

My dad taught me what infinity meant when I was eleven. At the bottom of his birthday card I wrote, "I love you to the moon and back times a trillion gazillion double million," and in parentheses, the number one with too many zeros to count or even make sense. "That is a lot of zeros my sweetness, he said joyfully. Not enough." I responded, my hand cramped but I pinky promise I love you more. He grabbed a napkin from the table and wrote "I love you to the moon and back times ∞ ." It means I love you more than the human mind is capable of knowing. There is a potent unconditionality to infinity, and from that day on I simply assumed that all people knew it equally. But infinity is elusive and

After a bit of time, we walked back to the dorms together, because I was cold and Ahmad needed to go to the dry cleaners to get his suits pressed. I hate wearing suits, he told me. When I asked why, he said that he only wore suits on Christmas day, and Christmas was the one day he had to stand next to his father in their family portrait and pretend that they were equally respectable men. Ahmad asked if I loved my father and whether I called my father dad. There is a great distinction in what we value by how we call it. I call my mom "Mama" and she has a beautiful spirit, one that hugs you no matter what. My dad has a colorful mind, one that is saturated in curiosity and a desire to understand. Not only was I never beaten, but I was often hugged. And I am convinced their love for me is what taught me how to hold myself. I never quite understood how Ahmad existed with such joy, grace, and kindness despite a faulty father. He is proof that a person is as significant and influential as one lets them be.

I was raised by family game nights and home-cooked sit-down meals, I was taken to the mountains to learn about myself, given an education to learn about everything else, and offered an infinity, not of time, but of love. While the most optimistic of people might assume that all people know and show love equally, there are distortions. Love is something we cannot ignore, no matter how much we desire to. Love is a necessity, but also a privilege. It is people like Ahmad that are proof that conditional love does not always birth conditional love. It is people like Ahmad that keep hope kindled.

Ahmad and I slipped back into talking about the weather. It was even colder now despite being closer to afternoon. It was time to go. Goodbye Habibi, he said. I knew what that meant, having been told weeks earlier that it meant "my love" in Arabic, and I wondered how a boy could so easily say a word that he had rarely heard himself. I loved him for it, loved him for his ability to love despite his own deficit. He carried on, waved, whistled a bit, and shrugged as he walked away. Another day, another conversation, another story told. His words crept into my being, and I found both a deep sadness and infinite appreciation for the joy that pools in the corners of people's eyes as they speak of what they do have. He thought nothing of it, but I slept differently that night, and I love him for reminding me what a privilege it is to love and be loved.

I throw my phone across the room, hearing the thud as my door halts its flight. Underneath the sharp sound is something important, something irreversible, something more profound. In the ensuing silence, I hear it. The irrevocable crack that precedes the shatter. A sound that alters this moment, reverberating through my hunched body; a noise that transmutes my world, shaking me to my core. A shiver that changes me. I will never be the same.

In the aftermath of the cataclysm, I lay amid the rubble. Broken trust. Broken friendship. Broken heart. Curled in the fetal position, my cheek is pressed against the soiled sheets of my bed. My hands push against my chest in a feeble attempt to protect my heart as the dam inside me ruptures, and out pours the dark waters that were locked behind it. A tidal wave of memories, so profoundly mundane, rushes over me, drowning me with its savage force and dragging me out towards an apathetic and unforgiving sea. The jagged edges of my heart impede my resistance—I am so tired of treading these treacherous waters—I surrender.

I let the sea of memories sweep me away from the safety of the shore that day, from the security of ignorance and denial. And I sank. His voice floated to me through the murk, wrapped around me like a constrictor. A voice I loved, a voice I remembered but no longer recognized, a voice that saved me in my peril only to crush me in my safety. The voice of a ghost. "I think I'm losing my mind." I say to him through my hysterical, unguarded laughter. "Can't lose what you never had," he replies cheekily. Once and a thousand other times he'd teased me, laughed at me, with me. His voice was a dog-eared novel in the library of my mind. The echoes of it faded with each passing day, my memory of it washed out by time, like sand in the tide. A deafening silence took its place. In this absence of sound, I heard everything I should have said to him. I should have told him, could have a hundred times... My friend, you're scored on my heart...

