I fell down the slope, once. About a third of the way up the right side, on the path that dumps you out to the left of Willard Straight. It happened fast, with little preamble, but I’m sure it was my shoes. The grooves in the sole had filled in with snow; my foot planed ahead of me, throwing me into a lunge that came uncomfortably close to splitting my jeans. I was saved that embarrassment when my backpack sheared left, tugging my shoulder up and spinning me around ninety degrees. I landed, hard, on hip and shoulder, but didn’t worry. My focus was on the Johnson Museum, slowly sliding by.

Physics was not kind to me that day. The blond girl who stopped my impromptu sledding, on the other hand, was. Thus, my first three memorable learning experiences at Cornell: never wear sneakers in the snow, never be too sure of yourself, and never try to pick up girls while lying on the ground. None of these get you where you need go. But while the first and third have served me well over the years, it’s the second that’s stuck with me.

I spent my freshman year at The George Washington University in Washington, D.C. I felt the way I imagine many people do in the first year of a college or university they adore. It started with a desperate desire to establish myself and devour such a fresh, terrifyingly exciting environment, and culminated with an infusion of new people, places, activities, and ideas that broadened my horizons and fulfilled the foretelling’s of every admissions spiel. It was the first time I have ever felt entirely comfortable with the various pieces of my life.

In contrast, I have been uncomfortable every semester I’ve been at Cornell. The intense academic environment, mentally exhausting classes, and demanding
extracurriculars have made sure of that. Thank god. Because if I had to go back to being
comfortable with where I was in the world, I don’t think I’d be able to sit still.

What drove me here was the image of the field scientist I wanted to be: a straight-
laced, stoic man taking measurements and collecting data for the rest of his days. The
Natural Resources major beckoned, offering me a chance to become just that. It wouldn’t
last, though. Not as it was. A convenient bit of convergent evolution merged the SNES
program and Natural Resources major under the shiny new Environmental Science and
Sustainability umbrella. Now I’m a relic, a living fossil in the College of Agriculture and
Life Sciences. But I can go back, dig up my own skeletons, and see how I evolved.

Just the science classes would have left me content: field biology, advanced
ecology, biological statistics, population dynamics, genetics, and so on. They filled my
early semesters and their influence is easy to find. Now, look deeper, at the English class
sophomore year, reading and writing about nature in Frankenstein and William
Wordsworth, and at the magazine I wrote in a communications class, last semester, with
almost no time left in my undergraduate career. What did these selected detours offer me,
besides what feels like, at times, a large hernia? Most immediately, they inspired me to
go after Bill Nye’s job once I graduate.

I know now that I want to be more than just a ruggedly handsome field scientist. I
want to be a ruggedly handsome field scientist who captivates the world with stories of
science and conservation, the way Mr. Nye did with his show and Neil Degrasse-Tyson
does with tales of the cosmos.

Studying here has shown me that being content with who I am is good in small
doses. I should be proud of my achievements, and revel in them, but only for a time. I see
it logarithmically, now. Getting into Cornell was exciting—but being a student at Cornell meant ten times more. Graduating from Cornell will be almost unreal—but everything after will be ten times more incredible than even that. I’ve learned to avoid complacency, and to pass my milestones instead of hanging around them.

As the nice blond girl helped me up I caught a glimpse of the clock tower against the gray sky, and the amusement behind her eyes. I couldn’t help but laugh in their faces—what could I possibly say? I brushed the slush off my jacket, kicked the snow out of my sneakers, and trudged the rest of the way up.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank the professors in the Communications and English departments who’ve taught me so much, and my friends in NTRES for making my switch to Cornell so easy. A special thanks to the girl who stopped my fall—it would’ve been a long way down.