

# Umbrellas

Andrew Poelstra

December 26, 2011

In memory of

## Ronnie James Dio

*Ronnie, it has been an honor for my life to overlap yours, no matter for how short a time. Your music, and the music of those you have inspired, has changed my life and will live with me forever. Thank you, and goodbye.*

The first day of school. Don stepped out the door into the pouring rain and sighed. *You can pave the rainforest*, he thought, *but it keeps right on being a rainforest, doesn't it?* That was the truth. Summer was ending, taking a month-long dry spell with it, and the clouds had some catching up to do. Truth be told, Don liked the rain most of the time — when he didn't have to walk through it, mainly — but today he was not so lucky. By the time he was halfway down his driveway, his coat was wet and heavy, pressing coldly on his bare arms. His hair was matted, backpack soaked, and textbooks probably ruined — but he smiled. First days are funny that way.

Two minutes later the bus stop came into view. A couple of people were standing nearby, wearing raincoats or huddled under umbrellas. All of them looked tired and distant as they waited. One man, however, stood out. He was sitting on the bench, wearing no coat and bearing no umbrella. His hair was greying and wild, though the rain held it down, and his unshaven face was slightly wrinkled. He wore faded, ripped jeans and a white T-shirt bearing the words “University of Vienna” in faded letters. Though he wore glasses, there were no raindrops on them. Don looked at them in confusion for a few seconds, then realized that they had no lenses. It didn't matter, though. The man's eyes were closed.

When Don stopped walking, the man opened his eyes and looked straight at him. There was a moment of silence as they surveyed each other, then Don spoke. “No umbrella today?” He asked with a small smile.

The rain-man laughed out loud, a bright smile spread across his face. “Umbrellas are fascinating, aren't they?” He asked. “You can stand out here, in the middle of the rain, and not get wet.”

Don didn't reply.

“You start to wonder, though,” the rain-man continued, “if we're the ones holding the umbrella, or maybe we're the raindrops. Have you ever thought of that?”

“No,” Don replied truthfully.

“Don't. You'll drive yourself mad.”

Don chuckled. “Mad enough to sit out in the pouring rain with nothing but a T-shirt?”

“Oh, the rain would find me anyway,” the reply was light-hearted, but rain-man's eyes were bitter, almost fearful. “It always seems to, doesn't it?” This last part was said more to himself than to Don, and he shut his eyes again.

Hoping that that was the end of the conversation, Don turned around to face the road, watching for the bus beside the other commuters. He glanced at each of them in turn, but they were all lost in their own world, completely unaware of the conversation that had just happened. A minute passed in silence.

A bus came by, but it was the wrong one. All but one of the people beside Don piled on, and it pulled away with a heavy groan. He turned to the only person left — a young woman huddled underneath an umbrella, backpack hanging loosely from her shoulders — and scrunched his face at the rain. She replied in turn, and they both chuckled. From behind Don, the rain-man yelled “hey!”

They both turned toward the voice, but the rain-man only looked at Don. “I need to borrow your phone,” he said.

Don glanced down the road. No bus was coming, so he fished his phone from his pocket and handed it over. Still sitting, soaking in the rain, the rain-man reached out and accepted it. He flipped it open, stared at the screen for a couple of seconds, then dialed a number. His fingers were slick and water poured freely from his hair, and by the time he moved the phone to his head, it was just as wet as he was. “Albert?” He asked with a slight Austrian accent. “Albert, I need to talk to you. I’ve found a hole — a hole — Albert?”

The rain-man handed the phone back to Don. “Shorted out,” he said with a shrug. Don glared at him in a half-serious way, popped the battery out, and put the phone back in his pocket.

“It’ll come back,” the rain-man assured him. “Just let it dry out.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“If not, you come after me,” he laughed, coughing sharply and shivering in the rain. “Your bus is here.”

Don looked. Sure enough, the bus had arrived, so he followed the young woman on board, flashing his pass at the driver, who nodded sleepily and shut the door. He made his way to the back of the bus, glancing first at the woman — who eyes stared blankly into his — and then to the rain-man, still sitting at the stop in his soaked t-shirt and jeans.

School was bustling. Once off the over-packed bus, Don found the campus swarming with new arrivals. The rain had mostly stopped, but everyone still looked wet. Don smiled to himself and made his way to his English lecture.

English went by slowly. The professor spent the first part of the lecture fighting with his microphone and the projector, then gave up and simply

shouted while drawing on the chalkboard. From the back, Don couldn't hear much, but it didn't matter. As near as he could tell, the entire lecture was nothing but the course outline and marking scheme, and those things could always be checked later. He left an hour later, a little less tired — he had ducked out for a coffee break — and glad to be gone.

“Electricity,” his physics professor began, “is the least understood concept in all of science. Open a magazine, turn on the TV, hell, open a high school textbook on electricity, and everything in there is *wrong*. Complete and utter *bullshit*.”

