

No Protocol

ON THE ORIGIN OF RISK

By **ASTRA LINCOLN**

The first blue ice of autumn had just crystallized in the canyons when Michelle texted me to ask the favor. *My friend jen is looking for a dog sitter for one night this weekend. I sent her your number.* I had been very sick that season, and resented that this request was the closest I could come to being included in the adventure. And I did not like dogs. But I was worried that if I said no to everything, Michelle would eventually stop inviting me. I agreed.

Early Saturday morning, I arrived at Jen's apartment. Michelle, who had taken a red-eye from DC the night before and begun her six-hour drive from Los Angeles in the first light of dawn, was late. We laughed at her tenacity. *Oh, to be only 22.* Jen was so immediately affable, I wasn't mad I had to wait around to catch Michelle. I had barely finished taking off my coat when we started swapping the names of peaks we both wanted to climb, making a giddy list of the routes we could do together.

An hour later, Michelle arrived in a flurry of motion, her massive duffel bags half-open, the sharp ends of ice axes protruding from a mess of nylon cords. Flushed and fast-talking, she threw her bags onto the carpet, then hunched over the guidebook already cracked on the counter, open to the page for Red Slate Mountain's North Couloir. I hung around as they compared the forecasts from three different weather apps: wind, sun, and cold.

Before I left, Jen handed me a half-dozen pages, rolling her eyes in embarrassment. "In case of an emergency," she explained. "You know, with the dog." Listed were the phone numbers for the regular vet, the emergency vet, a canine heart surgeon specialist vet in New York City, plus her roommates, all of her neighbors, her closest friends, and her mom. As I flipped through the pages, I felt a knot of dread grow in my stomach. I had thought all I'd agreed to was to let some mutt follow me around for the weekend. The papers crinkling in my fingers, I saw that I'd actually agreed to a much larger request: to be responsible, to know what to do in a crisis, to follow through with the minutiae that goes into caring for something well.

I was annoyed by Jen's thoroughness. The dog had a better emergency-

management plan than I did. So many times, I had scurried off into the mountains without so much as telling someone where I planned to go. Just months after I began climbing, I started scrambling up fifth-class peaks—almost always alone, frequently at night, occasionally without a headlamp, even on nights with no moon. I was clumsy; I stumbled along knife-edge ridges and lost my footing in no-fall zones. I was tempting fate, and I knew it.

I tried to remain oblivious to how this affect was my inheritance, the way that I reproduced the legacy of the cowboy frontierism that is inbred in the West: What is a climber if not someone who longs to live outside of consequence? Over time, the weight of the intervening years had compressed my initial thrill at being lucky into festering embarrassment. By refusing to tell anyone about my plans, I thought that I was insulating others from my bad choices and their inevitable outcomes. But whether or not I *wanted* to shield myself from love's obligations turned out to be irrelevant. I'd miscalculated. The risk didn't begin when I left for the mountains. It began the instant I became somebody's friend.

At some point on Sunday, hours before they were due to return, I became convinced that Jen and Michelle were dead. It was only a feeling, but it is like that sometimes: an ordinary moment, and suddenly, you are certain something unthinkable has occurred.

I'm just mad I have to watch this needy dog for another night, I scolded myself. I stared at Jen's vizsla as it cowered in the corner of my living room, its face twisted in a dog-grimace. *They're not dead*, I thought, *I'm just not a dog person.*

I tried to imagine the way I'd rib Jen and Michelle for not following through on the promises we had made as I was leaving Jen's apartment the day before—to get dinner together Sunday night, to call me when they got home safe. I tried to imagine the inside jokes that would one day come from this. But I couldn't remember clearly what anyone had said. The moment had been overshadowed in my memory, replaced by the awful fact that I could have been the last person who spoke to them while they were alive.

A deep cold descended. The wind howled as it pushed through the seams in my apartment's rattling windows. That night, the dog shimmied under the comforter to lay on my stomach, heavy and trembling. My cat followed behind her, sniffed the blanket, then gingerly stepped on top of the loaf of the dog's body and laid down. The cat looked at me smugly. The dog quieted. None of us got any sleep.

I watched the clock's minute-hand spiral until it was finally 8:00 a.m. on Monday morning, when the county sheriff's non-emergency dispatch line would open. Eyes screwed shut, I dialed the number. "I'd like to report two missing persons," I said, just as I had recited.

Ready for these magic words to snap protocol into action, I assumed that the burden would pass effortlessly from me. I had expected the dispatch officer to eagerly record my information. A highly trained team of experts, among them doctors and mountaineers, maybe a wizard, and at least one avalanche dog would spring into action; an hour would pass, and then Jen would be laughing in my kitchen. I would get to learn how my new friend acted when she was a little bit ashamed, and she'd learn how gracious I could be.

