

Richmond Art and Writing Region of the
Scholastic Art & Writing Awards
Silver Key Recipients in Writing



**Scholastic
Art & Writing
Awards**



Malena Lo Prete, *A Portrait of Mothers and Daughters*, Mixed Media, Monacan High School, Grade 12, Educator: Meg Murtagh

2022



**VISUAL ARTS CENTER
OF RICHMOND**

Amina Adeyola

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Cindy Cunningham

Category: Poetry

I've Always Wanted to Cry at the End of a Good Rom-Com

i.

when i daydream about my love, i can't see a gender,
all i know is that we are better than our parents.
and we can kiss the galaxies when our black bodies
weren't even supposed to see the stars.

ii.

i asked my mom if she jumped
the broom at her wedding. and when
she shows me a photo of the happiest
day of her life, (from my films, i expect
white dresses and tulips rising from
a young smile, a beach, waves singing) and
as if mimicking fortune teller, the paper
corners blacken and turn in on itself. caving
in to what i hope was love at least once.

i don't ask my parents for relationship advice.

iii.

questions for my sheik:
what does it mean to be in love and black?

does it mean a continuous magic trick? an announcement
of the coming of saws and still an audience of gasps at

my split open stomach. is black woman supposed to expect
the reckoning and know how to make herself whole again?

is black woman a pretty poem held at the hip? is she protector
and still always alone? is she asked to smile? is she never flower?

can black woman love a black woman? how long
before love is not a resistance? what if black woman loved

and it just meant *love* and not *black love*? is black love
a new way to count holes left by blue bullets? the ghosts

i can't know will be here tomorrow but i still love
anyway. can we believe in ghosts? can we believe

in the making of earth in three days, but not
my brown and their brown together being beautiful

enough to make our god weep? the rain will flood and ask,
what am i washing if not their blood? do i still know

how to make this dirt a flower? make ghost a poem?
and we'd answer with makeshift vows & pistols & swallow their oceans whole.

Amina Adeyola

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Cindy Cunningham

Category: Poetry

My Grandmother Says She Still Can Whoop My Father's Ass Which is to Say

Queen Nandi, how often did you
slap Shaka Zulu with a wooden comb?
did you tug on his shoulders, wishing
for stillness and, like thunder, threaten,
"Shaka kaSenzangakhona!" did you
know his name would become threat
enough? and your name, a song
birthed from a new nation.

i think of you, untouched in war, smelling
of coconut oil and the stars' unwavering
breath. stubborn son winces under your feet.
umi, when you birthed the warrior king,

did you know he would be tender headed?

//

my grandmother talks to me on our porch, the red
paint peeling from years of rain. she says
she used to write poems, just like me. she recites the one
she remembers, the wind stilling, and this poem must have

belonged to the sky once. the way her hands move
to her own lyrics, she must know what it means to have the earth
taken from her grip. i ask her how many poems before we know
kingdom. to answer, we count the men who mistake our names

for their conquered land and i wonder if they'll ever sit at my feet
or are they forever soldier? we talk about the zulu nation.
how queen nandi was shamed for love called illegitimate.
how her boy was claimed beetle before child, how she named

her son after a town's disgrace. and her son conquered a nation
for her. what love but *this* is worth a war? i sit with my grandmother
and we hum a serenade until we fall asleep. and i dream of land after
a metamorphosis. mothers and no apartheid. a queen. my own nation.

//

man reaches his fingers into the dirt in which he came from.
he forgot mother. forgot language. but knows how war should
feel against his teeth. his diction converted to corded battle
plans. he is mighty. and soldier. and alone.

ama, he says and it's unknown if he's calling
for mother or his own hardened skin. his commander
taught him that armor is all he needs to be legend.
and as he fades, he yells: *i believe, i believe*.

//

before queen nandi was queen, she was in love.
racking a comb through an unknown boy's hair. her hands
were rough but the only home a child ever needed.
so what if warrior meant nothing? and *son* was enough.

Aaliyah Anderson

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

A Self-Portrait Before Next Block

T-Minus 5 Minutes Until the Bell:

skidding feet
echo from evacuated halls—
you copy every step
onto the ruled lines
below your knuckles and

wonder who they'll
get if speckled tiles
high five
your cheek. you

hope it's a kind lady
who smells like
ice-pack-cold
kale salad
and expect everyone
will wait
as you explain
why fist bumps
are better. your

incisors will flash
just once
as she hands you
damp napkins to
sweep dust mites
off your face,
then, you'd
ought to lay on
the padded table
(for safety reasons)
and recite, no,
thank, you, until
you're morbid
because it'll read
the same temperature
as hiking into
a classroom
and gasping,
“good morning,”
loud enough for

each vowel
and consonant
to forge a lecture, and
no one likes
lectures, especially yourself
'cause most days the bell rings,
and you never get around to asking,
'how do tuna know they're ready to congeal
in a can most people loathe?"

Renee Anderson

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Flash Fiction

Twirling Times Two

Twirling Times Two

The sun clings to the melanin of a brother and a sister as they run out to their backyard after breakfast. They are adorable six-year-old twins. The sister had two afro puffs with blue beads that matched her dress and jelly slip-on shoes. The brother had on jeans, white sneakers, and a shirt the same baby blue as his sister's beads and dress.

Their backyard is bare, with nothing but grass covering the area. To the twins their backyard changes every day; some days it is a stage. Other days it is a karate dojo. Sparingly, it has been a battlefield. Today, the backyard is a dance studio.

Their mother is cleaning the plates from breakfast in the kitchen. Through the window, she overhears her children's voices ping-ponging the phrase, "Look, look. I can do it longer." The twins are trying to best each other by twirling for as long as they can, while the other keeps count of how many seconds they last. Their mother worries they will fall and mess up their brand new outfits, so she tries to get them to listen by telling the twins a scary and ridiculous lie.

She sticks her head out and calls through the kitchen window, "Stop spinning, or you'll turn your bacon and eggs into a tornado in your stomach and throw them up!" They don't listen to their mother; they're too encompassed in their competition. The sister is mad that her brother counts much slower than she does. He drags out the 'Mississippi' behind every number, making her only reach five seconds. He got to nine and a half.

Sam Anderson

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Glen Allen High School, Glen Allen, VA

Educator: Jill Vick

Category: Dramatic Script

Therapy

INT. DR.KNOX'S OFFICE - DAY

The room was dimly lit. Because of the building being so close to the one on its left, the room didn't get much light. There is a lamp to the left of Dr. Knox's chair, and one to the left of the couch. between the chair and the couch lies a coffee table, with three magazines on it. The lightbulbs in the lamps give off an orange glow to the room.

The protagonist sits on the couch, fiddling with his fingers. He takes his pointer finger and cracks it. One by one, he cracks each of his fingers. Suddenly, the door swings wide open.

DR. KNOX:

(Quickly walking into the room, standing in front of his chair with his hands on the back-rest)

Sorry about the wait, it usually doesn't take me this long. But considering the urgent you sounded on the phone... I came as soon as I could.

The Protagonist stares at Dr. Knox, not knowing exactly what to say. Their bond has never been perfect, as if he's the only person he could find that would do his job.

DR. KNOX:

(Walking over to the curtains, closing them)

Of course like always, everything you say to me hear will only be disclosed between the two of us. And under no circumstances will I ever get your parents involved unless I feel like your life is in immediate danger.

Dr. Knox ends up back at his seat after closing all of the blinds to give the room a more personal feeling.

DR. KNOX (CONT'D):

(He sits down in the chair)

So let's start with the boring questions that I have to ask you.

He pulls out a notebook, brown, worn at the edges. He also pulls out a standard number two pencil, it's halfway used, however the lead is fully sharpened.

DR. KNOX:

How are you doing in school?

PROTAGONIST:

Fine.

DR. KNOX:

Are you liking your classes, I remember you saying you were excited for your...

He flips through a couple pages of his notebook, looking back to find the name of the class the Protagonist was excited for.

DR. KNOX (CONT'D):

(Using his finger to find the correct note.)

Digital Media Art and Design class. You talked a lot about your passion for film and animation in our last session,

that was before your school year started. So... how is it.

PROTAGONIST:

Not exactly what I thought it was going to be.

DR. KNOX:

Do you want to elaborate?

PROTAGONIST:

(pauses)

Too much photoshop.

DR. KNOX:

(nodding)

Not enough animation, makes sense.

DR. KNOX (CONT'D):

Are you still having feelings of Loneliness and Depression.

The shot pauses on the Protagonist.

PROTAGONIST:

(He lowers his head)

Yeah.

DR. KNOX:

It's nothing to be ashamed of. Most teens your age experience these feeling, it's just something we have to get through, together.

Dr. Knox jots down some notes, then flips to the next page.

DR. KNOX:

Do you have suicidal thoughts?

PROTAGONIST:

Yeah... But not that I'd actually do it, suicides for pussies. I just... in the moment, I want it to stop, but I can't. So that's why.

DR. KNOX:

You want what to stop?

PROTAGONIST:

The voices

DR. KNOX:

What voices?

PROTAGONIST:

The ones in my head that tell me I'm worthless. That everyone one, and every little thing around me is out to get me, against me, hates me.

Dr. Knox stares at the Protagonist, listening with his head tilted slightly.

PROTAGONIST:

Those voices.

DR. KNOX:

Are you a writer?

PROTAGONIST:

What?

DR. KNOX:

Do you like to write? Everyone talks a certain way, and you are very symbolic with your speech. Descriptive, heart felt.

PROTAGONIST:

I have... written a little before.

DR. KNOX:

Do you have one of those writings on you?

PROTAGONIST:

I have all of them. On my phone I mean, I wouldn't carry around a stack of papers everywhere I went, that would

be, weird.

DR. KNOX:

Can I hear one?

The protagonist looks down, and then back up to the doctor, not knowing if he wants to get that personal. His writings are like a piece of him, spilling them would be like sharing a piece of his heart.

PROTAGONIST:

Sure.

The Protagonist pulls out his phone from his jean's pocket. They are tighter than he thought so he stands up a little to reach all the way into his pocket. He fiddles with his phone as it tries to load in the poor reception.

PROTAGONIST:

I'm sorry it's just taking forever to load.

DR. KNOX:

It's no problem, after six years of being in this building, you get used to it... trust me.

The doctor rests his head on his fist, which is resting on the arm of his chair, he is making himself more comfortable for the upcoming story he is about to hear.

PROTAGONIST:

Um, I've found one.

DR. KNOX:

Take it away.

PROTAGONIST:

It's called Christmas Eve.

The Protagonist clears his throat and begins to read.

PROTAGONIST:

The layout is the same, but the details have changed.

He takes a long pause, letting himself collect his words.

PROTAGONIST:

The light from the tired sun shines through my window, illuminating the details of my room. The cracks in the trim of my walls have grown deeper, and the paint has begun to chip. The wooden floor boards are separating and the light flickers... flicker, and the lights flicker more than they use too. Sorry.

DR. KNOX:

It's okay, keep going.

PROTAGONIST:

(Nodding his head)

The wreaths that hung out of the windows have now been replaced by dust, and the garland that lined the railing now breathes the stuffy air of my attic. Walking down the stairs, the sound that fills the house is that of creaking floorboards. They ache of pain from years and years of stomping feet and fallen debris. My grandpa, who used to tell jokes that would fill the living room with laughter, now only smiles when a furry friend appears. In the middle of the room sits a coffee table, worn at the edges where two generations of dogs used to relieve their stress. On the coffee table lies a tray of cookies, where three used to fill the empty space. As I make my way to the couch, I remember that the furniture has rotated from its original position. I haven't seen the sun this low before, around this time I would be falling asleep to the soothing sound of wind breaking off my moms car, and the slight rumble of the highway. My mom would turn on the Christmas station and I would drift off into a land of bliss and happiness. My mom's side of the family would gather at my grandma's house first. I would find myself waking up out of instinct right as we entered the driveway. Smell is the only thing that has lasted time. As the door opened I would always be met by the refreshing smell of German food cooking in the kitchen, but what was more overwhelming was the smell of the walls. A scent that is almost impossible to describe and yet exists in all grandparents' homes. A welcoming smell I can no longer experience on the eve of Christmas. After a feast of food that felt never ending, and a fun night of

greeting family and friends that I only got the chance to see twice a year; we would drive back to my father's side of the family. There, we would do the same, eat and greet each other. However, the house has turned to memories as I can no longer go back. The sun has settled below the sleeping trees. The struggling leaves hanging on the branches or the oak, trying to stay afloat, light up as the sun's rays shoot through them. Orange, Red, and yellow lights fill the living room, lights that could put me in a trance. As I watch the sun set, the leaves fall from the branches down to the vast swimming pool of dead leaves below. I hear my mom yell to me from the kitchen; my grandparents from my father's side are leaving; I wish they could stay longer. I was so entranced by the falling sun that I didn't notice my dad helping his father out of the living room and into the car. Finally, as the night comes to an end, my mother sits us down in the living room to partake in our yearly tradition of reading the book, *The Night Before Christmas*. My sister and I used to argue over who would be the one to read the book, but now we just choose by which of us is the least tired. I grab the weathered cover of the book, and turn to the first page. Each line I read is a reminder of a past year, a memory of when Christmas eve used to be more joyful. As I read I try each of the folds on the sides of the pages to see if the pop ups still work; they never do. When I finish reading, we tell each other goodnight and head off to bed. I say to myself, even though the holidays aren't as they once were, I'm still as happy as I used to be.

The protagonist puts his phone back into his pocket.

DR. KNOX:

That was beautiful, you really are an inspiring writer.

PROTAGONIST:

The end is a lie.

DR. KNOX:

I'm sorry?

PROTAGONIST:

"I'm still as happy as I used to be". It's not true, I've never felt lonelier.

DR. KNOX:

So why did you right it, if it's not true.

PROTAGONIST:

(Shrugs)

I didn't want my teacher to see. Everything I write about is so sad that I thought maybe if I wrote something that had a happy ending then she wouldn't be, I don't know, suspicious.

DR. KNOX:

Do you feel as if writing a happier ending could've made you feel happier in the moment, perhaps when reading out loud, just like now.

PROTAGONIST:

(shakes his head in disagreement)

No, I- I don't think so.

DR. KNOX:

Okay.

The doctor writes a few more notes and then turns the page again.

DR. KNOX (CONT'D):

Let's continue with the questions. Do you feel safe at home, school, romantic relationships, and with friends?

PROTAGONIST:

Yeah, yeah... for the most part.

DR. KNOX:

For the most part?

PROTAGONIST:

No, I'm just saying... yeah.

DR. KNOX:

You know, if you're not completely honest with me, I won't be able to help you to my fullest ability.

They pause for a second.

DR. KNOX:

But that doesn't mean you have to share if you're not comfortable, I'm only here to listen.

The doctor jots down a few more notes before moving on to the next question.

DR. KNOX:

Has your eating behavior improved?

PROTAGONIST:

Yeah my parents have me taking medicine, to calm my stomach or whatever.

DR. KNOX:

That's good, I'm glad you're getting help for that.

The doctor again writes in his notebook.

DR. KNOX:

Are you sexually active?

The protagonist is taken aback by the question

PROTAGONIST:

What does that have to do with anything?!

DR. KNOX:

It's just one of the questions that I have to ask.

PROTAGONIST:

It's a stupid question.

DR. KNOX:

Why do you say that?

PROTAGONIST:

I don't know, it just seems like a dumb question.

DR. KNOX:

Do you find yourself feeling embarrassed when people talk about sex?

PROTAGONIST:

No, it's just not something I think is a topic for... discussion.

DR. KNOX:

I don't think you believe that. I think you actually think about sex a lot. Do you find yourself feeling left behind because you haven't had a... sexual relationship with someone before? Do you feel like you need to?

PROTAGONIST:

(pauses)

Yeah... maybe I do feel like I'll be left behind. I mean, the average age to lose your virginity is like 17, so... I don't know. I'm just going to go to college and be the only person who hasn't experienced what it's like to be a teenager, to live.

There's a long pause in the room. The doctor closes his book and scoots closer to the edge of his chair, making the distance between him and the protagonist smaller.

DR. KNOX:

We aren't defined by trivial things like sex or when we had our first kiss. We all live different lives and grow up in different circumstances. You just went through a year of heartache loneliness, two things that are completely out of your control. Everyone lost something or suffered because of the pandemic, you're no different. Just because people can't see the grief you've experienced, doesn't mean it's anything less than what others have gone through.

The protagonist starts to tear up.

PROTAGONIST:

(starts to cry)

But I miss her!

The doctor quickly gets up out of his chair to comfort the protagonist.

DR. KNOX:

I know, I know you do. The heart works in mysterious ways. It can be hard to let go of the people that we love, and even when we think we don't love them anymore or gotten over them, those feelings will always remain. Not because we are weak, but because they are a part of us, and to forget those memories is to forget a part of who we are, as people who love, who care, who suffer, who morn. The love you feel, and the pain that follow isn't meant to be a curse. That's why you must learn to accept those feelings, and the choices that were made. She's a part of you, and always will be. Love is an ever-fixed mark. Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks, but bears it out even to the edge of doom.

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(He sits down in the chair)

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He pulls out a notebook, brown, worn at the edges. He also pulls out a standard number two pencil, it's halfway used, however the lead is fully sharpened.

DR. KNOX
How are you doing in school?

PROTAGONIST
Fine.

DR. KNOX
Are you liking your classes, I
remember you saying you were excited
for your...

He flips through a couple pages of his notebook, looking back
to find the name of the class the Protagonist was excited
for.

DR. KNOX (CONT'D)
(Using his finger to find
the correct note.)
Digital Media Art and Design class.
You talked a lot about your passion
for film and animation in our last
session, that was before your school
year started. So... how is it.

PROTAGONIST
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going to be.

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Do you want to elaborate?

PROTAGONIST
(pauses)
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DR. KNOX
(nodding)
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PROTAGONIST
(He lowers his head.)
Yeah.

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teens your age experience these
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PROTAGONIST

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once were, I'm still as happy as I used to be.

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PROTAGONIST

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DR. KNOX

So why did you right it, if it's not true.

PROTAGONIST

(Shrugs)

I didn't want my teacher to see. Everything I write about is so sad that I thought maybe if I wrote something that had a happy ending then she wouldn't be, I don't know, suspicious.

DR. KNOX

Do you feel as if writing a happier ending could've made you feel happier in the moment, perhaps when reading out loud, just like now.

PROTAGONIST

(shakes his head in disagreement)

No, I- I don't think so.

DR. KNOX

Okay.

The doctor writes a few more notes and then turns the page again.

DR. KNOX (CONT'D)

Let's continue with the questions.

DR. KNOX

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romantic relationships, and with
friends?

PROTAGONIST

Yeah, yeah... for the most part.

DR. KNOX

For the most part?

PROTAGONIST

No, I'm just saying... yeah.

DR. KNOX

You know, if you're not completely
honest with me, I won't be able to
help you to my fullest ability.

They pause for a second.

DR. KNOX

But that doesn't mean you have to
share if you're not comfortable, I'm
only here to listen.

The doctor jots down a few more notes before moving on to the
next question.

DR. KNOX

Has your eating behavior improved?

PROTAGONIST

Yeah my parents have me taking
medicine, to calm my stomach or
whatever.

DR. KNOX

That's good, I'm glad you're getting
help for that.

The doctor again writes in his notebook.

DR. KNOX

Are you sexually active?

The protagonist is taken aback by the question

PROTAGONIST

What does that have to do with
anything?!

DR. KNOX

It's just one of the questions that
I have to ask.

PROTAGONIST

It's a stupid question.

DR. KNOX

Why do you say that?

PROTAGONIST

I don't know, it just seems like a dumb question.

DR. KNOX

Do you find yourself feeling embarrassed when people talk about sex?

PROTAGONIST

No, it's just not something I think is a topic for... discussion.

DR. KNOX

I don't think you believe that. I think you actually think about sex a lot. Do you find yourself feeling left behind because you haven't had a... sexual relationship with someone before? Do you feel like you need to?

PROTAGONIST

(pauses)

Yeah... maybe I do feel like I'll be left behind. I mean, the average age to lose your virginity is like 17, so... I don't know. Hell I haven't even had my first kiss so what does that say about me. I'm just going to go to college and be the only person who hasn't experienced what it's like to be a teenager, to live.

There's a long pause in the room. The doctor closes his book and scoots closer to the edge of his chair, making the distance between him and the protagonist smaller.

DR. KNOX

We aren't defined by trivial things like sex or when we had our first kiss. We all live different lives and grow up in different circumstances. You just went through a year of heartache loneliness, two things that are completely out of your control. Everyone lost something or suffered because of the

pandemic, you're no different. Just because people can't see the grief you've experienced, doesn't mean it's anything less than what others have gone through.

The protagonist starts to tear up.

PROTAGONIST

(starts to cry)

But I miss her!

The doctor quickly gets up out of his chair to comfort the protagonist.

DR. KNOX

I know, I know you do. The heart works in mysterious ways. It can be hard to let go of the people that we love, and even when we think we don't love them anymore or gotten over them, those feelings will always remain. Not because we are weak, but because they are a part of us, and to forget those memories is to forget a part of who we are, as people who love, who care, who suffer, who morn. The love you feel, and the pain that follow isn't meant to be a curse. That's why you must learn to accept those feelings, and the choices that were made. She's a part of you, and always will be. Love is an ever-fixed mark. Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks, but bears it out even to the edge of doom.

Aditya Badhrayan

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Maggie L Walker Governor's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Kara Love

Category: Short Story

Outskirts

Clean. Safe. Pure - Come to Swarg Now.

I stared at the tattered pamphlet in my hand, the slogan of our destination printed on the piece of paper in a bright yellow font meant to look like gold. However, the wear and tear had faded the color into dirty light grime, reminiscent of disease and sickness, as though it was mocking us of our current plight. Through the tiny hole at the top right corner of the rusted train car, I could see a soft neon glow, which could only be the aura of the paradise we would soon be residing in, Swarg.

Clean. Safe. Pure - Come to Swarg Now.

The fecal matter had begun to collect under the train; people had nowhere else to excrete than onto the tracks right under us. It wasn't the choice of the citizens; it was the necessity created by the circumstance.

Waves of disease inevitably erupted, and there was no treatment available.

The ill were exempt from the waiting list and kindly requested to leave.

There is a zero percent chance of survival outside the train.

The population of the citizens of the Eretz district of Patal placed on the refugee train had reduced by seventy-five percent. We were the last three hundred.

"Hot, decadent oatmeal with fruit and cream," said the barrel in the corner.

A crowd piled around the three-foot-tall pot, awaiting the moment where they could gather some sustenance for survival. The quality of the rations had deteriorated almost rapidly after we arrived, but it was a better alternative than scavenging for edible scraps.

