I live in Brimley Forge, New Mexico.

Brimley Forge sits halfway between Santa Fe and Taos along the old San Gabriel Trail (which is now Highway 618). It started as a dusty little supply post called Gristle Creek, named after the narrow, twisting stream that once ran through the valley.

Then, in 1829, a man named Elias Marindale discovered silver in Gristle Creek, and, well, word got out. The town’s population doubled, then tripled, then sextupled. More people looking for silver meant more people finding all sorts of things, including iron ore in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. At first, the silver miners hated finding iron because it got in the way of the real money. But then the railroads came, and suddenly, iron was valuable.

Which brings us to 1845, a crucial year in my town’s history.

That was the year Jonathan Brimley built his forge in Gristle Creek and immediately put it to work making weapons. Brimley’s forge was a giant stone and brick structure that dominated the valley, and in it he made rifles, bayonets, sabers, and more. He planned to ship it all east by rail, but wouldn’t you know it, in 1846, the Mexican-American War broke out. Suddenly, there were so many people who wanted weapons that Brimley didn’t even have to load them on the train. The buyers came straight to him.

Brimley’s forge became famous, or maybe infamous, depending on who you asked. By the time the American Civil War broke out, Brimley Forge was one of the biggest arms suppliers in the Southwest, churning out rifles, sabers, and bayonets by the thousands. The forge was so important that it didn’t just shape the town, it *became the town*. Gristle Creek was wiped off the map. From then on, it was Brimley Forge.

But no boom lasts forever.

As the 20th century marched ahead, the silver veins dried up. The iron ran low. The forge went cold. Fortunes built in the 1800s were spent in the 1900s and not replenished. By the 1970s, for the first time in generations, people started leaving. Some thought the town might disappear entirely, a little piece of forgotten blight in the mountains north of Santa Fe.

But a town full of miners, metalsmiths, and machinists, sitting just up the road from two national laboratories, was too valuable to fade away.

In 1977, the Tanthrop Hammond company moved in. A defense contractor with deep pockets and government ties, they built their headquarters on the edge of town, hiring up what was left of the old industry and bringing in new blood.

Brimley Forge came back to life as a small but modern city.

But, as often happens in stories like this, as a new part of the city came to life, built around the Tanthrop Hammond company, the old part of the city started to die.

The forge for which the town was named, a giant brick box of a building near downtown, had gone cold and empty, and, in time, turned dilapidated and dangerous. Grandpa told me once that the town came within days of tearing the old building down.

“That is, until Marvin Marindale decided to save it,” Grandpa had said.

Marvin Marindale, eccentric billionaire, heir to the Marindale family silver fortune, lover of old books about math and science, donated a chunk of his money to rebuild the old forge.

And turn it into a library.

The Atlas.

The weirdest, most wonderful library on Earth.

A giant brick box of a building that once was a burning hearth of iron, hammers, and steel, was now five stories of books.

And other library-ish oddities like old maps and weird tools and secret basement rooms.

But mostly books. Old, dusty books about anything and everything, but mostly boring stuff (there was an entire floor dedicated to the history of silver mining). The Atlas wasn’t the kind of library you’d go to if you wanted to read the latest bestseller. It was more the library you’d go to if you wanted to see what chemical engineering textbooks looked like in 1953. Or if you wanted to read an old study about the changing dynamics of scorpion populations in Central New Mexico.

There was a nice collection of old sci-fi and fantasy books on the 2nd floor. And a bunch of literary classics on the 3rd. There were reference books and unspeakably boring tomes on the 4th floor (seriously, those books on the 3rd floor were wack). In the basement they had “America’s Largest Collection on the History of Silver Mining.”

And on the 5th floor…

![A drawing of a library

AI-generated content may be incorrect.]()

The bookshelves on the 5th floor were laid out as a maze.

No, the word *maze* doesn’t capture the scale of what’s happening on the 5th floor of the Atlas. A better word is *labyrinth*. A place where you, a human, might get totally lost forever, and for all you know, run into a Minotaur somewhere near the middle.

It’s so wonderfully weird up there, a dream world of some mad librarian who, for reasons unknown, laid out that one floor in a series of corridors with sharp turns and dead ends.