What actually happened: The dispatch officer told me it was too early to deploy a search team, let alone mobilize a rescue. Had I driven to the trailhead to see if their cars were still there? Had I pounded my fists on Jen's front door, had I broken it off its hinges, had I barged in and checked the bed? *No, no, no*: I had a bad concussion; I was not allowed to drive.

I closed my eyes, and all I saw was Michelle's inReach two-way satellite device, already clipped onto the shoulder of her pack when she'd burst through the front door of Jen's apartment Saturday morning, its specific burnt orange blazed across the inside of my thoughts. If they were still alive, they would have sent a message. I asked the officer to trust me. But trust wasn't part of the protocol. Until I gathered more information, there was nothing she could do.

I hung up the phone. I crawled out of bed. I listened to a punk song with the volume all the way up on repeat for three hours while I paced the living room. I took my antidepressant. I took a Xanax, then another. I took a vitamin D gummy.

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I ate cold leftover pasta with red sauce. I opened a bottle of wine. I closed it without pouring any out. I realized I needed to get rid of this fucking dog.

The rest of the day, I lived two versions of the same horrible reality in which my friends had died. One version was mercifully easy: Via the instructions she had left me for the dog's care, I knew exactly how to be Jen's emergency contact. The pamphlet was a perfect proxy. It contained the contact information of everyone she knew and loved. I texted the neighbors to ask if they had seen her car. I texted three of her friends to tell them I still had the dog, and could someone please come take it, and did anyone know what was going on, and *I'm sorry*. In the unbearably white-bright daytime, Jen's friend Olivia parked her car in the middle of the road outside my apartment. The vizsla hopped onto the Subaru's bench seat. Olivia and I looked at each other for a while, and then she said she thought it was time for us to call the parents. We agreed she would call Jen's family, and I would call Michelle's. I handed her the doggy emergency pamphlet and pointed to the page with the number of Jen's mother. "Do you have Michelle's information?" Olivia asked. I shook my head,

and was jerked into the second version of reality: I was Michelle's emergency contact, and I had no idea what to do.

I should have been a minor character in Michelle's life. We had met two years earlier, in 2017, when she volunteered at an American Alpine Club stewardship event that I was leading. For some reason, the searchlight intensity of her eyes focused on me.

We had vanishingly little in common. I was in my late twenties and still eating out of dumpsters; she was 20 and about to finish an ivy league MBA. For hours, we bloodied our fingers twisting fencing wire and talking about granite like it was a language only we could speak. Laughing with her, it felt as though the bathroom-run intimacy of female friendship had finally been translated into something I could understand. We stayed in nearly constant contact after that.

Seemingly every weekend, Michelle snuck off to a new country to climb routes that were outlandishly difficult to me, propelled by the frenetic momentum of someone who's become an expert while they're very young. She was the strongest climbing partner that I ever had. She was fearless, sure-footed, and fiercely kind. We had only climbed together once before she invited me to go with her to Nepal, sending me a list of routes that had never been completed by all-women teams. When I told her I didn't know how to swing spindly tools into ice or thread a line through stiff snow for an anchor, she put in a request for a week off so we could train on Mt. Shasta. "I think we should summit each morning, then come down and run crevasse rescue drills and ice climbing clinics every afternoon," she texted with a picture of the permit. We never did put up a first female ascent together—I sprained my ankle before I'd saved enough for a plane ticket—but because of her, I temporarily became someone who could.

When I eventually met Michelle's friends, I found she had this effect on everyone. She was a magnifying glass, igniting all the lives she crossed with the sharpness of her focus. We only ever made it out together for three climbs, but each time, her presence suffused me with the feeling that there was something waiting to be realized, something that had previously been invisible to me. Climbing with her, I rose to the challenge of being the person she understood me to be.

But Michelle had not asked me to be her emergency contact. It would have been a ludicrous request—we were basically strangers, as much as I wanted to believe we were close friends. I had only agreed to give her climbing partner's dog kibble, water, and medicine; to

take it on twice daily walks; to scoop its poop up into disposable plastic bags. The time at which this favor was meant to expire had come and gone; the space between what I had agreed to and what was being demanded had yawned open. I thought I had signed up to dogsit for a stranger, but in fact I had agreed to open the emotional aperture of my life.

Did I owe Michelle what she had asked me to do, or what the unexpected situation was asking of me? I wondered, and then felt selfish for wondering. Of course, what I owed her and what she deserved were nothing alike.