The prof's name was Al Bliteby, a balding forty-something with wild hair circling his head, excited eyes and a big voice. Don took a liking to him immediately, and listened as he talked about electric and magnetic fields, electron flow and electrical energy. “They're different things!” he cried. “People use the word *electricity* for charge and energy flow like they're the same thing, but they're absolutely not!”

“If they were,” he continued. “How could AC power move down the lines?” He said this last question while looking directly at a girl in the front row, who covered instead of offering an answer. He laughed friendly, and she smiled nervously.

After Physics, Don had a history lecture, then a break for lunch. It took a bit of hunting, but he found a cheap pizza place and ate alone. His schedule gave him an hour to eat, then a mathematics lecture in room 2202. Don looked at the room number a few times. He'd never heard of the place, so he finished early to go hunt for it.

He needed the extra time. After passing from room 2200 to 2210 four times, he tried the floors above and below. No luck. Failing that, he went down a couple of other hallways, but they too were dead ends. Finally, he went outside and re-entered through another door. This led him into a small, dimly lit hallway he'd never seen before. There was another door at the far end leading outside, but otherwise the place was completely inaccessible from the rest of the building.

On each side, there were closed doors, and thankfully one was marked ‘2202’. Quietly, he opened it and slipped inside, ten minutes late.

Inside the small classroom were about a dozen people, including the professor. He was a small man with wild hair and thick glasses. Like most of the room, he looked slightly damp, though his clothing was dry. His name, which he had written on the whiteboard, was Lars Peduo. Below that: Math 389, Intro to Crypto. Through a Hungarian accent, Lars got right down to

business. After five minutes overviewing the course, he explained that any English words to be encoded would be expressed as base-27 numbers (“‘A’ is one, ‘Z’ is twenty-six!”). Then he began listing the various algorithms they would be using, and Don began to drift off.

Throughout the lecture, people arrived, out of breath and looking bewildered at the odd placement of the classroom. The first few, Lars looked at for a moment and blinked before continuing, but after that he just ignored them. By the time the lecture was over, he had summarized twelve different encryption techniques, though he looked a little out of breath as he finished. He smiled like a madman and wished the class good night.

The evening bus was quiet, and Don drifted in and out of sleep as the sun set slowly and the clouds drifted apart. Nobody had assigned him homework yet and tomorrow was Tuesday — no school — so he let his mind wander and textbooks sit. He put the battery back into his phone, which started up admirably.

It began to rain again in the night, though not very much. When Don woke up and walked out to the mailbox, the road was wet but the air was dry. Over a block away, the rain-man was sitting at the bus stop. He looked damp, even from here. He turned to look at Don, who waved, then turned away.

Wednesday and Thursday drifted by with no event. Friday night rolled around, and Don met up with his friends at a local bar.

“Don!” Alan greeted. “How’s it going?”

“Oh, back to school.”

“I hear ya, man. Hitting the books, eh?”

Don shrugged. “Not really.”

Alan laughed, and turned to see their friend Chuck arriving. He was already tipsy, but managed to high-five the others before crashing into the seat beside Don. “Hey guys,” he slurred, then addressed Don. “How’s life on university mountain?”

“Still summer there, Chuck. You should come up.”

“Yeah, not a chance. That place gives me the creeps.” Don’s school was built into the mountainside, and engulfed in fog most of the year, which had earned it a reputation as a creepy place. Chuck had been there once, in pea soup so thick he couldn’t see his feet, and never gone back.

The three drank and talked about school — Alan was taking a break from school to do some “top-secret government project”, and Chuck was studying industrial mechanics — late into the night, and when the bar began to close,

they left. Alan immediately said goodbye and headed for home, leaving the other two standing in the parking lot.

“Wanna go for a walk?” Chuck asked. He was having trouble standing, and looked like he could use some fresh air.

“Sure,” Don replied.

The two of them wandered through town, stopping at the local amphitheatre. The stage gave them somewhere to sit, and the trees blocked the noise and streetlights, letting them drink freely without fear of cops or strangers. An hour later, tired and nearly out of whiskey, they parted ways, stumbling toward their respective houses.

It was a clear, chilly night, and the streetlights glared eerily, creating black halos in the star-speckled sky. Don’s watch displayed 2:00 AM, and the streets were silent. He wrapped his coat around himself and shivered. He fished through his pockets and found some earbud headphones, which he pressed into his ears, drunkenly and shivering. A few seconds later, Iron Maiden began to blare, hiding the harsh silence of the night.

Don’s walk dragged on, the loud music making him jumpy as his tired eyes saw movement in the shadows. Wind picked up, moving tree branches in his peripheral, and every pair of headlights seemed to be watching him. Afraid, he ducked through a park to avoid them. His vision was slightly blurred and it was difficult to think straight. His thoughts turned to the rain-man.

*Umbrellas are fascinating, aren't they?* he had said. *You can stand in the rain, and not a drop hits you.* Something like that. Don looked out at a streetlight, fascinated by its halo. *Lights are umbrellas of the stars, aren't they? And the sun . . . the biggest of them all.* Don laughed out loud, and felt suddenly nauseous. He sat down on a park bench and took a deep breath.

