

“A billion.”

“A googol.”

And I shouted, “infinity!”

Jolo jumped in. “But infinity isn’t a number.”

He’s right. My father’s a pastor, so eight-year-old me heard stuff like “his wisdom was as infinite as sand on the seashore” or “God’s love is as infinite as the universe.” But neither sand nor the universe are infinite.

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When I was nine, I did math competitions to spend more time with Raphael and Jolo. When I was ten, I got on the math team. I joined the Metrobank Mathematics Competition, where thousands of students across the Philippines compete. We never made it past the city level.

When I was eleven, I entered middle school. When I was twelve, I got on the MMC team again. When I was thirteen, our team placed first in the city, then fifth in the region. My parents didn’t seem to care.

When I was fourteen, I entered high school. The International Mathematical Olympiad is the Olympics of high school math, where each country sends a team of its six best high schoolers to compete. It sounds ridiculous, but I’d read stories about it. Contestants played cards, went to field trips, and talked about math for a whole week. Participants would go on to study abroad, with the IMO topping their achievement list.

The qualifying test was the Philippine Mathematical Olympiad. I told myself I would be happy to make the national stage. When I was fifteen, I did it. I placed in the top twenty and

made the national stage of the PMO. But it suddenly felt unsatisfying—now I wanted to make the IMO. I wanted to make the top six, I wanted another thing on my brag sheet, I wanted to mess around in another country with a bunch of friends.

When I was fifteen, I was eighth in line for the team.

When I was sixteen, my parents stopped me from even trying.

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Let me try again. When I was eleven, I entered middle school. Raphael, Jolo, and I went to different ones. It was the beginning of seventh grade. Everyone's new to middle school, no one knows each other, and people make friends through common interests. But when others talked about video games, I talked about board games. When others talked about struggling in math, I couldn't relate. And when others talked about TV shows, Spongebob wasn't cool any more.

When I was twelve, for the first time in five years, I celebrated my birthday alone. When I was thirteen, I got depressed. My father urged me to spend more time in the church, but that didn't help. Not when no one in church seemed to be interested in math, not when none of the other teens in church wanted to hang out with me, not when church was *twenty hours a week*, not when I was about to enter high school, not when I started struggling with academics for the first time in my life, not when I didn't have enough time to do homework because of church, no.

When I was fourteen, I entered high school. All of a sudden, being nerdy was something *valued*. Classmates would come to me for homework help during recess, ask me for help customizing their Tumblr blogs, get me to review their essays' grammar. When I was fifteen, I started making friends closer than Raphael and Jolo were. But I couldn't really hang out with

them, because my parents warned me against the unbelievers. I couldn't go to the movies with them, because the church didn't allow that. I couldn't even invite them over to celebrate my birthday because I didn't want my parents to think I hung out with them, "the unbelievers".

And I grew frustrated. I had friends, but so what if I couldn't spend time with them? It felt as if something stopped me from really being happy, as if every time I got close to actually being satisfied, something just had to stop me. No. This doesn't work either.

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Let me try again. When I was thirteen, I got depressed. When I was fourteen, instead of finding solace in church, I found it on the internet. My classmates and I started keeping blogs on Tumblr. I talked about my life on forums. I started reading things online.

When I was fifteen, I got interested in philosophy. I read *Rationality: From AI to Zombies*, a book by the AI researcher Eliezer Yudkowsky, dedicated to something called *rationality*. A section called "Crisis of Faith" begins with "Many in this world retain beliefs whose flaws a ten-year-old could point out, if that ten-year-old were hearing the beliefs for the first time" (Yudkowsky). When I thought about it, so many of the church's beliefs—*my* beliefs—felt like this. Like how going to the movies led to demonic possession, or the senseless bigotry against the queer, the atheists, or the unbelievers. After hours and hours of reading and reflecting, the book prompted me to stage a crisis of faith. And I came out of it an unbeliever.

I started lying. I'd tell mom I'm going to a friend's place to work on a project, when we'd go to the movies instead. Or I'd tell her there's math contest training, when I'd hang out with friends. And I fell in love with another guy. I was discovering the world my parents withheld from me, and everything was new.

But every interaction became a minefield. My father would ask me why I didn't spend time with the other believers, and I couldn't say I didn't like them. My mother would ask if I still felt that "depression" thing, and I couldn't tell her God didn't help. And at church, for twenty hours a week, I pretended to be enthusiastic. I really felt God's presence when we sang that hymn. I'm so thankful for God's wisdom during that contest. I really felt what dad said in the sermon, when he said that gay people were going to hell.

Maybe it doesn't sound so bad. And it's not, at first. But lying twenty hours a week? Putting on a mask from the moment I go home to the moment I go to sleep? Twenty hours a week meant twenty less hours to spend doing other things. I was running out of excuses every time I wanted to go out. I'd have to keep up the lie until I could be financially independent, which would take years.

I started complaining about my parents when I was sixteen. The first person I complained to told me, "Sure, your parents are strict, but so are everyone else's."

"No," I told him. "You don't understand. This is different. This is wrong."

And my friends all said the same thing. "It isn't that bad." Or, "It'll be better once you turn eighteen." Or, "So what?" It broke me.

