

Page Count

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Reading is at its absolute hardest when I think too much about it. I'm talking about those moments when 10 pages and 20 minutes into reading, I realize I'm 90 pages and 180 minutes out from finishing. The number at the top of the page stares me down, daring me to watch it slowly, painfully, inch towards a finish. I try to forget; I try to avoid its glare; I try to let time go; still, sometimes I just focus too much on endings to enjoy anything at all.

The Kindle app is the worst for this kind of problem. On the bottom of the screen, above a gradually filling progress bar colored eye-poison blue, the app displays the proportion that I've read with a percentage. Page numbers are bad enough, but the arithmetic simplicity of percentages means that I instantly know a three percent marker means I'll repeat that process 33 more times. Perhaps worse, a few taps on the corner of the screen away, there lurks a prediction of how much longer the book or chapter will take me to read. Page numbers, unlike time, are a malleable measurement. Maybe I'll speed up as I go along. Maybe it'll get easier to read as I get used to the prose. The Kindle app says 'Absolutely Not' — it etches those minutes into stone. Pages at least give me agency, but time moves for no one.

All of this was on my mind as I began *The Soul of an Octopus* by Sy Montgomery. It was August 28, and Amy and I had been apart for four days. Over the summer, when we started dating, we'd seen each other almost every single day. Over this first semester, while she studied abroad in Ireland, we'd see each other for three days if we were lucky. Two and a half months together would turn into four months apart. I had never been in love before; I had no idea what would happen. I knew only one thing for certain: four days down meant we were three percent finished.

I was on Vinalhaven Island, off the coast of Maine. That day, 11 other students and I drove an hour and a half to Rockville, rode a ferry for 45 minutes, and explored the surrounding town for at least 20 before retiring to our church floor. In a rectangle of open space behind the legion of pews, 12 "beds" of sleeping bags and camping pads lay strewn across the ground. In mine, while most of the others were outside enjoying the sunset, I was trying to get through my book and get through this trip.

We weren't allowed to bring our phones to the island. Amy and I knew that we wouldn't be able to talk for a few days, and we knew that it would be hard. I picked out a wholesome book for us both to read. I also brought a flimsy little

journal, so that I could write with the intention of sending it all to her when I was back. At least in some way, I thought we could still do something together.

I got through about 10 pages before deciding to go to sleep. By then, everybody was back inside, ready to turn in after a long day of traveling. I wasn't tired, but I didn't want to be awake any longer. I wanted this night, this trip, this semester to be over with. I wanted to be back with her. A clock feels slower while you're watching: that's why I wasn't watching the sunset.

The Vinalhaven trip ended quickly, but once I was back at Bowdoin, the semester didn't. Amy and I had both downloaded countdown apps. We both had the same picture backgrounding a counter of months, days, hours, minutes, and seconds until we saw each other. The only difference was that hers said "Until Jack," and mine said "Until Amy."

Most nights before I went to sleep, I'd look at the countdown and think. Ireland is five hours ahead of the East Coast, so she would be long asleep. When I was staring at that countdown, even a second felt long. Looking at the time in analog, the skinny second hand's speed is almost sickening compared to the leisurely, deliberate crawl of minutes and hours. But once I attach numbers to that movement, reducing the fourth dimension to pixels, the seconds abandon their free-flowing pace. Watching the app's digital clock enumerate every integer from 60 to zero, the process completely unnoticed by the rest of the numbers but for once a minute, the immensity of all those months, days, hours, minutes, and seconds would overbear like a starless night.

If I waited long enough, the sun would always rise, and on most days that meant Japanese class. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday mornings always began with an 8:30 a.m. meeting at the top of Coles Tower. This 16 floor housing building looms high over the rest of the humble campus. In the classroom at the top of the tower, I could see further than anywhere else on campus. Our class was arranged into two long, parallel tables, nine students on each end. I sat at the table opposite the window, so every morning I'd see the odd bird, Maine's cloudy sky, and maybe a person from the nearby town walking their dog across the fields far below.

Every day class started with Aridome-sensei asking us to say the date. "Ohayou," he'd begin the session with: good morning. "Ohayou gozaimasu," we'd all reply. He'd show the date on his powerpoint. "Nannichi desu ka?" he asked. "Juugatsu, nijuusannichi desu," we said in unison: October 23rd. I wrote "10/23/19" across the top of my page, marking the day's lecture notes. He'd then run through a

gambit of date-related questions. What day of the week was it? What was yesterday's date? Two days ago? What was the day of the week then? It was a helpful reminder of our Japanese dates and an unintentional reminder of time's slow procession. At the top of every morning of every day of classes, sitting in the tallest building on campus, answering question upon question about what day it was, what day it had been, and what day it will be soon, the beginnings of these classes were the page numbers at the top of my life.

The numbers went by slowly, but by either great mercy or great cruelty, time always moves forward. December 19 did eventually come around, and Amy and I were back together. She flew back on a six-hour plane from Ireland, went on the 15-minute drive from her house to mine, and we hugged, talked, and set up the Christmas tree with the rest of my family. We were back together. It was over. We had done it.

But in two weeks, she'd go back to school. My friends would leave soon after, and I would be alone at home for another two weeks before my classes started up again; and even when we were only a three-hour train ride apart back at school, it would take three weeks for her to have a weekend free enough to come visit; during most summers, she'd be working internships in Boston; one of these semesters, I'd be going abroad to study in Japan. Maybe after I graduate, I'll even be living in Japan for a year or so. And maybe even then, she won't be able to follow. Maybe, it never ends. Until it did, when we broke up eight months later.

In those free two weeks I had before school, I worked up enough courage to start Haruki Murakami's *1Q84*. It's an almost 1200-page book, so I thought it'd be perfect for such an empty time. For the first one or two hundred pages, I couldn't stop thinking about how ridiculously long the novel was. How much time would it take, I kept wondering. Still, I also kept reading. Slowly, those page numbers melted away. Gradually, I learned to keep an eye trained more to the page and less to the number. And eventually, I stopped caring when the book would be finished. In every chapter, I found passages so moving that I had to save them onto my phone. I found ideas and metaphors and characters that took over my imagination. I found pages and pages and pages of real, soul-stirring beauty.

I'm at page 1057 out of 1157 right now. I've been at that spot for a month. I could finish it whenever I want. For days and days, though, it's sat on my desk, those final pages untouched. I'm sure that ending will be great. Or maybe it won't. Either way, I hope to get there someday.