A minute later, he was feeling better, and stood up. He took a quick look around, and his blood ran cold. Sitting on a bus-bench, not a hundred meters away, the rain-man was sitting, watching him. Don sat back down, and the two stared at each other for a moment. Then, as if in trance, Don stood up and walked toward him.

“Got yerself lost, eh?” the rain-man asked when Don was close enough.

Don chuckled, then looked around. It was true that he wasn’t quite sure where he was, but he wasn’t nearly *lost*. He opened his mouth to reply, but the rain-man beat him to it.

“I got lost once,” he said, and sighed. “Long time ago.” He reached into his pocket for a smoke, but the box was empty. His mouth twitched and he

threw it aside.

“Wanna drink?” Don offered, pulling a bottle of Chuck’s whiskey from his pocket. The rain-man accepted gratefully, taking a deep swig and handing it back, coughing roughly. “Thanks.”

Don took a swig himself, then sat down to wait for the rain-man’s bus with him. “When’s it coming?” he asked, staring down the empty road.

“I dunno,” the rain-man replied. “I think’ve missed the last one. S’fine, I need some sleep anyway.”

“You live out here?” Don asked, confused. He was drunker than he thought.

The rain-man ignored the question. “Those headphones of yours,” he said, pointing at the earbuds hanging from Don’s neck. “They’re an umbrella of sorts, ain’t they?”

“I suppose,” Don lied.

“Only instead of rain, you’re blocking out the world.”

Don smiled at that. “Just like these streetlights are blocking out the sky,” he said.

The rain-man laughed loudly, then coughed. “You got it, Pontiac.”

They were quiet for a moment, then Don spoke. “So where’re you headed, then?”

“As I say, I’m lost,” the rain-man was speaking slowly, thoughtfully. “To be honest, I’m not sure I even know where I’m tryin’ to get anymore. These cities drift by, and I just bounce right off of ’em. Maybe one day I’ll stick, then I’ll be home, y’know?”

Don didn’t know, and he said so.

“I’ve seen you ride the bus,” the rain-man continued. “Eyes closed and headphones in. Can’t hear a thing. You can’t.” He coughed the words *you can’t* raspily. “The world pelts you and yeh don’t even feel it, ’cause you’re trapped in your head.”

Don swallowed, and the rain-man looked directly into his eyes. “Umbrellas can be terrifying things, can’t they?” Then: “Don’t get lost.”

With that, the rain-man stood up and walked away. Don watched as he faded into the night, then closed his eyes. He heard a bus pull up, but he ignored it and it drove away. Sleeping on the bench sounded like a lovely idea, but he forced the thought from his mind, and made his eyes open. The orangelit street was still in front of him, empty and vivid. Across the road, a chainlink fence bordered the park, which was little more than the black silhouette of trees in the distance. Above that, the sky glowed a dark



blue, dotted with stars who twinkled coldly in the night air. A traffic light changed somewhere to Don's right, changing the orange light around him from vaguely green to vaguely red. A car engine roared in the distance.

Ten minutes passed in silence. Don went home.

The weekend went by uneventfully. Don rode his bicycle all through town, but he didn't see the rain-man.

Monday rolled around, and with it Math 389. Written across the board were the words "RSA Cryptosystem," below which were written a dozen or so random numbers, and Lars was nearly jumping out of his skin as he waited excitedly for class to start. When he noticed Don, his smile faded, but he propped it back up and said nothing. A minute later, the lecture began.

"As usual, we will convert our words to numbers by treating the letters as base-27 digits," Lars spoke rapidly. "So 'dog' is 3328, 'cat' is 2234, and so on. Today we will discuss *asymmetric cryptography*, amazing systems in which anyone can encrypt a message —" he paused to face the class — "but only *one* can decrypt it." He was grinning ear to ear.

Don tried to share the professor's enthusiasm, but found himself drifting off as the old man raved about number theory. Halfway through the word "exponentiation", Don's head slipped from his hand and hit the desk in front of him. Startled, the professor stopped speaking and looked directly at Don, who blinked sheepishly.

"Late nights studying graph theory?" Lars asked with a sly smile. "Tracing bus routes with wet strangers?"

"What?" Don asked bluntly.

"Sleep is very important for stress and sanity," Lars said, and turned back to his lecture.

The whiteboard faded to black, and came back sideways. Don realized his head was laying on the desk, and he quickly sat back up. Unsure how much of the previous conversation had been a dream, he looked around the classroom. Nobody seemed perturbed, and Lars had his back to the class, writing quietly. The words *cat* and *dog* were still on the board, scribbled hastily but very much real.

When the lecture ended, Don walked to the coffee shop. *Shit, I need to sleep*, he thought, but ordered a large coffee for the ride home. It didn't help: the bus was as slow and monotonous as ever, and soon he was drifting off.

Tuesday he slept.

Wednesday afternoon arrived in time, and with it Lars' cryptography

class. This time he wrote an array of numbers on the board:

281947	485981	27958	448203	467687	397523
59398	291646	416997	375254	60518	435145
377725	547121	101363	32582	254390	

“I have an exciting challenge for you!” the prof said excitedly. “Of course, a computer could do this in a fraction of a second, so I can’t . . .”

