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Addition

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Extract

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1

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It all counts.

Not long after the accident, I turned at the gate on my way to school one morning and looked back at the front stairs. There were only ten – normal-looking grey concrete, not like the twenty-two treacherous wooden steps at the back. The front stairs had a small set of lines and some grey sand set in the middle so you wouldn't slip in bad weather. Somehow it seemed wrong to have walked down them unawares. I felt bad about it. Ungrateful to those stairs that had borne my weight uncomplaining for all of my eight years. I walked back to the stairs and climbed to the top. Then I started down again but this time I counted each one. There. 10.

The day went on but I couldn't stop thinking about those 10 stairs. Not obsessing. Nothing that kept me from schoolwork or skipping or talking, but a gentle teasing like the way your tongue is drawn to a loose front tooth. On the way home it seemed natural to count my steps from the school gate, down the path, over the footpath, across the road, along the street at the bottom of the hill, across another road, up the hill and then into our yard: 2827.

A lot of steps for so short a distance, but I was smaller then. I'd like to do that walk again now that I'm 172

centimetres instead of 120, and I might one day. I can only remember lying in bed at the end of that first day, triumphant. I had measured the dimensions of my world, and I knew them, and now no one could change them.

Unlike the weather, in Melbourne. 36 degrees and sunny; 38 the same; 36 the same; 12 and raining so hard I risk concussion getting the mail. This January has been like that, so far. When I was a kid I could hardly stand it. From the age of eight I graphed each day's max and min from the newspapers, desperate for a pattern.

In time, counting became the scaffolding of my life. What's the best way to stop nonchalantly, so as not to arouse suspicion should someone interrupt? It's okay to stop, it doesn't break the rules – the numbers are patient and will wait, provided you don't forget where you are up to or take an extra pace. But whatever you do, don't lose count or you'll have to start again. It's hard to stop the involuntary twitching, though.

'Grace, why are your fingers moving like that?'

'Like what?'

Funny how I sensed this wasn't something to be discussed with other people, even when I was eight.

The numbers were a secret that belonged only to me. Some kids didn't even know the length of the school or their house, much less the number of letters in their own name. I am a 19: Grace Lisa Vandenburg. Jill is a 20: Jill Stella Vandenburg, one more than me despite being three years younger. My mother is a 22: Marjorie Anne Vandenburg. My father was a 19 too: James Clay Vandenburg.

Tens began to resonate. Why do things almost always end in zeros? Crossing a road was 30. From the front fence to the shop was 870. Was I subconsciously deci-

malising my count? Did I stop at the shop's doormat, rather than the door, so it would end in a zero?

Zeros. Tens. Fingers, toes. The way we name the numbers, in blocks. One day in maths we learnt rounding, changing a number to the nearest one divisible by 10. I asked Mrs Doyle the word for moving a number to the nearest divisible by 7. She didn't know what I meant.

Why are clocks so obviously wrong? Counting on a base of 60 is a pagan tendency. Why do people tolerate it?

By the time I finished high school I knew about the digital system and its Hindu–Arabic history and the role of the Fibonacci in gaining support for base 10 in 1202. There's still anger out there in cyberspace – flat-earthers upset that base 10 was chosen over base 12, which they consider purer: easy to halve and quarter, the number of the months and of the apostles. But to me it's about the fingers – it's the way the body's been designed. No debate.

Realising the world was driven by tens was a beautiful turning point, like someone had given me the key. When tidying my room, I started picking up 10 things. 10 things an hour, 10 things a day. 10 brushes of my hair. 10 grapes from the bunch for little lunch. 10 pages of my book to read before sleep. 10 peas to eat. 10 socks to fold. 10 minutes to shower. 10. Now I could see, not just the dimensions of my world, but the size and shape of everything in it. Defined, clear and in its place.

My Barbie Country Camper was out; my Cuisenaire rods were in. On the outside they don't look like much. Green plastic box; inside, bits of wood, cut and smoothed, in various sizes and colours. Invented by Georges Cuisenaire, my second favourite inventor, while he was looking for a way to make maths easier for

children. I love them, especially the colours. Each rod is a number that corresponds to its length, and each number is a different colour. For years into my adult life, numbers were also colours. White was 1. Red was 2. Light green was 3. Pink (a hot, sticky pink) was 4. Yellow was 5. Dark green was 6. Black was 7. Brown was 8. Blue was 9. Orange (although I'd always thought of it as tan, a small vowel shift) was 10.

