

Your eyes open and you see the sun on your tent. Julia lies sleeping next to you in her sleeping bag. It's getting warm in here. You hit the moment where it's time to move.

Your legs ache from yesterday's hike, your feet with the skin of blisters. You get up and dress in the tent, feeling your unwashed skin itch, feeling every minute of your 9 hours asleep last night.

You shake Julia awake, and she sort of opens her eyes and goes back to sleep. You decide to let her sleep some more. Who knows how much sleep another person needs?

You unzip the tent, taking your shoes out to the ground cover outside, and get your feet into them, tying them securely. You zip up the tent and walk past a few conifers to where Brian is, making breakfast. You three are...

CAMPING IN THE MOUNTAINS

(Waiting for Margot, episode 6)

The campsite has a grill (encrusted with a black substance), a fire pit, a wooden picnic table, and a place to park or be dropped off. You three were dropped off by a camp shuttle, and every so often the camping service comes by, and if you're there, you can talk about how things are going. If you need to go home early, that's how you'll have to do it. But you're probably not going to have to go home

early, or want to.

Somewhere not too far away is a pit toilet, but fortunately it's not close enough for you to smell it. And there are trees everywhere, and underbrush, and the day is warm and dry and you're feeling the freshness of being awake, and the feeling that you're fading out and dehydrated, already, so early in the day. It's a dry day, and you can smell smoke from somebody else's fire. It's a beautiful place.

Brian is cooking rice over a propane stove. He has a couple cans of beans waiting, and some salsa he made himself before coming up here.

YOU: Brian, good morning.

BRIAN: Good morning. Is Julia still asleep?

YOU: Yes, I think so. That's how I left her.

BRIAN: I had a good time this morning.

YOU: You're an early riser, aren't you?

BRIAN: I've gotten into the habit, and it's hard to break. So I got up around dawn and went for a walk. I saw some interesting birds. I even saw a mountain quail.

YOU: Are those rare?

BRIAN: Yeah, they're considered rare. But it just looked like a bird to me. But a particular kind of bird.

YOU: It just looked like a mountain quail.

BRIAN: Yeah. The bird ran off into the brush.

YOU: Why do you get up early?

BRIAN: I like to read the Bible and meditate.

YOU: What kind of meditation?

BRIAN: Just a centering prayer, a kind of measured breathing.

YOU: When I'm up on the mountain, I don't really feel any closer to God.

BRIAN: Do you feel closer to the universe?

YOU: No, but it's nice being on the mountain.

BRIAN: I don't feel any closer to God on the mountain either. But I do feel different.

Julia barges in.

JULIA: How can you guys not feel close to the universe up here? It's everywhere!

BRIAN: I think that might be the problem. The universe is always everywhere. It's as present in the times when you feel far from it as when you feel close.

JULIA: Okay, that makes sense. But why do I feel closer to it here?

BRIAN: We feel close to things when we trust them.

JULIA: Yes. That makes sense. Thank you, teacher.

BRIAN: You're welcome. Would you like to try some salsa? I made it myself. Here,

He offers a bag of chips from last night. She selects one, and dips it in the salsa, and eats.

JULIA: Wow... um, it's kind of... different.

BRIAN: It is different. Do you think you'll want some on your rice and beans?

JULIA: That's what's for breakfast?

BRIAN: That's what I'm making.

JULIA: I think plain will be fine.

Now you're curious.

BRIAN: Here, try some, Beth.

You make your test. The flavors in the salsa are fine, there's nothing wrong with any of them individually, and the salsa doesn't exactly taste bad, but it doesn't taste good either. Somehow, it just tastes like itself.

YOU: Yeah, Brian, this is... different.

BRIAN: You think you'll want some on your rice and beans?

YOU: Yeah, I think I'll give it a try.

BRIAN: Everything's different when you're

camping.

YOU: Do you make that salsa when you're back at home?

BRIAN: Not too often. If I have a lot of peppers from my pepper plants, sometimes I make it.

JULIA: You have pepper plants?

BRIAN: Yeah, they're potted plants. I have a south window and so, I leave the blinds open and they get enough sun.

JULIA: Wow, sometime we should visit your apartment. I bet it looks like a monastery.

BRIAN: It does.

JULIA: By which I mean pretty much like everyone's apartment.

BRIAN: The late industrial age is the age of mass monasticism...

JULIA: And also the age of constant partying...

YOU: And of total normality...

JULIA: High fives, everyone. High fives for the chemistry.

High fives all around.

BRIAN: That was some good chemistry.

He checks to see if the rice is done.

BRIAN: Looks good. Get your bowl and we can

eat.