Lars trailed off, looking suddenly confused and terribly old. He blinked stupidly a few times, then shook his head and continued speaking as though nothing had happened. “. . . give marks for this, but I encourage you to try it nonetheless.”

Don copied the numbers from the board as Lars flipped through his notes, muttering to himself as he searched for something. Finally he cried “Aha!” and looked back up to the class.

“I have here a message for you to decrypt,” he started. “It is encoded using the RSA system we discussed last week. The modulus is 547 thousand 319 and exponent is 81 thousand 763. Good luck!”

He grinned wildly at his students for nearly a minute, then wordlessly turned and erased the numbers from the board. In their place he wrote the words ELLIPTIC CURVES. With his usual smile, he turned to the class and announced that they would be doing new and exciting algebra for the next five weeks.

Once again, Friday night rolled around, and with it Chuck, Alan and whiskey. Eventually Don found himself in the back of a bus home, a couple hours away. The rain-man sat a few seats away, but seemed not to notice him. Hoping to stay unnoticed, Don closed his eyes and pretended to sleep. His head swam as he tilted it backward, and he nearly fell out of his seat, disoriented. Perhaps he had had too much to drink.

When he opened his eyes, he was looking at a few sheets of paper piled sloppily on the seat beside the rain-man. Scribbled on the top one was a bunch of numbers, laid out in rows, some circled and others lined out. With a dull surprise, tempered by his drunkenness, Don recognized the handwriting. He looked up to the rain-man, who looked back at him. Behind the lensless glasses, above a stubbly, dusty smirk, were Lars’ eyes.

For a moment, they looked at each other. Then Don broke the silence: “What the hell, man?”

Lars chuckled, and looked shyly at the bus floor. “It’s hard sometimes,”

he mumbled. “Staying in one place all the time. I have it on good faith —” he coughed roughly. “On sound logic, of a sort, that it’s impossible to make sense of it all. Impossible.”

He giggled, and Don laughed back, not getting the joke. The rain-man continued. “You see, kid, there will always be connections you just can’t see. Always some thing you know to be true, but can’t ever show. Always a bigger fish.”

Don glanced down at the numbers, and Lars followed his gaze. “What do they say?” Don asked.

The rain-man ignored the question, and kept looking at the paper beside him. “These numbers are like raindrops,” he mused. “Maybe one day, one will slip through a hole in God’s umbrella. I don’t suppose —”

He stopped talking, and Don looked up to see if he was okay. Lars was now trying to get the attention of a shifty-looking youth across from him, giving no indication that he had just been talking to himself. The youth, earbuds cranked up and looking out the window, gave no notice. Finally the rain-man held his arm out straight, pointing, his finger a few inches from the youth’s face.

“What?” the youth snapped angrily, pulling his earbuds out and glaring.

Lars ignored the harshness of the reply, but lowered his arm nonetheless. “Which bus do I need to get to Phibbs Exchange?” he asked softly. The bus was stopping now to let someone off, but they were in a quiet rural area. There were no other busses to catch.

The youth blinked. “You need the 211, man, 50 clicks west. You’re way lost.”

The rain-man smiled. “I’ll be alright.”

Turing to Don, he tapped the papers and stared meaningfully through his frames. “211, then,” he said, tossing a calculator at Don, and left the bus.

Don took the calculator and stared at it for a moment. There was nothing strange about it – just an ordinary, run-of-the-mill scientific calculator. He turned it on, and a black 0 popped into view on the display. It stared blankly back at Don, who half-expected something strange to happen. Nothing did.

There was nearly half an hour left in Don’s trip, so he grabbed a few papers, which the rain-man had left on the bus. The top one contained the numbers from class, as well as the number *211*, circled messily beside some scribbled calculations. The others were blank.

It looked as though the rain-man had been decrypting the message using

211 as the key. He had gotten as far as “thes” and trailed off. Don looked at the calculator, shrugged, and continued the work.

As the bus trundled on, passengers got off until he was the only one on the bus. Streetlights flickered erratically as the bus sped by, bouncing over potholes and brushing violently through trees. It was difficult to read in such a shaky environment, but Don wasn’t sure he’d finish the decryption before he got off the bus. Finally, with two minutes to go, he pencilled in the last word and looked at the result:

*thes are the nig hts that coud have been dre ams*

Don felt a chill run down his spine and glanced to the front of the bus. There were no other passengers. In the rear-view mirror, the driver’s eyes found Don’s. They blinked once, then widened in shock.

The bus screeched to a halt, throwing Don forward. Just as he was about to slam face-first into a plexiglass barrier, he woke up. He was sitting up, in his bed at home, breathing heavily. Beside his bed lay the numbers from class, covered in pen marks and nowhere near solved.

It was still dark outside his window. Still feeling very tired, Don thought to write “211” on the paper beside him, so that he would remember when he woke to try it. But even as he reached for a pencil, he slumped over and fell right to sleep.