The lost echoes of his voice dripped down the dark, sepulchral pathways of my memory, conjuring images of snow and ice. Vanilla ice cream homemade. Two parts white snow from his porch. One part milk. One part white sugar. All pure joy. His house where I joke with his sister and bicker with his brother where I play with his dog. Where we laugh together and banter and play Battleship. As the remnants of the memory lingered in my mind, I reflexively reminded myself to never play that game with you because you were a near-pathological cheater... before I ruthlessly righted myself: we would never play Battleship again.

The tide shifted, and I saw the two of us as we wandered side-by-side through a December morning.

know. I had to know because that letter wasn't really a goodbye at all, it was a plea for reassurance, a shout into the void, a last desperate attempt to hold on. So I asked him. And when he just said "yeah", I said, "and...?"

And the floodgates opened. Torrents of scathing words and accusations and the most horrible, unimaginable belief, immovably implanted in his mind. My last vestige of hope was crushed that day, the pedestal that I had misguidedly built beneath him felled. "And...?" I type, breath uneven. His reply comes, and with it a world of pain: And now I see that you were only using me all along My family tried to warn me and I didn't listen to them but now I see "

Using him...to like me? Pretending to be his friend? Pretending to care? All the laughter and love and joy was reduced, mutated, obliterated by a terrible misunderstanding. My careless, foolish words twisted into something alien, a wretched and irreversible conclusion. It was the reality that was so difficult to absorb, the immutability of the outcome—I was helpless in the face of its wrath.

The May flowers bloomed as my heart wilted. The world burst to life in a plethora of vivid colors, but my mind was a study of gray. I tried to remember everything about him, to lock it in my heart, where it could never be lost. I found that those memories were guarded like a fragrant rose, surrounded by sentries of unforgiving thorns. I tried to forget, but that was even worse. An ocean cannot be held back through sheer force of will. And always, at the back of my mind, constant as the tide: What if he was right? What if I only used him, him with his short laugh and quick smile and heart of gold?

The month passed in a thousand agonizing minutes, time stretched and lengthened by the hands of regret. By the time I heard from him again, I was changed. Ge 970 0 0 0.9696970 0.5454545 3.27t 4.9 (e) -3.y 3.27 55.2757 (s) 2.1 (r2 (iner)5 (.5 (e 97)-4.9de:7 1 .276 (a) 6.5 (lg) 4(in, m /T2.58

Cardinals are popular songbirds, credited for their beauty. So eye-catching are they that seven U.S. states call them their state bird ("Northern Cardinal: Life History").

Courting consists of the male and female cardinals singing solo with their heads held high, swaying back and forth, in rhythm with the song (Kaufman).

BJ and Jim's first date was actually not even a date. Instead, it was a double date. They came with two other partners, who are not important now. It was their first dance. Dancing along to the radio was free so, growing up poor with not much to do, Jim and his sisters were excellent dancers. His date was not.

"Do you know how to jitterbug?"

"No."

Looking across the table, his eyes landed on BJ, with her fiery red hair.

"Do you know how to jitterbug?"

"A little."

Next thing she knew they were out on the floor dancing the night away. Their original dates stayed sitting awkwardly, sullen about their pairs of two left feet.

"In summer, their sweet whistles are one of the first sounds of the morning" ("Northern Cardinal: Life History").

After marriage and their first child, she said she was staying home.

There was no point in arguing with her.

She raised the kids; he raised a business. The bank laughed at him when he requested a loan.

It seems paradoxical for the

A friend once told me the Great Sand Dunes “are the quietest place in the lower 48 states.” Where he got this information is unclear and it could very well be one of his own factoids, but there was no reason for me to doubt the authenticity of his fact because for the first time, in the Sand Dunes, I heard complete silence.

