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I met Alexander Grothendieck on January 2, 2012. As I made my way to a car rental center in the outskirts of Toulouse that morning, with the sky still dark, the displays on passing buses flashed between their numbers and “Bonne Année”.

I was halfway into my third year of graduate school and had read a bit of Alexander Grothendieck’s mathematical work and felt a sense of connection with it. I found his writing to be generally very clear, and I liked his approach to algebraic geometry. In my own career, I was at a point where I was not only not making progress on solving any problems, but miserably unengaged by my work. But despite the burnout, Grothendieck’s work remained an island of enjoyment in an otherwise featureless sea. Grothendieck is unquestionably one of the most influential mathematicians of the 20th century, and to a graduate student all the way in California, his exit to live the life of a hermit, location unknown somewhere in the Pyrenees of France or Andorra, rendered him a practically mythical figure.

But I am driven to demystify – it is part of what motivates me to be a mathematician – and when we tell ourselves and others that our heroes are inhuman and on a pedestal that is not just high but unattainable, we are actually pushing ourselves down rather than climbing. And so, following a decision to attend a conference in France, some emails, a lesson driving with a manual transmission, a session of studying maps, and a long conversation at the rental car center made difficult by my limited French, that brisk but mild winter morning found me driving through rural France, wildly hoping for a conversation about mathematics, or that I might at least see that it was truly a real person who did all the work with the name Grothendieck on it.

Lasserre is small and remote, but Grothendieck’s house is by no means the isolated cabin in a dark forest that I had imagined when I first heard about him. That area of the Pyrenees is lovely, and the drive through a rolling landscape down lanes lined with sycamore trees featured views of fallow winter fields and blue mountains swelling along the horizon that reminded me very strongly of where I grew up in the foothills of the Appalachians. The town is so small that the houses do not have numbers, which, judging by the dubious looks and patient explanations that addresses really should have numbers that French postal workers gave me when I handed them my letters addressed to Grothendieck, is relatively uncommon. Since I didn’t know which house in Lasserre was Grothendieck’s, I chose to park in a convenient small gravel lot. I was faced with a very finite number of possible houses since Lasserre consists of

the intersection of a few roads, and figured I would find my way after knocking on some doors and inquiring where I might find the person who proved the representability of the Quot functor. However, it wasn't necessary to make inquiries this way: my appearance in a rental car was a strange enough event in Lasserre that as soon as I put the car in park, a friendly man came out of a nearby house to ask if I needed any help. He appeared to be a bit puzzled by my pronunciation of "Alexander Grothendieck", but after I further explained that the person I was seeking would be someone "vieux et étrange", he was abruptly quite certain of who I had in mind, and we giggled like children whispering in the back of the classroom over having described Grothendieck this way. Grothendieck's house was not 50 feet away from where I had parked. His neighbor walked me over to the locked gate, shrugged, and walked away.

I returned to the car to equip myself with a pair of shoes lighter than the boots I was wearing that I had brought along for fence-climbing, and some galettes du roi full of almond paste, a pastry made during the church season of Epiphany, which I had purchased that morning in preparation for fence-climbing-apologizing.

Some lights were on in the house, but there was no sign of movement when I approached the gate. I hopped easily over the fence, which was made of wood and stone and about waist-height, much more modest than it had loomed in my imaginings in the previous weeks. I stepped furtively across the slightly ramshackle yard, which had many plants and terra cotta pots in various degrees of wholeness, and walked up the steps. I knocked on the door and waited, and then I knocked again. Getting more nervous, but aware that this would likely be my only chance to meet him, I shouted "Monsieur Grothendieck!" and waited, but there was no response. Thinking of the baked goods in my bag, I called "Je vous apporte quelque chose de bon!" and then cringed as I realized that was an odd tactic, like something someone might say to entice children into a windowless van. What should one say to get Grothendieck's attention? Maybe a new proof of a big conjecture, but I didn't bring one. I tried calling his name a couple more times, but there was no sign that I was heard. Looking over at the windows to my right, I started to wonder how long I should stay. I had done my best to arrive at a likely time of day, about 11 am, and it occurred to me that I hadn't decided what to do in the event that Alexander Grothendieck did not happen to be sitting right by the door, ready to greet me.