The mucilaginous and colorless liquid with scattered garnishes of grain sloshed in my bowl as I struggled to sit down on the rotting, damp wood that formed some sort of separation between the suffocating train car and the tracks that lay below. My hand shook as I struggled to bring the plastic spoon from the paper bowl to my chapped lips. "Be grateful," I said to myself in a soft, raspy whisper; and swallowed the sour, spoiled porridge.

The car was designed to seat no more than one hundred individuals; however, it had evolved into a claustrophobic carriage that contained more than three times the amount.

I closed my eyes, receiving solace in the darkness of my eyelids, a refuge from the horror of disgust that surrounded me.

There was no escape. My ears grappled on to the echoes of sobbing and retching that filled the air; as if an unknown abolition of laughter had taken place. Mothers and fathers consoled their wailing infants and youths who were unoccupied stuck together scraps of cloth and metal to form shapeless brooms in an effort to sweep the vomit and saliva that covered areas of the floor. Almost all the elderly had disappeared, succumbing to the illness and harsh conditions that now existed.

I covered my ears, but the smell, oh the smell, entered my nose, the scent creeping up my face and traveling to my throbbing temple, threatening to burst my veins. The stench had found a permanence within the very cells of every human being in the Eretz District car, a rancid sulfurous malodor that could burn nostrils.

However, the people on the train chose to live through this because there was hope. Hope in the mothers and fathers, hope in the youth, hope in the children that they would be free one day. One day the train would move the half-mile separating them from torture and salvation. One day they would feel heat, light, and comfort. One day, they would be in Swarg.

Just like the hope in mom and dad when they ran with the others to the majestic walls saying, "Stay on the train, take care of Granny, we will meet you inside the walls." I had felt hope, felt pride, felt joy, that we had finally escaped the terror of Eretz, that the train would start moving soon, and that I would witness the splendor that the pamphlet depicted. I would experience cleanliness, purity, and safety for the first time in my thirteen years of existence.

I was wrong.

Hope is useless.

We didn't know Swarg only allowed entrance through the train, and any other form of entry would result in being sent back; my parents were forced to walk the distance back to our car, but night had befallen.

Two days later, disheveled rotten bodies resembling a male and a female were broadcast on the information board, reminding us not to exit the train.

Granny began to show symptoms of illness, boils ran down her face and neck, and pus oozed from the giant pimples covering her once benevolent aura. She was asked to leave the train.

I begged and cried and kicked and wailed and punched and yelled and harmed the youths aiding her down the steps and off the car; but I was too weak, my body was thrown and my head banged on the metal wall opposite the door.

"Don't you get it, kid, your granny is a hindrance, don't you want us all to live peacefully inside Swarg?" said a young boy no older than twenty. I nodded weakly, my head swimming with the emotion and the impact of the collision.

"THEN WE HAVE TO LIVE TILL THEN!" shrieked the boy, discarding his gentleness and flinging Granny onto the tracks.

I sobbed mercilessly that night, tears rolling down my cheeks and soaking my clothes. My family was gone, I was the only one left; what would I do? Where would I go? Who will protect me? How long will it be till I am thrown off?

Another skeleton was added to the information board at the front of the train, reminding us to stay safe.

I had lost everyone I loved.

My eyes flung open, a fear of dread fell across my face, had I fallen asleep? I looked through the windows, the sky a dark navy blue. The rest of the car had gone silent, everyone resting in a soft slumber. I groaned in frustration, anger spreading throughout my body, *"How could I let this happen to me,"* I whispered as I chastised myself for missing another day's worth of rations. My body was even weaker now, and I wouldn't be strong enough to fight off sickness. If I kept this up, I would meet the same fate as Granny and so many others. I couldn't let this happen again, I had to stay strong enough until we were let in. I had to stay well. I closed my eyes once again.

I opened my eyes. Morning.

The day went by.

Now it was night. I closed them.

Days passed. Reports after reports and warnings and cautions kept reaching our train, but the news of us ever going into the city was non-existent. More and more people fell ill and were sent to exile. I stayed to myself, trying to avoid contact with anything that breathed, afraid to contract anything from anyone. Survival was dependent on just me now. I had to survive so that I could make it into the city.

"Soon enough, they'll call us," I heard parents tell their children every night.

We all knew that we had been forgotten, being given rations just as a formality.

There were only fifty of us left, all of us numb to the loss of our community and population, just wanting to enter the city. I had gotten acclimated to some of the families, them showing sympathy in their words to me because I was the poor, lonely orphan who had to depend on others. However, they never displayed any sense of compassion in their acts. It was a game of survival. After all, I was the hindrance now.

--

It was morning again.

"Wake up!" said Mr. Bellevue, a slightly overweight middle-aged man and father to two toddler twins. I winced and woke up with a glare on my face, wanting to live in the utopia of my dreams for just a bit longer, slightly afraid to face the daunting reality that existed outside my shell. However, there was something different on his face. In fact, in all the faces. People were conversing with each other, the youth were joyfully rowdy and playful, and there was laughter.

Laughter. Laughter for the first time since the seven months we had been here.

"What happened?" I questioned.

Mr. Bellevue eyed the far right corner of the train car, "Why don't you take a look for yourself."

I walked cautiously, thoughts already flooding into my mind over what it could be, one, in particular, shining above the rest. No, it couldn't be. After all this time? Why would they think about us now?

I reached the corner and glanced at a piece of paper stuck on the wall.

I roared. Blood rushed to my face. It was as if I had been induced with unknown strength, the stench disappeared, and the filth seemed to almost disintegrate.

The paper read:

"Train Car 10034: Eretz District of Patal

Status: Admitted

Date of Admittance: 12/09/2232"

Today was the second of December. Salvation was seven days away.

For once, my loneliness seemed to quiet, the internal pain and external suffering seeming to be put on a low volume, like the TVs back at home.

Gosh, I had forgotten what a TV looked like. A sense of all the things I had missed flooded over me as I realized that I would be reunited with the modern world once again. Luxury, couches, cotton, silk, beds, and light would finally be mine, everything my family would want me to have. My body couldn't handle the euphoria that transmitted within my nerves.

I was going to be in Swarg.

I, finally, was going to be in Swarg.

Swarg.

Swarg.

--

The week passed by quickly and all of us forgot about where we were, only focused on where we would be. The youths and the families packed their measly belongings. All of us no longer cared about the energy we were wasting; we wouldn't have to worry about it at all in a few more days. The wooden floor seemed to have rejuvenated into fresh planks, the sun shining a thousand times, my body seemed to no longer appear as scrawny, and my skin did not hug as tightly to my bones and tendons. The world was better.

Night occurred; the following day, our train would move the last mile to the wall, where we would be greeted by the sweet fragrance of the colorful city. Tonight was the first night where I couldn't sleep since Granny's death. The sentiment was shared by everyone as rustles and groans of restlessness prevailed in the train.

My eyes refused to shut; there was nothing to seek solace from.

I reached down into the pocket of my trousers and pulled out the folded poster, the words inviting me.

Clean. Safe. Pure

Morning.

Light streaked through the windows. Everyone was awake, anticipating the movement the still wheels of the train would fulfill their purpose and move us into the city. Minutes turned into hours, but we waited.

It was evening. The day had passed, and we hadn't moved a centimeter. Yet, there was still some time before night.

We all sat down near the door, waiting for information to arrive.

One hour passed, and the sky was now dark.

Maybe there was a mistake on the paper. What if the immigration officers meant the day after the date they told us?

It's probably logistical issues, we all told ourselves, calming down the betrayal we felt.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door as one of the Immigration officers of Swarg climbed up the steps and onto the train car. A look of disgust spread on his face as he saw how we had been living, but we chose to ignore it. He immediately took a handkerchief, covered his nose, and took a step back, as if it was impossible for him to even be in the same vicinity as us.

"There seems to have been a mishap. Swarg cannot accommodate all of you."

Huh? What did he mean by that? We were only fifty people; surely we could fit in such an immense city.

Silence.

The official repeated himself, "There is an automobile waiting outside that can take only twenty people. We cannot accommodate everyone."

Silence.

Mrs. Bellevue yelled at him, "WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THAT! We have lived in torture for eternity; just let us in, I'm begging you."

The immigration officer was expressionless, "I didn't say you may not go. I just said that we can't take all of you."

“Some of you may have to go back to Eretz.”

“No, no, no,” wailed a scrawny youth. “Imbeciles, do you know what will happen if we go back, we’ll all die!”

“Please,” yelled a woman who appeared to be in her thirties, “you can’t send the rest of us back; if anything, poison us right here, I’ll gladly take it.”

All of us shouted and protested but to no avail.

Then it happened.

A single piece of wood hit the official in the head.

No one knew who threw it, but it was all we needed.

We knew that we couldn’t live like this.

Everyone began throwing materials at the Official.

Then came the brooms.

Then the sharp metals from the track.

Then the police arrived, with their large rifles pointing at us.

Then blood.

Havoc ensued as our primordial instinct to live in a place that we deserved took over. Everyone pushed each other out of the car and into the cold night.

The police were thrown aback but quickly regained their composure. The bullets flew out at twice the rate, ending the lives of the infants, parents, and juveniles.

I couldn’t comprehend what was occurring. The entire event had gone too fast, too quick for my mind to grasp on to any single emotion.

However, there was one thing that I knew.

I had to enter. No matter the cost.

My legs burst into shots of energy, and I found myself sprinting towards the neon board as the wails and cries of the people behind me grew dimmer.

The aura of paradise called to me.

I didn’t care what happened anymore; I had to get to the wall.

The pamphlet fell out of my pocket.

Clean. Safe. Pure- Come to Swarg Now.

Serenity Bassett

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

Welcome to Death's Table

Welcome to Death's Table

"Do you have what it takes? I don't offer health insurance, you know." His joke and his tone would have perhaps made one think this was an ordinary job offer, but Eden knew full well the weight his question carried. Did she have what it took? However, no matter how much time she took to think it over, she knew that- in the end- there was only one way for her to answer.

Resolve shone in her crystal blue eyes as she locked her gaze with the man across from her. It was just the two of them out in this garden; not a single bee came for the flowers, a single fly for their tea, not a single bird for the nonexistent worms. However, if Eden were an insect or a bird, she would stay away, too. Eden had spent her whole life learning empty trivia and her favorite had always been the language of the flowers. These flowers told Eden nothing but to stay away, to admit that she didn't have the strength to do this. Black roses, what beautifully foreboding symbols of death. How fitting. The rose bushes stood tall, forming a wall around the simple white table and the two sitting at it. Eden and Rea, as he insisted on being called. Do you have what it takes, he had asked. Eden answered the only way she could.

"I do."

The sun never stopped shining, and it was never drowned out by clouds or rain. Eden found it creepy. At least the garden wasn't quite as creepy as when she had first arrived here. As per Eden's request, the tall and imposing rose bushes were removed. She had them replaced with chrysanthemums. She had read that they were often used to mean goodbye, a much kinder message than the thought of death. The arbor that served as an entrance was lined with irises, for hope. Previously, from the arbor to the table was a very short walk, but Eden thought that time for personal reflection was important. Therefore, a small stone path led from the arbor, through the garden, and across a bridge before one could get to the table. Eden had a lovely pond put in, and because the silence had started to drive her mad, she got ducks. They weren't traditional ducks in the sense that they didn't need to eat and had partially translucent feathers, but it was the thought that counted. Eden was proud of her renovations to the garden.

She was basking in the unwavering light of the sun and wondering whether it was too late to give the ducks names when she heard a familiar voice speaking directly into her head.

"File incoming, my dear Eden."

Eden's hand flew to the side of her head. "I told you not to do that." She grumbled. "Use the entrance like everyone else."

The voice in her head only got louder. "My my! It's almost hard to tell which one of us is the boss! You say to do that like everyone else, but I'm not everyone else, am I?"

"I don't like you. In. My head." Eden sipped irritably at her tea. Chamomile. Good for headaches.

“That stings! Oh well, we can work this out later. As I said. File incoming. This is gonna be a tricky one, so hang in there!” The annoying voice cut out.

“He doesn’t have to tell me every time one’s coming. It’s not like I won’t see it coming since I hardly ever get up from this table. Isn’t that right- Mr. Quacks?”

“Quack.” The duck quacked in indifference.

“... Yeah, there wasn’t a shred of effort in that, sorry.” Eden chuckled a little. She was talking to ducks. She wasn’t an old lady, she shouldn’t be going senile yet. She brushed some of her short white hair behind her ear as she picked up the manilla folder that had appeared on the table. She busied herself reading it over while she waited.

Soon enough, a small child sat across from her. Pale, dark hair, dark eyes. According to the file, he was four feet and eleven inches tall. A kid... that’s what made it so tricky. What made it trickier was the hospital gown he was wearing.

“Hi, there.” Eden smiled gently. “I’m Eden. Do you want something to drink?”

The boy was silent for a minute. “Hi, Eden. ‘M William... I’m not supposed to have too much fluid. My heart isn’t-good.”

Eden bit her lip. Again... “Is that so?” She knew that, but really- it was okay for him to have whatever he wanted right now. “Listen, I promise you can have some, okay?”

“Are you a doctor?”

“Well- Not exactly, but-”

William laughed. “No, it’s okay, lady. I’m dead, right? I don’t have to take care of my heart anymore. Do you have juice?”

That caught Eden severely off guard. “Huh... What did you just ask?”

“If you have any juice?”

“No.” Eden twiddled her thumbs under the table. “You asked if you were dead.”

William nodded, a small smile traced his lips, although his eyes looked a little sad. “I’ve been told that I was going to die enough times for it to not be too surprising. Actually, part of me feels like it’s almost better. To finally be done, instead of hearing even one more time that I was gonna die.”

“... You were nine, right?”

“Mhm. I turned ten tomorrow.”

Eden felt like her heart was going to claw its way from her chest. What kind of bullshit was this? She gritted her teeth. He hadn’t even got to see his tenth birthday, but he could still accept death just like that? Who could ever accept dying? “Happy birthday. Do you like chocolate?”

William grinned. “I love chocolate.”

Eden slowly unclenched her jaw and smiled softly for her young friend. “Let’s celebrate, then.” An extravagant four-tiered chocolate cake appeared on the table before them. On the top, written in white icing: ‘Happy 10th Birthday, William!’ Two plates and forks, and two glasses of apple juice. Eden raised her glass. “Dig in.”

Eden was supposed to conduct a Life Interview, but she couldn’t bring herself to do it. Instead, they talked about ordinary things that allowed William to keep smiling. Together, they ate the whole cake. Eden didn’t count, but at the

end, William told her she had sung him “Happy Birthday” thirteen times. Once their little party was over, William got up and waved goodbye. He disappeared beyond the flowers and towards the entrance. It also served as an exit, but it really was still an entrance in every sense of the word. An entrance to the next one. Eden pushed a button under the table, the one labelled 'AGAIN! >v<'. She didn't approve of Rea's button labels.

“Speak of the devil and he shall appear! Or rather... Think of Death and he'll sit across from you? Why don't you ever offer me apple juice when I come by?”

“You can get it yourself,” Eden murmured, resting her head on the table. “You said that one would be tricky. He was so at peace with it.”

Rea smirked, leaning across the table to take Eden's plate of cake to rob her of her precious crumbs. “I never said who it would be tricky for.”

“None of this is easy for me.” Eden closed her eyes. It was so heartbreaking every time, but this one was especially sad.

“I thought you had what it takes.” Rea set down the plate, narrowing his eyes. “Do I have to remind you? The After is different for every individual, but for someone like you, it would be particularly like- ah, what's the word people use...? Hell. Now, if you can't do this job, and you'd rather go....”

Eden sat up, biting her lip and staring determinedly at Rea. “I have what it takes.”

“To do what, my dear? What's your mission statement?”

If he made her recite this thing one more time... “My goal is to give every soul the chance to reach the state of their ideal After.”

“Meaning.”

“Meaning after someone dies and they come to the Garden, I'm to conduct a Life Interview and determine whether or not the life they've lived will result in a suitable After.”

“And if not?”

“I send them back to try again until it works out.”

“So what's the problem? You've been clear on this from the start!” Rea smiled cheerily, picking up the plate and licking it clean. Gross.

“The problem is... That this is the thirty-second time I've seen that soul. Thirty two lives, and every single one of them has just been...” Eden reached under the table, opening her hand. The file she was thinking of materialized in her hand, and she pulled it out and placed it on the table. “The last time, the soul died in a car accident at seven.” Eden reached under the table for another file, pulling it out and placing it on top of that one. “The time before that, it didn't even make it past infancy. A fire.” She continued the file stacking until she had all thirty-two files stacked on top of one another. They were higher than William's cake had been. “This is more than unfair, Rea. Explain.”

Rea had idly begun drawing in a patch of icing with the fork. He drew a skull, 'how totally cool', as Eden was sure he'd say. Once Eden had finished stacking and complaining, he let out a deep sigh. “I don't typically determine where souls go and how they live, I only determine what happens when they aren't alive.”

“Typically. So you can do something.” Eden refused to let any details slide when Rea talked. Death had a tricky tongue.

“... Touché, my little garden!”

“Don't call me that.”

Rea raised his hands in mock surrender. "Sorry, sorry! Anyways, You've really been keeping an eye on this soul, haven't you."

"So you noticed. Did you do something?" Eden narrowed her eyes. Rea... might be the only consistent company she had apart from these ducks, but sometimes she would do better to remember that he wasn't trustworthy in the slightest.

"Now what makes you think that, Eden?"

"Right." Dammit... If he had done something to that soul just because she was keeping an eye on it, she'd never be able to atone for the suffering it had been through, would she? "Are you going to do something to fix it?" She kept her eyes locked with Rea's.

"It's quite a bit of effort to help a soul so bound by poor luck..."

"It's not an effort for me to go take a look at my After. I'd prefer it to being here with you, anyways." Eden's gaze didn't waver. For some reason, if she made that threat seriously enough, it always worked. Maybe even the Reaper got lonely here.

"... Fine~ My hands are successfully tied, Eden. Just because I'm so fond of you, I'll go take a crack at that soul's luck."

"Thank you," Eden breathed. Rea always left her feeling so exasperated.

"Some juice first?"

"Go."

"Fine! I'll talk to you later, Eden~"

"Not if I'm lucky."

In an instant, Eden was once again the only one at the table. Another instant, and it was all cleaned up. She looked over at the duck that she had been trying to name Mr. Quacks earlier. "How about I call you William?"

Max Bell

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

townie

the old factory's door creaks as i step inside.
the lathered blood and sweat has long since dried
from the men who worked tirelessly for years,
only for the result to be a worn-down, rusted building,
abandoned at the touch.
i introduce your hand to the decaying walls.
they drag along, following the lines in the concrete
as we progress through the gray halls,
passing the bones and slit veins of this town,
until we reach the exit.
you get nervous and leave before me,
i follow behind.

the dirt path—
which is hardly a path and more so
the faint outline of years of tire tracks between dead grass—
trails off into a park of the woods
that you're not sure about going down.
we find, instead, the graveyard where my father lives,
and pass it.
if you squint, you could see him waving.
but only if you squint.

'round the corner of the graveyard lies the post office,
where i found you.
you slip your hand back into the open, off-white envelope,
and whisper every word back to me
to the tune of the printer.

Flannery Boshier

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: St Catherine's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Julie Elmore

Category: Short Story

A Book of Memories

As I took one final look around my room, one could practically smell the melancholy in the air. That, and all of the dust just hanging in the room, everything still. The carpet was ripped up, all of my things were in the moving van, and there were holes all over the walls from where all of my photos had been hanging. Despite the emptiness of the room, it felt suffocating; it was filled to the brim with sadness.

After standing in my empty shell of a room for what felt like hours, there was a knock on my door.

"Ally?" I heard Sam call, "Are you okay?"

I quickly wiped the tears off of my face and turned to the door as she entered. I must have looked horrible, because the concern on Sam's face barely left any room to show that she was upset.

"I'm fine," I tried to respond, but my voice was more unsteady and hiccup-y than I had intended.

Sam had always been steadier, less emotional, cooler, and more confident than me. Still, after being best friends for ten years, we were practically sisters. I would have thought that us becoming separated by two-thousand nine-hundred three miles would've brought a few tears. But her sole focus was on how I was holding up.

"Don't worry," she said confidently. "With the internet these days, it's practically impossible to never see each other. I promise we'll still talk all the time."

I nodded, really just trying to convince myself. But two-thousand nine-hundred three miles was still two-thousand nine-hundred three miles. New York to California was a long way.

Suddenly, I heard my mom call me from downstairs.

"Ally!" she called, "We need to leave soon! Come downstairs now!"

As I dragged myself out of my room, Sam put her arm over my shoulder in an attempt to make me feel better, so we were practically hugging each other as we walked downstairs. Once we made our way downstairs and out of the house, I turned around to face the home I'd lived in all my life one last time.

The house wasn't huge, but it stuck out like a sore thumb. It was a brick house coated in a not particularly pretty shade of bright yellow paint, but my parents never cared enough to change it. The door was navy blue, and the chimney went twice as high as the house itself. But despite the house's ugliness, I'd lived in it all my life and so had my mom before me, and her dad before her, and seeing it completely empty and hollow just crushed me. I felt ready to start crying again.

"Hey," said Sam. "It's okay. You can come back to visit all the time. And you always have our book to look at whenever you miss me."

The thought of our book comforted me, if only a tiny bit. But my brief moment of reassurance quickly went away when I realized that I didn't remember packing my book.

"Oh no," I barely whispered under my breath. "I don't have it!"

"What?" Sam asked. Then she realized, her face paling. "You don't have the book?"

My sorrow evaporated in an instant, turning into panic. I sprinted towards the house with Sam right behind me. I could hear my mom yelling that I needed to come back and that we needed to leave soon, but there was no way on heaven or earth that I was leaving without that book.

Where could it be, where could it be? My brain was spinning so frantically, and I was so panicked that I couldn't think straight. The first place I ran to was the kitchen. I threw open the cabinet doors and found nothing. Sam came in right behind me and searched the kitchen island. After every single cabinet door in the kitchen was set completely ajar, we ran into the living room.

I was completely frantic. I checked in the fireplace and even peered up the chimney. After I finally concluded that nobody hid my book up there, Sam attempted to calm me down.

"Ally, calm down," she said. "Come on, deep breaths. Just take a moment to think. Are you sure that it didn't get packed up already?"

"No, I would've been the one to pack it!" My voice cracked three times in that one sentence, and I felt ready to sob. How could I have been such an idiot as to lose our book? That book was the most important thing in the world to me, and I was never going to see it again, because I had been stupid and irresponsible.

It really was a good thing Sam was there. She was so calm, and she was actually thinking straight.

"Did you empty out your secret closet in the wall? The one that we used as our little hide out when we were younger?"

Right as she said that, my brain stopped spinning, and the panic subsided as I slowly registered what she'd just said. I felt incredibly stupid for not thinking of that. I raced upstairs and ran into my room, Sam right behind me, and pulled open the door right next to where my bed used to be. The door was practically invisible, as it was the exact same color and texture as the wall.