When he woke again, the numbers had completely left his mind.

It was a cold Saturday morning. Birds chirped intermittently outside his window. There weren’t many left now, this far north. Don placed his cool hand on his forehead, which was pounding. The headache didn’t last long, and by the time Don had showered and brushed his teeth it was gone.

He left the house to check the mail, making a point of pausing by the mailbox to watch the bus stop down the street. The rain-man was not there. *I guess he wouldn’t be*, Don mused tiredly. *It’s not going to rain today.*

There was no mail, so Don turned to leave. As he did so, he felt his cell phone vibrate in his pocket. He fished it out and looked at the display: a new message from an unknown number. *im feelin so lonely.*

Don sighed. He had only had his phone number for a few months and was still receiving strange texts for its previous owner. *new number*, he replied. *who is this?*

The stranger replied almost immediately: *ada. You deleted my number?*

Don smiled. *no, deleted MY number. This is don. You don’t know me.*

There was no reply.

When Don arrived at school that day, Lars was not the rain-man. His eyes were too soft, his face less wrinkled. There was a similarity, certainly, but Don could not see how he had confused them in his dream.

“Well, it’s been a week,” Lars said. “Time to get these damn numbers off the board. Did anyone manage to decrypt them?”

The class was silent for a few seconds, before a young man piped up. “John 4:2.”

“Exactly!” Lars exclaimed, and wrote the full decryption on the board.

*whos sin cau sed him tobe come blnd his sin or his par ents john four two*

Lars added some punctuation as an after-thought, then turned and threw a piece of candy at the student who had answered. Don watched as the candy bounced off the young man’s forehead. He was at least part native, with dark skin and hair, and wore a blue polo shirt. He chuckled and picked up the candy, slipping it into the pocket of his jeans.

Don noticed all this in passing, before his eye caught on the backpack sitting on the next chair. There was a wet umbrella poking out of it.

After a minute or so, he turned back to the lesson. Lars was rambling on about projective geometry and group actions, and soon Don was falling asleep as usual. Nothing exciting happened, though Lars got so caught up in his lesson that he only stopped when students from the next block began banging on the windows.

That night, Don returned to the classroom in a dream. It was very dark in there, lit only by the lights in the hallway. Every few seconds, a light or two inside the room would flicker weakly, throwing shadows in every direction from the empty desks and chairs.

A sound outside the doorway made Don turn around. It was Lars, out of breath and hands full of paper. “Sorry I’m late, guys,” he gasped as he hurried in.

Don looked back to the empty desks. They were occupied now, by a class waiting patiently for Lars to start, oblivious to the dim, flickering light that surrounded them. Nervously, Don took a seat.

“Well, it’s been a week,” Lars said. “Time to get these damn numbers off the board. Did anyone manage to decrypt them?”

The class was silent for a minute. A few seats away, the young man who had decrypted it was muttering under his breath. At first Don could not

make out what he was saying, but he seemed to be repeating himself over and over.

“Anyone?” Lars asked again.

*These are the nights*, the young man was saying. *These are the nights that* – “These are the nights that could have been dreams,” he said out loud, looking directly at Don. “If only you’d made it to bed.”

With that, he stood up suddenly, shoving his desk violently forward into the girl in front of him. Her head hit her desk with a sudden *thwack*, though Don didn’t see it. He was looking instead at the young man, who rushed toward him faster than was humanly possible. He stood up quickly and tried to back away, stumbling over his own chair. The young man had turned now into the rain-man. Don fell.

From the floor, he could see the whiteboard, which had become nearly transparent. Behind it was a dark room. Several people were inside, their hands on the board, squinting into the classroom as though they could barely see through. Among them were Alan and Chuck. Lars was drawing umbrellas in their hands, humming quietly to himself.

Don only saw this for a second, though, before the rain-man grabbed his ankle. He looked down in surprise, seeing the rain-man’s face in a contorted smile as he pulled Don toward him by his leg.

The words *if only you’d made it to bed* flashed through Don’s mind, then he woke up.

He was sitting on the bus bench near his mailbox. A bus was trundling by, and Don could dimly see Alan and Chuck through the window, hidden by sky’s reflection. In the seat in front of them, the rain-man was asleep. Unnerved, Don went home.

After a few hours of trying to watch television, Don gave up and left on his bicycle. He had no destination in mind, and soon found himself over ten kilometers away, rolling through the woods in a city park. Watching the sunlight flicker through the passing trees, he became aware of a faint hissing sound coming from his front tire. He sighed, stopped the bike, and hopped off to check for a leak.

Sure enough, there was a thorn in the tire, around which air was seeping rapidly. Unfortunately, Don had a pump in his backpack but no spare tubes. Fortunately, he was only a couple kilometers from a bike shop, and the woods were fairly empty, so he tied the bike to a tree and set off on foot.

Two hours later, Don had purchased a new tube and a bite to eat, and had found his way back to the bike. It was beginning to get dark, and a cold

breeze filtered through the trees, making him shiver. He popped the wheel off, replaced the tube as quickly as he could, then unlocked the bike.