When I looked up from my reverie, I realized that a figure with a large white beard wearing a brown robe over his clothes had appeared utterly silently quite nearby on my left. I was so startled that I felt like I was outside myself watching the scene. My eyes widened, I jumped involuntarily, my heart pounded. I thought, wildly, "Oh no, what if I have accidentally come to the home of the wrong hermit?". But as soon as I looked at his face, I recognized it from photos I had seen. Oddly enough, it was not the more recent photos where I saw the resemblance, but to a much older black and white photo of him when he was young. "It's you!" I managed, idiotically. Grothendieck stood impassively. In one hand, he held a short pitchfork loosely at his side. It reminded me of his doodle of devils with pitchforks around the Grothendieck–Riemann–Roch

formula. His free hand rose, brandishing an admonitory finger. “Il ne faut pas entrer,” he said, advancing slowly toward me. I tried to form some sentences about visiting, but Grothendieck did not react. He continued to walk slowly toward me, wagging his finger, telling me that I shouldn’t be in here disturbing him, and asking me how I got in here.

When he seemed totally unmoved by my getting out the bakery box from my bag and told me again to leave, I returned to the gate. I explained that I had climbed the gate to get in, but when he didn’t react at all, I thought (nonsensically, I now realize) that he wanted me to climb back over the gate to prove to him that this was indeed how I entered his yard. But, the ground under the gate was sloped so that the fence was significantly higher from the inside, and I was shaking from the huge influx of adrenaline that I was experiencing. After a few horribly embarrassing failed attempts at pushing myself back over the gate, during which all I could think, over and over, was “Alexander Grothendieck is watching me” (which he was, with what I might describe, in retrospect, as detached bemusement), I asked him to unlock the gate. However, he stood totally still and silent, like my own personal Ghost of Christmas Future, and then told me, once more, to get out. I thought I had better not fail at this next attempt. I tossed my bag, hat, and scarf over, did a bit of a run up, and vaulted inelegantly over, smacking my shin hard on the gate on the way. Seeing the bruise later helped me convince myself that I had not dreamed up this entire episode.

Once he had seen me leave his yard, I thought that Grothendieck might just walk off, but I decided to wait. He did as well, and we studied each other from opposite sides of the gate for a moment. We were a similar height, and his blue eyes were alert and focused. Grothendieck asked me not angrily, but a bit sternly, in French, how I knew his address and how I had gotten there. He told me again that I should not have come in, and should not have disturbed him in his “cloître”, which reinforced the impression given by the brown robe he wore that he thought of himself, in some sense, as a monk. When I was given the address, I had said I wouldn’t tell Grothendieck how I came by it, so I just watched him silently during this monologue, looking shocked.

Then, he asked me my name, and explained that he could not hear very well anymore and so I must shout into his ear, a piece of information that abruptly made sense of our interaction thus far. It was quite disconcerting to need to get so close to him, and after I said my name I started to spell it to be helpful, but he stopped me partway in since he had already recognized it: a couple of weeks before, I had sent what I now realize was a very enthusiastic fan letter. He then switched to English and, irritably, asked me why I included a French translation. “To be polite? La politesse?” Everything I had seen of Grothendieck’s was written in French or German, and so it had seemed appropriate to me, but it was very apparent that he found my explanation unsatisfactory. Of course he knew English, and I had offended him a little.

He told me he had responded to my letter, explaining that my reasons for contacting him were insufficient, and that I should not visit. I felt a bit deflated as I realized the content of my letter was of course in no way interesting to

him, but I also couldn't help but be a little amused. Trust a mathematician to tell me that my reasons for writing were "not sufficient". I hadn't received his response, and realized that including my own name on the return address (rather than the name on the mailbox at the place I was staying) must have been an error. Later, I went to a post office to try to retrieve the letter, but had no luck. Actually, my inquiries ended with the woman working there getting very angry and shouting at me that if the letter was so important I should have addressed it properly – how could it be delivered without the correct name? The people delivering the mail aren't mind-readers! I made the mistake since US postal workers, also not mind-readers, deliver mail to the address on a letter regardless of the name listed. Trying to explain the reason for the mix-up in my politest French, in the hopes that the worker would feel sympathetic and help me to navigate the system, only brought forth more ire. I've still never gotten the letter.

