

Reuben Merringer

Positioning

Jim lived in a valley far away from his family, and he didn't drive. One afternoon on the walk home from work, alongside his distorted face, Jim saw in the chrome of a drinking fountain a smear of blue paint. It looked a bit like an arrow. One block later, he saw another smear of the exact color and shape, right next to the P on a stop sign. They didn't mean much to him at the time, but over the course of the next couple days, the two sightings would blossom into thick memories.

When he got home, he found a little brown box propped against his door, and the blue smears sank into the soil of his mind. He picked it up. MOM & DAD was written at the top of the return address. He took it inside, sat on the couch, and opened it. This disconnected version of Christmas was a new thing for him. After thirty three years of stressful family holidays, his parents had opted to boycott it this time and go on a cruise, leaving Jim and his siblings without even the option of going home for Christmas. Not that he was aching to see them, anyway.

After peeling several layers of cardboard and plastic, he held in his hand a brand new GPS box. He turned it

over and over in his hands. It had been five years since he'd begged for one of these, back when he was in college, back when he was curious. Work and loan payments had done a good job of ridding him of that burden. He shoved the box into the side of the couch, along with the rest of the debris.

The next day, some of his coworkers were chatting in the break room. An intern was talking about a funny thing her minister had said. She went to one of those megachurches that really knew how to put on a show. Without waiting to hear what the minister had said, Jim grabbed a cup, chuckled, and filled up. "I can't believe you people still go to church. What *year* is this?" He downed the water and bounced the crumpled cup off the side of the wastebasket and walked away.

He stopped at the library after work to cool off. It was unseasonably warm. Back home they were probably still shivering in coats and scarves. Holidays aside, Midwestern winters were something worth escaping.

He stopped at the same drinking fountain as the day before. Again, he noticed the blue smear, and again, he ignored it. The one on the stop sign was still there, too. This time, he found their similarity very strange. They were practically identical.

The arrow, if that's what it was, pointed right. Instead of crossing the street like he should, he took a right. He'd still get home; the turns would get a little mixed up was all. But when he reached the point where he would absolutely have to turn home lest he walk further than necessary, he kept on. It was nice, doing something new.

A high, grating voice tore him from his reverie: "Excuse me!"

A very deliberate looking woman clopped past on heels like dainty wood blocks. She was racing to cross the street, and he saw why. The red man was flashing, the numbers diminishing.

Rather than wait for the next walk light, he launched into a gallop and gleamed with pride as he overtook the bitch. But on the other side, she soon overtook him while he hunched over, gasping for air. The threat of

vomiting gave him no choice but to bury his gaze between his feet and hope for the best.

Right there between his loafers he saw another blue smear.

It wasn't exactly like the others. It had been dulled and worn by so many clacking heels, the arrow shape lost, but it was definitely the same artist. The first two pointed in opposite directions, so he dismissed the idea that they led somewhere. Still, it must *mean* something. He skipped home at a conservative pace, grabbed the GPS box, and went back to record the coordinates of each in reverse order.

The drinking fountain was so close to work that he continued on out of habit. So he searched the exterior of the building for more blue smears. There weren't any. He found a multi-colored pancake of chewing gum mashed onto one of the steps, and a notch hacked into one of the old railroad-tie tree planters, but that was it.

Dissatisfied, he continued on, ignoring the pleas of his empty stomach.

He came to a construction site. There, on the side of a green port-a-potty, he discerned an anomaly in the dim evening light. His pursed lips cranked into a smile. He recorded his coordinates with a flourish and went home.

Over the next few weeks his homeward journeys became more and more eccentric as they drifted into new territories. His goal was to find at least one new smear by the time his route spiraled inward. On good days he'd find three, four smears. On even the worst days he'd find at least one. And each time, he recorded the coordinates in the GPS box, buzzing in his shoes. It felt like, *This could lead anywhere.*

He found other times to search. Once, on a paper run for work, he found one on a gutter two blocks from Staples. Another time, on a federal holiday, he went to an outdoor concert downtown and found one on a manhole, and one on a pop machine. One day, after overhearing a pretty coworker recommend a farmer's market to a client, he checked it out for himself, partly hoping to see her there. It was closed, but he did find four smears within a six block radius—a pretty good day.

The days and weeks rolled off and disappeared. Every time he found a smear he'd feel a brief shudder of excitement, quelled by the instant need to find another. There was no end to it. They popped up everywhere.

Not since the beginning did he go a day without finding one. His searches started to go later. He started carrying a flashlight to work in case it came to that, and then it did. But no matter how late or dark it got, he didn't stop until he found something.