Sure enough, sitting on the floor right in the middle of the closet was a sparkly purple binder. On the front, it had big letters glued on rather sloppily, reading "BFFs". On the inside of the book contained pictures of me and Sam together, ranging from age five to age fifteen.

A noise that was a combination between a laugh, sob, and a sigh of relief escaped my throat. All of my anxiety and misery had exhausted me to the point that I just sat down on the dusty floor and pulled the book into my lap. Sam sat down next to me and peered over my shoulder as I opened it.

On the page that fell open was a photograph of me and Sam on Halloween when we were six years old. I was dressed up as a pumpkin, and she was dressed up as a cat. We were sitting together in the secret closet of my bedroom, and we were surrounded by candy wrappers. The memory of that Halloween made me laugh. Sam laughed too.

"I remember that," she said, with a smile on her face. "We wanted to coordinate on our costumes, but you really wanted to be a pumpkin while I thought being a cat was way cooler."

"And I remember that we came up with a whole story about how our costumes were connected," I said. "We told everybody who asked a story about how the cat saved the pumpkin from rolling into the river, and how the cat and the pumpkin were best friends after that."

Sam laughed. "Ah, what an amazing story. Creativity at its finest." I laughed too, hiccuping a little bit. I turned a couple pages forward. We saw a picture of me and Sam hugging and posing for a picture in front of the beach. We were about ten years old, and wearing matching one-piece bathing suits.

"Our trip to South Carolina!"

"Remember when we found that massive crab on the beach?" I asked, beginning to get excited.

"Oh, Lord," Sam replied, with a massive eye roll. "How could I forget?"

"You thought it was dead," I recalled, beginning to laugh. "And you tried to pick it up. And then it snapped it pinchers at you. You screamed so loud that I thought it actually pinched you!" I genuinely snorted as I thought about the memory. Sam had sprinted to the otherside of the beach, so far away that I was completely winded by the time I caught up with her.

I began snorting and giggling as I remembered how I had laughed that day on the beach when we realized that the crab hadn't even pinched Sam and that she was just overreacting. The way I was laughing nobody would've thought that I had been bawling and crying a mere five minutes ago. Sam tried to look angry at me for laughing at her, but she eventually began laughing with me. We began to calm down, our laughter quieting. Then somehow, we started laughing even harder; we were practically unable to stop.

Finally we calmed down, and the old, sad thoughts drifted back into my head. I remembered that I was about to move away, and we might never have a beach trip like that again. I tried to focus on the memory of us on the beach and our pumpkin and cat costumes from halloween. I tried to use the happy memories as a distraction.

As I flipped through the pages, I saw images of me and Sam at our first homecoming, posing together in our dresses. There were pictures of us at football games and at carnivals. There were a few pictures of us wearing matching pajamas for Christmas when we were little.

These pictures came with happy memories, but I was crying all the same. I looked over at Sam to discover that she too had tears dripping down her cheeks, but she was still smiling.

"This isn't the end, you know," she told me. Her voice sounded more shaky than it had been before, but she was still entirely confident. "Next time we have a beach trip, we can go to California. We've been friends for so long, surviving two-thousand nine-hundred three miles shouldn't be too difficult."

For whatever reason, that made me laugh.

"You're right," I said. "I'll visit every Christmas, we can spend the whole summer together, and we'll talk every night on the phone."

"Exactly! It'll be like you never left," she agreed. She seemed glad to see that I was finally catching on to her positive attitude.

Suddenly, my mom called again from downstairs.

“Ally, we really need to go now.”

Sam and I looked at each other, making eye contact, then we both stood up. We exited the room in silence, the book tucked under my arm. Once we made it outside, I put the book in the car and turned back to Sam to give her a giant hug.

“I love you soooooooooooooooooooooo much, and you’re my best friend ever!” I said. The sentence came out very fast, with the exception of the word “so”, which was longer than the rest of the entire sentence put together.

“I love you waaaaaaaay more!” she responded.

“I’ll call you right when the plane lands!”

“You’d better!”

Finally, I got into the car as Sam stepped back and watched. As we began pulling out, I stuck my head out of the window turning to face where Sam was standing. I waved to her as we pulled away, and she waved back at me, until we finally rounded the corner, setting off to the airport.

Ford Clark

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: St. Christopher's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Ron Smith

Category: Poetry

The Great Savannah

The Great Savannah

There was a Great Savannah

Many legends to its name

It bakes and burns, it snakes and turns

But was not known for its game

In terms of life and homeliness

The great plain so did lack

For whenever a seed needed water to feed

Its environs fought it back

Despite this lonesome history,

A change would soon be brought

For it's vast expanse, there was great advance

With the first rose, life it sought

It broke the brittle, hardened ground

Determination in its veins

But as it started to bud, a foreigner sought blood

And ended the bold campaign

The upended roots and dark black bud

Lay dead upon red rock

As the lava bubbled, and the heat stayed double

It stayed one of one in stock

When crossing through the paths of fire

A local, lifeless shell

Looked at the corpse, in his devilish court

"How did this grow in hell?"

Ford Clark

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: St. Christopher's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Ron Smith

Category: Poetry

The Ball in the Brush

The Ball in the Brush

Outside on one fair sunny morn
I looked upon the grassy court
Inhaled the smell of Fall, so gay
And worries gave me pain no more

It caused a change in me not felt
Since ages of some past November
My shoulder's Atlas now removed
A loosening unmatched in measure

Although this sense was so profound
It troubled me the force was there
So powerful and pure but yet
It's origins were unaware

Hazy thoughts of feelings old
Conscious in my head once more
Forced my eyes to the wooden gate
And told me of my life before

I made with purpose to the point
A trance-like state I walked across
The yard in which spent my youth
One with my spirit's spring, now lost

My hands unlatched the gate with ease
A motion gone yet not forgotten
And viewed upon a ruined highway
Once bustling but not since trodden

The Ball once bright and bold was trapped
In thorns and roots that made the brush
And weathering had run its course
And greatly dimmed the sphere's gold flush

Just as fast as it had come
My soul's sweet breath had left my lungs
A Herculean effort's end
Brought minds return to modern tongues

Despite the turn to worldliness
I made a vow to keep my hue
Prevent the roots and thorns to trap
What makes me who I am to you

Jack Couchman

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

Blood Toxin

this is the last poem I write about you

the last time I'll mention your nails
grown out like talons
and the marks you'd leave
when you'd grab Me by the jaw to make Me
look you in the eyes.

this is the last time I'll talk about your breath
that smelled of rotting flesh and decay
two inches away as you spit curses
onto My face
onto My Name.

I'm not letting you tie me down anymore
I'm not going to think about you
or write about you ever again

.
.
.

but i can't help myself.
You still have a grip on me
somewhere
less obvious than my face
and i can't free myself of it.

i'm Yours once again
and no matter how far i run
every street leads back to You
leads back
home.

i will always be Your
daughter
i will always share Your reflection
and i will never be more than just an extension of
You

You
You
it's only You

behind my eyes
inside my veins

i've gotten headaches
from trying to dig you out
i've lost the blush in my cheeks
for weeks trying to
spill you down the drain

I've been trying for a year
without you even being here
and yet I am still
caught
in your phantom strings

hanging onto you
by the threads of
the last time you said
"I love you."
and meant it.

when was the last time
you meant it?
just tell Me if you didn't
and I'll let it go
I'll let go

Sydni Denton

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: Collegiate School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Linda Rouse

Category: Flash Fiction

Small & Full of Nothing

Small & Full of Nothing

It was a small thing, no bigger than a house cat... and come to think of it, that's what it resembled as well. If you were to see it from afar, that's likely what you'd assume it is. There were but two things that gave it away: its eyes and its shadow. The eyes weren't overly large or extremely small; they were just empty. I don't mean the sockets, I mean if you were to look into its eyes, you'd see something hollow, something lacking, something, as I said, *empty*. The shadow was something much harder to catch as it mostly came out in the dark, but if you did happen to catch it in the light, you'd see it wasn't the shadow of a cat at all. No, its shadow was something much more gruesome, something bigger, something with sharper claws and longer limbs, something much more horrific than a house cat. Perhaps, I think, that the shadow reveals what lurks beneath the surface, under that fur and those whiskers. It comes to your door at night, scratches with its paws until you open up and see this poor and bedraggled little wayward kitty and let it in. You let it in to offer it comfort, to maybe feel better about yourself, so you don't have to deal with feeling guilty later, whatever the reason, you let it in. Once it's in, you'll catch sight of its shadow and wonder if you've gone mad. You'll examine it closer and think it's a trick of the light. You'll turn to this cat-like creature and give it a closer look. A closer look into those eyes, into that emptiness, and suddenly your falling, everything within you being drawn out and sucked away. Just like that, you're gone, your skin ashen and eyes... eyes empty. Then that thing is off to find something else to attempt to fill its emptiness with because you simply didn't do the trick.

Greyson Fisher

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Patty Smith

Category: Novel Writing

The Institution

Brief summary:

"What if the rat race went so far that even children were considered a distraction from work? Children taken at birth, parents drugged to be good workers, and a society built around the central concept of work while producing nothing. That is the Institution." Jackson is a boy in the Institution who one day wakes up and starts questioning things. His red hair sets him apart from other kids, who all have brown hair. A simple diction that is so pronounced in a reality so stagnated. He discovers an old book in the library that talks about fathers and mothers, and begins to wonder who his real parents are. He begins to crawl through the Institution and ask questions. Questions that land him in trouble with the supervisor. One of his friends Hazel is captured after they sneak out of the vents and sent to Time Out - no-one returns from Time Out. This scares his friend so much to stop looking for answers and Jackson decides to stop asking so many questions and find answers for himself. He escapes the Institution, which sits at the center of the city, and finds his mother. To his shock she seems to reject him. As if the Institution is more important than her own son. He's brought back to the Institution in chains after his mother betrays him. He's sent to Time Out, where his father recognizes him for having red-hair, and takes him to H.O.M.E, leaving the Institution.

Excerpt:

Jackson.

"Welcome to the Institution."

The first muffled noises Jackson heard were from the bed next to him. He couldn't open his eyes to see who it was. He could smell something that reminded him of white walls and clinics, but where or why, he did not know. It felt like floating in the black empty shell of his head. All he knew was his name, Jackson.

"I hear it's like waking from a coma," whispered a kid in the far corner of the room.

The sounds of shoes, *nurse's shoes*, Jackson recognized them from earlier. His attempt to think back to when he heard them earlier was blocked.

"No, I think it's like waking up after your first nap in ten years," hissed another kid somewhere near the first.

Jackson's eyes twitched. *It certainly didn't feel like that*, thought Jackson. It was like standing on the verge of a wave, just about to fall down the crescendo, engulfed by the tide and into the waking world.

"Shh, just let them wake," said a third kid.

Jackson's eyebrow twitched. A nurse, or someone, must've noticed because he heard them move over to him. The wave folded forward, thrusting Jackson into his body.

His left eye opened, just a wink. A narrow bead of fluorescent light spilled in. The Nurse scooped him up and carried him over to a cot. Then the nurse left, letting Jackson slowly acclimate to the climate in the room and wake up.

Jackson opened his eyes. He was on a cot in a white-walled room where nurses carted waking children from lofty stretches that had been dispensed in the middle of the room, like robots in a factory depositing boxes on trucks. To his right must be the kid who had stirred earlier. Some memory tried to tug on the back of his mind, a kid's name, Bradley or Baxter, or something.

One of the nurses came over to him with a glass of water and a cookie.

She pointed at the cookie, which had a bold I stamped on both sides. "Eat this before you drink your water, it'll make you feel better," said the nurse quietly, as to not disturb the rest of the patients.

Jackson accepted the food and drink, put off by the whole thing. Who were these people, what was their deal?

Another kid stirred, a girl roughly Jackson's age, but what number he did not know. One of the nurses rushed from

the wall where they stood and carted the girl to the loft next to Jackson's. The boy next to him stirred. He had dark brown hair, white skin, brown eyes, *like the rest of the boys* Jackson thought. But why did his brain not say *its*? His thoughts were interrupted by a different nurse coming back with food and drink. It wasn't the same nurse as before, but how could Jackson be sure, they moved too fast for him to see their faces.

The boy looked at his cookie, shrugged, and ate it without a second thought. Jackson still held onto his cookie and drink, trying to wrap his mind around the whole strange scenario. The girl to his right took a sip of the water, made a nasty face, bit down on the cookie, and then finished the water. Jackson realized the nurses along the far wall were watching to see what he would do. *Didn't they say it would make him feel better?*

He split the cookie and ate it. It tasted like firecrackers and vitamin pills, not at all like what his mouth expected it to taste like. He downed the water, letting the cool liquid silence his parched throat.

Another nurse came over and took their glasses. She smiled at all three of them. "Welcome back to the Institution." Jackson was already too light-headed to fully understand what the women had said. He collapsed backward onto his cot and fell asleep, much like the boy and girl had next to him and the dozens that surrounded them. All snoozing away to be carted out of the room, the great cattle of the rat race destined to be born, raised, and sacrificed in the society they founded.

* * *

Jackson woke up in a dorm room. He rolled to his side and almost dropped five feet to the floor. He pulled himself back to the covers and surveyed the room. He had no idea where he was.

Four bunk beds flanked each wall, a total of sixteen kids were in the room. Already Jackson heard some of the other kids moving around, quietly as to not disturb the peace of those resting. But he knew it was only a matter of time before some kid made a loud noise and the gentle peace was broken.

Two kids sat near the front of the room, both lower bunks, playing a game of cards. Another kid, with dark brown hair and a stiff jaw line, was on his top bunk rolling a ball between his hands. Jackson wondered where they had gotten the toys, and why the kids were all his age?

Sixteen. The word jumped in his head so fast he almost yelped. Sixteen, he rolled the word over in his mind. A number. He looked around the room. All of the kids were sixteen. Some of them, like the sleeping boy on the bottom bunk to his left and the boy rolling the ball, seemed familiar to him. As if he'd known them before. But now he couldn't make out their names. Something pricked on the back of his neck but was smoothed out by the drugs they had given them.

Jackson realized with a start the boy with the ball was the one who'd been to his right when they had woken up for a short time in the clinic.

"What are you looking at?" asked the kid with the ball. He didn't ask it in a mean way, but it was clear he was suspicious why Jackson had been looking intensely at him.

Jackson didn't realize he had been staring.

"Sorry, nothing, you reminded me of someone," said Jackson innocently.

The kid shrugged his shoulders. "Heck, everyone in this room reminds me of someone. But I just can't put my finger on who."

Jackson nodded. Before he could ask the kid his name the door to the dorm swished open and a man and woman walked in, both dressed in smiles and grey clothing.

"Good morning boys!" said the woman in an overly cheerful tone.

The last few kids who had been dozing rolled to their sides and rubbed their eyes.

"I'm Mother Susan, and this is Father Gabriel, and we're your parents," Mother Susan smiled at the dorm room with her pearly white teeth that set Jackson on guard.

People always compensated for something.

Father Gabriel stepped in front of Mother Susan. Jackson noticed his smile was much more pinched. "If you would please get out of your beds and follow me."

Jackson peered over the side and clambered down from his top bunk. The kid just beneath him glanced his way but didn't say a word as Jackson's feet slapped to the cold floor.

He met the ball boys with the eyes on his way to join the line next to Father Gabriel. The ball boys just nodded at him and lined up behind him. It felt natural to form a line. Subconsciously moving in a rhythm that they'd always moved in.

Father Gabriel clapped after everyone had formed into line.

"Great!" Father Gabriel stressed the last three letters, so it sounded like "gr-EAT".

The line of boys filed out after Father Gabriel, the soles of their feet slapping against the hard floor. They passed out of the dorm room and into a central hallway. At either end of the hallway, it split into a Y-shape. Across the hall, a group of girls, all similar ages to the boys, were also making their way out into the hall. Along the wall of the hallway were lockers, each with a number on them. Intersecting these lockers were doors with classroom names on them.

Father Gabriel led them down the hallway. By this point, Jackson's feet were beginning to sting with the cold. As if sensing this, Gabriel stopped off at a door marked "Laundry" and led the boys inside.

"Please stand against the far wall." Yet again Father Gabriel clapped excitedly when the boys did as was instructed. Jackson pressed himself to the wall. Opposite him were stacks of neatly pressed clothes. All light grey with hints of white near the collar. *Those look weird*, thought Jackson. Only once looked down did he realize he was wearing the exact same clothing. He didn't have any time to mentally complain to his former self, who he didn't remember, about putting on the uniform as Mother Susan entered the room.

She inspected the line of boys. She made a tsk-tsk sound. Subconsciously, like dogs who'd been taught a trick and then forgot their master, the boys straightened their shoulders. Mother Susan smiled her brighter than normal teeth again.

"In just a moment we'll get you boys some proper shoes," she looked at Father Gabriel. "While you're waiting, Father will come around and get you sorted into your clothing."

Father Gabriel stepped forward and clapped his hands again.

What was his deal with clapping? thought Jackson. He was really getting tired of the clapping. And every time Father did it, he flinched.

"Please step forward and extend your left arm," instructed Father Gabriel, "and do be sure to let them do their work."

Who? mentally asked Jackson. But he stepped forward and extended his left arm like a robot trained to do commands. In an instant sixteen men in matching red outfits marched into the room and began taking measurements. The one that was assigned to Jackson was a skinny man with shrunken eyes, as he'd been reprimanded for looking and his eyes had retreated back into his head.

"Twenty-two," muttered the man.

"Excuse me?" asked Jackson softly.

The man glanced up at Jackson and immediately swung his head back down again. "Never look. The Institution is always right," he muttered.

"What?" asked Jackson. His neck started tingling again.

Instead of answering the man retreated to the stack of his clothes. Ran his fingers on top of several ones before plucking a pile of them and dropping them off at Jackson's feet.

"Right foot please," whispered the man.

Jackson winced as the man took out a metal tool and measured Jackson's foot. His finger tracing along the ridgeline leading up from the heel to the big toe.

"Size 12," muttered the man. He rushed over to a stack of black boxes and picked up two with the number "12" stamped on their sides in large white font. He came back to Jacksons and put them down. "Thank you," he whispered before leaving the room without another sound.

Jackson started to watch him go then stopped. It felt like something was forcing him to look down at the ground and mind his own business.

A minute later the last of the red shirts had left and Father Gabriel clapped his hands again. Jackson jumped slightly. "Alright!" Father said walking over to the nearest boy, a slightly round one with brown hair and brown eyes. "These are your clothes for the first week. Everyone has the same set of three pairs. Next, shoes." He pointed to the boxes on the ground. "Take out the first pair."

Jackson bent down and picked up his shoes. They were simply made, pieces of rubber melted and sown together. He pulled each sock on before pushing his feet into the shoes. They were a tight fit, but Jackson guessed they would work. It wasn't like he could just go and ask for any others. With the shoes on, Jackson's feet stopped stinging against the cold floor.

Once everyone had put on their shoes Father Gabriel took this as another opportunity to clap.

"Follow me. Pick up your clothes and boxes, we're going back to your dorm before we begin the tour," Father said. The boys did as instructed. On the short walk back to the dorm, Jackson glanced up from the floor and across the hall to where the girls had begun their tour. Another Mother, not Mother Susan, was leading the troop of girls from door to door.

Jackson wasn't watching where he was going and almost barreled into the back of the boy in front of him.

"Watch it," the kid snarled, "or I'll drop you."

Great, he didn't even know the kid's name and he had already made an enemy thought Jackson glumly.

"Boys, clothes down on beds please," said Father Gabriel once everyone was in the door. "Shoes under beds for lower bunks and along the wall next to your bed for upper bunks."

The boys worked as a unit. Mindless, like drones, putting clothes on bunks and shoes under beds or against walls. A ritual done before but forgotten. Only the ritual had been remembered by the boys. Not each other, not the teachers, not their friends, only the ritual. And everything apart from that had been whited out. Once the clothes were put

away Father Gabriel clapped again like an owner excited his dog was doing tricks, Jackson did not jump this time. "Follow me," said Father Gabriel with a smile, "this is where the tour begins."

The boys were marched out into the hall. They learned about the lockers, discovered their individual lock combinations. They were shown doors to classrooms where they would learn that year of the wonders being White Collar workers. At the end of the north Y-intersection was a set of doors that led to the Gym and the pool, with locker rooms on either side. The other Y-Intersection were the bathrooms, with a door that when a kid asked where it led Father Gabriel momentarily lost his smile.

"Let's just say you don't want to go through that one," said Father Gabriel softly. "Now, who wants to see the rec room!" he said, his voice becoming much more energetic, though Jackson bet it was forced.

Throughout the tour, Jackson couldn't help but look around at the walls. They looked both brand new and as if they'd been lived in. Though as far as he could tell, he'd seen no one else on their tour. It seemed as if, for the time being, this was it for their living quarters. They couldn't leave it. It was a cage to Jackson. He knew very little about himself, but he knew he did not like cages or liars.

* * *

After Father Gabriel finished his tour, he retired the boys back to their dorm, with the promise that class would start the next day and they ought to get to know each other.

Most of the boys stood staring at each other before one cleared his throat and offered to play a game of cards. The boys sat in a circle, or as close to a circle you can get with sixteen sixteen-year-old boys. Jackson was unlucky enough to sit next to the kid he'd bumped into. Every time the kid played a card, his elbow would hit Jackson. After a while of Jackson not responding, the kid jerked his elbow more forcibly. Jackson noticed more and more eyes swinging in his direction. Watching the two boys in the silent power struggle. Jackson knew he had to speak up, otherwise, he'd be the beta of the pack and he had no idea what that even meant.

"Could you stop?" asked Jackson.

The kid continued to play, his elbow forcibly hitting Jackson.

"Hey, back off," said the kid with the red ball.

"Or you'll do what?" snarled the bully.

"I'll throw this ball at you," snapped back the kid.

The bully silenced. The threat of the lone projectile being hurled at him and perhaps him showing any sign of weakness was enough to keep him from acting out anymore.

Jackson nodded his thanks.

After the last round finished, the game retired, the boys tired from the strange day.

Jackson made his way over to the kid who'd saved his body any more bruises.

"Hey thanks," said Jackson.

The kid nodded. "No problem. I saw you needed help."

"The name's Jackson," he offered his hand.

"Bryan and you have red hair," Bryan took Jackson's hand and shook it.

Jackson released Bryan's hand. "I do?"

"Just a little. It's just more red than the rest of ours," Bryan shrugged.

Jackson glanced around the room. He hadn't noticed it before, but everyone had brown hair and brown eyes. "Wow, I guess I'm just a little different."

Bryan eyed him. "I can tell in a place like this, where we all look and dress the same, that's going to mean a lot."

"Thanks for the advice. I'll keep it in mind," joked Jackson.

Bryan shrugged. "No problem Jackson."

"Good night, Bryan."

The two boys retired to their beds, believing themselves ready for whatever class could bring the following day.

What surprises you the most about humanity?

“Man.