As he swung his leg over the seat, another cyclist whipped past him on a bright white bike, followed quickly by two others. Don could have sworn it was the rain-man, but decided his eyes were playing tricks on him in the dark. He shook his head, pushed off, and headed out of the woods.

There was little light left in the woods, so Don pedaled slowly, his eyes held wide to see the path in front of him. Fifteen minutes later, he was back on the main roads, glad to have the streetlights. The rain-man was sitting at a bus bench, the white bike locked in a parking lot behind him. The other cyclists were nowhere to be seen. As Don rode by, they made eye contact. The rain-man nodded, barely, and sat.

When Don got back to his neighborhood, the rain-man was there again, sitting at his usual bench. Don looked away, shook his head, and kept riding.

Morning came, and Don woke up in his bed, feeling unusually awake. The clock by his bed read 9:00. He left to check the mail.

The rain-man was still at his bench, asleep. His head was tilted back as he snored softly, his worn-out *University of Vienna* shirt ruffling subtly in the wind. Don cleared his throat as quietly as he could, trying to wake the rain-man gently.

His eyes shot open suddenly, darting to each side, as the rain-man tried to gain his bearings. He noticed Don and sighed. "I hate to be in your dreams like this," he said. "But you're the one trapped in his head. Stop hiding under that fucking umbrella—"

Don woke up as he slammed into the side of the bus bench outside the woods. The parking lot with the white bike in it rolled with his vision as he tried to get up on all fours. He was winded, confused and his right leg and arm stung angrily. A few meters down the road, he heard his own bike crash into the sidewalk and fall down. Streetlights blurred and came back into focus, confusing him. There shouldn't be streetlights at 9:00 in the morning.

Limping slightly, Don was able to get his bike back in working order — it was nearly fine; the chain had come off, that's all — and rode home. By the time he arrived, he had figured out that the previous night had been entirely a dream.

The rain-man was not at his usual stop.

Friday morning rolled around without event. Don walked to the empty bus-stop, headed for school. The rain-man walked by, humming an old

Black Sabbath tune to himself, but Don ignored him. He didn't seem to be stopping and Don didn't feel like talking. His phone vibrated in his pocket, so he fished it out to check his text messages.

There was one, from Ada, the wrong-number girl who had texted him a week ago. Her spelling was perfect, message bizarre: *got to be the saddest song I've ever heard*. This was a line from the rain-man's song, who by now was too far down the road to be heard.

Don looked in the direction he had come from. A girl had rounded the corner, and was approaching the bench. She sat down, looked at Don, then looked away. There were dark circles under her eyes, and her hair, though combed, had come undone in the wind. It seemed to Don that she had been walking for hours.

Without looking at him, the girl spoke. "He's doing it to you too, isn't he?"

"Yeah."

"How long's it been?"

"A few weeks. Months, maybe. It's hard to tell when so much turns out to be dreams."

The girl laughed, a bright sound that made Don smile. It was strange to hear something so lively from a girl so visibly exhausted. "I met him at a rave," she said, and looked directly at Don for the first time, smiling tiredly.

"Do you know his name?" he asked.

"Del Krögut, he tells me."

"Where did he come from?"

"Nowhere. Everywhere. Seems to me he's just a drifter, but it's strange. He knows history. And logic. Things no one who needs to drift should know. It's like —" Ada stopped, holding her hands apart uselessly as she looked for the right words.

"He's an alien?" Don finished for her, half-kidding.

"Sure," she replied. "Or maybe from earth, just thousands of years ago."

It was Don's turn to laugh. "I bet he's just a history major. And a crank."

Ada smiled. "I'd agree, but you know as well as I do, he's *everywhere*."

"Does he show up in your dreams?"

"Yeah."

"He comes to my school. Teaching crypto in room 2202."

Ada stifled a giggle. "Those numbers total to six. Del would love that, wouldn't he?"



“Come to my school. You should see it.”

“Maybe tomorrow,” she replied, sounding like she didn’t mean it. *Oh well*, Don thought. That was the best he was going to get. The two sat quietly for a few minutes.

“Why did you text me?” Don broke the silence.

“Del gave me your number, in a dream,” she replied. “He told me you knew how to wake up. Guess I wasn’t dreaming when I messaged you.”

“No,” Don agreed. “Probably not.”

That day in class, Lars talked about Kurt Gödel’s famous incompleteness theorems. He was his usual excited self as he rambled on for an hour about representations of logical predicates, undecidable statements and Gödel sentences. As he finally reached the end of his lecture, his voice rose giddily: “— and since  $T$  asserts its own unprovability in the given axiomatic system, though our metamathematical tinkering has shown it to be *true*, our axiomatic system *must be incomplete*.”

Nobody responded. A few students smiled politely, but most seemed either lost or asleep. Lars continued, looking for a reaction. “It turns out there are actually infinitely many of these statements,” he cried, “for *any* axiomatic system complex enough to describe itself. Even in our perfect mental world of logic and mathematical derivation, there are *infinitely many truths we cannot ever know*.”