Finally there was a fruitless day. Then another, and another. Those sleepless nights made terrifying days for his coworkers. His jabs and unwanted observations deflated anyone too slow to dodge them.

Two weeks later, he accepted defeat. There was only one thing he could do, because, for all his searching, he had yet to muster the gumption to plug the box into his computer and plot the coordinates to see if it made any sense.

He hung his bag on the hook by the door. He unbuttoned his shirt, carefully put it on a hanger, and buttoned it. He slapped out the wrinkles.

His bedroom was filthy, so he cleaned it. When he washed his hands afterward, he noticed his stovetop was covered with slippery little chunks of what might as well be poison. A half hour later, it was sleek and pure. Then he did the rest of the kitchen, even the nooks and crannies that no one ever sees. Especially those.

Never had his apartment looked so much like when he had first walked into it—excluding, of course, the curb-harvested furniture and the scant pictures on the wall that looked like tiny little rectangles of nothing. Now he was ready.

But there was one detail he had missed: Crumpled between his feet was a single blue sock, folded vaguely like an arrow. He dutifully entered its coordinates, and at the risk of more disappointment than he could theoretically bear, he followed the arrow to his computer, braving himself for the nervous necessary.

He eased into the captain's chair and wiggled the mouse. He plugged into the jack in the tower. The computer beeped with enthusiasm. A window appeared. Within it, a map. It was of the valley he now knew very well. And one by one, the coordinates of the blue smears appeared as coincidentally blue dots. They populated it quickly, hundreds of them, but before it was even done, he recognized an unmistakable figure. He gasped. It was a Q.

There wasn't a single deviation to its design. The highest concentration fell within his own neighborhood, and beyond that, way out where there were concerts, Staples, and markets, they were sparser, but still rounded out the figure, suggesting all the smears he must have missed (or were removed before he could get to them). The vast emptiness in the center of the Q made him chuckle as he recalled hours of futile searching. Even the blue sock was part of the figure. Out of curiosity, he eliminated all other coordinates but that one, and was amazed to see it fell right where the tail of the Q met its circle.

The next morning he awoke to rain. He didn't have an umbrella. On the way to work it got so bad he had to run into a mini-mart for shelter. Standing next to him was the same harried business woman he had raced across the street, weeks earlier. She looked constipated. He felt tall next to her.

The weather cleared by the end of the day, but he didn't look for any more smears. He already knew where he would find them. He wanted to look for something else. He didn't know what.

He left work and walked one block in a random direction.

Then he took a left.

Then he walked two blocks and took another left.

Three blocks and another left.

Four blocks and another left.

He traced an ever-expanding spiral outward, looking for patterns of any sort. Despair loomed, and when it finally descended, he collapsed against a bus shelter and leaned against it, looking at nothing.

But it wasn't nothing. His eyes widened. "I think I found something," he told a boy on a bike, who promptly sped away.

Mashed into the Plexiglas of the shelter was a multicolored pancake of smog-stained chewing gum. He hid his elation in case a competitor was lurking nearby. He cradled the box in his hands and recorded his position. Then he moved on to the one he'd found on the stairs at the start of his blue smear period. Though his stomach had visibly shrunk since this whole thing had begun, he felt like it held the world.

Over the next few weeks, he accumulated as many, if not more, gum-pancake coordinates as he had blue smears. He could barely concentrate at work, but at least he was pleasant. He even struck up a conversation with the girl who'd mentioned the farmer's market. Her name was Jeanna. Another day, Jeanna struck up a conversation with him. It didn't go beyond that, but it was enough to make him feel vital. And every night, he fought the urge to plug the box into the tower to see where the gum fell in the big picture, preferring mystery to obviation.

His spiral expanded once again until it reached a point where his firm legs could no longer carry him. He had gone further than he had ever traveled by foot. So, one Saturday, he went by bus to see a particular movie at a particular theater, both recommended by Jeanna. He went only to have a conversation starter. But he couldn't pay attention, so he left and wandered the streets, avenues, and alleys instead, searching high and low for pancakes of gum. He found five of them—his most fruitful search to date—so he went back there every day for the next two weeks until the territory was spent.

As with the blue smears, he hit a dry spell. It wasn't as bad as before, now that he was expecting it. Once again, it was time for the nervous necessary. His apartment had become filthy since that last cleaning, but this time

he went straight to the computer, but he couldn't find the right cable, not right away. He found it woven through a haphazard pile of dirty clothes, which, when he cocked his head and crossed his eyes, looked a bit like a pancake of chewing gum, so he recorded one last position and plugged the box in the tower.