I spent hours lying on my bed, holding my rods, listening to the *tink* as they knocked together. When I hear that sound I am eight years old again: the bed on a diagonal poking from a corner of the room; easier for my mother to tuck in from both sides. The sheets, flannelette with 34 pastel pink and blue stripes that I counted at night instead of sheep. Along the east wall were 4 dormer windows to catch the morning sun, the 31 slats of the aluminium Venetians pulled high. The bed head had a built-in light behind a translucent plastic screen, and a shelf that held a small transistor radio, untarnished silver in a mock-leather case, a birthday present from my grandfather. There were more shelves on the west wall that held 2 china figurines, a shepherdess and a mermaid, and 3 stuffed Pekinese dogs with long caramel hair that I brushed each night: father, mother and baby. There was a bride doll in a satin gown garnished with 40 pearls. On the floor in the corner were 7 tin cars the size of a child's fist, left behind after playing.

At school everything was normal. Better than normal. A plus, A plus, A plus. *And top of the class, again, is Grace Vandenburg*. The secret of my success was numbers: each week I did 100 minutes of homework for each subject, and when the work was done I memorised 10 words from the beginning of the dictionary. Aardvark,

aback, abacus, abalone, abandon, abase, abashed, abate, abattoirs, abbess, accident. My memory sharpened and primed on words and numbers – facts and figures, dates and words still stick today, even when I don't intend it.

When I fell in love with numbers, no one noticed. No one would have noticed if I'd been set on fire. That was a bad year for my parents. My mother would spend hours in the garden cradling every seedling as if the death of even one would diminish her. By then, my father had already begun to fade. Jill and I fended for ourselves. Counting became, and remained, my secret.

I live here in Glen Iris, two blocks from where I grew up. I live alone, except for Nikola. (Nikola Tesla: 11.) His photo is in a polished silver frame on my bedside table, right next to my Cuisenaire rods. The picture was taken in 1885 when he was 29 by Napoleon Sarony, the famous photographer – the original hangs in the Smithsonian in Washington, DC next to an induction motor Nikola invented in 1888. His hair is neatly parted and slicked down, although the right side refuses to lie flat. It's cut short above his ears, which are too large for his delicate head and which lie backwards on an angle: a greyhound sensing prey. His moustache is also asymmetrical, certainly presentable enough, not scruffy by any means but not preened either. He is wearing a white shirt with the collar pinned down inside his suit coat, which is darker and striped, with narrow lapels that I assume were usual at the time. But it's his eyes that show the world who he is. Deep set, dark – staring straight ahead. To the future.

I've stared at that photo for twenty years now. I wouldn't be surprised if he spoke one day. If the greyscale melted into warm flesh and his lips started moving.

'My name is Nikola Tesla,' he'd say. 'I was born at midnight between the ninth and tenth of July, 1856, in Croatia. My mother was Djuka Mandic and my father was Milutin Tesla. My brother was Dane and my sisters were Milka, Angelina and Marica. I studied engineering at the Austrian Polytechnic School in Graz. I emigrated to the United States in 1884 where I discovered electricity, magnetism, the AC motor, robotics, radar and wireless communication. I never married, nor had a girlfriend. My friends included Mark Twain, William K. Vanderbilt and Robert Underwood Johnson. I hate jewellery on women. I love pigeons.'

I'll be lying on the bed when I hear this, and I'll roll over to face him. 'My name is Grace Lisa Vandenburg,' I'll say. 'I am 35 years old. My mother, Marjorie Anne, is 70 and my sister Jill Stella is 33. Jill is married to Harry Venables; he's 40 on the second of May. They have three children: Harry junior is 11, Hilary is 10 and Bethany is 6. My father's name was James Clay Vandenburg and he died. I am a teacher, although I'm not working now. I was in love when I was 21. He was funny and clever and wanted to be a filmmaker. His name was Chris and he looked a bit like Nick Cave. I lost my virginity in his car outside my mother's house. It took four months before I realised he was also sleeping with his flatmate. I don't like coriander. I don't understand interpretive dance. I don't like realist paintings. Lycra makes me look fat.'

Scratch that bit. Possibly I wouldn't fill up the head space of the greatest genius the world has ever known with this riveting detail. He would understand, though. He'd understand me. He was also in love with numbers, but he didn't care much for 10s.

The love of numbers takes many forms, although 10s are obviously and anatomically superior. In one famous case, an 18-year-old boy was obsessed with 22. Imagine walking through doorways 22 times. Sitting in a chair, then immediately standing again, 22 times before you could finally rest. It highlights the inherent logic of 10s. There was a 13-year-old girl who had 9s – tapping her feet on the side of her bed 9 times before she could sleep or rise. There are a number of reports of 8s including a boy who had to spin around 8 times whenever he entered a room. The 6 story is probably the saddest. This teenager loathed the number so much he couldn't repeat anything 6 times. Or 60. Or 66. He even detested numbers that added up to 6. No 42s. No 33s.