What I had agreed to no longer mattered. When Jen and Michelle went missing, the possibility of consent was eclipsed by the crisis. The right set of actions had nothing to do with fairness or choice. “Some situations lie beyond justifications,” the philosopher Bernard Williams wrote about behaving morally in an emergency. You don’t need rules, or protocols, or permission; you give in to disaster’s velocity. What poet Franny Choi has called the “clarity of catastrophe” stems from this sublimation; crisis comes, and suddenly all pretense is abandoned.

I had to make a set of choices, to follow through with the cascading series of responsibilities that I had unwittingly taken on. I had to do this enthusiastically, and then live with regret if I misestimated what Michelle really wanted me to do—because even in the absence of clear protocols, there are still opportunities for hurt, and blame, and shame.

On Monday afternoon, I messaged half a dozen of Michelle’s friends tagged in her social media posts. I left all of them hanging after sending the same stock message: *Something has happened, she is one day overdue, I am trying to find a family member’s phone number just in case the situation escalates.* Eventually, someone

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replied. Yes, he had the number for Michelle’s mother, Ana.

The first dial tone had yet to finish when she picked up the phone. “Michelle is missing,” Ana blurted out before either of us had said hello.

“Yes,” I agreed.

“Do you think a bad man was there?” she asked me. Her voice was affectless. “I think someone must have gotten them.”

My heart rate rose. The room blurred as it started to spin. “Ana, I don’t think that’s what happened.” I told her about the unforecasted weather, how the freeze-thaw on Sunday morning would have been bad for the ice. I muttered something about the wind. The difficulty of the climb. I skipped over the details about the massive pile of rubble that Olivia’s partner had found at the base of Michelle and Jen’s route after he’d hiked in looking for them.

“I know Michelle is very strong,” Ana replied. “I trust my daughter,” she said, and then hung up.

The call had gone all wrong. Something crucial was lost in translation. I had performed my role as emergency contact badly.

It was not an outcome I thought that I could live with. I wondered what possible kindness I could offer Ana. I knew one person who spoke Mandarin, Ana’s native language. I texted that friend to ask if they would perform this wretched favor: Could she call a stranger and explain that her youngest daughter had likely died?

Twenty minutes later, Ana called me back. Her voice was shakier than before. “What do I do?” she asked me. “Come to Mammoth,” I told her. “It’s time.”

In my memories, the night that I learned for the second time that Jen and Michelle had died felt like a party. Earlier that afternoon, Olivia texted me to come

over to join her and Jen’s assembled friends. Before arriving, I had rehearsed in my head the *having-exactly-one-drink*, the *leaving-the-moment-I-finished*. But shortly after I got there, the group began discussing what Olivia’s partner had seen earlier that day: Jen’s tent empty near the base of Red Slate, and a speck of green in the couloir a thousand feet off the ground. And so I helped myself to a second drink, and then a third and a fourth, eventually letting myself be absorbed into the party.

It felt better than it should be drunk with these people, their faces rendered familiar by the immediacy of the occasion. Everyone was beautiful and close to all kinds of edges, vulnerable, laughing too loudly to cover it; talking about the weather, our dreams for the winter, big mountains we hoped to ski and climb, no one knowing how to talk about anything else, even here, even now, each of us wanting nothing more than to be suspended in those moments where everything goes blurry but also sharp and clear, where only our bodies existed, limitless. Something had cracked open. I felt my bravery reorient, away from believing myself outside of consequence, and toward believing myself capable of enduring whatever happened next.

Jen’s friends made a list of folks who wouldn’t have found out yet, and then divvied up the burden of placing calls with mathematical precision: Who would so-and-so want to hear the news from most? Who was still sober enough to tell them? How many calls had everyone placed already, and who deserved to take a break and tend to their own emotions for a while?

Thinking about all of this later, I recalled the “pod mapping” toolkit Mia Mingus had made for the Bay Area Transformative Justice Coalition. In transformative justice practices, communities look internally for support around violent, harmful, and abusive experiences (rather than turning to external state or social services). In 2016, the coalition surveyed the communities they worked with to see how many relationships people could actually trust to rise to the occasion after violence or trauma had occurred. They found that most people only had one or two relationships they could depend upon. Emotional trust doesn’t come from watching someone give a safe belay or having an experience of your partner catching your fall; it comes from “a track record of generative conflict; boundaries; being able to give and receive feedback; reliability.” And yet, here was this hodgepodge of strangers, performing the calculations demanded by this surreal moment with impossibly tender clarity.

A few years after the accident, I redid my emergency contact plan. I wanted to devise a protocol that was modeled after that night. Now, on Google Drive, I have a document that anyone with a link can view. It contains the name and contact information for my primary care provider, a note about my lack of established power of attorney, and a few advisory directives about when, and when not, to resuscitate. Below that, there is a list of details that might become relevant during a rescue: my car's make and model, who I've enabled iPhone location-sharing with. There are instructions on how to get into my bank account so that whomever is tasked with doing all of this can wire themselves a nice tip.