The new coordinates scattered tiny red dots amongst the tiny blue ones. Another letter superimposed itself over the Q. It was a U. Like the Q, the design was flawless. It even hinted at serifs in the typeface.

A bitter stab of irony gutted him: The new letter was really only an extension of the first one. It might as well have been a half-letter, with no further clue as to what the word or message might be. He sank. How often does one see a Q without a U?

Qatar?

QED?

It's only a minor setback, he realized. There were more marks to be found, something else to obsess over, something besides gum. And in a flash, it occurred to him what the next thing might be.

Jim passed a number of trees on his way to work, each beautiful in its own way, but one had a particularly understated grace. He knew the secret messenger would feel the same, so in the morning, he went right to it.

He approached and circled it like he was courting it, petted its bark; through his soles he sensed the roots that almost crested the dirt. There it was: Hacked into the base of the trunk, just as he'd expected, was a notch. After entering the coordinates, he went straight to the next one, hacked into the old railroad-tie planter at work.

As he entered that one, he imagined the sound it had made, wondered what tool had been used, and how the wood smelled when it was freshly split. It looked glorious. He moved closer, and was about to taste it when a voice called his name.

It was a coworker whose name escaped him. An unlit cigarette dangled from the corner of his mouth, one

eye squinted, his lighter at the ready. “You okay?” he asked.

Jim didn’t hear him.

“Hey, Jim!”

“Yeah?”

“Did you find something?”

“Oh, I’m fine. You?”

“Meh,” he shrugged, lighting his cigarette. “Coming to Jeanna’s going away party?”

Jim cleared his throat and slipped the box back in his pocket. “Jeanna’s quitting?” he muttered, hiding his disappointment with a half-smile. A lot of time had passed since this whole thing started.

The smoker took another drag and commiserated. “I know, right? So hot. Anyway, it’s at Jake’s. You should come. A bunch of us are walking there after work.”

“Today?” It was too much to take in. “Yeah. Of course I am. Yeah.”

“Sweet,” said the smoker.

Jim faked a migraine and left after lunch. He passed the smoker on his way out. Jim winked with a smirk, as if the smoker were in on it. The smoker raised an eyebrow.

As soon as he was outside the world started moving very quickly. He had no idea where to turn. He assigned himself the task of finding at least one more notch before joining the party—not only to make the day more redeeming, but to gain the confidence he needed to approach her, to find out if she would be staying in the valley, or going far beyond his influence. Romance-wise, she was his only prospect. A long shot, yes, but he needed it. There were notches out there and all he needed was one. Like a comet or a criminal, he picked a direction and ran in it.

The first tree he passed was a palm tree, and it had no notch. It would be difficult to tell if it did. He ran a tight circle around it anyway, looking it up and down, eyes bobbing like pistons. He started to sweat. When he sweated, he stank, and pretty soon, he did.

He ran down a residential street. Someone nearby was mowing. Jim sneezed. It was a violent one, slathering his hand with a slick of saliva, which he smeared on his shirt. It took a moment to recover. In the meantime, he studied his surroundings and spotted across the street a house made of naked wood, stained only by the dirty air.

He hustled over and circled it, just like he had the tree, ignoring the man watering the lawn in a blue Speedo, who watched Jim with amused interest. Jim noticed him and winked at him like he had the smoker. But this man winked back, like they really were in cahoots, but Jim didn't realize it until he was at the end of the block.

He peered over his shoulder. The gardener was still watching him, blowing a gum bubble, the limp hose spewing a perfect arc onto the grass.

Jim shook his head and took a few more steps, and stopped again, turning his head. This time, the man was no longer there. Neither was the hose. In their place was a sprinkler tossing a rainbow out into the street.

His phone rattled in his pocket. He looked at the display, sighed, and brought it to his ear.

“James?”

“Mom?”

“Hi, James.”

He heard her breathing.

“Mom, come on, I'm really busy.”

“Well, you know I've been feeling crappy for a while now—”

His chest inflated. “What is it—”

She cleared her throat.

Here it comes, he thought. It's gonna be—

“They think it might be pancreatitis.”

He frowned. It didn't ring any bells. “What is that, again?”

“Or something else,” she said.

“Oh.”

She reassured him. “It's no big deal, James. I mean, really. Or it shouldn't be. But it could be...”

Through her relentless vacillations he convinced her she was fine. Meanwhile, his attentions were wandering all around him. Clocks of all kinds ticked everywhere, while he stood there, like an idiot, with this chatterbox...

She finally came to a stop. “We never talk, James. We never get to see you anymore.”

It had been almost a year since he was home. He had never even left the valley. He wasn't exactly homesick, either. He didn't want to mention their Christmas cruise, so he just stood there, venting hard through his nose, holding the phone to it so she could hear.