The 5th floor was huge. There was some sort of weird architectural magic afoot in there where the top floor of a boxy brick building somehow felt much, much larger than the floors below. When I was eight years old I got lost up there, so lost that there were a few minutes that I felt like I might never find my way out. At the time, it was terrifying, but after I found my way back, and forever since, the whole experience turned thrilling in my memory. I got *completely lost in a labyrinth of books*. How cool is that? I’ve been drawn to the 5th floor of the Atlas ever since.

By the time I hit middle school I had explored the 5th floor so much that I pretty much had it mastered, and couldn’t get lost even if I tried. You might think that would have sucked out all the mystery of the 5th floor, but you’d be wrong, because there’s another weird librarian prank afoot up there. Whereas the other floors of the Atlas are all laid out like normal libraries, with Dewey Decimal numbers on the spines that allow you to find a specific book if you know what you’re looking for, the 5th floor of the Atlas, as far as I could tell, had no order to it at all. Books placed haphazardly on all the shelves, the numbers on their spines not following any kind of order in the slightest, just a weird, wonderful playland of old, oddball books of every kind in no discernible order. A total anarchy of books.

On the fifth floor you might find a book about science shelved next to a romance novel, which was next to a single volume of an old encyclopedia set, which was next to a book about World War Two. Shelf after shelf like this, the old, disjointed books seemingly lost forever in the chaos, doomed to an eternity of quiet and dust.

That was the other thing about the Atlas. Almost no one went there. A multi-story wonderland of old books in this beautiful old brick building and, on most days when I went, it was just me and the librarians.

Dad said the reason it was so empty was because “it’s in an older part of town.” That made no sense to me. If a place is amazing, who cares how old the neighborhood is?

But whatever. Everyone else’s loss was my gain. I liked it that the Atlas was quiet. I loved that I could go there and get immersed in the weirdness by myself.

Or, sometimes, with my friends.

Between Charlotte’s drama rehearsals, and Mateo’s basketball practice, we couldn’t make it to the Atlas to investigate Marvin Marindale’s clue until Friday afternoon.

My mom dropped us off at 4:00. A sign on the front door said the library closed at five.

“We have to hurry,” Charlotte said.

“I sure hope this book isn’t in that maze on the top floor,” said Mateo. “Because if it is, there’s no way we’re finding it in an hour.”

“If it’s on the top floor we’re not finding it at all,” I said. “But I bet it’s not.”

“Why do you say that?” said Charlotte.

“Because we’re meant to find this, whatever it is,” I said. “Otherwise he wouldn’t have left us a clue.”

We stepped through the enormous wooden doors at the front of the building and into the main lobby.

Sunlight slanted in through the stained glass window above the entrance, painting bits of color across Charlotte’s face as she turned to me, practically bouncing.

“Okay,” she said, grinning. “Where do we start?”

I felt as giddy as she looked. The Atlas did that to you. It was a playland disguised as a library.

“Guys! Look over here!” Mateo called to us, to which we both shushed him, because, come on, man, this is a library.

But we went over to see what he was excited about.

He was standing at a shiny bronze plaque that was mounted on the wall.



We read the plaque in silence. It made the afternoon feel even more mysterious, like Marvin was watching us.

“So weird that this rich, dead guy brought us here,” said Charlotte.

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s go see if that number leads to a clue.”

I had the paper with the Dewey Decimal number in my pocket, but I didn’t need it. I’d long since memorized the number: 317.86021

It’s kind of fun to memorize random numbers, isn’t it? I can recite pi to 40 digits. How many can you do? (if you’re new to memorizing digits of pi, I recommend *The Pi Song* to help you get started—it’s easy to find online).

Just for fun, memorize that Dewey decimal number with me. **317.86021**

See how fast you can do it. Look at it now and….

Look away! Can you do it?

My health teacher said that our memory is divided into two parts. There’s a short-term part that grabs new information fast and holds it just long enough for quick use, like a mental clipboard. But it lets go of things quickly to make room for whatever’s next. There’s also a long-term part that’s like a deep vault that can store ideas, facts, and memories for years, even a lifetime. If you want something to make it into that long-term vault, here are two tricks to get it there:

1) Connect it in your mind to something that’s already in the vault, like one of your favorite songs.