Because he sacrifices his health in order to make money. Then he sacrifices money to recuperate his health. And then he is so anxious about the future that he does not enjoy the present; the result being that he does not live in the present or the future; he lives as if he is never going to die, and then dies having never really lived.”

-Dalai Lama

Date: 10-7-3218

Name: Trina Livestock

Address: 5911 Peachwood Grove

Dear: Trina Livestock

On behalf of the Institution, we thank you for supporting our cause to better the future of humanity. Your donation is greatly valued and important to all of our futures. With your generous gift, you have fostered a child's future, and have ensured the longevity of the Institution and the great family that it creates.

Three simple principles are the founding of the Institution, hard work, loyalty, and above all else, family. Together, we deliver superior education compared to any Pre-Institution age school while continuing to advance the discoveries and progress of the human race.

The Institution could not do what it does without help from contributing members like you. Remember, if you would like to see an even greater future, you must encourage your friends to increase their donations to our flourishing Institution.

You must take two of the grey five-milligram pills every day for the next two weeks. After that, the tummy aches will stop and you can return to the workforce.

Thank you again for your donation to our esteemed organization. We hope to see you again in nine months.

Nos ducere
(we lead)

Jackson.

"Welcome to the Institution."

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She pointed at the cookie, which had a bold **I** stamped on both sides. "Eat this before you drink your water, it'll make you feel better," said the nurse quietly, as to not disturb the rest of the patients.

Jackson accepted the food and drink, put off by the whole thing. Who were these people, what was their deal?

Another kid stirred, a girl roughly Jackson's age, but what number he did not know. One of the nurses rushed from the wall where they stood and carted the girl to the loft next to Jackson's. The boy next to him stirred. He had dark brown hair, white skin, brown eyes, *like the rest of the boys*, Jackson thought. But why did his brain not say "*us*"?

His thoughts were interrupted by a different nurse coming back with food and drink. It wasn't the same nurse as before, but how could Jackson be sure, they moved too fast for him to see their faces.

The boy looked at his cookie, shrugged, and ate it without a second thought. Jackson still held onto his cookie and drink, trying to wrap his mind around the whole strange scenario. The girl to his right took a sip of the water, made a nasty face, bit down on the cookie, and then finished the water. Jackson realized the nurses along the far wall were watching to see what he would do. *Didn't they say it would make him feel better?*

He split the cookie and ate it. It tasted like firecrackers and vitamin pills, not at all like what his mouth expected it to taste like. He downed the water, letting the cool liquid silence his parched throat.

Another nurse came over and took their glasses. She smiled at all three of them. "Welcome back to the Institution."

Jackson was already too light-headed to fully understand what the women had said. He collapsed backward onto his cot and fell asleep, much like the boy and girl had next to him and the dozens that surrounded them. All snoozing away to be carted out of the room, the great cattle of the rat race destined to be born, raised, and sacrificed in the society they founded.

* * *

Jackson woke up in a dorm room. He rolled to his side and almost dropped five feet to the floor. He pulled himself back to the covers and surveyed the room. He had no idea where he was.

Four bunk beds flanked each wall, a total of sixteen kids were in the room. Already Jackson heard some of the other kids moving around, quietly as to not disturb the peace of those resting. But he knew it was only a matter of time before some kid made a loud noise and the gentle peace was broken.

Two kids sat near the front of the room, both lower bunks, playing a game of cards. Another kid, with dark brown hair and a stiff jaw line, was on his top bunk rolling a ball between his hands. Jackson wondered where they had gotten the toys, and why the kids were all his age?

Sixteen. The word jumped in his head so fast he almost yelped. Sixteen, he rolled the word over in his mind. A number. He looked around the room. All of the kids were sixteen. Some of them, like the sleeping boy on the bottom bunk to his left and the boy rolling the ball, seemed familiar to him. As if he'd known them before. But now he couldn't make out their names. Something pricked on the back of his neck but was smoothed out by the drugs they had given them.

Jackson realized with a start the boy with the ball was the one who'd been to his right when they had woken up for a short time in the clinic.

"What are you looking at?" asked the kid with the ball. He didn't ask it in a mean way, but it was clear he was suspicious why Jackson had been looking intensely at him.

Jackson didn't realize he had been staring.

"Sorry, nothing, you reminded me of someone," said Jackson innocently.

The kid shrugged his shoulders. "Heck, everyone in this room reminds me of someone. But I just can't put my finger on who."

Jackson nodded. Before he could ask the kid his name the door to the dorm swished open and a man and woman walked in, both dressed in smiles and grey clothing.

"Good morning boys!" said the woman in an overly cheerful tone.

The last few kids who had been dozing rolled to their sides and rubbed their eyes.

"I'm Mother Susan, and this is Father Gabriel, and we're your parents," Mother Susan smiled at the dorm room with her pearly white teeth that set Jackson on guard.

People always compensated for something.

Father Gabriel stepped in front of Mother Susan. Jackson noticed his smile was much more pinched. "If you would please get out of your beds and follow me."

Jackson peered over the side and clambered down from his top bunk. The kid just beneath him glanced his way but didn't say a word as Jackson's feet slapped to the cold floor.

He met the ball boys with the eyes on his way to join the line next to Father Gabriel. The ball boys just nodded at him and lined up behind him. It felt natural to form a line. Subconsciously moving in a rhythm that they'd always moved in.

Father Gabriel clapped after everyone had formed into line.

"Great!" Father Gabriel stressed the last three letters, so it sounded like "gr-EAT".

The line of boys filed out after Father Gabriel, the soles of their feet slapping against the hard floor. They passed out of the dorm room and into a central hallway. At either end of the hallway, it split

into a Y-shape. Across the hall, a group of girls, all similar ages to the boys, were also making their way out into the hall. Along the wall of the hallway were lockers, each with a number on them. Intersecting these lockers were doors with classroom names on them.

Father Gabriel led them down the hallway. By this point, Jackson's feet were beginning to sting with the cold. As if sensing this, Gabriel stopped off at a door marked "Laundry" and led the boys inside.

"Please stand against the far wall." Yet again Father Gabriel clapped excitedly when the boys did as was instructed.

Jackson pressed himself to the wall. Opposite him were stacks of neatly pressed clothes. All light grey with hints of white near the collar. *Those look weird*, thought Jackson. Only once looked down did he realize he was wearing the exact same clothing. He didn't have any time to mentally complain to his former self, who he didn't remember, about putting on the uniform as Mother Susan entered the room.

She inspected the line of boys. She made a tsk-tsk sound. Subconsciously, like dogs who'd been taught a trick and then forgot their master, the boys straightened their shoulders. Mother Susan smiled her brighter than normal teeth again.

"In just a moment we'll get you boys some proper shoes," she looked at Father Gabriel. "While you're waiting, Father will come around and get you sorted into your clothing."

Father Gabriel stepped forward and clapped his hands again.

What was his deal with clapping? thought Jackson. He was really getting tired of the clapping. And every time Father did it, he flinched.

"Please step forward and extend your left arm," instructed Father Gabriel, "and do be sure to let them do their work."

Who? mentally asked Jackson. But he stepped forward and extended his left arm like a robot trained to do commands. In an instant sixteen men in matching red outfits marched into the room and began taking measurements. The one that was assigned to Jackson was a skinny man with shrunken eyes, as he'd been reprimanded for looking and his eyes had retreated back into his head.

"Twenty-two," muttered the man.

"Excuse me?" asked Jackson softly.

The man glanced up at Jackson and immediately swung his head back down again. "Never look. The Institution is always right," he muttered.

"What?" asked Jackson. His neck started tingling again.

Instead of answering the man retreated to the stack of his clothes. Ran his fingers on top of several ones before plucking a pile of them and dropping them off at Jackson's feet.

"Right foot please," whispered the man.

Jackson winced as the man took out a metal tool and measured Jackson's foot. His finger tracing along the ridgeline leading up from the heel to the big toe.

"Size 12," muttered the man. He rushed over to a stack of black boxes and picked up two with the number "12" stamped on their sides in large white font. He came back to Jacksons and put them down. "Thank you," he whispered before leaving the room without another sound.

Jackson started to watch him go then stopped. It felt like something was forcing him to look down at the ground and mind his own business.

A minute later the last of the red shirts had left and Father Gabriel clapped his hands again. Jackson jumped slightly.

“Alright!” Father said walking over to the nearest boy, a slightly round one with brown hair and brown eyes. “These are your clothes for the first week. Everyone has the same set of three pairs. Next, shoes.” He pointed to the boxes on the ground. “Take out the first pair.”

Jackson bent down and picked up his shoes. They were simply made, pieces of rubber melted and sown together. He pulled each sock on before pushing his feet into the shoes. They were a tight fit, but Jackson guessed they would work. It wasn’t like he could just go and ask for any others. With the shoes on, Jackson’s feet stopped stinging against the cold floor.

Once everyone had put on their shoes Father Gabriel took this as another opportunity to clap.

“Follow me. Pick up your clothes and boxes, we’re going back to your dorm before we begin the tour,” Father said.

The boys did as instructed. On the short walk back to the dorm, Jackson glanced up from the floor and across the hall to where the girls had begun their tour. Another Mother, not Mother Susan, was leading the troop of girls from door to door.

Jackson wasn’t watching where he was going and almost barreled into the back of the boy in front of him.

“Watch it,” the kid snarled, “or I’ll drop you.”

Great, he didn’t even know the kid’s name and he had already made an enemy, thought Jackson glumly.

“Boys, clothes down on beds please,” said Father Gabriel once everyone was in the door. “Shoes under beds for lower bunks and along the wall next to your bed for upper bunks.”

The boys worked as a unit. Mindless, like drones, putting clothes on bunks and shoes under beds or against walls. A ritual done before but forgotten. Only the ritual had been remembered by the boys. Not each other, not the teachers, not their friends, only the ritual. And everything apart from that had been whited out. Once the clothes were put away Father Gabriel clapped again like an owner excited his dog was doing tricks, Jackson did not jump this time.

“Follow me,” said Father Gabriel with a smile, “this is where the tour begins.”

The boys were marched out into the hall. They learned about the lockers, discovered their individual lock combinations. They were shown doors to classrooms where they would learn that year of the wonders being White Collar workers. At the end of the north Y-intersection was a set of doors that led to the Gym and the pool, with locker rooms on either side. The other Y-Intersection were the bathrooms, with a door that when a kid asked where it led Father Gabriel momentarily lost his smile.

“Let’s just say you don’t want to go through that one,” said Father Gabriel softly. “Now, who wants to see the rec room!” he said, his voice becoming much more energetic, though Jackson bet it was forced.

Throughout the tour, Jackson couldn’t help but look around at the walls. They looked both brand new and as if they’d been lived in. Though as far as he could tell, he’d seen no one else on their tour. It seemed as if, for the time being, this was it for their living quarters. They couldn’t leave it. It was a cage to Jackson. He knew very little about himself, but he knew he did not like cages or liars.

* * *

After Father Gabriel finished his tour, he retired the boys back to their dorm, with the promise that class would start the next day and they ought to get to know each other.

Most of the boys stood staring at each other before one cleared his throat and offered to play a game of cards. The boys sat in a circle, or as close to a circle you can get with sixteen sixteen-year-old

boys. Jackson was unlucky enough to sit next to the kid he'd bumped into. Every time the kid played a card, his elbow would hit Jackson.

After a while of Jackson not responding, the kid jerked his elbow more forcibly. Jackson noticed more and more eyes swinging in his direction. Watching the two boys in the silent power struggle. Jackson knew he had to speak up, otherwise, he'd be the beta of the pack and he had no idea what that even meant.

"Could you stop?" asked Jackson.

The kid continued to play, his elbow forcibly hitting Jackson.

"Hey, back off," said the kid with the red ball.

"Or you'll do what?" snarled the bully.

"I'll throw this ball at you," snapped back the kid.

The bully silenced. The threat of the lone projectile being hurled at him and perhaps him showing any sign of weakness was enough to keep him from acting out anymore.

Jackson nodded his thanks.

After the last round finished, the game retired, the boys tired from the strange day.

Jackson made his way over to the kid who'd saved his body any more bruises.

"Hey thanks," said Jackson.

The kid nodded. "No problem. I saw you needed help."

"The name's Jackson," he offered his hand.

"Bryan and you have red hair," Bryan took Jackson's hand and shook it.

Jackson released Bryan's hand. "I do?"

"Just a little. It's just more red than the rest of ours," Bryan shrugged.

Jackson glanced around the room. He hadn't noticed it before, but everyone had brown hair and brown eyes. "Wow, I guess I'm just a little different."

Bryan eyed him. "I can tell in a place like this, where we all look and dress the same, that's going to mean a lot."

"Thanks for the advice. I'll keep it in mind," joked Jackson.

Bryan shrugged. "No problem Jackson."

"Good night, Bryan."

The two boys retired to their beds, believing themselves ready for whatever class could bring the following day.

Jackson.
"The Red Hair Kid"

Bryan was right about the red hair signaling Jackson out from his fellow classmates. At first, it was just a glance and a murmur, but then someone worked up the courage to come over to him. It turned out the kid nominated by the others was Corey, a kid with small eyes that made him look like a gopher.

They had been left in their dorm for the morning after breakfast brought to them by men wearing white shirts and pushing metal tables.

Jackson was sitting with Bryan, they were rolling the ball back and forth. They had devised a game where they would try to get the ball past the other goal. Corey approached and tapped Jackson on the shoulder. Jackson turned to face the kid.

"Do you have paint in your hair?" asked Corey.

Jackson rubbed his hand through his hair. "No." At least he thought he didn't. "Why?"

Corey cleared his throat. "Well, it's different than our brown hair."

Jackson blinked a few times. So Bryan was right. He ran his hand through his hair. It didn't feel like anything different. "Is that a problem?"

Corey shrugged. "We're still deciding that."

"Who's we?" asked Jackson.

"Us," Corey said, offering no answer to Jackson's question.

"Why would it be a problem?" asked Jackson.

Father Gaberial saved Corey from answering that question. The door to the dorm swished open and he walked in, followed by a new mother. Father Gaberial clapped his hands together.

"Good morning children, this is your first block mother, Mother Nelly," he extended his right hand to where Mother stood.

Mother Nelly wore her smile like a lopsided tie. Her eyes conveyed a feeling of home, safety, and something that smelled like it would stick to the back of your throat. She was about the same age as Mother Susan.

"Good morning!" she extended her hands, like giving the whole room a hug. "I am your mother for the first block as your Father said. If you follow me, we will begin class."

As if they'd all done this before, the boys swung themselves from bunks and assembled in a single file line. Jackson had no idea where the instinct came from, but he fell into line behind Corey. The boys marched out of the room, straight as a ruler across a desk. Father Gaberial watched them go with a gleam in his eyes.

In the hallway, Mother Susan waited with the group of sixteen girls. The girls had formed two groups of eight. Mother Nelly smiled and turned to the line of boys and began counting them off, "1, 2, 1, 2."

Jackson was a two, so was Bryan. Corey was a one.

"Ones on the right with Mother Susan," said Mother Nelly. The boys moved slowly, forming up next to the girls.

"Twos with Mother Nelly," said Mother Susan. Jackson noticed in the presence of Mother Nelly, her happy voice became more strained.

A group of eight girls moved over to where Jackson, Bryan, and six other boys stood. The girls extended their hands. Three of them giggled when Jackson caught their eyes.

“Ok class, follow me!” Mother Nelly beamed. She led them down the hall to a classroom. Sixteen seats, four by four, just like everything else in the Institution, waited for them. Jackson took his seat in the back of the classroom. There no one could comment on his red hair. Bryan sat near the front of a class. A girl with wavy brown hair sat down next to him. She momentarily glanced in his direction and then entered a quick discussion with Bryan.

Mother Nelly stood at the front of the classroom, next to a large whiteboard. She held a ruler in one hand and a red marker in the other. She tapped the board and the class quieted down, like a bunch of dogs trained to do a trick by a master they no longer knew.

She cleared her throat and lept into her speech.

“Welcome to the Institution class! You’re beyond lucky to be part of the White Collar division. Over the next three years, you will learn everything you need to know to be part of the best job division in the world!” She gave them a bright smile. She sounded confident in what she was saying. “You will have lofty positions, nice chairs, air conditioning, and will never have to worry about where your food comes from, how clean your floors are, or how to fix a lightbulb. All the other jobs and the other workers will do that for you. You get to relax, comfortable in knowing you’re the luckiest of the lucky!”

The kids in the room clapped.

“Today, we’ll start off with something easy, the Institution.”

She drew the word on the whiteboard. Its black ink seeming to dig into the smooth surface.

“The Institution is the best!”

Another round of applause.

“Everything in life would be impossible without the Institution. Otherwise, who would teach you how to have the best life? No one, that’s who. The Institution gives us everything, and in return, all it asks is that you remain loyal to its teachings. Think about it, you’ll never go hungry. You’ll never feel out of place because the Institution picks your place. You’ll never be sad! Work is fun, work is the best! You will always have a family, each other. And you’ll never feel lonely because you have the Institution at your side.”

This time a few kids, two girls, and one boy, whooped. Mother Nelly just bowed.

Jackson was impressed. The Institution gave him everything, that was true.

Mother Nelly walked around the class, passing out notebooks and pencils to everyone. She began by talking about the creature comforts of their job. The nice chairs. Good food. She stressed air conditioning.

Throughout the class, the only other thing that Mother Nelly talks about apart from the perks of the job is how great the Institution is.

By the end of the hour, Jackson was convinced not only was he in the luckiest profession but also he was in the best school. The only thing that still bugged him as if everything was so perfect, why couldn’t he remember anything.

After the class was over, he was going to approach Mother Nelly when she ushered them out of class. They had more classes to attend afterward. That day he was too busy, too distracted, to even think for a second what he was doing. He guessed that was the plan of the Institution. If you were too distracted, too busy with other work, other class, other people, then how were you going to complain about any of them?

* * *

It had been almost a month since school had started and Jackson had worked himself into a routine, or actually, the Institution had. Every morning, at eight sharp, the kids were woken up by the clap

of Father Gaberial. Food was rushed in with urgency and then disposed of in large circular bins in the corners of the room. From there they followed their respective mothers to their first block, then traded mothers, paused for another rush and clatter of dishes, then one last block, and then physical fitness.

The strange paranormal sense of fear had slowly been washed away. Every time it came back it set the back of Jackson's neck on fire, and then was smoothly replaced with a calm sense of peace.

Time became a blur to Jackson.

Wake up mixed into breakfast, which flooded into the first block, then the second block. Lunch was a breather where sometimes he'd sit alone, other times he'd sit with Bryan, though more and more often Bryan disappeared to talk to the girl with curly hair. The third block was the worst. Father Gaberial taught that block. His loud clapping hand causing Jackson to flinch and blink every time.

Gym was a relief, only slightly though.

The first time Jackson had been lead to the locker rooms and instructed to change, he did so without questions. But when lead into the weight room that mirrored the pool, he paused. What was he supposed to do? The Instructors left them alone for the first two days. Then on the third, in the good nature of the Institution, they came in and began teaching them how to properly use the machines.

The more Jackson hurried around, the more he caught glimpses of his fellow classmates folding into their own niches. There were the proud kids; the ones who scored high on every test, even though they were all about the same topics. There were the gossip girls; who leaned against lockers and dabbled each other with drama and the occasional romance. Jackson was part of the crowd. The largest niche. They didn't lean against lockers or show off the numbers on their papers. They just were there.

The Institution was like a tree, with a dozen different birds resting on her branches. Occasionally the birds would hop from one branch to the next when an occasional drama episode spilled over like Mother Susan's papers when they grew too tall.

Jackson moved in his dance along the halls. He didn't want to be noticed, but at the same time, his red-tinted hair kept dragging him into conversations he'd rather avoid. Not even the teachers were immune from gazing at his hair, nor was he blind to their whispers. Someone once whispered "Time-Out", though Jackson had no idea what that meant.

It was only after a particular instance where a gossip girl grabbed his hair and asked why it was that way did Jackson snap out of his dance. He felt his heartbeat draw steps stall and he paused. It was like when a wave washed over, but Jackson had no idea what that was like. He just stood there, gazed around the hallway for a few seconds, and reclaimed his breath.

His dance had been interrupted, but now he could see the other similar motions.

The lunch before Bryan would go meet with Hazel, that was the name of the girl with the curly hair, he'd make up an excuse for it. Jackson watched the way even the teachers danced. The way the white shirts walked with their heads bowed as if they couldn't be bothered to look at the students around them and the only thing concerning them was the polished tip of their shoe. It was like everyone had adopted work as their life.

After brushing down his hair, avoiding the giggles of the gossip girls, Jackson resumed his dance. Only it was a little slower. More observational.

The Gym teachers who ran the weight room didn't like the Gym teachers who ran the pool. Father Gaberial had a crush on Mother Susan, but she didn't like him. But Mother Nelly liked Father Gaberial. Little things like the way they walked gave it away to Jackson.

He hadn't realized he was staring until Mother Nelly giggled and saw him watching them from where he was putting away his books in his locker. She quickly rushed away. Too nervous to be seen

doing anything other than work. Anything other than what the Institution wanted. Isn't that what it wanted, "only loyalty in return for its service".

Jackson shrugged. Those ideas were just too big for him, at that point.

Jackson.
 “The Door and the Supervisor”

Jackson sat in the back of Penmanship. At the front of the class, the mother lectured, holding the pen like a spear. She had handed out the class, sixteen students, pieces of four by four paper, and a simple black ink pen. Jackson felt the class a waste of time. *Everyone knew how to write*, he thought annoyed. The mother drew eloquent curves on the paper, a curvy f, a curvy g. Jackson watched her, letting the time slip out of his fingers and splinter on the floor.

He needed a break, he decided.

Jackson raised his hand and instantly the mother pointed at him.

“Yes Jackson!” she asked with a high-pitched voice that wobbled on the last syllable of his name.

“I need to go to the bathroom,” he said.

Mother sighed. She waved her hand towards the door and Jackson left.

Realistically, Jackson shouldn’t have taken longer than two minutes in the bathroom. A slow walk there. A moment or two standing in front of the mirror, his hands placed like lion claws on the limestone. Check that he didn’t have to go. And then a brisk walk back to class. He’d arrive, freshened up, and maybe ready to learn. If not that, he’d at least be more comfortable to let the time slide by.

That’s not what happened. At the end of the Y-axis, the hallway was the door. Ever since Father Gabriel had told them not to go through it, Jackson had been fascinated. It was not like any of the other doors on the floor. It looked like instead someone had taken their shiny wooden desks and turned it into a door. Jackson paused at the entrance to the boy’s bathroom. And today, the door was slightly open.

This led to a flurry of excitement in Jackson’s brain.

The door had never been open before! Jackson glanced around the hallway. No one was there. He took a few steps towards the door. *I ought to go in*, he thought anxiously.

He pulled open the door slowly. Winced as it squeaked, and then disappeared around the corner into a hallway exactly like his own, except it wasn’t.