You and Julia get your plastic bowls and Brian serves some rice. You two get spoons while he opens a can of beans. He pours beans over your rice, then opens another can of beans, pours half of it over his.

BRIAN: We're going to have to finish off these beans.

No worries, you think, there's enough hunger between the three of us.

Brian spoons some salsa on his rice and beans, and you do the same. You all sit down at the wooden picnic table.

JULIA: Do you pray over your food, Brian?

BRIAN: I was going to pray silently.

JULIA: You were going to pray to God.

YOU: Would you like to pray to the Universe, instead?

JULIA: Offer gratitude, yes.

YOU: How about this. I'm an atheist. So I will create a powerful silence, and make space for reality.

The other two accept. You will an intense silence into the space where the three of you are. There is no room for hallowedness, gratitude, or awe. You don't understand where this silence

comes from, or where it is going.

BRIAN: Wow.

JULIA: Beth, you have... some kind of power.

YOU: I don't think that was me...

JULIA: Maybe it was the Universe...

YOU: Did you feel the Universe during that silence?

JULIA: No, I didn't. But it must have been there. The Universe is always there, in everything.

YOU: Brian, was there God in that silence?

BRIAN: Yes, there was God in that silence. That's the only time I've felt God's presence on this mountain.

JULIA: The trees don't speak God's presence to you?

By now you are eating rice and beans,
having a breakfast conversation.

BRIAN: I can only sense the presence of God when he comes near to me.

JULIA: But he's here all the time, right? He speaks the universe into existence, that's what you said earlier, right?

BRIAN: Yeah, that's true. I guess he's everywhere.

JULIA: Maybe God was in the silence, but the Universe wasn't.

YOU: But we all experienced our bodies and the air and the sounds in the woods while the silence came through me. That's the Universe.

JULIA: I hear what you're saying, Beth. But the Universe wasn't here, in the silence.

YOU: I agree, but I don't understand why.

You all fall silent. Eating rice and beans is not a difficult task, and soon you are done.

You all clean up, and then decide what to do with your day. You decide to hike over to the agricultural preserve.

AGRICULTURAL PRESERVE

You all walk down a road with a field fenced-in beside it. Workers are out in the fields, tending the grapevines that fill in the purpose of the tract of land. The sky is clear.

You remember something.

YOU: Oh, we forgot to put on sunscreen. Hold on.

You get out the sunscreen and start to put some on and pass it around.

BRIAN: Thanks for remembering.

YOU: I didn't really try to remember, so I'm not sure how much thanks I deserve.

BRIAN: Well, you kept living up until now. Was that easy?

YOU: Sometimes it was hard, yes.

JULIA: Well, there's your thanks. Thanks for making it this far in life.

YOU: I only did what anyone else would have done under the circumstances.

JULIA: Okay fine. You don't deserve anything at all, spoilsport. But when we all don't have sunburns later, it'll be because of you, and there's nothing you can do about it.

YOU: You're right, Julia. I am being a spoilsport. You can thank me if you want.

JULIA: Yes, I like thanking people. It makes me feel good inside.

BRIAN: Ah, Julia, you missed a spot.

JULIA: Where? On my nose?

BRIAN: You got it.

JULIA: We're so funny, caring about how we look up here on the mountain. We're camping!

YOU: It's the editor's instincts. When I'm writing an email, I can't help but fix problems in it. Even if I'm writing to a friend who doesn't care.

JULIA: Interesting. So if someone is a certain way and it bothers us, we want to fix them.

BRIAN: Make them perfect.

JULIA: If we couldn't edit them would it bother us if they were the way they were?

BRIAN: A long time ago, no one used deodorant, because it hadn't been invented. Were people in great misery, shunning each other, unable to love each other? Or did they just get over the smell?

JULIA: I don't know, Brian, have you ever taken the bus? There are some painful smells on the bus.

BRIAN: Yeah, so the truth hides in the middle.

YOU: I think there must be some kind of instinct for perfection. It's not always a rational thing.

BRIAN: Yeah, I think I agree.

Julia notices someone in the vines.

JULIA: Hello!

WORKER: Oh hey, how are all you?

JULIA: We're camping!

WORKER: Better than "great"?

He stands up straight, taking this as opportunity to rest.

JULIA: Just different. Camping is its own thing.

WORKER: When I take my vacations, I go down to the city. That's its own thing.

JULIA: I know what you mean. Everything is different and we go from place to place. Do you like your job?

WORKER: Eh, it's okay. It beats being stuck inside.

JULIA: I've done some farm work. I like being outside!

WORKER: Yeah! Well, I have to get back to work. You all have a nice day.

YOU: Thanks, we will.