“Jesus Christ, James! We'll pay for the god-damned ticket!”

The battery light flashed on the GPS box. He grunted.

“Tell your work, they'll understand.”

“Fine.”

“Here's the thing, James. We have to drive up to Iowa City in a few days, and we might be there for a while. They're probably gonna wanna keep me up there. Kevin and Emily got here last night. Kevin can give you a ride from the airport—”

Right on cue, Jim heard Kevin in the background listing airlines and prices.

“Hey, that’s not too bad for last minute. Jim? Less than two hundred dollars for one-way, leaves at six.

That’s pretty good, ain’t it?”

“You want me to leave tonight?!”

“No, in the morning. What? Oh. Yeah, tonight.”

There was a scuffle as Kevin grabbed the phone: “This is family, Jimmy. IT’S ONLY A JOB.”

Jim stared out the window as the plane made its ascent. The hills sunk beneath him, red-topped in the late light. A blur of rising smoke marred one of the hillsides.

He awoke the next morning with his heels wedged in the footboard of his childhood bed. Emily was pounding on his door, rattling it in its hinges. Her foot shadows shifted beneath it. *“Wake the fuck up!”* she was screaming, over and over again.

“Stop it!” he pleaded.

“Finally,” she said, and then proceeded to recite imperatives as if she read them off a list at random: “Come downstairs, Dad made biscuits, everyone’s downstairs, you need to come down, we’re sick of waiting.” She sighed loud enough for him to hear.

“Emily! Is he up?” Kevin called from downstairs.

“I did my job,” she said. The shadows disappeared and her gallop downstairs rattle a framed photo of the Washington Monument had had hung over a tiny portable tv, taken on a junior high trip to D.C.

No one was at the table when went down. His mom called from the living room.

For the first time in over a year, he saw her sitting on the couch, in a lint-balled nightgown the color of sterility, her skin waxen. She wore a bonnet/shower cap thing the same color as the nightgown. Emily sat beside

her, petting her pointed shoulder. Kevin read something smart-looking on the other couch. Their father was in a rocking chair, turned to face the corner window, where it never had been before. He was motionless. But the other three faced Jim directly—his siblings like spotlights, his mother like a dim lamp. But Jim felt like the sick one.

Emily nudged her and whispered in her ear. She nudged her again. Finally, Mom cleared her throat: “I lied about how bad it was, Jim”

He swallowed.

“I think you should stick around for a while.”

“Um—”

“They said it wouldn’t come back and it did, I just—” she sobbed into an old tissue as Emily gripped her shoulder.

He frowned. “What came back?”

She blinked at him through the tissue, like he should know. “Well, the cancer, James.”

“What cancer?”

No one spoke for a long time, long enough for everyone’s gaze to drift into totally different directions, except for Dad’s, whose gaze remained fixed.

“You know, it might be smart with the fires and all,” Kevin finally announced.

“What might be smart?” Emily asked.

“Hanging around here.”

“What fires?” Jim asked.

“Don’t you live by the hills?”

“Depends on which hills.”

“Hold on a sec.” Kevin shifted around on the couch, digging beneath him until he apparently yanked remote control out of his ass. He fired it at the TV.

A man appeared, and behind him, a map of Jim’s valley. He was pointing at hotspots like a weatherman points at rain. Then a fire engine zooming down a dark street, its doors opening before it even stopped. The sky glowed in places, red and orange.

Jim knelt and crawled to the screen.

A house crumpled into ash. A palm tree went up in the foreground. Jim ran his fingers along the bowed trunk, a thousand miles from his fingertips, orange rings licking up and down.

His sister was saying something, getting closer and closer. Finally she yanked him by the shoulder, but he yanked himself back, his eyes plunging into the screen.

The map reappeared. Blobs of orange, red, pink, and white designated the intensity of the fires. The area the Q and U had occupied was now one enormous pink-rimmed white blob.

A tear slid down his cheek. He turned and saw his sister escorting their broken mother to the kitchen. Kevin stood in the doorway shaking his thick neck. Then he too disappeared. His father stayed where he was.

Jim turned back to the TV, and the map. He squinted to blur the screen. He stood up, took a step back, then forward, then back again. He cocked his head sideways, upside-down, and cocked it the other way. He tried crossing his eyes and emptying his mind of all reason, and brought them back to focus on the colorful blobs.

His father cleared his throat. Jim turned to look at him. He was still looking out the window. “It’s all right, Jim,” he said.

He looked back at the blobs, but no matter which way he looked, he couldn’t make them look like anything the least bit meaningful.