He had a sense of déjà vu or something. The hallway was exactly the same as the hallway he just came out of. He heard the sounds of kids in classrooms. *That was off*, he thought. The hallway also smelled slightly different, a little more like the brown stuff that sometimes parents tracked in. *Dirt*, the word came to him so fast he almost fell over. It was like touching a nerve ending and having his hand smack him across the face.

After calming himself down, he moved across the hallway. He checked the boy’s bathroom. *Yep, exactly the same*, he thought. He crept to the edge of the Y-axis. The hallway wasn’t much larger, but still, he felt as if he was standing on the edge of a cliff waiting to jump. He looked to his shoulder, expecting to see someone telling him to go, but there was no one.

He stepped across the imaginary threshold, nothing happened. The rooms continued jabbering. He continued to breathe. He moved to one of the lockers. Now only half of the hallway could see him through the windows on their doors.

“-offspring will be derived from a female and male parent-” said a female voice.

Jackson stopped moving. *Offspring?* he asked himself.

“-these used to be called kids. All species reproduce. In order to continue producing, we will need a simple equation-” the mother continued speaking. But Jackson’s mind had already drowned her out.

One male, one female, one kid, he thought. Why did that make him stop and think? He continued to move down the hallway. He stopped outside another classroom. This time he peered through the window.

Sixteen kids, all the same age as him, stood leaning against pillars staring at the front of the classroom. Jackson followed their gaze. A single chair sat at the front of the classroom, a prisoner put on trial. A Father with a long curly stick stood at the front of the class.

“You were lucky,” he said to the class, “to be chosen as Manual Workers. The luckiest of the lot!” His voice carried like a flute over a long distance. “To be able to work at SouthWards Farm for young creatures!” A cheerful tune. “You can thank yourselves now that you didn’t have to work in WhiteCollar,” he exhaled loudly, the class giggled, “I mean, you’d have to sit in these things all day.” He pointed at the chair. Jackson now noticed the back was bent forward, forcing the person to lean uncomfortably. “You get to stand up all day in the sun with animals you love and care for!”

Those weren’t the chairs we sat in? thought Jackson outraged. The man was lying to them! He was about to go in there when he heard the soft clapping of shoes. A hand landed on his shoulder.

“With me, now,” snapped the voice in his ear.

Jackson’s heart missed a beat as he was steered back through the Y-axis. Only after the door was shut and locked did the person turn Jackson around to face them. It was Mother Nelly. He had always liked Mother Nelly, even if Jackson was annoyed with how she always said “best”. And she was always friendly to everyone. But today she looked mad.

“Why were you in there?” she whispered harshly.

Jackson wanted to shrink down into a ball. “I don’t know,” he muttered.

“Never go in there again,” she snapped. She sighed. “I’m going to have to take you somewhere.” She grabbed his hand and led him from the Y-axis.

“Where are we going?” Jackson asked.

“To see someone important,” she said.

* * *

Mother Nelly led him to her empty classroom and put him in the front most desk. She told him to stay then left again. The classroom smelled of something fresh and tangy.

His heart thumped. *What had he just seen?* he thought. A parent lying to their class, that’s what! He felt outraged. The chair was a lie. But something else tickled the back of his mind. *Offspring and kids* rang his ears. He leaned forward on his desk, his arms folding forward to create a cushion for his head. *The desk wasn’t that uncomfortable*, thought Jackson.

He heard Mother Nelly coming back for him. He straightened up in his seat. The door burst open and she gestured for him to follow. The hallway was empty, everyone else being in one class or another. Jackson was stunned he’d stayed that long.

Mother Nelly led him down the hallway to where a silver door stood. Jackson remembered it as the place where the chefs brought them food. Until then, he hadn’t noticed the tiny grey button just next to the door, hidden by design. Nelly pressed her finger against the button and waited. Jackson started counting in his head.

Ten seconds passed, then twenty, thirty. He was almost to forty when there was a small chime and the silver doors opened. Mother Nelly led him inside.

The room was seven feet by seven feet, coated in a grey varnish that made everything look old and new at the same time. There was a light pad on the ceiling of the room. Then there came a shaking

like he was falling and rising at the same time. Jackson felt unsteady, like the room was rising, or he was falling!

“Mother!” he shouted.

She just put a hand on his shoulder. “It’s how an elevator works.”

Elevator, a new word. Jackson stopped shaking but still felt weary as the elevator seemed to rise but the room never changed. Faint music played from the speakers, ten notes, and then it repeated. Jackson was already annoyed by it. Then suddenly there was a horizontal shift as if the elevator had moved tracks.

The elevator came to a stop and the silver doors opened on a floor Jackson had not seen before. It was much smaller than his own floor, just being two rooms. The first room had a grey carpet that led to the door of the first room. The first room was painted a nice white, with what seemed like pictures of random paint thrown on the walls.

Mother Nelly steered him past those. She muttered something under her breath. *Distractions*, Jackson’s subconscious told him. She walked up to the door of the second room, an old wooden door with a window on the top half with the blinds shut. Mother Nelly knocked twice and stepped back.

There came the sound of something large moving inside. *A beast!* thought Jackson nervously.

But when the door opened, there was not a beast, but a man the size of one.

He was at least six and a half feet tall with an imposing build. His eyes were silver-grey, like money thrown down wet wishing wells and through sewer gates. His face had an impressive jaw, dotted in grey stubble. Everything about the man was grey apart from his lofty white hair that looked like someone had let a tissue in the air.

Jackson’s legs were shaking, the man scared him. The man clapped a large hand on Jackson’s shoulder and led him inside. He did not say a word to Mother Nelly.

Once the door was closed he made himself comfortable at the chair behind the desk. Jackson looked around the office.

At the center of the room was an old desk, real wood. On it were stacks of papers, a few tablets, a mirror, and a black and blue pen. Behind the desk was a large fluffy recliner chair. The walls were the most interesting. They were dotted with small pictures. But on the wall to the right of the man from where Jackson was standing opposite to him was a glass perched on a shelf.

Jackson took a seat in the one chair to the front of the desk. The Supervisor regarded him carefully. Like he was an expensive art piece, or an explosive one second away from... *detonating*, filled in his mind.

The Supervisor leaned forward, a lot of clicks and groaning came from the chair. His elbows rested on the table, he clasped his hands together, his face bobbing just above them.

“You have caused a distraction Jackson,” he said slowly. He seemed to peer into Jackson’s eyes, making him squirm. “Do you know what a troublemaker is?” asked the Supervisor.

Jackson shook his head.

“A troublemaker is someone who distracts, takes away, the good man from his work. Work which makes him happy. And when the work is taken away, he becomes unhappy,” the Supervisor blinked. “And you,” he said, Jackson felt shivers go up to his shine, “were just a troublemaker. And you, just made someone unhappy.”

Jackson bowed his head in shame.

“Those paintings outside my room are less distracting than you are son. Do you know the reason I have those paintings?”

Jackson shook his head. He was still staring at his shoes. The ground was a checkered pattern of dark red tiles.

The Supervisor sighed. "Look up at me," he commanded. Jackson's head was pulled up by the fear of what would happen if he didn't. He pointed past Jackson to the hall outside. "Those paintings are a test bench. Everyone here had better be less distracting than any one of those paintings. That is when we will have a perfect character. The perfect happy worker. They are the image of abstract, or dis-trac-tion. They are the image of the mind of the troublemaker."

Jackson bobbed his head in agreement.

The Supervisor picked up his pen and began clicking it. As if deciding what to do with Jackson since he was more distracting than a painting. "Since this is your first time, I'm going to let you off with a warning. But be careful. Two more of these and you'll have to go to Time-Out," he said Time-Out as if it was the end of back roads, where the asphalt slowly drives into the grass. "Your teachers won't tell you of Time-Out, but I make it clear to everyone I see that it is not a place you want to go to."

He stood up from his chair and opened the door. He motioned for Jackson to leave. "Go back to class. Less time I keep you here, the more time you can spend learning about your job."

Jackson nodded and left the room. Mother Nelly was waiting for him outside, standing perfectly still. She grabbed Jackson loosely under the arm and steered him in the right direction. But the entire time, Jackson continued thinking, *what the heck was an offspring.*

Jackson.

"The Library, the Classroom, and the Hallway."

When Jackson returned to the hallway, led by Mother Nelly, the class had ended for the day and kids were making their way down towards the Gym. Mother Nelly let him go and disappeared to chat up Father Gaberial.

Jackson was left on his own, outside the door that merged into the wall, with two words in his mind "*offspring*" and "*child*". He moved cautiously down the hallway. No one glanced at him and murmured, they had grown tired of gossiping about his red hair. None of the kids even glanced his way apart from the occasional hello. No one seemed to have noticed his absence, and that left Jackson with a strange feeling of cold warmth buried right below his heart. No one had cared enough about him to notice the thirty or so minutes he'd disappeared. But yet, perhaps no one had felt the need to put him on edge by asking where he had gone.

So he followed the flock towards the Gym and carried out his rituals like the day before when he'd never been on the other side of the door.

That night the words "*offspring*" and "*child*" continued to plague Jackson. He lay awake, thinking of why those words tingled the back of his brain. Was there some hidden meaning? Maybe he'd heard them before. He rolled to his side, his eyes tracing along the far wall. *What had those words meant?* he thought. They had said, parent. Offspring came from parents, mothers, and fathers. But Mothers and Fathers were teachers. He was sure he knew he didn't come from Gaberial because he did not have an obsessive clapping disorder.

An intake fan slowly hummed to life in the background. It was a soothing purr, Jackson felt his eyelids grow heavy. Darkness rolled forward, like blankets, and then it stopped.

Jackson forced his eyes open and tapped his fingers together. He rolled off the bed and dropped to the ground flat-footed. There was no clap of escaping air. Just a gentle thud and the continuous lullaby hum of the vent fan.

His shoes were against the wall next to his bed and he quickly scooped his feet into them. He didn't know where he was going, but he knew he had to do something. Then it came to him, *the library*, whispered his subconscious into the ear of his brain. The room where the kids who bragged about the numbers on their papers hung out. He'd been in there once. It was where the standardized textbooks were. Their massive fonts and big green covers slammed into neat rows like dominoes or battery packs.

The door to the hallway slid open easily. Outside, in the hallway, the lights had also been shut off. It wasn't an eerie dark, more like a colder grey. A few lights had been left on in the room and the Gym. The pool lights were washing across the hallway. They formed bands and beads, then broke apart again. Jackson was quick to shut the door behind him so as to not disturb any of the other sleeping kids.

The library was next to the pool, the last classroom before the Y-axis split. Jackson glanced to his right, down the other Y-axis where the old wooden door stood. He felt tempted to go through it again but realized the clock was counting down. Every second he stayed frozen to the wall was another second Father Gaberial could round the corner with his massive clapping hands and catch him. His excuse would be *sleepwalking*, but he was sure Father Gaberial would take him up to meet the Supervisor, who would not be pleased to see him two times in a day.

Jackson rolled down the hallway, careful to keep his footsteps long and quiet. Each set felt like a day in the Gym. Careful not to make a sound. At long last, he made it to the library door. Which was the

same as the rest of the doors on the level, a sliding door with a window on the front. Jackson hit the release button and prayed it would be silent.

It was.

The Library was a little larger in the darkness than how Jackson had remembered it in the light. The large banisters of bookshelves stood eerily silent as if scolded sharply. But the same rows of books awaited him. *Now only to find the answers*, he thought. He knew that would be the hardest part.

No one would say anything about offspring in the textbooks about White Collar workers, Jackson knew that. But he still ran his finger along their spines, letting it bump across the seemingly new books.

He moved down the aisles, of which there were only two. The front aisle was just textbooks, but the back aisle seemed to be something else. A faint smell of yellow pages came to him. He stood in front of the wall of books, letting his hand do the thinking. He'd be looking for something Pre-Institution, but he had no idea how far back that would be. He was thinking maybe a hundred years ago. His hand stopped above a book whose spine had been tapped over so many times the title had disappeared.

Bingo.

He slid the book out from between its broken cousins and put it down on a table. The worn cover flecked as he flipped it open. The title, "*A man's guide to the mystery of Women*", was strangely elusive in its description. There was no index, no chapter log, just page after page of faded ink. But it was something, it was a start.

Jackson drew up a chair and began reading, oblivious to the time slipping by. Most of the pages were illegible. The ink had faded away into the paper long ago. So Jackson began flipping through pages, looking for the pens he could read. Sometimes the pages would stick together, but he was too scared of ripping the paper and incurring the wrath of whatever imaginary librarian still remained. He found a passage on the fifty-seventh page about something called intercourse, but most of it didn't make sense to him. Then another page about how to swoon a woman with something called "ba-on", the middle letter was blurred out. It wasn't until the one hundred and seven fourth page did he come across his answer. A single paragraph, written in clear concise language he could understand.

"Now of course the objects of love and folly are beheld to some, but yet they are best approached with a careful caution. The idea of a loving relationship of marriage between two partners, one man, one female, is the only possible way to conceive a child. They are then to be the parents of the child, the father, and the mother. While biological urges will temp you to pursue such urges, it is best to wait until marriage to conceive a child. For all times beforehand, it is best to use protection".

Jackson was confused about most of the rambling, such as protection. Did that mean they would bring something to shield themselves? But one thing stood out, a burning torch in the cobweb maze of the Institution, "*The idea of a loving relationship of marriage between two partners, one man, one female, is the only possible way to conceive a child.*" He was not some accident spurred on. He had parents, real ones. Not like mother Susan and Nelly or Father Gaberial. A loving father and mother. Perhaps they were even looking for him! His parents, they were out there!

He lifted himself up from the table and placed the book back where it belonged, careful not to bend its already worn cover. He put the chair back where he had found it resting against the wall and slipped outside of the room.

The hallway was still dark and secretive, but Jackson did not feel the oppressive nature of the dark lockers as he quietly sailed back to his dorm. His parents were out there, they were looking for him, he repeated to himself.

He hit the open button to the dorm room's door and slipped inside. It was quiet. The occasional ruffled snore came from the back of the room where Huey slept. The door closed automatically behind him.

No one had noticed his absence, and Jackson was ecstatic by it. He quickly pushed off his shoes, clambered back in bed, and fell asleep. Not once did he notice the pair of eyes that had followed him on the way out and then again on his way in.

* * *

Jackson woke the next day with the satisfaction of a man who'd stolen from his parents and gotten away with it. He was energetic as he swung out of his bunk and pulled on his shoes. He was even smiling when they all lined up against the wall, waiting for Father Gaberial to come in with breakfast.

The first block was normal, Mother Nelly occasionally glanced his way, but for the most part, she stayed true to the subject matter of the precise way to fold pages.

"A forty-five-degree angle from the edge of the paper. Flatten it with the tip of your finger and gently press upward." she continued on. Jackson had drowned her out with his own thoughts.

When a girl near the front of the class, *Mary*, raised her hand Mother Nelly nodded to her.

"Mother,-

She's not your mother, thought Jackson.

-why not use a piece of paper to stop the page?"

"That's perfectly reasonable as well," said Mother Nelly. "Although, only the advise book notes would be the two by six inch-"

Jackson drowned her out again. He looked down at the paper he was supposed to be folding. He did a quick fold as Mother Nelly came along. She marked him a few points off, and then he was out of the class heading for Second block with Mother Susan.

Mother Susan stood by the whiteboard with a stack of papers in her hand when the students arrived. She allowed them to take their seats, then carefully walked over to the door and locked it shut. *That's odd*, thought Jackson.

Mother Susan took a deep breath and began handing out pieces of paper. Bryan said thank you. The girl next to him, Hazel, nodded her head. When Mother Susan reached him, Jackson just murmured something and took the piece of paper. Mother Susan had effectively spread a feeling of somber through the classroom. When she arrived back at the front of the class, her pearly black shoes snapping together she picked up a red marker and drew the word "*Undesirable*" on the whiteboard.

"Can anyone tell me what an Undesirable is?" she asked. When no one answered she began lecturing. "An Undesirable is someone who is an enemy to you. They want nothing more than to take your nice life away, steal your food, and remove you from your job." There was a wave of shock and murmurs through the class. "An Undesirable will stop at nothing to take everything from you, they are the bane of every good person's life, for they have decided to step away from our society and cannot bear the idea of anyone living in it."

She wrote another word on the whiteboard next to "*Undesirable*", "*Distraction*". Jackson knew that word. The Supervisor said he was that word.

"Undesirables use distractions to disway you from your happy job. Distractions are the fundamental route of an Undesirables life. The reason for this is distracted workers are not happy workers. Distracted workers cannot get as much of their job done as a happy worker can. And Undesirables feed on this. They want nothing more than to distract you from your job so the whole

society can collapse,” Mother Susan stopped. “Anyone can be an Undesirable as long as they distract. Do not distract, or perhaps you are becoming one of society’s underthings.”

The class was quiet apart from the occasional murmur sob from a girl in the middle row whose name eluded Jackson.

Distractions, Jackson rolled the word over his tongue. *He was a distraction. His hair was a distraction. His walking through the door was a distraction.* He mentally laughed. He was what Mother Susan feared. His red hair was the start. The ability not to fit in with the rest of the same looking, same acting kids who’d grow up to be the same looking and same acting adults. Mother Susan had continued talking. Jackson tuned back in.

“-anything remotely out of the ordinary can be a distraction.” It felt like she was staring just above him.

Jackson raised his hand.

Mother Susan nodded at him.

“Like my hair?” he asked.

The class was dead silent.

Mother Susan composed herself. “Of course not. Why would you say that?”

“Because it’s a slight hint red and you’ve been staring at it.”

Mother Susan shot him a forced smile. Her cheeks twitched. “Well, now that you’ve pointed it out, it is.”

“But how come it’s a distraction?” asked Jackson.

“Because you’re bringing attention to it and not to the subject of the matter.”

“Which are distractions.”

“Yes,” Mother Susan caught herself, “but no.”

“But I’m contributing to the discussion.”

“By making yourself a distraction. And anyway this was a lecture.”

“Which is just a one-sided discussion, now it’s two-sided.” Jackson paused. When Mother Susan just sighed he dropped the grenade in the dead quiet class. “So I’m an Undesirable?”

“What! No, of course not. None of my children are-”

“But we’re not your children,” said Jackson.

“Where did you hear that? Because now you’re becoming a distraction.” Mother Susan was flustered.

“I don’t think I’ve done anything wrong,” shrugged Jackson. “It’s just we’re not your children, are we?”

“Sit down,” snapped Mother Susan.

Jackson didn’t even notice he was standing. But Mother Susan’s comment had brought light to what he was doing. If he was sent upstairs now, that would not bode well.

When Jackson plopped back in his seat Mother Susan took a few deep breaths.

“I am your Mother for this class and this year. You are my children. You are the Institutions children. Comments like what just occurred only stray you farther from the happiness of work-”

“You don’t look happy,” murmured Jackson.

Mother Susan ignored him. “-and will not allow you to feel the full happiness of your job. And with that, class dismissed.”

The class slowly stood, like waking up out of a dream. Jackson moved out of the class first and sped to his lunch block, not noticing the boy who’d watched him last night following him.

* * *

Jackson drifted down the hallway after class. He had no idea the rush of adrenaline that would come to him, nor the numb effect of invincibility that would linger after it left. He picked up the silver foil-wrapped sandwich that was lunch every day and moved down towards where he usually ate. Down the hall in a small alcove where the air respirators hissed and spat at each other. Large white machines with grates on the top that made for appropriate chairs or backrests. He sat down, crisscross, and leaned against one of them.

Bryan hadn't sat with him yesterday, so Jackson expected him to sit near the air recyclers today. He anticipated Bryan showing up, only he didn't anticipate who he'd show up with. It was the brown curly-haired girl who Bryan had a crush on, Hazel.

"Hey Bryan," said Jackson, raising his sandwich in the usual toast.

Bryan sat across from him, the girl taking up space in the middle of the two of them. They all ate in silence for a few seconds then the girl broke the ice.

"I'm Hazel," she said.

Jackson stuck out a hand and she shook it. "Jackson, nice to meet you."

"We heard what you said in class today," said Hazel.

"I bet the other classes also heard it," said Jackson.

"If they didn't then, they have by now because of the gossip girls," Hazel laughed.

Bryan and Jackson joined in with her. Jackson noticed Bryan's laugh was a little forced. Clearly, he wanted to win Hazel's favor. Jackson just wanted to see what she had come for.

"Anyway," Hazel slapped her hands down on her legs, resuming where she left off, "we heard what you said and it really resonated with some things that we've been talking about."

Jackson nodded. He took another bite of the ham and cheese, it was always two pieces of ham and only one piece of cheese. By this point, it didn't even taste like anything, just more of a cold sludge.

"So you were thinking?" asked Jackson.

"Well for starters, I'd like to join you guys here. The other girls are super into the whole Institution idea, at least the ones I used to sit with." Hazel shrugged. "Also the air recyclers provide a nice sense of privacy."

Jackson indicated his sandwich towards Bryan. "You can thank him for that. He's the one who showed me the place in the start."

Hazel nodded.

"So we'd like to sneak out," said Hazel, just dropping the grenade on Jackson's lap. Not that Jackson had any idea what a grenade was.

"What?" asked Jackson, stunned.

"Bryan said you were able to do it last night, so why can't all of us? With three people we'll be able to cover more ground, check out more things, and it's just cooler." Hazel shrugged again. She really liked shrugging, noticed Jackson.

Jackson shot Bryan a quick questioning glance. "You saw me last night?"

Bryan nodded. "Yeah. You were going out. The only reason I noticed you was because I couldn't fall asleep."

"But with three people we'll be more noticeable," argued Jackson.

"We can have someone keep guard," said Hazel with a smile. "Like Bryan?"

"And anyway, how will we sneak out? It's not like there are many places to go. I bet that door's trip wired because last time I went through it they found me really quick."

The air recyclers let in a raspy intake.

"We'll figure that out later," said Hazel. "I just really want to go."

"What do you want to find?" asked Jackson.

"Anything, everything, and above," Hazel finished her sandwich. "It's not like anything bad could happen. We could say we're sleepwalking."

Jackson took a deep breath.

Bryan noticed him. "What's up?"

Jackson looked at him seriously. "You can get in trouble. I got in trouble when I went through the door. They took me up to see this man, he calls himself the Supervisor. He'll reprimand us. He warned me about getting three strikes. I already have one."

"But you still snuck out last night?" asked Hazel.

"That was a one-time thing," protested Jackson, but he could already tell where this was going.

"But with us working as a team, we can make it more than one time." Hazel sighed. "Does anyone else feel, I don't know, like this isn't right? Like for some reason we're all here. The mothers and fathers say they're our parents, but something just feels off about it. Like we're not supposed to be here at all. Like--"

Jackson laid a hand on her shoulder. Hazel had started speaking louder and hyperventilating.

"It's okay, I understand," he said calmly.

She looked at him and nodded her thanks. There was a silence when they locked eyes. Jackson swore Hazel blushed.