Nikola loved 3s. He counted his steps like me, but it was 3s that captured his heart. He would only stay in a hotel room if the number was divisible by 3. Each night when he ate his dinner at the Waldorf-Astoria, at precisely 8.00 p.m. at his usual table, he had 18 napkins folded beside him. Why 18? Why not 6 or 9 or 72? I'd love to roll over in bed one morning, see him next to my pillow and ask him. This year on 27 August I turn 36. He'd love that.

Walking the streets of New York was difficult for him because if he went more than halfway around a city block he needed to keep going until he had walked around it 3 times. Instead of counting food the way I do, he calculated the cubic volume of each forkful or plateful or glass; he didn't care if he ate two beans or twenty. This kind of mental gymnastics takes some concentration even for the world's greatest genius, so he always ate alone. He loved playing cards, which I've

long suspected is a way of channelling a love of counting. Gambling is one of the few things Nikola and I disagree on. Cards and wheels don't behave in any kind of pattern despite the desperate hopes of those sad casino addicts. Back in 1876 Nikola had become a gambler, which worried his father, a minister of religion. But he conquered this vice, like he conquered smoking and drinking coffee, because he could conquer anything.

The front stairs at our house started me counting, but I sometimes imagine how it all began. There are so many possibilities, but it had to start somewhere. With someone. One person.

In my most usual imaginings it's a Cro-Magnon woman. It's not that men weren't capable, but men protected the tribe and hunted – numbers were less important to them. It's the women who needed them more.

A group of women collecting wild grains or fruit or caring for children. They would need to measure things like when a baby was due or how many days of food were left. More than 10,000 years ago, she would have been on a trip, maybe to visit another tribe and perhaps she wanted to know when her period would come. The tribe had some rules, say: a menstruating woman couldn't handle food, or mix with men or skin game. She may have needed animal skin torn into strips. She didn't want to be unprepared. It was late winter and the sky was overcast. She couldn't see the moon. She took something extra with her on that journey. She took the radius bone of a wolf that she had found one day while looking for ptarmigan eggs. She picked up that bone without really knowing why but, on the day before her

journey and the first day of her period, she marked it with a piece of flint that had broken off a spear-head. She drew a line:

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Would she have been heralded as a great benefactor, the giver of a way to know how many bison were in a herd or how many days' walk to the ocean? Prized as a mate, a mother, a senior member of the tribe? Perhaps it would have been too different, this way of seeing. Was she ostracised or punished or bullied because her insight was greater? Was she alone, sent away because she defied the moon and the seasons and the knowledge that they bring?

It started as a row of notches; but it didn't take long for the notches to be grouped in finger-lots of 5. Then the groups of 5s became 4 downward strokes with 1 cross stroke through them. In fact the Arabic numerals 2 and 3 come from those strokes. A 2 is just two horizontal strokes joined together; a 3 is three joined strokes. Eventually special symbols would evolve for 5 and 10, to end the repetition of all those strokes. Yet there's purity in those simple marks, the kind you still see on children's blackboards. We all count with our hearts when we are young. At teachers' college most of my classmates aspired to teach upper secondary, but primary school was all I ever wanted. Seeing small children learn to count thrilled me year after year, as if it were me drawing those marks for the very first time. I remember everything about being a teacher. The feeling of chalk dust, silky against my palms. The wonder and mischief on those little faces.

Sometimes at night, after all the day's counting is done, I imagine I am the woman who finds the numbers

first. The woman who cut the marks into the wolf's bone. I am to be sacrificed for my heresy. It is always Nikola who saves me.

Sometimes I'm in Salem, Massachusetts. My puritan-black smock is laced tight over my breasts. My wrists are bound behind my back, around a stake piled with branches for burning. From waist to ankles my legs have been pressed together and tied by my church-going neighbours who take the chance to force roughened hands under my skirts, lingering over my calves, my thighs. The crowd jeers. The fire is lit. There is no hope for me. I am to be devoured by the flames. Suddenly, the crowd falls silent. A black horse thunders through the night. It is Nikola. He walks towards me, the flames curling around his knee-length black boots. He is unburned. Unharmed. He snaps my ties and cradles me against his chest.