You all continue on down the road.

BRIAN: I wonder sometimes. What will things look like in thirty years?

YOU: The scientists predict the Calamity.

BRIAN: Our prophets -- we don't want to hear what they have to say.

YOU: Yeah. I guess it'll be the end.

JULIA: What are you guys talking about? I don't check the news.

BRIAN: You're wise.

JULIA: Maybe not. Maybe I'm stupid. I bet I'll be alive when the Calamity comes.

BRIAN: Hopefully.

JULIA: So, I want to be prepared. What can I do?

BRIAN: I think we're doing the right thing.

JULIA: Going camping?

BRIAN: Yeah, going camping, hanging out, that's the right thing to do. No one knows exactly how the Calamity is going to play out. We don't even

know when it's coming. It's hard to know anything too specific to do. But one thing that makes hard times more liveable is when people can trust each other.

JULIA: I guess I can trust you two... better than a lot of people.

BRIAN: It may be that we're lucky, and don't have to work to become trustworthy for each other.

JULIA: I don't remember having to work at all.

YOU: I think we all worked, really hard, just by surviving to the point we met each other.

BRIAN: So if I know you, I can trust you. And the way to know things is to spend time together.

JULIA: Are you suggesting we make a pact?

BRIAN: What do you mean?

JULIA: Like, I don't know, a covenant, Bible scholar.

BRIAN: What would be in this pact that you propose, Julia?

JULIA: If things go to hell -- not just Hellscape Wonderland hell, but *real* hell, we will stick together.

YOU: Wow, I'm not sure I feel how momentous this is. I just want to say "yes" casually.

JULIA: That's okay.

BRIAN: Yeah, you can say "yes" casually and then

take what you say seriously.

YOU: I guess I can grow into it.

JULIA: That's the spirit. Such enthusiasm!

You feel a little shut down.

BRIAN: She's okay, Julia.

JULIA: I know, I was just yanking her chain. I've been enough people to have been her.

BRIAN: Why are you hard on her?

JULIA: I'm teasing her. She's so old. Old people are ridiculous.

BRIAN: That should fill you with sorrow, Julia, to be so unfortunate as to be better than her.

JULIA: I've been older than her. She's just being a 41 year old. And she's better than me.

YOU: No, I'm not better than you. And I'm not worse. I am myself.

JULIA: Huh. You're yourself.

BRIAN: She's Beth.

JULIA: What does "Beth" mean, Beth?

YOU: I don't know. I know what the name means in general, but I don't know what the name means in my case.

JULIA: You don't know who you are.

YOU: No, it's like that Augustine quote about time.

JULIA: How does that go?

YOU: Do you remember, Brian?

BRIAN: It was something about knowing what time is until it's time to define it.

YOU: So, I know who I am, but I can't even define myself.

JULIA: Okay, then why not give you a hard time?

YOU: I don't know.

JULIA: Are we still friends?

YOU: Yes.

JULIA: Chemistry! We are so good!

You all ascend to the surface, and see the sky.

BRIAN: Huh, I think I see thunderclouds in the distance.

YOU: Uh oh, maybe we should head back.

JULIA: Yeah, that's a good idea.

You turn back and see the fields, remarking on what you see in them.

BRIAN: One thing that will always be relevant is agriculture.

JULIA: What if we became hunter-gatherers?

BRIAN: Yeah, that's true, we might even lose agriculture from the Calamity.

JULIA: But yeah, I see your point. We always have to be able to get food.

BRIAN: Another skill is being able to be hungry and not be too unhappy.

JULIA: That's a skill?

BRIAN: Yeah, you have to learn how to be happy and also hungry.

JULIA: So how can people be happy? By going camping?

BRIAN: We have to learn how to be happy in the city too. We can't afford to be sad.

JULIA: But maybe we can practice being tough when we have a lot of food by being hard on ourselves. And then when it comes time to be hungry, we can stop being as hard on ourselves. And our lives will still be tough.

BRIAN: Sounds like a plan.

JULIA: Is that part of the pact?

BRIAN: Yeah, sure.

JULIA: Are you in on the pact?

BRIAN: Yeah.

JULIA: Such enthusiasm! Wow!

BRIAN: Yeah, I'm in.

JULIA: So how do you want to be hard on yourself?

BRIAN: I like thinking. So maybe I can think really hard.

YOU: I can work harder and use the money to help prepare for the Calamity.

JULIA: Excellent. I wonder what I'll do?

YOU: Is your life easy?

JULIA: You know, now that you mention it, no.

YOU: So you're tough enough.

JULIA: Yeah, I don't know how I could handle anything being worse.

YOU: You have to figure out a way to become strong.