Bryan interrupted it by clearing his throat.

"Hey guys," he said.

Hazel and Jackson looked over to him.

"I think I just solved our issue," he pointed upwards. Up the hard metal wall to where a grate for a vent stood.

Jackson was amazed he hadn't thought of that.

He got to his feet and reached for the vent, just inches out of his grasp. Then he had a realization. He planted his feet on the air recycler's lid, it gurgled for a second then just obliged. He felt his hands around the cold clean bars of the grate and tugged once, it came free.

Inside was enough room for a person to crouch. *Seriously*, Jackson thought, *how big were these vents*. He looked over his shoulder to where Hazel and Bryan stood amazed.

"This will do," he said.

"That's good," Bryan said, "because lunch just ended."

A bell rung above their heads. The speakers were always hidden.

Jackson replaced the vent and hopped down next to Hazel.

"Time for the physics of the workspace," said Bryan.

"Always a delight," Hazel said sarcastically.

"Yes, to sleep through," Jackson chuckled.

"Her voice is very good for putting people to sleep," Hazel said.

"They should use it to help Bryan go to sleep," Jackson said.

All three laughed. This time, Jackson noticed, Bryan's wasn't forced.

Jackson.
“Welcome to the Vents.”

The rest of the day passed in a fluid motion. The parents assigned less work, students moved quicker, as if the entire “family” had a single conscious effort of moving Jackson to the vent. For once Gym seemed to be shorter as if the weights were urging him to put them down and scurry out into the hallway and up into the vent.

Finally, after dinner, nighttime arrived. Jackson had always found it strange that the only difference between night and day was the dimming of the lights. There were no windows to see outside. They were told that windows to cover the side of the building were still being worked on. Jackson believed them. It seemed impossible to have a window that was larger than a door frame. The largest one he’d seen was the one in front of the pool, which was almost the upper half of the door, and that blew his mind.

Father Gaberial set them to bed that night. Closing the door with a soft hiss, his footsteps echoed out into the hallway until Jackson could no longer hear them.

It seemed to be years that Jackson waited in the dark for the rest of the boys to fall asleep. From the gossip whispers and half-draw cackles of a few boys, one of the girls had slipped in the hallway and flashed someone. Jackson just kept staring at the ceiling, watching the shadows form waves against the concrete. After thirty minutes the fan kicked on and most of the boys fell asleep. When no one moved Jackson tilted his head down until he was facing the foot of his bed and across the aisle to where Bryan lay.

For a few minutes, Bryan didn’t move. Jackson was fearful he had fallen asleep and that Hazel was waiting for them. But after a second or two, Bryan lifted his head slowly.

The two boys met eyes across a damply darkened room, over the snore of a fan, and nodded. Each boy moved slowly from their bunk, careful not to knock into a resting hand or outstretched elbow. They had agreed not to slide on their shoes, socks would do for the time, no matter how cold it made their feet. They feared the clipping of soles would make too much noise.

Bryan moved first to the door and waited until Jackson was nearby to open it.

Yet again, Jackson expected a stern-faced teacher to wait there for them, but none came. Jackson took the lead and moved slowly and silently down the hallway. His hair pricked up at the slightest pencil point drop of a sound.

At the alcove, Hazel already waited. She tried to make it clear that she was impatient of waiting for them, but her eagerness and excitement drowned it out. She was almost bouncing on her toes.

“I can’t believe we’re doing this,” she whispered.

Bryan nodded. Jackson stepped up on the air respirator and carefully dug his fingers around the corners of the vent. A low rumbling sound started, like a deep breath, and Jackson almost jumped before realizing it was just the machine going about its rounds of cleaning the air.

“Sorry,” he whispered. His socks weren’t going to make the air any cleaner.

Jackson feared that taking off the vent would make too much noise. He didn’t realize how long he was taking until his leg began to cramp. *It’s probably been five minutes*, thought Jackson. Sucking in, he slid his fingers all the way under and gave the vent a little tug.

The grate came away with a slight pop. Not loud enough to alert anyone sleeping, but enough sound to make Jackson’s heart stop beating in fear of giving away where he was.

He stepped down from the vent and placed the grate on the ground.

"I'll go first," he whispered to the other two.

In the darkness, their faces washed together. Shadows of noses hiding mouths. The only thing that stood out was their eyes reflecting the slight glint of the dim humming lights in the hallway.

Jackson stood up and pulled himself into the vent. It was slick and smooth, with a strange smell that reminded Jackson of ice cubes. Bryan came in behind him, and Hazel took up the rear.

The vent was large enough for two of them to be side by side, and they could fit all three of them at intersections. Every ten or so feet, they'd come across a little lip where the next section had been soldered into formation. Each line was perfect, an exact replica of the line before it and the line after it. Each vent was an exact replica of the rest as well. It didn't take long for Jackson to realize they could easily get lost.

"Here's the place," he hissed. His voice seemed almost normal in the vents, though he was speaking quietly.

Hazel and Bryan stopped moving.

"Since we don't have any way to trace our path, we're going to go straight down and straight back," finished Jackson.

The other two nodded in agreement.

The vents seemed to stretch endlessly. There were only a few intersections, but at each one there was a grate pointing downward, and each time the trio saw something unusual. From what looked like rows upon rows of computers with no one behind them. To entire fake fields that smelled of cardboard and blood.

They were nearly the third intersection when Bryan gasped. Jackson stopped and looked over his shoulder. He couldn't see much in the dark.

"What?" he whispered.

"Come look at this," Bryan whispered back.

Somehow Jackson had passed a grate in the side of the wall. But since all the other grates had been on the floor, he hadn't ever thought to look at the walls. Jackson moved up next to Bryan.

The grate was a thin slate, only a few bars thick, and it looked into a large set of hallways. These weren't like the other hallways that Jackson had been in. They seemed almost the largest. Like the large arteries that pushed blood, while the vents were the veins. *And the fans are the snores*, added his brain. He stopped himself before he could go any farther into thinking the Institution was some massive beast.

In the hallway, what looked like parents flocked. Some wore long white coats, others wore simply pants and button shirts.

"Look, that's Father Gaberial," whispered Hazel.

Jackson looked for a minute and then spotted the man. He was drinking from a large cup while gossiping to a woman.

"And that's not mother Susan or Nelly," whispered Jackson.

"What do you think they're doing?" asked Bryan.

"It looks like socializing," said Hazel.

"Look at how many parents there are," Jackson whistled. "That must be at least another ten families."

"That's insane," whispered Hazel, "no way could one building fit that many people."

"I think this is just one grade," said Bryan.

"What do you mean?" asked Hazel.

“Well, remember how you were telling me to think more about all that cloudy stuff because I could remember more than you and that if maybe I could crack it that could get rid of this nagging itch in the back of our skulls about what happened before. Well, I remember how we all came from this large classroom, at least triple the number of kids currently in our family, like close to a hundred in total. I remember you,” he pointed to Jackson. “The big class was all of different ages, and they called them grades. The older grades slowly disappeared, until it was our turn, and then we ended up here.”

“So maybe this is where all the other kids went,” said Hazel. “You’re a genius!” she grabbed his hand with her hand. Jackson pretended to not notice Bryan blush in the blackness, even though it was hardly noticeable.

To distract himself from the strange quirk in his heart that asked why Hazel didn’t grab his hand, he thought about the grades. The trio was quiet for a few minutes as they stared out at the teachers laughing and sharing drinks in paper cups.

“It’s not just one floor,” said Jackson, coming to a conclusion, “it’s more than one.”

“What do you mean?” asked Hazel.

“The Institution is larger than one floor, we can guess that. And it’s definitely more than one grade. And unless they had jammed into those classrooms before like sardines, there’s definitely more than one floor, because how else are they going to fit up. The higher grade you are, the higher class you are. And when I took the moving room up to the Supervisor, it felt like I was rising in the air, so that means there’s definitely more than one floor.”

Bryan let out a slow whistle, “Woah, that’s a lot of stuff to unpack.”

Slowly the teachers began to un mingle. “Looks like they’re going,” said Jackson, “We should probably head back before they check the beds and notice we’re missing.”

The way back seemed a lot quicker than the way there, almost as if half of the travel time was spent imagining what waited before them. They emptied out into the hallway, said their quick goodbyes, and raced back to the bedrooms in order to beat the nightly inspection that was about to happen.

Jackson pulled up his covers. It was indeed a lot to think about, Bryan had been right. But still, even with the Institutions’ size solved, there seemed to be something else still nagging at the back of his mind. There seemed to be a lot more things to be discovered, and Jackson was determined to do that.

* * *

After their first adventure through the vents of the Institution, Jackson, Bryan, and Hazel became more confident. Though they did not speak out in class, they made subtle remarks occasionally that ensured that their loyalty was not one hundred percent with the Institution. While both the mothers ignored this, Mother Nelly even gave Jackson a glance across the classroom, confirming his beliefs that she knew, while Father Gaberial did not.

During classes with Father Gaberial, his insistent clapping would echo sharply upward in the number of claps every time one of the three of them made a quick comment that didn’t entirely situate with the role and guidance of the Institution.

But still, Jackson, Bryan, and Hazel snuck out. While it wasn’t every night, it was most. If it wasn’t through the vents, it was to the library or even the classrooms just for the heck of it. They became accustomed to the vents. Taking worn socks and slowly unraveled the thread from them until they became very long strings leading back to the exit of the vent. They discovered it even more mysterious. Like how the children assigned to caring for animals were taught that pigs, chickens, cows, and sheep were their friends and were alive, but yet the slaughterhouse children were instructed that an animal was one step away from killing them and that they were arbitrary resources for humanities consumption.

Every once and a while, the three of them would come across something strange, a downshift in the vent. A vent that led deeper. How deep, they did not know. Once they started going down one until they caught the smell of a salty clean smell that sent shivers up their backs.

Bryan had gotten better at remembering things. He said to Jackson and Hazel that they had been given some antidote and then they blacked out. Jackson reasoned this was why they could remember some things but not others. Whatever had erased the classes before them had taken parts of their memories with it, but left others like broken pencils with no love.

They explored the vents further and further, every two or three times coming across that smell. To Jackson, it smelled like clean white walls and padded beds on wheels. Even after finding his way through the tricky vents, Jackson was still lost on what exactly that white sterile smell implied.

Jackson.
 "The Clinic."

Jackson leaned against the wall outside of the vent, his back pressed up against the noisy air respirator. Bryan was across from him, his arm crossed and head bowed in the darkness. They were waiting for Hazel, who had never been late up until then.

It had almost been a month since they went through the vents for the first time Jackson realized. The vents had slowly become their secret place where they could uncover the many buried secrets of the Institution. Ships dragged down under and drugged back up by the trio's espionage.

A few more minutes passed and still Hazel had not shown up. Bryan moved from where he was on the wall.

"Do you think she's forgotten?" he whispered, peeking out into the hallway.

Jackson shook his head. "I bet she's just being cautious."

Ever since their first introduction, Hazel had begun flirting with Jackson, which made him uncomfortable due to his friendship with Bryan who had a clear crush on her. Jackson bet that Hazel knew of Bryan's crush on her. But Bryan was impatient to see Hazel.

"I'm going to check on her," said Bryan.

"No need," whispered Hazel as she came around the corner, "I was just getting some stuff ready."

"Like what?" asked Jackson.

Hazel tapped her head. "Just memorizing the route. I've got an idea of where to go tonight."

Every time they went into the vents they had always just wandered. None of them, not even Bryan, could remember any passageways or special places, so when Hazel said she had a plan, that threw Jackson off.

"I'm not going to object," said Jackson, "but where does this plan intend to take us."

"Just follow me," said Hazel. Jackson could have sworn she winked his way, but that could've been the shadows messing with him.

Hazel led them through the vents to one of the passages that led downward. Jackson was about to protest when she started going down the gentle slope, but Bryan nudged him to hurry up. The vent slope was a gradual decline. The smell of white hallways and cleaning solutions began to increase.

Jackson followed Hazel down the path till where it leveled out. The vents were seemingly larger as if built to accommodate even more airflow. As Jackson thought about it, a fan began to whirr in one of the grates.

"Follow me," Hazel hissed.

"Why?" asked Jackson.

Hazel didn't give an answer and just moved down the passage. At the first intersection, she took a right and then stopped. The smell of clean hallways was unnervingly sharp here.

Hazel had stopped at a grate that was the size of a door. Fifty feet below them was a massive amphitheater cut into a dozen smaller rooms.

"This is why you stopped?" asked Jackson. He couldn't see anything special about the place.

"Look," whispered Hazel, she pointed at the floor of the amphitheater.

Jackson peered down, squinting his eyes to see the rows of beds.

"Beds with wheels. Bryan said he saw beds with wheels," explained Hazel. "That's the last thing he remembered before the White-Out, remember?"

Jackson nodded. He moved along the edge of the grate. Careful not to put any weight on the grate. Bryan scooped up next to the grate and stared down.

"Yeah, that's them," he answered.

"How did you know about this place?" asked Jackson, but Hazel was already on the move again.

Hazel led them to another declining slope, one that Jackson guessed would take them to the level the beds were on. The sharp smell continued to rise in its intensity, stinging at Jackson's nose.

"Holy, what's that smell?" asked Bryan.

"Cleaning solution," said Hazel.

"It makes me think of white walls," said Jackson.

Bryan stopped. Jackson heard his arms and legs stop plodding along.

"The clinic," whispered Bryan. Something about the word didn't make Jackson think that was a good place.

Hazel stopped ahead of Jackson and turned around. "The what?"

"That's where they took us," Bryan shook his head. "They put us on cots and drugged us so we wouldn't remember each other, the clinic, or any of it. Then they put us in the classrooms with each other."

"Why?" asked Hazel.

"I don't know--"

"To make us better workers," said Jackson. The other two silenced and focuses on him. "When I went up to the Supervisor, he told me about how we needed to be the best workers, how distractions didn't make good workers. I bet they erased our memories of each other to no longer distract us with the past--"

"-and only focus on the future," Hazel nodded in agreement.

"It makes enough sense," said Jackson. "But where are we going?"

Hazel paused. "I've had a change of heart. Let's go to the lower classes."

"The where?" asked Bryan.

"Where we came from," answered Hazel. "Come, they're two levels down and we have a Nelly quiz that we can't be sleepy for."

Jackson shrugged at Bryans's confused face and followed Hazel down into the vents.

It took them twenty minutes to get where Hazel wanted them to go. Positioned right about a vent over a class clearly meant for forty small kids. Everything was identical to the next.

"That's wrong," whispered Bryan.

"What?" Jackson looked at him.

"The technology is all the same," Bryan whispered.

"Huh?" Jackson looked down. "Oh."

Hazel looked at the two of them. "What about technology?"

Jackson pointed down at the tablets on each of the tables. "Those are at least two generations old. But this year, they said they were upgrading everyone. And there," Jackson pointed to the whiteboard, "that's at least also two generations overdue for an upgrade."

"Maybe it just hasn't reached them yet," shrugged Hazel.

Bryan shook his head. "That's not right. I remember when we were here we were told we were upgraded every year. We were excited to receive the new stuff," he waved his hand at the classroom, "and this was it."

"So maybe--"

“-the Institution lied to us,” Jackson shrugged, “I’m getting pretty used to it.”

Hazel giggled. “Well, that’s true.”

Jackson looked down at the classroom again. “I wonder...”

“What?” asked Hazel.

“Let’s check out some other classrooms, maybe this one is just unlucky,” said Jackson.

“Why not just go deeper in the Institution?” asked Bryan, “See if we can’t find the lower than this classroom to check the technology.”

“Because we’ll get lost, and I bet if we find all the tech here the same, then the lower classes will be using the even older stuff and the kids will still be told it’s brand new,” said Jackson.

The three of them moved from grate to grate, slowly confirming what Jackson had proposed, that technology had stagnated.

“If this is true,” said Hazel, she was out of breath after all of the crawling they had done, “then that means all of the technology in our classes today, the stuff we were told was brand new is probably old.”

“-probably old,” whispered Bryan alongside her.

Jackson stifled a yawn.

“Oh no,” Hazel said, “how long have we been down here?”

Jackson momentarily looked up for a clock to judge the time and hit his head on the vented ceiling. “I have no idea,” he said while he rubbed his head.

“Back up and out?” asked Bryan.

Jackson and Hazel nodded. “Back up and out,” they echoed.

The return journey took them only thirty minutes. Hazel had come down there once by herself and knew the quickest way up. Once they had exited the vents, confirmed they were in the right area by checking the respirator was noisy enough, they headed back to their bunks.

Jackson and Bryan quickly walked down the hall. Jackson checked the clock before entering the dorm, they had been in the vents for three hours. The clock blinked again. Three hours and one minute. Jackson followed Bryan into the dorm room and tucked himself into bed.

All of the technology was the same, thought Jackson. The idea stunned him. Technology had never moved. The only thing that had moved was the people. As long as you never allowed the grades to intermingle, no one would ever be the wisher. Everyone would all think that they had the newest tech. That they were at the forefront of technology. But that was a lie. Jackson stared at the ceiling that was the beginning of a floor for another person. Everything about the place was one massive lie.

* * *

Hazel was right, they were sleepy the next day. In the middle of Mother Nelly’s class, Bryan took a big yawn. The woman shot a look at Bryan that made him sit back up straight in his chair.

Jackson had tried to disguise his fatigue by staring at the ground, giving no one any excuse to look at his bleary eyes. It hadn’t worked, and now he was more tired than before and had a sore neck.

Hazel on the other hand had attempted to blend in by blinking a bunch to make it look as if she’d been crying and not sleepy.

None of their tactics had worked.

When class ended Mother Nelly held up her hand for the three of them.

Well, shoot, thought Jackson as he leaned back into his chair, they’d been caught.

“Now I understand that all three of you are sleepy,” said Mother Nelly.

She knows, Jackson thought nervously.

“Usually,” continued Mother Nelly, “I’d assume that you just have a tough night sleeping. But the fact that a whole friend group has had all had a tough night’s sleep all on one night is very suspicious.”

Jackson nodded. “Ma’am, if I may,” started Jackson but Mother Nelly held up her hand.

“I don’t want any lazy excuse. I don’t even want to know what you’re doing, especially since one of you already has a strike. All I wanted to say is that you better stop whatever you’re doing because the Institution always finds out.” Mother Nelly waved at the door. “You may go.”

The three of them hurried out of class.

“So?” asked Hazel once they’d made it into the hallway.

“I say we don’t,” said Bryan. “They have nothing on us.”

Jackson looked in surprise at his friend. Usually, Bryan might have taken this as an opportunity to back down. But then again, he did have a big crush on Hazel.

“Jackson?” asked Hazel. “You’re standing there with this dumb look on your face.”

Jackson shook his head. “Sorry. I’m just thinking that we might as well play it safe. The supervisor sounded pretty serious about this whole Time Out thing.”

Hazel shrugged her shoulders. “Ok, I say we go. But I’ll only go if everyone agrees.”

“Let’s go,” said Bryan. He shot Jackson a look that said “come on man”.

Jackson shrugged. “Alright, I’ll go.”

“Tonight?” asked Hazel.

“Tonight,” nodded Jackson.

Jackson.
 “The Supervisor part 2.”

Jackson clambered out right after Hazel. They’d been in the vents two nights in a row now, never once heeding their teacher’s advice to take a break. Jackson yawned and slid out, his feet bumping against the air respirator.

That night they’d yet again went down and checked out the technology. Every year each class was introduced to what they were told was the brand new stuff, even though last year and every year before them had used the same devices.

Jackson yawned. Hazel followed covering up her mouth as if mortified, like someone caught with their hand in a pie. Jackson glanced Bryan’s way, he shrugged, and that’s when they got them.

Two men, dressed in black swung around the corner and pinned Hazel and Jackson to the wall. Bryan let out a stifled gasp and a third man came around and grabbed him.

Jackson could feel the man’s breath who held him. It smelled sour, like a mix of stale mats for Gym and that time when the oatmeal had no warm water. The man wore wool gloves that dug into Jackson’s wrists. Jackson tried to squirm but he was too tired from the late-night sleep and crawling around through vents.

Jackson could tell where they were going however by the way the men were marching them, the moving room.

In the darkness the sudden light in the elevator blinded Jackson. It felt too bright for the time. *Could they dim that down a little bit?* he thought.

The elevator ride felt slow. The men that held them occasionally grumbling and tugging them up when they started to lean forward. The same mellow elevator music was playing. A dozen notes, then a repeat.

When the elevator finally stopped Jackson was thankful for the cut-off of music that followed. The men pushed the trio out into the waiting room, past the paintings meant for distraction, and opened the door with the authority that Mother Nelly had never had.

Inside the Supervisor waited, his hands placidly crossed. His grey eyebrows raised in amusement, as if taunting, *you got caught that quickly?* The men shoved Jackson into a chair with a stiff back. Hazel and Bryan were pushed into similar chairs. *So he was expecting us*, thought Jackson. He attempted to keep his face neutral, but the aspect of tiredness most likely just made him look delicious.

“So,” said the Supervisor after a few minutes of no one talking, “we have to do this again.” He sighed and waved off the men, who emptied out of the room as if they’d never been there. “I see you met my personal security. I had a reason to believe that you were sneaking out again after your Mother and Father came to me.” He cocked his head at the trio. Jackson averted his gaze and stared at the floor.

The Supervisor sighed. “Look up,” he commanded.

Jackson felt his gaze drawn up the old wooden desk and to the supervisors mentally draining eyes. Jackson suddenly had an image of when he washed clay out of his clothes in the one art class they’d had and the mixture had formed a dark soupy complexion that was slowly being pulled down the drain.

The Supervisor pulled out his pen and clicked it. “Now,” said the Supervisor, “since this is mainly Jackson’s fault and he is the ringleader of this-”

“No,” interrupted Hazel. Jackson glanced over to her. He was too scared to speak in the Supervisors presence, and here she was interrupting him to save him. Jackson looked over to Bryan, who was still staring at the ground, fearful for retribution.

The Supervisor cocked a coy smile. "What?"

"I also was part of this," said Hazel. "I told them to go tonight. It's my fault."

The Supervisor laughed, which surprised the trio. The sudden echo of laughter snapped along the room.

"I have never had someone talk to me that way in so long," said the Supervisor. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "What about you young man?" he pointed his pen in Bryan's direction.

Bryan let out a little whimper then sucked it back in. "I'm sorry," he stammered.

The Supervisor shook his head. He looked back at Hazel "You are so stupid." He clicked his pen two more times. "And perhaps a little too bold. No doubt Jackson has explained the three strike rule, but policy says I go over it again. Three strikes and you're sent to Time-Out. Let me make it very clear that you do not want to go to Time-Out. Do you understand me?"

There was a bobbing of heads.