2) Think about it over and over. Repetition is a cue to your brain that whatever you’re thinking about is worth keeping.

That’s why *The Pi Song* is so useful if you want to memorize digits of pi. You associate the digits with a melody that most kids have already heard a lot of times (it’s a famous piece of classical music), and then, once you start singing along with it, you can’t help but do it over and over again in your head.

Quick! Recite the Dewey Decimal number again!

Now, sing your favorite song in your head—quietly, please, we’re in a library. Then swap the words with the number: 317.86021. Bonus points if it rhymes.

Okay, so…with that song in your head, even if it doesn’t work terribly well or make a lot of sense, think of the melody, but replace the words with the numbers in that Dewey Decimal code.



I had those numbers set to my own favorite tune that I played in my head as my friends and I went deeper into the library.

I was eager to show off for Mateo and Charlotte how well I knew this place. I took them straight to a back stairwell, then we cut through a corridor of shelves on the second floor, stepping onto a metal staircase right in the middle of the stacks. On the third floor we went under a wooden archway, then walked past a glass display cases holding antique tools, brass telescopes, and an old globe.

“Weird vibe in here,” Mateo whispered, glancing around.

Up a dimly lit stairwell hidden inside a back wall and we reached the fourth floor landing, which was lined with windows that gave a view over Grindle Park. We stopped briefly to take in the view. We were looking out over Grindle park, which was a mix of beautiful trees and blowing trash. In the distance was the old mansion, Hammerstrike, which was now a history museum.

As we gazed out the window, Charlotte said, “I love all the sunflowers that grow wild in this part of town.”

(show sketch)

“Huh, yeah, I guess that is cool,” I said. “Come on. I want to find this book.”

A minute later we were in the middle of the stacks. This part of the library had a dusty smell to it that I loved. Everything was ultra quiet up here—quieter than the lower floors. I led us into the 300s section. Soon enough the numbers were starting with 314…then 315…

“Is it just me, or are these books the most boring-looking books you’ve ever seen?” said Mateo.

I couldn’t argue with him. One of the books we passed was called *General Statistics of East Dublin*. Another was called *Life Expectancies in East Asia*.

“What even are these books?” Mateo said.

“They’re the most boring books in the library,” said Charlotte. “I bet that’s the point. Think about it. If you wanted to hide something in a book and have it sit there safely for years…”

“You would hide it in one of these books!” said Mateo. “Brilliant! Because, seriously, these books look so boring!”

A few steps more and now the book numbers started with *316* and had titles like, *Livestock Census of Nigeria*, followed by *Livestock Census of Tanzania*, and then ten more books about “Livestock Census,” whatever that meant.

“Here’s 317!” said Charlotte.

We slowed down and looked over the whole shelf. These titles looked like the most boring of all. Imagine a bunch of old men in gray suits sitting at a dimly lit table speaking in a monotone about the most boring topics on Earth and that’s what these books were like.

“This is it!” Charlotte said. “Three one seven point eight six zero two one.”

(Show sketch of book on shelf. The book we’re looking for is titled *Annual Report on the Production and Consumption of Rivets in Lower Montana, 1903-1912*. On either side of it are *Proceedings of the Sub-Committee on Standardized Fastener Thread Pitch for Non-Ferrous Alloys, Vol. IV and Analysis of Annual Rainfall Variation and its Effect on Localized Topsoil Erosion in Unincorporated Communities of Eastern Wyoming, 1930-1945.)*

I’ve never been so excited to find a book in the library.

“Alright guys,” I said, pulling it off the shelf, feeling a little weird about it.

Charlotte’s theory that Marvin would have purposely hidden the clue in the most boring book imaginable made sense.

But still…**this** book? *Annual Report on the Production and Consumption of Rivets in Lower Montana*?

“So funny that it’s a book about rivets,” said Charlotte.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because I can’t imagine anything less…*riveting*.”

We all stood for a second. You could practically hear the crickets chirping.

“Riveting?” she said again.

“Yeah, we got it,” said Mateo. “Open the book already, Gavin. I want to see if there’s something inside.”

(end chapter)