JULIA: How do I do that? Do you go tell a plant in a garden, "Figure out a way to grow into a big, strong plant?" While people are tearing up the soil all the time?

BRIAN: We can help you, but maybe you need to be under the protection of someone else. I notice that you didn't take your first date up here on the mountain.

JULIA: Yeah, it would have turned into a second date up here, as much time as we're up here...

BRIAN: And that's how romance works for you, the first date thing?

JULIA: Yeah, someday he'll become just one person... but I don't know how long it will be until then.

BRIAN: So maybe there's someone else out there. Not romance, and not us. If you were a believer, I would say that you should join a church or something like that.

JULIA: I am a believer. I believe in the Universe.

BRIAN: Okay, maybe you can find people like that. Or maybe you can be adopted by a family.

JULIA: I like that last one. But it's hard to find a family.

BRIAN: Okay, well, over time, things will work out.

JULIA: Brian! You're being encouraging!

BRIAN: Oh, sorry, I'm so sorry.

You soon enough arrive back at your campsite, with thunder in the wind. You put everything where it can't get wet, and wait by the fire, for the first drops of rain.

And they start to come, and you retire to your tents, which keep off the rain.

INSIDE THAT LITTLE TENT

You and Julia can hear the drops coming thicker, setting up a sound on the roof.

JULIA: Beth, do you believe in God?

YOU: I think I'm an atheist.

JULIA: But you're not sure.

YOU: Sometimes I feel like my life has meaning. How is that possible without God?

JULIA: Like that stuff Brian talks about?

YOU: I don't know if it's Brian's thing about things needing to be spoken to us by God because, how does he put it?

JULIA: I know what you're talking about.

YOU: There's some kind of technical reason why meaning could only be spoken by God, yeah, that sort of makes sense, but it doesn't really convince me. No, it's just that, somehow, things meaning something just feels like God exists.

JULIA: So it's not a rational thing.

YOU: No, it's not. And I want everything to be rational.

JULIA: But is it rational when you hear the rain hitting the tent? Bam! No time to be rational or irrational.

YOU: You're right. Well, meaning could always be an illusion that we create ourselves.

JULIA: Do you really believe that?

YOU: No.

JULIA: Maybe you're an agnostic.

YOU: Yeah. Maybe I'm just holding onto my atheism. Like the church people who go to church but are really agnostics.

JULIA: Do you believe in atheism?

YOU: You mean, beyond just thinking God doesn't exist, like take that belief and trust it itself?

JULIA: Yeah. That's a good way to put it. Once you trust something enough to think it's true, then you can trust it even more.

YOU: And you can trust something as an idea even if you don't think it's true.

JULIA: Yeah, so do you trust atheism?

YOU: I'm into atheism because it's the truth. But I don't have anything against believing in God. I just don't want to believe in something that isn't true.

JULIA: You just have to trust sometimes.

YOU: Yeah, but there's different kinds of trust. I can trust up to a point, but I need to hear something from God before I believe he exists.

JULIA: I guess I've always believed in the Universe since I was a little girl. So I don't know where you're coming from.

YOU: What about in all those lives you've lived? Has there been one like mine?

JULIA: Yeah, for some reason... no. There are limits to my empathy.

YOU: You look so sad.

You give her a hug. She brightens.

JULIA: This rain won't let up! Let's lie back and I'll tell you a story.

So you lie back and relax for a half minute, and then Julia begins to speak.

JULIA: Once, I was a scared girl living in the city. I was waiting during the rain at a bus stop. A drunk woman sat down next to me under the shelter. There was a bar right next to the bus stop. She was talking about something and then she put her hands around my neck. I can't remember why, just the feeling of her hands around my neck. It flowed from the conversation somehow. And I just sat there, and felt completely fine. This woman could have choked me, but I knew she wouldn't.

YOU: But you were a scared girl back then?

JULIA: Yes, but while she had her hands around my neck, I felt fine.

YOU: What happened next?

JULIA: She took her hands off my neck and finished her story. Then I caught the bus.

YOU: That's it?

JULIA: That's it.

And then the rain lets up. You two get out and so does Brian. Somehow all the walking and talking got you back in the afternoon and now it is evening. You are starving. Time for dinner: rice and beans.

BRIAN: We're preparing for the Calamity. Rice and beans are cheap.

You sit around the fire, and then go to bed for real, late at night, deep in the night: your watch says 11 PM.

[closing theme]

WAITING FOR MARGOT
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COMMENTS

1. Mountain quail aren't really rare, but they're shy.

2. In our world, things which might resemble "Calamities" may warrant more specific preparation in addition to finding people whom we can trust.

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