Under a bold, all-caps header—**DON'T USE THIS PART UNLESS I'VE DEFINITELY DIED**—and a subheader to please ask someone else to do this next part, someone who didn't know me as well, is a list of people to be called. In the idealized scenario this document is intended to construct, my death would elicit a kind of de facto telephone tree; each person listed would, upon receiving the news, take over the responsibility of reaching out to our mutual friends. The list contains six people I love, one from each major chapter of my life, plus my landlord, my neighbor, and the boss at each of my jobs. I'm embarrassed by how often I update it to include the name and number of whoever happens to be my current crush.

I'm embarrassed that I have this document at all. In this way, having an emergency contact feels exactly like *not* having one did: I am disgusted by my neediness. When I was younger, was I afraid to admit that I was fallible, that I was reckless? *Yes, yes.* But more than that, I never made in-case-of-emergency plans because I did not know what to do with my persistent sense that I was going it alone. I was sickened by how much I desired closeness, by how incompletely I believed I would be able to meet its demands. By romanticizing danger, I thought I could protect myself from having to find out whether I was as alone as I felt.

Now, I send a link to the emergency-contact document to a friend anytime I go on a long bike ride, a road trip, or a first date with a man on whom I can't run an internet background check. There is something luxurious about giving into my tendency toward hypervigilance. But I also feel ashamed to ask for care like this. The difference is that, unlike when I was younger and plan-less, now my disgust is directed at the eagerness with which I jump at the occasion to be rigorous in love; the shame that I didn't learn to do this sooner; the enduring hurt at what it took for the lesson to finally land.

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I learned that Jen and Michelle were dead for the third and final time on Wednesday afternoon. Twenty of us had gathered for the second day in a row in a room that the municipal airport had generously provided while the several-day-long search ran its course. A sheriff stepped into the room, and cleared his throat. He sighed, then started to speak.

For two days, Mono County Search and Rescue had been trying to reach Michelle and Jen through the wind and the still-falling rocks. Multiple helicopters had gotten close, but the angle of the narrow couloir made it impossible to access; they could not send down a line. That morning, a ground team had climbed up the rubble and rotten ice. They found Jen and Michelle still clipped into an anchor, both of them wearing their heaviest coats. Several tons of rock had released from the top of the couloir while they were having lunch. It was an “act of God”—an event that no amount of human interference or preparedness could have prevented.

Years later, I tell my therapist that I know the timelines do not line up in a way that could conceivably make any of that week's events my fault. But it feels like they were. It's not lost on me that if I hadn't watched the dog, Michelle and Jen might not have gone to Red Slate Mountain. (Several of Jen's friends told me that she had asked them first to watch the vizsla, and they had all declined.) My therapist smiled sadly at my admission. “Why do you think you were trusted with this?” he asked. “How does it make you feel to know that you were trusted to know what to do?”

I settled into his couch and thought about all the times I'd been the one to intervene: cleaning Caroline's wound when she split her thumb open under a hammer, or injecting Darius with the EpiPen after he'd been stung by a bee; talking one friend and then another out of swallowing a handful of pills. *Can you come over, can I bring you dinner, is there someone you can be with right now?* Questions I had asked or answered, accumulated like movie stills, flickering like a rolodex until my solar plexus eventually warmed. I had wanted to become someone who was worthy of tending to others' accidents. And I had.

On Thursday, a tiny helicopter was able to send down a haul line. A group of friends and family stood sentinel in the airport parking lot, where the only thing separating us from Red Slate was the Mt. Morrison cirque and the interstate. We watched as the bodies were carried down from the mountain. My face stayed wet all day.

Two weeks later, I drove Michelle's black Lexus with the fancy engine and the two-wheel drive across the Sierra Nevada during the first snow. At each elbow in the road, the wheels squealed in the slush, but I never drifted too far onto the shoulder.

Michelle's parents were holding hands when they opened their front door. They appeared tired, but were tanner. The memory of what they had looked like, walking across the tarmac after identifying their youngest daughter's body, shuddered before me like a holograph and obscured their smiles. “Take your shoes off,” Tom instructed as Ana set slippers for me on the floor. Her tiny hand grabbed my wrist. She pulled me through the foyer to the kitchen table, where Tom took a seat at my side. We sat in silence for a few moments.

“Would you like to see the photos Michelle took the morning that she died?” Tom eventually asked. We spent an hour flipping through the album on her cracked cell phone, and I tried to use my insider knowledge to help him put together clues, to construct a narrative of the day, to tell a version of the story that would maybe feel halfway alright. 