Yes. There were eight. Four first-halves, and four second-halves."

I think about this for a moment. It doesn't seem to matter. "I found one on the hill, and one in the parkette in the alley." I say. She smiles slightly, but says nothing. I have many questions to ask, but there is one above all that I must articulate. "How... I mean, did you really expect anyone to find two of them?"

She shakes her head. "No, I really didn't." Her hands work at her apron, gnarling it into ball. "Especially since some of them were timed... it seemed impossible."

"Then why did you do it?" I ask, at a loss.

She pauses for a moment before replying. "Well, I thought... I mean, I felt that if I was going to meet someone this way, that I wanted fate to have a part in it. You know what I mean?"

I think I do, but I am not really sure. I do not know what to say. While I am standing there like an oaf, she takes my hand and looks at me seriously.

"Listen," she says, "I can't talk to you right now, and I'm leaving town tomorrow for a week to visit family, but would you maybe like to meet me somewhere next Saturday so that we can talk?"

"Yes, I would." I say; too quickly, perhaps. "I would very much like that."

She fumbles about in her pocket, and extracts a slim wand of a phone. "Here," she says, touching it to mine. "Track me?"

I nod. "Thank you." I am fumbling with words: Eloquence is an impossibility right now. After so much time in silence, my words are atrophied. "You do the same with me."

She smiles then, and tucks it away. Another pause, more fidgeting and not looking at each other. "I should go, then," she says. "See you Saturday?"

"Yes, I will see you Saturday."

She waves jerkily, and returns from whence she came. As she turns, I notice for the first time that her hair is glossy and black. I have already forgotten what her face looks like. The last minutes had been too replete with circumstance for my senses to adequately register even the coarsest details. I stand frozen for a short time, and then I head for home.

On the train, I realize that the tension that I had been carrying with me for most of the day has disappeared. I watch the landscape whir by the window, and for once my thoughts are placid and inane.

VII

It is midnight. I am in bed, once again reading this book, and once again oblivious to what the text is actually saying. I must go to sleep.

I turn out the light, and instinctively grab the phone to take one last look at the display. On the map, to the northwest of me, there is an orange blip. It is pulsing warmly, and the diffuse orange light is faintly visible on the walls around me.

I place the phone back on the nightstand with a contented sigh. I feel the floor and walls framed thickly around me. The air is a warm fuzz, and I sleep.