Other times my wrists are bound in front of me and I am kneeling before the Aztec high priest. My eyes and mouth are open wide. My clothing, elaborate gilded and jewelled cloth wound around my body, is removed by two guards who stand on either side, hands on my shoulders. They tie a silken blindfold over my eyes. One guard cups my naked breast insolently. I am helpless. They haul me to my feet by a chain around my throat and bend me over an altar. A cold hand presses against the nape of my neck. Abruptly I sense a change in the crowd – murmurs, scuffling. I am hauled from the altar, lifted over Nikola's shoulder. My blindfold falls to the ground. The guards lie dead, the high priest grovelling.

It's a teenage fairytale fantasy I know, but so vivid sometimes that real life seems pale. At least it's not like

the typical middle-class fantasies of a middle-class woman from a middle-class suburb. I can imagine how they go: 'Take me on the granite benchtop, Julio! Let me see your pumping arse reflected in the European double-door stainless steel fridge with ice-maker!'

In my fantasies, I am always about to die and Nikola always saves me. I have never been to Europe or America or Asia, but my fantasies show me exotic places I can smell and touch and feel. My dreams have no numbers in them, none at all; no counting, no signage, no paces. I wake, and count again.

It's Saturday. It is 24 degrees, an annoying number because technically 'room temperature' is between 20 and 23 degrees. I wake at 5.55 a.m. I have 5 minutes to gather myself then my feet hit the floor the second the numbers roll around to 6.00. (I check the time on the internet at 6.00 p.m. every night and readjust all my clocks and my watch if necessary. It is rarely necessary.) The rest of Glen Iris might have morphed overnight from leafy streetscape to alien-inhabited moonscape. I never open the blinds.

I stand. 25 paces to the bathroom. Luckily my legs are long for my height. If I had to face a 27 or a 28 so early in the morning it would throw out my day. Brush my teeth – this is tricky. Each tooth has 3 surfaces – inner, top and outer, except for the front row which has only 2 surfaces because the tops are sharpened like a razor blade. There are 6 rows – top left, centre, top right, bottom left, centre, bottom right. Each surface needs 10 full strokes of the brush, back and forth. This means 16 by 10 strokes. 160. It takes a little while. Then floss up and down between each tooth 10 times.

Shower. When scrubbing each limb 10 times with soap it's important not to be heavy-handed. Hair: washed every second day and counted out in the circles formed by each finger pressing against my scalp. 10 circles for each finger, and move to another place on my head. Repeat 10 times. The conditioner needs less – only 10 by 5. Out of the shower, dry myself with a towel from the top of the pile. Again, 10 wipes on each limb, 10 for the chest and 10 for the back. Wash my face. My face is divided into 5 zones: forehead – pale, wide, smooth. Each cheek, defined by sharp cheekbones. One nose, a little too pointy. And one chin, prominent. The overall effect is attractive but sharp, like a Scandinavian maitre d' wearing underpants a size too small. Each zone needs 5 wipes with a cotton pad to remove the cleanser. Repeat with toner. Use the same action to apply moisturiser. Repeat with sunscreen. Dry hair, 100 slow strokes with the big brush under the dryer. This is the most difficult part because each stroke must be full and complete right to the tips down the small of my back, yet gentle so I don't end up with a halo of blonde frizz. The only variation to this is Sunday morning, when I also trim my nails and push back the cuticles and cut them, and buff the nails 10 times each with each side of my buffer. There are 4 sides to my buffer: a file, a ridge-remover, a smoother and a polisher. This, too, takes a while.

But it isn't Sunday. Back to the bedroom, another 25 steps. I have 10 pairs of knickers and 5 bras. These are folded in the appropriate drawers and I select from the top. Each bra I wear 5 times and each pair of knickers once. I have 10 pairs of trousers and 10 skirts. I have 10 short-sleeved tops and 10 long-sleeved tops. The trousers and long-sleeved tops are, of course, for the cold

months and I wear them alternating on a daily basis from April 15, which is halfway through autumn, until October 15, halfway through spring. For the actual winter months of June, July and August I add a jacket regardless of the temperature. The skirts and short-sleeved shirts are for the other half of the year. Each top is worn once and each pair of trousers or skirt 5 times if its first day is a Monday but only twice if its first day is a Saturday.

I start at the left of my wardrobe and work towards the right, because after I have washed and ironed my clothes I hang them back at the right side. The order is random, determined by how I hang them on the line which is determined by the order in which I remove them from the washing machine; I put my hand in and pull out the first piece of cloth I touch. I don't worry about co-ordination but there is a disproportionate amount of solid, dark colour in my wardrobe. Patterns and prints are asking for trouble. I have 10 pairs of shoes: day and evening shoes for each half of the year, plus boots, sneakers, Ugg boots, slippers, old sneakers and a pair of sandals that don't fit but make up the 10. The evening shoes don't get much wear because I haven't been out in the evening for a while.