When I was sixteen, for the first time in my life, I wanted to kill myself.

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As someone who did math, patterns were something I noticed all the time. When patterns appeared in my life, I couldn't help but notice. Sure I made the PMO, but not the IMO. I made friends, but couldn't get close to them. I discovered myself, at the risk of getting thrown out of

home. It felt as if every time I climb a mountain, there's a higher peak taunting me. As if I'm counting higher and higher, but never reaching infinity.

Everyone told me that things would get better once I turned eighteen, once I became an adult and got a job and could run away from my parents. I was afraid that I wouldn't be alive for that. I was afraid that by then, my suffering would have sucked out all my excitement. I was afraid that new and new problems would come up, because that was the pattern.

It was no surprise, then, that of all his philosophical reading, fifteen-year-old me was drawn most to the myth of Sisyphus. In Greek myth, Sisyphus was punished to roll a boulder to the top of a hill, only to have it roll back down again. He was to push it back up again, and again, and again, for all of eternity (Camus 75). And didn't that sound familiar?

Sure, it's a metaphor. All of these are metaphors—mountains, infinity, Sisyphus. I find it particularly poetic when a mathematical metaphor is used to explain. Mathematicians Davis and Hersh write an *entire book* called *The Mathematical Experience* where they use this technique so masterfully. For example, they explain Plato's idea of forms by writing "The so-called real world of experience, says Plato, is not real at all... The objects of mathematics are all abstract and the Platonic world is the dwelling place of the true circle, and the true square" (Davis and Hersh 129). I love that book so much. Maybe that's why I love explaining my life through metaphors, and why I sought answers to my questions through them.

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Sixteen-year-old me, with his suicidal preoccupation, was drawn in a different way to the philosopher Camus. He opens *The Myth of Sisyphus* with "There is only one really serious

philosophical question, and that is suicide” (Camus 3). While most of the work was impenetrable, I eventually understood this part:

I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain. One always finds one’s burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself, forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy (Camus 123).

At first, Camus’s conclusion felt absurd. That Sisyphus’s endless effort wasn’t futile, but a *triumph*. That his work represented “scorn of the gods” and “hatred of death” (Camus 120). That when the rock falls down the hill, “he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock” (Camus 121). Though he never escapes his punishment, it is through the knowledge and acceptance of this that he is happy.

I couldn’t empathize. Sure, there’s a brief, momentary happiness when Sisyphus reaches the top; that much, I felt too. I could at least understand why Camus concluded why Sisyphus wanted to continue; this I felt too. I understood his point when I read *The Mathematical Experience* again. When Davis and Hersh explain infinity, they write

Observe the equation

$$\frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{4} + \frac{1}{8} + \frac{1}{16} + \cdots = 1.$$

...On the left-hand side, we seem to have incompleteness, infinite striving. On the right-hand side we have finitude, completion. There is a tension between the two sides which is a source of power and paradox. There is an overwhelming mathematical desire to bridge the gap between the finite and the infinite. We want to complete the incomplete, to catch it, to cage it, to tame it (Davis and Hersh 153).

It was then that I understood. Of course Sisyphus had “scorn of the gods” and “hatred of death”. It’s through the fact that his struggles are endless that Sisyphus catches the infinite. By embracing and accepting the punishment, Sisyphus cages the infinite. In the sum of moments the rock falls, Sisyphus rebels; even if his task is endless, it’s *complete*.

If I was going to look for answers through metaphors, then, I must be looking at things the wrong way. Here I was complaining about infinity, but as someone who did math, didn’t I deal with infinity all the time? If Sisyphus feels triumph whenever the rock rolls down, if I feel happy whenever I solve a problem, then maybe it’s *good* that my problems are infinite. Because then, I’d always find a reason to be happy.

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So let me try again.

When I was fifteen, I realized I was a gay atheist. When I was sixteen, I wanted to kill myself. When I was seventeen, my parents found out, and they kicked me out of home. I had enough money to rent out a dingy, dilapidated place. I slept on a mattress no thicker than my thumb. My blanket was my only defense against the mosquitoes feasting on me. I had no internet

when I was in my room, an unreliable source of power, and a window that leaked every time it rained.

And yet, that was the first time in life that I felt *free*. I didn't have to go to church twenty hours a week. I didn't have to lie whenever I wanted to go to the movies. But of course, problems cropped up, as the pattern dictates. My parents tracked me down and threatened to sue my landlord because she was sheltering a minor without parental consent. I was evicted, and was forced to stay with my parents. For months, I suffered.

When I turned eighteen, I ran away from home. I had enough savings to get a better place. I got a raise. I moved to live closer with my friends, and I hung out with them every night. And true to pattern, I worried about college apps and job security and having enough money to go abroad. I got deferred to MIT before I got accepted. The embassy rejected my application twice before giving me a student visa.

I'm nineteen now. I'm studying somewhere my seventeen-year-old self thought was a pipe dream. I'm also struggling through my academics and social life.

But I'll solve this problem. Soon I'll be twenty, and then I'll have a different one. I'll be forty, sixty, eighty, a hundred. A thousand, a million, a billion, a googol.

I'll never reach infinity, but it is in this manner I cage it.

It means that my upward count will never stop.

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