It was then that Don noticed Lars’ eyes. They were the rain-man’s eyes again, and his smile was no longer boyish but mad, and terribly, terribly old. “It’s like,” the rain-man said, with Lars’ voice, “all of our investigations are just raindrops blowing into Plato’s cave, while the truth stays hidden behind its umbrella.”

Lars’ face laughed at his terrible analogy, while the rain-man’s eyes looked directly at Don, daring him to respond. Don shook his head, stood up, and left.

The next day was Saturday. Don went to the bus stop in case Ada was there, and to his surprise, she was. They said hello shyly, sat quietly for a minute or so, then boarded a bus to Don’s school.

The hallway to room 2202 was dark, but everything was unlocked. Don’s cell phone had a built-in flashlight, and he turned it on. Aside from the dim lighting, everything seemed normal. He had hoped to show Ada something much spookier. All the neighboring classrooms were empty, bits of work on their whiteboards, desks and floors clean.

It occurred suddenly to Don to look behind the whiteboard in room 2202.

He and Ada entered the room, propping the door open and turning the lights on. A few of the fluorescents flickered weakly, but they would need a few minutes to warm up. The two approached the board, in the dim, erratic light, and looked for ways to move it.

Soon Don realized that the entire right half of the board could be slid out of the way. He pushed it, hard, and it made an awful grinding noise as it moved to the side. It sounded as though it hadn't been moved in years.

Behind the board was a small passageway. It was completely dark, but old, dusty wooden stairs were visible for a meter or so, descending into the void.

Don backed away. "Are we gonna do this?" He asked nervously. Ada replied "yes," and led the way.

As soon as Don stepped onto the stairway, he felt terribly cold. He stepped back in surprise, and felt cool cement behind him. The blackboard was blocked. There was no way but down.

Fortunately, it was not nearly as dark as it had seemed from outside. Don followed Ada, who had continued down the stairs, seemingly unaware that they were trapped.

At the bottom of the stairs was a narrow hallway. The walls were blank, grey cement, harshly lit as though by bare fluorescent bulbs. Don looked up. There was no source to the light. Every few meters were gaps in the wall, leading to other hallways. It seemed they were in some kind of maze.

From behind the wall at the top of the stairs, Don could hear a large shuffling sound, as though something too big to move comfortably was forcing itself by. Above and below the hallway were intermittent, soft, rapid pattering sounds. Mostly though, the place was silent. Ada had stopped now, looking nervously at Don. Neither spoke for a moment.

"Let's follow the right-hand wall," Don suggested. "That way we'll explore every path without getting lost."

Wordlessly, Ada nodded.

Two right turns later, Ada and Don found the rain-man. He had his ear to the wall and eyes closed, though they shot open when he heard them round the bend. Quickly, he pushed himself from the wall and ran in the other direction. Ada tried to run after him, but Don held her back. "Let's just find a way out of here," he said.

The shuffling sound was much louder now.

They continued to explore, abandoning their right-wall rule in favor of recording each left, straight or right decision as a base-three number. "It'll

be like exploring a Cantor set!” Ada said, and giggled.

In the corners of Don’s eyes, shadows were moving of their own accord. This happened for a few minutes before it occurred to him how odd it was that there even were shadows in this strangely-lit place. The strange noises from beyond the walls continued unabated — mostly the pitter-patter of tiny creatures, but sometimes loud scraping or shuffling noises.

Many of the hallways now were blocked by doors, which Don and Ada were too nervous to open. Their curiosity was beginning to wear thin as fear and fatigue took their hold. After a time, though, Don started trying handles just to see what would happen. As it turned out, none of the doors would open. Most were locked, but others had no handles at all, and Ada found two that were simply painted onto the wall!

Finally, they found themselves at the end of a hallway, blocked by a heavy wooden door. It had a knob, which was warm to the touch. There was a breeze, now, but neither Don nor Ada could imagine where it was coming from.

Footsteps echoed through the hallway, starting quietly then becoming gradually louder. There was no movement to be seen, but going back now seemed just as terrifying as going forward. Behind the door, Don became aware of a deep rumbling sound. Ada took a deep breath.

Don opened the door.

The rumbling sound exploded into a roar, which echoed through the hallway and filled Don’s mind. The light from the hallway dimmed sharply as though it had been sucked out through the door. He stumbled backward, startled. He reached back to grab Ada, but his hand swung through the air and he fell.

His vision shook as his head hit the floor, but Don didn’t feel it. His view was tinted red and he could taste blood. Strong smells of burnt toast and compost filled his nostrils, and the roaring noise seemed to fill his mind, crushing rational thought beneath its weight. He tried to get up but found he couldn’t control his limbs, which flailed impotently as he rolled back and forth.

Somewhere, far away, Ada was screaming.

In the open doorway, the shadows shifted and Don could make out a humanoid shape rising out of the shadows. It didn’t reflect even the dim light still left in the hallway, looking like a skeletal silhouette, perhaps ten meters tall but still mostly crouched. A long, bony arm reached out to

touch Don's face. As its hand inched closer, intense pain grew in Don's eyes, spreading to his entire head and down his spine. The hallway flickered and went completely black.