So now I'm ready for breakfast. It's 7.45.

As it's Saturday, after breakfast I go to the supermarket. At 8.45 on Saturday morning in January in Glen Iris the supermarket is deserted – everyone is still asleep in their beach houses at Portsea or Anglesea or Phillip Island, dreaming about whomever it is they dream about while they lay beside their spouses. Waiting for me at the checkout is a handsome boy, twentysomething, with too much enthusiasm on his pink face. Either he's still full of

love for all mankind from last night's ecstasy or he's waiting for the right time to talk to me about Amway. Still, there's no other checkout open. The boy smiles encouragingly. I feel a headache coming on. I push my shopping trolley over, squeaking with each step.

My trolley has 2 trays of chicken thighs, fat and glossy, each tray containing 5. A carton of eggs marked as a dozen. (Each week I assure ecstasy-boy or high-pain-threshold-girl, a Kiwi backpacker with seven piercings in each ear, that I have already checked the eggs. This is so they won't open the carton and notice I have removed 2 and left them in the assorted spices.) Plastic bags containing 100 beans (that's a pain), 10 carrots, 10 baby potatoes, 10 small onions. 100 grams of salad mix. (I refuse to shop in a supermarket without a digital scale.) 10 little tins of tuna. 10 orange bottles of shampoo. 9 bananas.

What?

Count again.

How the fuck did I get 9 bananas in my trolley?

This is impossible. I look behind the eggs, behind the bag of beans. This is *not* possible.

The drug-addled multilevel marketer is standing behind the counter, smiling. Those teeth are money well spent. He's got a smile like a Scientologist's. Well, I'm going back. I can't buy 9 bananas. He can wait while I go back to aisle 12 and get another.

Just as I am about to excuse myself, someone comes to a stop behind me with a basket hanging over his arm; now I'll lose my spot. And I was here first. What kind of a Nigel No-friends is at the supermarket this early on a Saturday anyway? Must have had a big Friday night with 'Inspector Morse' on DVD and a cup of hot cocoa. The

Scientologist drug dealer is still standing there. His smile is fading. He folds his arms.

The guy with the basket is reading *Celebrity Nosejobs*, or some other Pulitzer-winning publication picked from the display near the checkout. He must be nearsighted because he's holding the magazine about one inch from his face. All I can see is his forearms below shirt sleeves scrunched up to his elbows. His forearms are smooth on the underside. One has a tendon taut from the weight of the basket. Dark blond hair on the front. Not too much. Not extending to the back of the square, capable hands. Dangling over the edge of his basket amidst 2 trays of mince, 3 trays of sausages, a jar of chilli paste and 3 apples is 1 unfettered banana.

The key to an operation like this is nonchalance. I smile, piranha-like, at the Scientologist. He fiddles with his tie. I start loading my groceries onto the belt at the end furthest from the scanner. All except the bananas. The belt rolls onward, remorselessly. It could care less about the bananas.

'I'm exhausted,' I say.

He jumps. Whoever trained him should have mentioned that customers sometimes speak.

'I spent all day yesterday collecting spare change for the Red Cross. Famine relief. For the kiddies.' I wink. His smile returns. I beckon him closer with a crooked finger and wave my hand over the groceries. I lower my voice to just above a whisper. 'Do you mind if I pay for this lot in five-cent pieces?'

His eyes bug and as he says, 'I have to check with the manager,' his voice breaks. He spins around looking for somebody, anybody. While he's distracted I nonchalantly pick up the bananas from my trolley with both

hands. Nonchalantly I rock back, then *ever* so nonchalantly I spin around, reach my arms full stretch, grab the shrivelled brown end of Nigel's banana and lift it out of his basket. He can't see a thing from behind that magazine.

By the time my prospective money-laundering cultist has looked back, all he sees is me smiling eerily, hands up like I'm about to crown Miss Universe with a bunch of bananas. A bunch of 10 bananas that I lay gently on the belt.

'Never mind about the coins,' I say, pulling a fifty from my purse. 'Not everyone's a cheapskate.'

Operation Restore Banana is complete. My groceries are bagged and paid for. I stop for a minute or two to scan the headlines of the pile of newspapers near the door. Humming the theme to *The Great Escape*, I walk out of the store, 2 bags in each hand. In the car park I lean over for a moment to readjust the plastic bags before they amputate my fingers. I straighten. Someone is standing right in front of me.

It's Nigel No-friends. In his right hand is an apple. He throws the apple in the air and catches it.