"Now Jackson already has one strike," said the Supervisor, "and originally I intended to give him two tonight for being the ringleader of the group, which would send him to Time-Out, where no one's ever seen again, but since you all spoke for him it's clear that you are the aforementioned ringleaders of this group." He pressed his pen to his lips. "Jackson and Bryan, you both will receive one strike for disobeying the Institution's rules. Hazel, you will receive two. One for entering the vents and trespassing upon the Institutions' trust, and another for coercing your friends to join you." He tossed his pen on the table. "Go."

Jackson looked over at Hazel. She had sacrificed herself for him. Now instead of her and Bryan having one strike, she now had two. She glanced over at Jackson and gave him a tearful wink. Bryan on the other hand just stared at the floor, stunned silent that he'd received any strike at all.

The three men entered the room again and grabbed the kids, preparing to take them out. Jackson was about to be pulled out of the door, following Hazel and Bryan when the Supervisor held up his hand and said "wait."

The man holding him turned Jackson to face the Supervisor.

"Jackson," said the Supervisor, "let me make this very clear to you. You're graduating to another grade soon. It would be in your best interest that when you do so, nothing goes astray for you or your friends."

Jackson was led out of the room, past the paintings that deterred progress, into the too-bright elevator and back down into the belly of the Institution.

Year 2

Jackson.
 "Transition"

The Supervisor was right, they were transitioning grades. Jackson woke up the day following his second visit with the Supervisor to a strange quiet. There was no clapping from Father Gaberial. No sound of muffled footsteps of teachers outside. Around the room, the rest of the boys were waking up. It felt later in the day to Jackson. But with the nonexistent outdoor light, he couldn't tell. The fluorescents buzzed the same in the morning as they did in the evening. When nothing happened for another stint of time Jackson grew tired of whatever game the Institution was playing.

Jackson got down from his bunk and walked over to the door. He felt the eyes of the rest of the boys on him. He clicked the open button, nothing happened. *Figures* thought Jackson. The Institution would never make it easy. He went to click another button and then the entire room shook.

It felt like the walls were grinding upwards. The bunks would've smacked into one another if they hadn't been welded to the floor.

"What did you do!" shouted Corey, who'd grown in height since the last time Jackson had paid him any attention at the start of the year.

"I didn't touch anything!" shouted Jackson back. He had grabbed onto a nearby bunk for support as his feet shook from the vibrations.

Slowly the vibrations receded until there came a faint but noticeable click, like a conveyor belt stopping at its destination.

"What was that," whispered Bryan.

From outside of the door Jackson heard voices and footsteps. Someone was coming close to the door.

"Someone's coming!" Jackson shooed away the boys who'd come close to the door.

The doorsteps stopped outside of the dorm. Then a faint knock, a buzz, and the door swished open to three new parents.

"Good morning and welcome to tenth grade, our names are," started the first one.

Jackson felt a wave of nausea wash over him, it was like the same year repeating again. He began to daze out when Bryan snapped him back to reality with a little shove.

"Wake up," said Bryan, "they're taking us on a tour."

"Sorry, what did I miss?" asked Jackson.

"The same as last year," said Bryan.

The tour was the same as last year. Same classes, same Gym, same layout. The parents knew this and the tour was over much quicker than last year, with the classes allowed to go to lunch without the over watchful eye of the parents.

"Do you think she'll be there?" asked Bryan as they made their way over to the alcove with their foil-wrapped sandwiches.

"I bet she will be," said Jackson.

Hazel was already waiting for them, having quickly grabbed a sandwich and then run back to the alcove. She gestured it to them in a mock toast.

"Did your room bounce around as well?" asked Hazel.

"Yeah," said Jackson. He took a seat with his back against the air recycler. "I bet it was the rooms moving floors."

"What do you mean?" asked Bryan.

"I think that we're one floor above our previous floor," said Jackson.

"That makes enough sense," shrugged Hazel. She took a bite out of her sandwich and chewed it slowly. "It will give enough time for the rooms below us to be properly cleaned for anything we left behind."

"That's at least a day-long process," said Bryan.

"Which means every class moves up one day at a time. So the previous class was here yesterday morning before being moved up," said Jackson.

"So whatever we missed out on.-"

"The white out," interrupted Bryan.

"What?" asked Jackson.

"The white out. The thing where all of our memories went missing apart from the constructional ones and those who tagged along. That happens tonight. It's got to," said Bryan.

"So it's settled then." Hazel finished her sandwich and wadded up her foil. "I'll see you boys tonight then. Let's go check out what the Institution desperately doesn't want us to see."

* * *

That night Hazel was waiting for them. She was impatient to go through the vents. Without a word, she'd replaced Jackson as the de facto leader of their little expeditions.

"We're going to go down a few levels," she whispered. She pulled herself up on the air respirator and popped off the vent grate. "Come on, we've got to be quick."

Jackson followed Hazel into the air ducts, slowly weaving their way down and through the passages. They passed back where they used to live, several cleaning crews dressed in white with hair nets sweeping the floors. Father Gabriel and Mother Nelly flirting with each other in the hallway. Down through the vents until they stopped at what used to be an empty auditorium.

"Holy," whispered Jackson amazed. "It's full of kids."

Hundreds of kids waited on the cots in the auditorium. Stacks of papers waited on the edge of the auditorium.

"Those are the tests," whispered Bryan. "I remember they made us take them before putting us on the cots."

"So what now?" asked Jackson.

"Let's move down to get a closer look," said Hazel.

They moved to another grate, just above a white sterile hallway with several doors branching off. Doctors were moving cots down the hallway, the kids already asleep.

"Look," said Hazel, "they're bringing the kids from other areas."

"I bet they have more than one auditorium," Jackson went quiet as two snoozing kids were wheeled into a room marked "white-collar, section 5."

"So they take the tests and then they get sorted?" asked Hazel. She was looking at Bryan.

"I think so." he paused. Two attendants in lab coats rushed down the hallway, hauling large stacks of paper. "But I have no idea how they read them so fast."

"Let's go watch," said Jackson.

They followed the lab coats down the hallway and into a small side room. There they watched as the lab coats quickly dropped off the papers and sped out again. Once the door closed another two workers came in, these ones dressed in dark purple. They wore big leather gloves and grabbed a section of the wall, hoisting it open to reveal pink and red dancing lights.

"What is that?" Jackson asked. He could feel a sensation of warmth driving down his arms.

"It doesn't look like reading," said Hazel.

The men tossed the papers in, which disappeared in a flash of red and black. Once the papers were gone they disappeared back into the side room.

The trio watched several more times as the lab coats dropped off the papers and the tests were scooped into the glowing hole in the wall.

Slowly a question had begun to form in Jackson's mind. "Remember how the dorms switched?" he asked.

"Yeah," said Bryan.

"And the beds were bolted to the floor, so they couldn't shake?"

"Yes."

"Well, then that means only a certain number of kids actually make it into the Institution. It's not like they can add more kids. But the classes down there seemed too large to fit in all of these rooms. So what happens to the excess?" asked Jackson.

The vent was quiet.

"I mean, maybe they have an exact amount," Bryan trailed off.

"What's that sound?" asked Hazel.

A low rumbling filled the air. Jackson moved down the vent to where it looked into the hallway. At the far end, a pair of three nurses pushed close to twenty beds of sleeping kids. At every door they stopped and knocked, checking if there was an empty space. If there was, the kids were shuffled in, if not, they kept moving. At the end of the hallway, there were still seven beds.

"Follow them," whispered Jackson. Those beds were important, or at least where they went was.

The nurses moved the beds into a moving room and let the doors close. From where Jackson watched he could see the little orange button on the side, the elevator was scheduled to go two floors down. The doors stayed open, allowing for the nurses to make one last round. Once all the doors were confirmed there came a great rumbling noise.

"That's the rooms moving up," whispered Hazel.

"I wonder how they don't wake up," murmured Bryan.

"Must have been a pretty powerful sedative they gave us," said Jackson.

Once the rooms had moved up the nurses collected the remaining beds, a total of eleven.

"Come on," whispered Jackson.

"Where?" asked Hazel.

"To wherever those beds are going," said Jackson.

"It's already late enough," said Hazel.

"Those beds, or wherever they're going, aren't going to stay around forever," said Jackson with impatience.

"I'm going up," said Hazel. "If I were you, I'd go as well."

"Go then," said Jackson, "we'll tell you about it."

"Ok. Come on Bryan," Hazel began to move. But when Bryan stayed by Jackson's side she stopped. "What?"

"I'm following those beds," said Bryan.

Hazel huffed. "Fine, just come back up once you're done."

Once Hazel had disappeared around the corner Bryan and Jackson took off after the elevators. They traversed down two sets of vents and became nervous when they couldn't see any beds but then they heard the creaking sound of wheels being pushed down the hallway.

They followed the sound until it led them to a short passageway. The nurses who were pushing the bed quickly got out of the area, as if they feared for their lives. A feeling Jackson hadn't felt in a while. A sign on the door read "Time Out".

Two of the beds were moved in the open door by a man with no special clothing. Two minutes later the cots re-emerged, with no one on them.

"Come on," whispered Jackson. "Let's go around the side to see inside."

The boys made their way through the vents a tiny side grate that looked up from under a large box. They could see the lower half of the man's body and the cots that the kids were rolled in one. The man took out a needle and inserted it into the neck of the kid on the nearest cot. He slowly depressed the plunger, letting the liquid escape. He held his hand to the boy's wrist and slowly counted down from twenty.

The twenty seconds seemed to trip by slowly. Like a muddy stream emptying. The boys stayed frozen to where they huddled in the vent looking out from under the box. Once the man stopped counting he held his ear over the boy's mouth. It stayed there for a second. Jackson didn't see the boy's mouth move but he must've said something because the man picked him up and put him in the box. He closed the lid and Jackson heard the body go tumbling down a pipe.

Another boy, another needle, another twenty seconds, and another one in the box. Only this one didn't fit. Jackson heard the man kick the box for a few moments until there came a sharp crack and something fell to the floor in front of Jackson. A twisted purple hand. The man picked it up, opened the box, and tossed it down after its owner.

Jackson felt vomit catch in his mouth. That was a boy's hand. Those boys weren't alive anymore.

"Oh my," said Bryan. Jackson could see the fear in his eyes.

His own stomach turned and twisted in the horror of what he'd just seen. He had imagined the Institution was not his friend, but never in a way like that. He and Bryan made their way quickly back up to their new levels. Entered their dorm room with no trouble and didn't sleep at all.

Jackson.

“Disappearance and Confrontation.”

“-and that’s what makes working as a White Collar worker the most prosperous job opportunity,” the bell rang in the corner of the classroom. “Oops, that’s the bell. Now y’all hurry out of here. And don’t forget your homework on Monday, page twenty-two numbers five through fifteen!”

The class slowly filtered out. Jackson and Bryan locked eyes and nodded.

The two boys approached the desk. They had both noticed Hazel’s strange disappearance from lunch near the hissing air recyclers. She was never late for lunch. But since no boys were allowed in the girl’s rooms, they couldn’t go to check if she was sick.

“Ma’am, I was wondering if you could tell us where Hazel is? We haven’t seen her all day,” asked Bryan innocently.

The mother looked up from her book, as calm as could be. “Why boys, that’s no surprise, she was sent to Time Out last night. I’m not surprised, after all, she was undesirable.”

Both Jackson and Bryan stood there, stunned, before another class flooded in behind them and swept them to the side like a great tidal wave.

* * *

After Hazel never returned from Time Out, Bryan stopped talking. He’d disappear after class into the tight grey hallways studded with lockers. Sometimes Jackson tried to race after him, but Bryan would always lose him. He became tight-lipped, not saying a word unless the teacher asked him, and even then his response was rigid. He was becoming the perfect student in the teachers’ eyes. Jackson realized Bryan was becoming just like the rest of them. The kid who’d mouth off and crept out late at night now sat straight in chairs and pulled up his covers at nine sharp. Bryan even stopped wearing the silver necklace they found outside of the administrator’s office that Hazel gave him.

One day, two months into eleventh grade, almost three months since Hazel disappeared, Jackson finally got his chance to confront him. It was after another long class about the wonders of work and how pleased everyone was to work. Jackson closed his book after doodling on the officially stamped notes and headed out of the classroom for the lockers to change before evening Gym.

He passed the spot the three flirtatious girls used to lean before a parent told them they were becoming a distraction and if they didn’t stop they’d become Undesirables. The girls had run in hysterics back to the bathroom to wash off.

Jackson turned right down the hallway. He momentarily glanced at the door to the common bathroom, the door that had changed it all for him. If he had never walked out that door, never overheard the farmers class that no White Collar worker was ever supposed to hear, maybe he’d believe this whole mess.

He crossed another set of five lockers and walked into his dorm.

Bryan’s bunk was the second bottom bunk on the right, Jackson’s was the fourth top bunk on the left. Bryan always kept his orderly, neat white and grey sheets tucked in, pillow fluffed. Jackson just tossed his blanket over the scrambled sheets to hide the mess.

Jackson passed Felix, another kid who hung out with Bryan, on his way into the dorm. Felix passed a glance back to Bryan, who was pulling on his Gym shirt. He noticed Jackson and stared.

“Go on,” said Bryan, barely glancing Felix’s way. Felix scurried out into the hallway.

“What do you want?” asked Bryan. He seemed agitated by Jackson’s presence.

“Why you won’t talk to me,” said Jackson. He stopped in front of the door, blocking it with his body.

“Get out of my way,” Bryan said, “I don’t want to talk to you.”

Bryan had gotten bigger since Hazel’s disappearance, probably big enough to beat up Jackson. He had been putting on double hours in the Gym. Jackson bet it was to try and forget her.

Jackson pressed his palm on the door release, letting the flat slab of metal shut and lock behind him. He didn’t say a word, he hoped his face was neutral.

“Didn’t you hear me, I don’t want to talk to you!” Bryan shouted. He stormed up to Jackson and shoved him. “Now go away!” He raised his hand to pummel Jackson’s face.

“It’s because of Hazel,” Jackson said. Bryan stopped. “Isn’t it?”

“Of course it’s because of her,” Bryan dropped his hands and stormed back to his bed. His hands were shaking. “It’s always because of her to me, but not for you!”

“I didn’t mean it that way,” Jackson raised his hands.

“Then what did you mean? Or did you not think again?” snapped Bryan.

“She’s the one who wanted to go back alone,” Jackson said, trying to defend himself.

“You’re the one who convinced her to get out of bed,” Bryan pushed his clothes roughly into his bag. “If it wasn’t for you, this wouldn’t have happened! You always think because of your red-brown hair you’re so special, well you’re not!”

“It’s not about her, is it? It’s about you,” said Jackson, he had his suspicions about Bryan’s behavior. He unconsciously rubbed his hand through his hair.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Bryan.

“You had a crush on her,” said Jackson.

“And she always liked you,” muttered Bryan.

The two boys were silent, the tension started to dissolve.

“I’m sorry,” said Jackson softly.

Bryan shook his head. “Just sometimes I’d wish you realize you can’t change this.” He pushed his bag under the bed. He stood up and looked at Jackson. “Maybe it’s better if you just go along with it.”

“What do you think Hazel would say to this?” asked Jackson.

“Don’t bring her up,” Bryan slid his hands into his tight pockets. He stared at his shoes. “It’s better this way.”

Jackson shook his head. “You’re lost. You’re just living the same lie that you fought against.”

Bryan moved towards him and the door. He hit the open button, the door pulled open to a crowded hallway between classes. He and Jackson were now face to face.

“I’m as lost as the rest of us,” Jackson said.

Jackson.

"Through the vents-."

Jackson sat in the back of "Basic Studies of Resisting Undesirables." The last class of the day. His textbook was propped open on the desk in front of him. He mindlessly flipped through two pages. A vivid photo of a homeless man took up an entire page, with many red arrows pointing to various parts of the man's body. "Undesirable" was printed in bold harsh print underneath the picture.

He started thinking about his conversation with Bryan earlier. *Did he really only care about himself?* He studied his fingernails, a little grime had gotten underneath. *Why hadn't he felt as guilty as Bryan over Hazel?* He didn't know why they didn't come for him. Why hadn't he felt the needles-

-Pop!

He glanced up suddenly. The teacher had slapped the backboard with her ruler. She was now off the homeless man and lecturing on about the great benefits of the chair that each white-collar worker received. The free food. The air conditioning. The nice comfy chair. There was a lot about the chair. How it was much better than any labor worker, how they would have to stand up all day at work. How it was bad for the body to be standing for that long.

That's not right, correct Jackson in the back of his mind. He turned to tell Bryan that, but he remembered that he no longer wanted to talk. Jackson returned to facing forward. No one wanted to hear him anymore. *Well not in here*, he thought. He stretched his arm.

"Yes Jackson," said the mother, *no, teacher*.

"No," Jackson shook his head.

The teacher cocked her head and then returned to the blackboard.

A few minutes later the class ended. Bryan shot Jackson a confused glance as he filed out of class. But Jackson ignored it and slowly packed away his books.

"Jackson, if you could stay a second," said the teacher.

Jackson felt bad that he hadn't learned her name. "Yes?"

"You okay?" asked the teacher.

Jackson nodded his head. He picked up his bag. "Yes."

The teacher gripped her ruler. "You know you're not the first, right?"

Jackson sighed. "I've heard this before," he murmured.

"No one really wins in the end," said the teacher. "Everyone has their own thoughts. But the system exists for a reason. If you have your griefs with it, I understand, but the system makes people have a purpose and happy," said the teacher.

"They're not really happy," grumbled Jackson.

"But they're happier than the alternative," said the teacher.

"And what's the alternative," Jackson swirled on her.

The teacher backed up suddenly. She held a hand to her chest and took a few deep breaths. "It's just better."

Jackson shook his head. "You're as unhappy as me, but you're not willing to do anything."

The teacher frowned and murmured something at her shoes. "We had a kid like you in our class. His name was Simon or something. One day they came and grabbed him. He never finished eleventh grade." She looked up. Jackson noticed her eyes were slightly red. "I don't want one of my kids to end up like that."

"I'm not your kid," snapped Jackson, "I'm your student." He snatched his bag off the table. "And I'm not as much of a coward as you are. Hazel was never as much of a coward as you were!"

The teacher gripped Jackson's hands. He looked into her eyes.

"At least I'm alive," she whispered.

Jackson stopped. "Take that back," he whispered.

"I don't want to see another child go missing in the Institution," said the teacher. "Maybe if you make it out you can change the world from the outside. But I know it's never going to happen in here." The teacher tightened her grip. "Please."

Jackson tugged his hand from her grip. He stormed for the door.

"Please!" the teacher shouted just before Jackson slammed the door shut behind him.

Outside the hallway was empty, quiet as people gossiped in locker rooms and from beneath Gym machines. Jackson walked down the halls, his footsteps echoed, a shadow that could be heard.

What did she mean if I made it outside? Thought Jackson. He already knew the Supervisor would at one point put him down, it was only natural. But to have his fears confirmed. Jackson shuddered. That would be it. Undoubtedly some other kid would come after him and the same thing would happen, time and time again. Even the teacher's class had a kid who was like him and put down.

If I go outside, I'll break the cycle. Jackson pulled his heavy book from his bag and dropped it off on top of one of the lockers. *If I'm going outside, I won't be needing that.*

Maybe he could meet his parents. The thought got him excited. The idea of finding them was far-fetched, but maybe it was possible. *The teacher wants me to influence the world from the outside, so I'll do it.* Jackson entered the empty locker room, everyone was already in the gym or pool. It brought him no comfort that someone had left him an invitation to join them on the cycling machines. Most likely it was an all-star peer of his conscripted by the supervisor to help benefit the Institution which he served.

Jackson set his bag down on the bench. Two doors, same as always. One to the Gym and pool, one back out into the hallway. *What would it be today?* He asked himself. He knew the hallway would lead him back to the vents, back through the memories, through the veins of the beast, and to the outside. The Gym would lead him to a small desk behind another small desk in a cubicle surrounded by dozens of others boxes in a skyscraper out of hundreds.

He knew where his heart tugged, but he knew if he went that way, there really would be no coming back. *But by this point, they're already likely going to put you in Time Out,* Jackson argued.

He sat there a few more minutes. His heart and head felt like lead drained into the soup. Each choice was neither good nor bad. But only one would really bring him happiness. He picked up his bag to go when a kid walked in from the pool.

"Hey Jackson!" said the kid, his hair was all strung to one side from the towel.

"Hey Clydis," replied Jackson. Clydis was one of the few kids Jackson knew by name. A good student with a reputation for having a photo memory. But also a bit of a showoff.

"You heading in?" asked Clydis, he pointed at the door.

Jackson shook his head. "Actually heading out."

"Well, I just finished a set of fifteen two hundred IMs," Clydis started.

Jackson was already heading for the door. And before Clydis could go on with his set Jackson was out in the hallway, heading for the vent that would lead him to his final destiny, his parents.

Jackson.
“-and to the streets.”

Jackson knew he was in the right place when the wind hit him. He, Bryan, and Hazel had been down here once. That had been their second to last adventure together. Down through the vents, into the depths of the Institution, to peer down on the lower classes. They weren't together anymore. The progression of the Institution had caused that.

Jackson stopped moving, his belly flat to the cold steel of the floor of the pipe. There were the faint whispers of the clinical staff moving down in the hallways beneath him. He peeked through one of the grates as two docs dressed in sharp white jackets walked by chatting about their unit gossip. Jackson waited until the hallway became quiet before dropping down from the vents.

He couldn't have gone any further, they had learned that last time when they ran into the large fans that almost swallowed three of Bryan's fingers. Jackson slid to the wall and moved down the hallway, trying to hide against the hard walls even though he knew it was futile. If anyone came down the hallway, unless they were completely blind, they would see him. Luck seemed to be on his side as he made his way down two corridors without seeing anyone. It looked like all of the clinic staff still practiced the same routine they had when they were students at the Institution. The injuries could wait until the Institution deemed it time to fix them.

Jackson slipped out of the vent and headed down the sterile white hallway. He had completely forgotten about people until he reached a fork and heard voices echoing from around the turn. His head jumped up in his throat. He turned around to check if he could go down the other hallway when he heard more voices coming from that way. He was trapped!

Jackson looked around the area, on each wall, there were signs mounted. On a plaque above his head, pointing down the hall straight ahead of him, read “Genealogy Laboratory”. Jackson took a few deep breaths. The voices were getting closer from either side. Once he was seen, it was over. But he was this far, and the Genealogy Lab sounded like a good idea to get a few final answers.

He sprinted across the opening at full speed and blazed right in front of two scientists carrying large containers in their arms.

He expected someone to shout, grab him, or do something. But their silence haunted him. He tore for the door, tugged it open, and disappeared into the Genealogy Laboratory.

That's when the alarm went off.

It wasn't like one of the practice fire alarms that they had trained within the class where a gentle voice echoed for them to line up against the wall and proceed quietly from the space to the nearest fireproof shelter. Those were nothing compared to the sudden blaring klaxons that exploded from the ceiling. Jackson cupped his hands to his ears.