"Do I have another chance?" Don screamed into the blackness, but he heard no sound. "Give me my light back! I didn't mean it! I didn't mean it!" Still nothing. Frantic, Don kept yelling, trying to make any noise at all.

Through the roar, Don became aware of another voice, and it took him a few seconds to realize that it wasn't his. It was the rain-man – or Lars – or Del – shouting at him to shut up. Don stopped screaming, and the darkness seemed to weaken. He was aware of the rain-man's face, eyes burning with an anger Don couldn't imagine another human experiencing. The shadow thing watched him, and though his face had no features, Don could tell it was just as angry.

The shadow and the rain-man looked at each other, hatefully, fearfully, for a moment before they both lunged at each other. They tackled each other, fell to the ground, and just as quickly pulled apart. At the same time, both stood up and ran in opposite directions. As their footsteps faded, so did Don's vision, and he finally passed out.

When Don woke up, he was laying on a stone bench in a small room. Ada and the rain-man sat on benches of their own, looking tired but otherwise healthy. It appeared the room was somewhere in the labyrinth; it was lit by bright light from nowhere and the air was very still.

"Good morning," the rain-man said nonchalantly.

"Who are you?" Don replied.

The rain-man sighed, and spoke intently, as though he were reciting something memorized. "These are the nights that could have been dreams," he mumbled, struggling to remember the words. "If only you'd made it to bed. But despite how so very surreal it seems, you don't think you're sleeping. Or dead."

He paused to breathe, then continued. "Momentum will take you so deep into night . . . that Newton thought it could go forever on. But rolling to sleep, you'll fall without light. You'll wake with the stars, who keep right along. Their lights are like eyes in the moonlight. They watch you drift slowly away. . ."

He stopped. "I don't remember the rest."

Ada chuckled. "The man in the dark might have known it," she finished. "And forgotten it all in the day."

“That’s it,” the rain-man agreed. “Where did you learn that?”

“From you. In a dream.”

They stared at each other. For a second, and the rain-man started, as though to demand she continue. He decided against it, and turned back to Don.

“You’re good with maths, yes?” He spoke to Don, who nodded. The rain-man chuckled.

“You know, then,” he continued, “that between any two numbers, you can find an infinity of more numbers.”

Don nodded again, less confidently.

“It’s a pretty strange place numbers live in, isn’t it?” The rain-man mused. “With infinite chasms between every pair, it must be the loneliest place in the world. And yet – and yet, no matter how close you look to a number, you’ll always find another just like it.”

Don didn’t respond.

“Do you agree that numbers exist, nonetheless?”

Don, already tired, felt terribly disoriented. He suspected that the rain-man was messing with him deliberately. “What are you getting at?” he asked, his voice echoing in a surreal way against the hard stone walls of the room.

“This place, where numbers live,” the rain-man concluded. “I live there too.”

Nobody spoke. Ada looked quickly to Don, then looked away. The room stayed quiet for a long time.

“Why are you here?” Don asked, finally.

The rain-man looked away, searching for the right words to use. “Umbrellas are fascinating, aren’t they?” He started. “You can stand out there, in the middle of the rain, and not get wet. . .”

His voice faded out. He thought for a moment, then tried a different tack. “You humans love numbers, don’t you?”

Don smiled. “Not many of us,” he replied. “Mostly computers.”

The rain-man laughed. “That’s exactly it, isn’t it? I live in out in the world of numbers, and the probability of your computers finding me is exactly zero. On some level, you all know that.”

“I suppose we do.”

“I’m just standing out there, in the middle of your computations, completely dry. You never even came close, for the millions of years you’ve been trying. Until computers came onto the scene.”

“And then we got close,” Ada spoke up.

“Yes,” the rain-man replied, nodding. “And that’s why you see me now.”  
Nobody spoke for a long time.

“What were all the noises we heard?” Ada asked.

The rain-man laughed. “Don’t think you’re the only creatures to have found this place. There are beings almost as old as the universe here. Old—” he cut himself abruptly, as though he hadn’t meant to speak so loudly. Looking at his shoes, he spoke quietly, almost to himself. “Older, even. Death is here.”

They were silent for a moment.

“How can we get out of here?” Don asked. “The stairway leads to a concrete wall.”

“Of course it does!” The rain-man barked. “What else did you think would be behind that whiteboard?”

“So we’re trapped?”

“No! Haven’t you been listening? Open your eyes!”

“My eyes *are* open, damn you!” Don was starting to feel angry.

The rain-man sighed and stood. “I’m sure you’ll see me again,” he said, walking toward Don. “I’m everywhere.”

With that, he grabbed Don’s shirt and shoved him roughly into the wall behind him. Don eyes shut in surprise, and when they opened, he was sitting at the bus stop where he’d first seen the rain-man. The world was wet, as though it had been raining moments ago, but the clouds had parted to let the sun shine through.

Don blinked as he adjusted to the light.

Sitting beside him, Ada was doing the same.