Seven of us lay lined up next to each other on a tarp barricading our sleeping bags from the sand. I awoke suddenly. The sleeping bag rustled around me as I sat up to stare at the moon-lit dunes surrounding me. The rustling stopped after I adjusted for comfort and that's when I heard the silence. I couldn't hear the congested breaths of my friends or the crickets chirping. I couldn't even hear the constant sound of air. There was nothing. Maybe I was experiencing the sound deaf people hear or maybe the sound a dead person hears. Either way, it was the loudest silence to be heard.

Trevor Cox went to Kelso Dunes (another set of sand dunes located near Baker, San Bernardino County, California) and said he “experienced something quite rare: complete silence.”

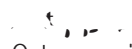
Perceive with the ear the sound made by someone or something.

We use silence to honor the dead. We take a moment of silence to reflect on what has happened to them, to remember them, to honor them.

During the Black Lives Matter movement, we knelt at the corner of Colfax and Speer in downtown Denver. The streets were blocked off by police officers and filled with attendants down countless blocks. We knelt in silence for eight minutes and 46 seconds. Eight minutes and 46 seconds. The same amount of time Derek Chauvin had his knee on George Floyd's neck. Thousands of us covered the Denver streets honoring George Floyd silently for eight minutes and 46 seconds.

American composer John Cage created the controversial, influential, inspiring, perplexing, infamous piece 4'33". It is a three-movement composition of four minutes and 33 seconds of silence.

When pianist David Tudor performed John Cage's 4'33", he sat down at his piano, covered the keyboard, and glanced at his stopwatch. During the four minutes and 33 seconds he raised and lowered the keyboard twice, careful to make no sound, and turned pages of sheet music which were absent of musical notes. When the time was up, he stood to rest.



Outer space is the closest environment to hearing true silence. In space, there are no air molecules to carry the chirping sounds of humans, the

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To the mosquito in my room during a full moon,

I wish that you would die outside with my blood still inside of you.

I hate you,

Me.

Severin,

I should have told you that I was not looking for a relationship with you. I cannot admit to myself that I will never be comfortable in one place, and being near you could be considered a place. I find myself replaying the music and noise I heard in Calle Jesús María in my head. I enjoyed our first date when I was rolling too hard, and I lost my debit card, and my head felt like it would fall onto the turntables. I miss the chaos, and I never wanted to cook minestrone with you because it takes too long. I would have felt restless.

You should read this,

Your Cicciolino.

Dear Canyon de Chelly,

You felt very close to divinity.

Severin,

You make me feel less restless and that is enough for now.

Love,

Your Cicciolino.

To the border crossing in El Paso or Juárez,

I always looked forward to seeing you. It may have been masochistic, naive or alchemical. You were change. I was either going to become brown or American. I always wondered who I was when I stood right on top of you. I could have lived in one of the border patrol checkpoint booths—the really cramped ones where the officers are always smoking. I could live in constant excitement and fear.

Loosen up,

Javier Alejandro Padilla-Gonzalez.

Pedro Padilla,

You used to be a reference point for my life. An amazing stela carved with the cardinal directions, rooted deeply into sand caves. Since your pulmonary embolism, you are a point that I try to avoid. I know all of your riddles, and I don't think that you know that you keep repeating the same riddle. Maybe you cannot recognize me.

I hope your life was enough,

Alex.

Hi mom,

I met a boy and he is really sweet. Unfortunately, I am trying to get out of this relationship. I have been cheating on him with a girl who hates me, and it is fulfilling some stressed desire or prophecy. I would move to Switzerland with him and have his kids, and that scares me. All of my friends say that he is not cute enough to be with me, but I think they are jealous that I have found a place in someone and I could die tomorrow. He hates ice cream just like me. How is dad?

Honest,

Your son.

Hey Tony,

I stily,

to the vegetable vendor in Mercado Los Alamos,

Mom,

When you realize you have been sequestered, do you look to the lush lawns shielding your 1000-square-foot suburban home and feel some freedom? Do you also look to the mountains and imagine sprouting feet so long that you could sprint along the ridge for 20 minutes and find yourself lost in the Sierra Madre for the first time? Has English scalded your tongue so severely that if you try to roll your Rs on the roof of your mouth, it stings? Do you like to receive my letters during my quest to find a home, when you consider yourself home? Do you miss your