After Grothendieck discovered that I had not received his response to my letter, he seemed to decide that this explained my presence in part, but was still dissatisfied and asked again why I had visited. He told me repeatedly that I should have announced myself. It seemed lost on him that I had no idea how I might have done this. I certainly don't have his phone number, and would have struggled to provide the information far enough in advance to put in a letter. Did he take carrier pigeons? Clearly a bit suspicious that I had some unsavory motive, he said he thought that my visit must indicate that I wanted something. I told him that maybe he didn't realize, but he is very famous and I just wanted to meet him. He shrugged and said again that I didn't have any satisfactory reason for visiting, but I could tell that he was a bit amused by being told that he was famous, and he relaxed a bit.

He told me that he could see from my face that I didn't have any bad intentions, and that he would never want to harm anyone. I didn't notice it before, but I saw then that the pitchfork was no longer in his hand, but propped against the fence. He said that he had some bad experiences, and he could not invite me in, though he would like to. If you had received my reply, he said, you would have understood that I am not taking visitors and you should not disturb someone in their retirement. He expected, though, to receive a letter from me soon explaining how I got his address. "C'est la moindre des choses," he intoned, switching back to French for a moment. He used to receive all his visitors, he said, but he had two very bad experiences and no longer did it, though he was very sorry that I came such a long way to not be invited in, and that he was sorry for himself as well that he was not able to invite me in. He took my hand and shook it. The conversation took a maudlin turn. He told me that he thought we would meet again, very soon, though not in this life. He told me he thought that he would die within the year, though this prediction was made with a practiced air that suggested this was not the first time he had made it.

After these heavy declarations, he turned his attention back to my visit. For all his bluster about not wishing to be disturbed, a part of him was curious about his visitor. How did I get here? On a train? No, in a car. Am I rich?

No. Am I poor? Of course I'm poor! I'm a graduate student! I laughed, and he chuckled good-naturedly. Am I alone? Yes. Didn't I have something for him? The bakery box reemerged, and I opened it to show him the contents. He looked at the pastry inside. What is it? Galettes. What? Galettes! Did you make them? No, I bought them. What? I bought them! Oh, thank you for making them. He took the box from me, and said he wanted to get something for me too, and then went back into his house. I was glad for my instinct to bring baked goods. They smooth everything over in the American midwest, where I'm from.

This conversation had all developed in an unforeseen direction. I had not been able to discuss math with him at all. At one point, when I tried to make our conversation more detailed by writing on a piece of paper, he waved it away. But we spoke more than I had thought we might, and when he came back out of his house he presented me with a tomato and a packet of almond paste. The tomato was large and fresh and came from his garden – impressive for January – and he told me to eat it in good health. He also said I should remember that it was his friend; likely something was lost in translation. The packet of almond paste was very large. A kilo. I was not sure what to make of this generosity, and later, when I baked with it, it was good, though I realized that it had already expired when it was given to me. Almond paste has a very long shelf-life, so Grothendieck had likely had it for quite some time.

After the exchange of gifts was over, it seemed we were finished. Grothendieck wished me well, shook my hand again, and, after entreating me once more to write a letter telling him how I came to know his address, told me goodbye and walked back to his house. I said goodbye as well, but his back was already turned to me and I realized right after I spoke that he likely didn't hear me.

My experience of the rest of the day was odd and heightened. The drive back through the countryside. The primary colors of the public transit train in Toulouse. The tomato, when I ate it later that day. As the days and weeks went on, the visit was something I reflected on with enjoyment. My burnout faded and I got more excited about my work again.

A little while after my visit, I did write Grothendieck again, but my letter was returned unopened, even though he had requested I write it. I wrote to him a few further times, and my letters all came back unopened and labelled “retour a l'envoyeur” in his distinctive script. I knew from those returned letters that he did not die within a year of my visit, and I was glad to see his prediction was wrong, though after my letters continued to be returned, I gave up on writing. I was sad to learn of his recent death, and I have written about my visit to him as something of a memorial, though of course I am writing not as someone who knew Grothendieck at all, but someone who was interested by his life and work. As I look at the story of my visit, I hope it is clear that I didn't write it to be disrespectful, or to claim any great insight into Grothendieck's life, but I wrote it because I think it's a story worth telling: a bit odd, a bit funny, and, at least to me, a bit meaningful. Despite all the headlines suggesting it would be impossible, I got to meet Alexander Grothendieck in person. Although my fantasies of having some magical conversation about math with him had to

be swept aside in the face of the reality that he wasn't really interested in me (though I have to say he handled my trespassing on his property very cordially), I am grateful to have had the chance to meet him.