A few moments later there was the sound of footsteps coming in his direction, lots of them and fast. Jackson looked around the Laboratory. It was a standard design, with lots of tall tables and stools. He pulled a stool out of the way and ducked under a table. To his right was a narrow space between a specimen freezer and the wall. It was barely big enough for Jackson to squeeze behind.

Just in time as the door busted open and Jackson got an eyeful of three security officers coming in. Each held a baton that was as long as Jackson's forearm and made of hardwood and plastic. They were rarely seen, but when they were, it meant trouble. Behind them came two scientists, Jackson recognized them as the two he had blown past in the hallway.

The security officers pushed over stools and checked under tables. Jackson held his breath as one of them knocked over the stool he had been hiding behind and shone a flashlight that almost touched him.

The guards assembled back in front of the door.

"I told you it was nothing, the scientists were just seeing stuff again," said the Pantix of the guards. The man was taller than the other two, wearing a large red shirt, long black pants, and a pair of midnight black tight knee-high boots.

"Those scientists and their wacky ideas," murmured the second guard.

"I tell you," said the third. "Well no slacking, we have another two hallways to search for this mystery kid they swore they saw."

The Pantix laughed. "I mean even how would a kid get down here. The vents? Those are all dusty and gross."

Jackson stifled a scream. If they checked the vents they would see where his imprints led.

"Doesn't stop the little brats from wandering through them occasionally," pointed out the second guard.

The third was already halfway out into the hallway. "Do I have to say it again, let's get going. Last time we delayed, the Supervisor almost had us sent to Time Out."

The Pantix and the other guard shuttered at the memory and left the room, closing the door behind them.

Jackson realized he had stopped breathing and took a deep breath. He slid out from behind the freezer, past the tipped-over stool, and towards the glowing machine in the corner. He recognized it even if he shouldn't have. Every half-year the teachers had brought it in to test the kids for blood-borne illnesses. He reasoned the machine could probably test him and inform him of lineage.

He approached the machine. A glowing blue monitor greeted him. In glowing white letters, it read "Longvail Genealogy machine."

Jackson pressed his finger to the screen. A new screen popped up.

"A - Would you like to test your blood?"

"B - Would you like to see your lineage?"

Jackson pressed B and waited for the machine to compute. He was scared the low humming would attract the guards or worse, the scientists. But no one came to check on him.

"Please insert the sample." popped up on the screen and a small hole, the size of an index finger, opened up to the right of the monitor.

Jackson slid his finger into the hole, as they always had done in class. He felt the pinch of the needle. A warm pad touched the spot and the bleeding stopped. Jackson removed his finger and waited for the computer to do its work.

When it was finished a tab popped up. Then another. Then two more after that. Until suddenly hundreds upon hundreds of tabs were popping up. Jackson realized they were his ancestor's names. *But how, if the computer only has records to the Institution.* The idea seemed daunting. The tabs began to slow down until a final one appeared.

"Jack, White Collar Worker, and Trina, Livestock. Reasonable. One offspring."

Then Jackson's name popped up.

"Jackson. Eleventh Grade White Collar trainee. Institution. Two marks, disciplinary."

Jackson barely recognized his name. He had gotten what he wanted. He knew his parent's names now! He the surge of pride filled him. He walked to the door, his heart beating like a faulty tap in the

bathroom. He pressed his ear to the door to check for sounds, nothing. He opened the door and slipped out into the hallway.

He could hear the guards making their rounds, and right behind them the scientists who swore they saw a kid. The guards laughed and poked fun at the doctors. Jackson stayed still until he was sure they had passed the intersection. On the other side of the intersection were more doors. He began passing them, reading the signs quickly to see if they were anything important. He needed an address. Something where he could find his parents.

Jackson passed a varnish wooden door, one of the ones that indicated an older room. There was a single glass window that allowed Jackson to look in. It was a tiny storage room filled with filing cabinets. Along the walls were dozens of boxes marked "Donation letters". He knew what those were. Through those, he could find where his parents lived.

Jackson prayed the door was open. He twisted the knob, heard the old lock disintegrate from rust, and slipped inside before any doctor returning from a swim could see him.

Jackson did not risk turning on the light inside, so he operated by the light that filtered through the window on the door. The air inside was musky, stale, and cramped at the same time. With a slight hint of vanilla. He knew he was in the eleventh year, just starting. Which meant he'd been alive roughly sixteen years. The year, he paused. He'd never learned the year in school. He looked at the boxes, none of them had any dates apart from the months and the years on them. No one had ever thought to tell Jackson his birthday, so he was lost there.

He would have to use his reasoning.

The first rows of boxes, numbers one through five were too new, the cardboard still a bright orangish brown. The next rows, six through nine, looked to have worn through. The final row was Jackson's ticket. Just old enough to have spent sixteen years in an old room, but not too old to have fallen into mush.

Jackson gingerly stepped over the rows of boxes. He made it across with almost no mishaps, apart from his left foot tearing a hole through an older gross box. But since no one seemed to have come in anytime looking for them, Jackson doubted they would notice. Jackson picked up the middlebox from the final row, it looked different to him somehow. That or the fact that the other two boxes had rat droppings on them.

He made his way back to the center table and began flipping through papers. He wished it would be easy, that someone would have stamped "Jackson's parents" in big ink on the top of a page, but it wasn't like that.

By the time he had narrowed the pages down to three possible candidates he knew it was too late to turn back and head up to his family unit. They were all old font, stamped so long ago the ink and paper had bled together. But there, at the top of one, was his mother's name "Trina". He read the address right below it. "5911 Peachwood Grove. Livestock Sector 4".

Jackson pocketed the letter, shoved the other two back in the box, and put the box back in place. While no one would come looking for it, Jackson felt good putting the box back in its natural place. He made his way to the door. If only he had remembered to check for sounds.

Instead, he stepped outside just as the two scientists from earlier rounded the corner with the three security guards, whose faces were pressed up to individual screens.

The first scientist stopped and pointed. "There he is! There's the kid!"

The guards laughed, not lifting their faces from the screens until Jackson passed them at blitz speed, his real mother's name and letter stuffed in his pocket.

“Holy! The doctors were right!” the Pantix led the charge after Jackson, his boots making a snap-snap sound as they dragged closer to Jackson.

Jackson spun right at the intersection. He had no idea where he was going. His heart pumped in his ears. He had to get out of the Institution. *How old was the place? Hundreds of names.* He looked around but all he saw were white walls, bones. Black mirrors, eye sockets. Spiders, dozens of them, flooding from vents.

He turned left and headed past a sign that read “Recycling” with an arrow pointing towards a dark shaft at the end of the long hallway.

Behind him, he heard the guards cursing as they slipped on the slick white floor in their fancy boots.

He pushed past a confused scientist holding his after gym snack of blueberries. The fruit went flying.

Jackson smelled the recycling, a damp ugly odor wafting up from the shaft.

“Kid stop! We can be reasonable!” shouted the Pantix.

When Jackson didn’t stop the guard yelled at the scientists to grab him. But it was already too late.

Jackson dove headfirst into the recycling shaft. It was a dark wet slide that led to nowhere. He went down, up, spun, all while seeing nothing. The sound of his pursuers echoed into the background. At long last, the shoot ended and he was spat out onto a pile of bags.

He groaned and rolled to his side. His chest ached from the running and then sliding down metal plates. A glance around told him he was on the back of a truck waiting in what seemed to be a massive cavern. Two more bags came down the shoot after him. They landed on top of him, one of them conking him hard on the head. Jackson pushed the bag up and a hand fell out. Jackson wanted to throw up. His head swam from the braining the dead person had given him. The last thing he thought before passing out from the hit was *Hazel*.

Trina.
"The Pens"

Trina made her way slowly down the catwalk above the Cowpens. She was a livestock worker, pure and simple, or at least that was their motto. They never told her there was nothing simple about cows, and there definitely was nothing pure about what she did to them.

She passed over pen fifteen, where a newborn calf and its mother lounged. The calf was maybe half a day old, born that morning, that's at least what the machines told her. She'd have to soon separate them, for the betterment of both. The calf would be sent to where all of the other calves roamed to socialize until it was old enough to be put on the pumping station. That mother, well she didn't need any more distractions, she was due for the pumping station that afternoon. Trina stretched her arms. Most times it didn't bother her, separating a calf and a mother, it was just part of her job, and their jobs as well. But today she had an irking back to her Institution days when she wondered who really was her mother. It was the same, thought Trina. The mothers and their calves here and her and her child back at the Institution. She sighed and picked up the joystick that operated the mechanical arm above the pen. The mother would have to be sedated first, otherwise, she risked the mother hunching over her unconscious calf.

Trina moved the arm fluidly, just another part of her job, just another day on the job. The mother cow let out a slow moo when the dart hit it, followed by her rolling over on her side and almost crushing the baby calf. Trina shot the calf next, watching as its little legs gave out and it too rolled to its side.

She had to remove them now before any real bond was formed between the mother and child. To allow them any time together, any momentary weakness on her part could ruin the functionality of both animals. That's why she had been given the pills. Separate the bond, the connection between mother and child that would distract them both from their lives, their work.

Trina sang a lullaby they had been taught in the Institution as she lifted the calf from its pen and moved it onto the conveyor belt that led to the larger pen outside. She watched the little creature go, rolled along by the rubber until it was swallowed up in the darkness.

She had been conveyor belts like that before at the Institution when she was giving birth. Only the belt was made of human hands and doctors, slowly leading her baby out of the door. She had felt distressed right then, but the sedatives they had given her for the operation kept her calm on the bed. Jack, her husband of the time, didn't help either, just simply rolling his shoulders and continuing to eat the sandwich the Institution had provided. But the pills helped, the doctors were right about them. Two weeks after the birth she was back on the farm, not having missed much of work at all.

Of course, the other workers, her family, were interested in what had happened. She showed them the scar across her belly where the doctors had removed the baby like a tumor on a cow.

Trina rubbed the back of her head, she wondered why had those memories come back just then. Maybe it was the smell of whatever paper had arrived that morning, delivered from the White Collar stations in the city. It was that smell of artificial mint and tree that reminded her of Jack. After the birth, they had gone their separate ways. Him, back to the towers, her back to the fields. She wasn't complaining though, they were lucky enough to have been able to meet. Most often the relationships occur in the families. But he had been at the farm that day, filling out some paperwork for his boss and she had caught his eye.

She blushed at the memory and then regained herself. Such thoughts were not for the workplace. She moved down the catwalk, checking off each cow for milking when she found herself standing in the past again.

She remembered the Institution. Brought on by memories of doctors and the urge to follow her son. So she followed him in her memories until the drugs kicked in and he was forgotten as just another calf moved to the larger pen.

She slapped herself on the side of the head. It wasn't time to be thinking of the past when one was straddling the present on a catwalk.

Trina finished up and headed back to her office, where she'd wait until Matt came by with a donut so she could snag it. They played out the same ritual day after day. Just another part of the job, she repeated to herself.

In her swivel chair, she moved back and forth, letting gravity mingle and mix with itself.

She remembered when she first started in the Institution, learning of the idea of parents, or at least those who produced offspring. She once asked her teacher if they were like mother cows and father bulls, and the class was full of calves. The parents, a father, had laughed at that silly idea and moved on with the lecture.

Young Trina had felt scoffed by an elder. She had put serious thought into that question. Why didn't the teacher answer her honestly? If they were the parents, then they had to be the kids, except they weren't goats.

Young Trina had snuck out once, and it felt great. The feeling of dark empty corridors with no idea of what's behind them. She had no purpose for sneaking out, just the thrill. But that idea, of not having a purpose, is what stopped her. She hadn't wanted to get in trouble. Less anger her parents, who she looked up to. Sure, now she knew the mothers and fathers definitely hadn't given birth to her.

She took a deep breath and heard the door open behind her. Matt, she thought. And thus, her job continued, removing any time to think of such silly matters as where her child was.

Jackson.

"Welcome to the Outside World."

A cool breeze hit Jackson's nose and startled him awake. He was buried in the back of the recycling truck. His numb right hand brushed his forehead. He blinked several times and willed it to move, it did not. Above him, the floor of the Institution rotated as the truck made its turns around the area. He took a few more deep breaths. It was all happening. He was out! He turned his head to view the recycling truck. It wasn't all too dirty. Most of its cargo was old cardboard and wooden boxes, a few bags, and a change of clothes.

Jackson wiggled the fingers in his left hand. It was entombed somewhere beneath a large pile of paper. He pulled it out, sending papers everywhere. Using it he pushed himself up to a crouch, expecting his hand on his forehead to disappear, but it did not. Instead, his right arm emerged from under a large orange plastic bag. The hand that was on his forehead shifted, but remained limp.

That's odd, thought Jackson, *he didn't remember having three hands*. The plastic bag stank of sterilizer. The same awful smell as the Time Out Room. Jackson gagged at the thought of it. He sat down and leaned against the bag.

The hand landed on his shoulder. Jackson spun around surprised, throwing the handoff. Someone was alive in there!

Jackson bent down and unzipped the bag. A boy was in there. His eyes unfocused, gazing at the bottom of the Institution. His hand was limp, having fallen out of the bag, dragging his arm with it.

"Buddy! Wake up!" said Jackson, the kid was starting to freak him out.

The body did not respond. It lay there, staring silently at the ceiling of the Institution. Jackson put his hand to the kid's wrist, checking for a pulse. Nothing. Jackson was silent. His grief that had built up for so long in him spilled out. Not for the boy, but for Hazel. But for her fate. The fate of being carted away in the back of a recycling van. Jackson cried until the tears stopped, and then he shook in the corner for what seemed like an hour as the truck passed under more of the Institution.

Jackson exhaled and inhaled several times and stood up. He needed to be calm. He needed to survive. To escape. For Hazel, for all of them.

The underneath of the Institution was essentially one massive parking garage. Large concrete pillars as wide as the truck and at least thirty feet high dotted the surface, keeping the ceiling up. Orange lights dropped from what looked like exhaust vents but were instead dump points for the trucks. As Jackson looked around he realized just how truly terrifyingly large the Institution was. It felt like standing under the crust of a planet.

The truck he was on continued straight, zeroing in on a pair of dual red lights on the far tunnel wall. They passed two more trucks, each zooming back to the drop-off points to pick up whatever had been too unique, outspoken, or worthless for the Institution.

The first time a truck came by, Jackson jumped down and hid in between the bodies. But the second time he peeked over the lip and saw to his surprise a man behind the wheel. A forty-year-old, his brown hair glossed over in a blue cap. He had untrimmed stubble around the corners of his lips. But those were only the things Jackson subconsciously noticed.

The entire idea that there could be people who saw the horrors and turned a blind eye had eluded Jackson. The Time-Out doctors and clinic workers were probably the only ones who really knew. The truck drivers just guessed it was waste material if they even looked up at all. Jackson started thinking. If

he could get the truck drivers to stop driving or at least look at what they were carrying, then he could bring the Institution down. *The teacher was right!* he thought excitedly.

The paper in his pocket grew heavier. He picked it back up and unfurled it. "Trina. 5911 Peachwood Grove. Sector 4 LiveStock." His parents, or at least his mother was out there right now, thought Jackson. He was going to find them and prove to everyone at the Institution that he had won! He would beat the system.

The truck slowly started going uphill. Jackson felt the shift and moved himself to lean against a set of boxes against the wall. A body bag rolled across the floor and smacked up against the wall next to him. Jackson looked forward, a few more boxes and bodies were beginning to roll his way. He'd be crushed, he realized. He started to work his way up the back of the truck, but gravity did not cooperate. The truck tilted even higher. Jackson felt blood rush to his head.

A wall joint to his left had a welding brace put up against it. That would serve as cover from the boxes and boxes.

The ball of clothing rolled down towards him and almost swept him off his feet. He lunged for the retaining beam and latched his fingers around it. The body bag hit his left leg and his foot lost traction, slipping and dangling for a second.

The truck began to level out. Jackson started climbing forward. He reached the top of the bay just as the truck fully leveled out. In front of them was a single entrance point only wide enough for two trucks at most. Jackson noticed the two armed guards who were only there to provide the illusion of security. They carried big flat-tube guns in their hands. Not at all like the guns he'd seen the labor class being taught about. But even if their job was an illusion, Jackson bet they would be pleased to nab him, so he ducked low until they passed.

When Jackson rose, he caught his breath.

The city was not at all like he had imagined it. It rose for miles in every direction. Gleaming skyscrapers wrapped by interstates packed with cars. Several planes and helicopters flew over. Huge billboards advertised the latest movie or product. But it all seemed to be wrapping around something. Jackson turned around and almost gasped.

The Institution was massive. Ten times bigger than what he had lost thought it was. At the heart of the city, it stood taller than any skyscraper, at least a hundred floors. And it was wide, a massive brick form instead of the slender buildings of the city. It was all a uniform concrete grey. Jackson realized the only lights in the entire complex were on the very top of the building. He looked to his right. Dead weeds ran up to a broken chain link fence dotted with wire. But just on the other side of the wire was a luscious green grass leading for half a mile to the city.

Jackson felt the transition as they left the Institution and entered the city. It was a breath of fresh air and smoother driving. Jackson looked back one last time at the shaky gravel road leading to the smooth asphalt of the city.

Jackson couldn't help but be mesmerized by the city as they traveled through it. The buildings rose up, their sunlit top floors gleaming down on the world. It was beautiful, entrancing. A tale of what could be achieved by those who wanted it. Jackson realized it was supposed to be a lure. He forced himself to look down at the streets. They were the same ugly grey as the Institution. Unappealing, unwanted, disgraceful. No one wanted to be on the streets, or back at the Institution for that matter.

Jackson realized the genius of the city.

The Institution was built efficiently on the inside, nothing too shabby or over the top expensive. But on the outside, it was made to look unappealing so people wouldn't flock back there or even think

about it. The same could be said for the streets. Less time on the street, less dirty you were, and the higher up you were on the work ladder. Everyone wanted to be in the large skyscrapers. Jackson wondered how strained their necks were from always looking up.

Jackson at the street behind the truck. Already a cloud of traffic had formed up behind the truck. The people behind the wheels didn't seem to even look up from just about their dashboards. As if they couldn't be bothered. Jackson realized the creepy thing. Every car was exactly the same.

They passed a large neon blue sign that said: "Now Exiting Sector 1". Then replaced by a sign saying "Now entering Sector 2".

Sector 2 was the same as Sector 1, only the men wore full-dress suits and the woman wore thin black cloth, a veil over their eyes. Same parents, same jobs, different clothing made for different people. The difference between the two sectors was like a candy cut down the middle. The wave of white collars stopped at one side of the road where the black suits started at the other.

"Now entering Sector 3." Another large sign. This time the massive skyscrapers that had been straight glass were replaced by tall wide buildings with lights all over them. Jackson felt a primate urge to hop out of the back of the truck and run into one of the shops.

The truck slowly rolled out of the city and into the rolling hills beyond. Jackson watched in fascination as they passed large flat buildings with large fences surrounding them. Animals walked through the grass. The smell hit him, tangy and earthy, the same smell that had stuck to him when he passed the Livestock class in the Institution. *Livestock*, he thought. He watched several more farms go past until the truck began to slow.

"Now entering Sector 4."

His mother worked in livestock in sector 4, so that was the best bet of where she was going to be.

Jackson looked behind, most of the traffic had been left in the city. Only a few cars were on the road. Jackson knew this was his stop, but it didn't seem like the truck would be stopping anytime soon.

He glanced over his shoulder at the soft grass and jumped off the side of the truck. The truck didn't even flinch, but the car he'd just jumped in front of did. The car slammed on its brakes, its passenger cursing at Jackson for slowing him down on his drive to work. Jackson rushed over to the side of a fence where he knew he stood out.

A little ways away, a collection of six large buildings stood. *Houses*, thought Jackson.

It took him close to thirty minutes to make it to the buildings. They stood tall and grey, each a miniature of the Institution. A strange smell wafted out of them, definitely not houses. Jackson moved around the side. The six buildings all emptied into six equally large fields where young animals roamed.

Jackson walked down the side of the street, looking out for a woman with reddish hair. A woman exited the building in front of him and headed for the bus stop where several other women stood in a line, waiting for the bus to take them somewhere else.

Jackson ran up to the last woman in line and tapped her on the shoulder. She turned and glanced at him as if looking to see if he belonged.

"Do I know you?" asked the woman.

But Jackson already had his own questions in mind. "Do you have any kids?"

The woman laughed. "That's one way to get a lady's number, but no."

Jackson had already moved on.

The next woman also had not yet had any kids, though she was in a serious relationship.

The third person in line was a man who just shook his head at Jackson and went back to staring at his newspaper on his tablet.

The fourth and first person in line was a woman with a puppy dog nose.

“Do you have any kids?” asked Jackson.

The woman nodded. “One.”

Jackson felt his heartbeat tick up. This could be it. “How long ago?”

The woman shrugged. “That’s hard to remember.”

“About sixteen years?” asked Jackson.

The woman nodded. “Probably. It was with this white-collar worker named Jack.”

Jackson felt his adrenaline soar. This was his mom! He had found his mom!

“Ma’am,” he said. She turned to look at him with a serious face. “I think I’m your child.”

Her face screwed up, in confusion, then a mix of anger, and then finally filtered out as a fit of laughter.

“Haha,” said Trina, still laughing. “Who sent you? Matt? I bet it was Matt-”

“No,” Jackson touched her wrist, “I’m your son Trina.”

She blinked. “How do you know my name?”

“Mom, it’s me, Jackson.”

Trina shook her head. “I don’t know you. Tell Matt this has gone too far.”

“This doesn’t involve Matt!” shouted Jackson.

Trina skewed up her face, this time there was no laughter. “Whatever you’re doing, whoever you are, stop it!”

Jackson heard the bus pull in behind him. This was his last chance.

“Mom, please! I’m your son with Jack! I’m here. We can go away, escape all of this! This isn’t right. I’m your family. Your life is a lie! Mom please, I love you,” all of it came babbling out. No matter how much he had practiced in his head, it had come out wrong. The whole line was looking at them. Jackson felt shivers run up the back of his neck due to the number of eyes staring at him.

“I don’t know you. Whoever you are. Whatever relationship you had to me. It doesn’t exist. You don’t exist. Now get out of my way and let me get to work,” said Trina in a cold voice that shook Jackson to his core. She tore Jackson’s hand off her wrist, where he hadn’t realized he’d been squeezing, and stormed into the bus. The rest of the line followed her, shooting glances over at Jackson.

“We’re her family,” echoed one of the people in the line.

Jackson watched them go, watched his mother leave him again, and then had an idea. He had her address. Maybe she hadn’t wanted to talk to him then in front of people, but perhaps she’d be more eager to talk to her son when there weren’t as many eyes.

Jackson.
 "Mother."

At nine twenty, two hours after the sun had been swallowed by the tallest towers of the city, Jackson's mother came home. Jackson sat crouched in the darkness of the bushes, the briefest smell of flowers flushed by the car exhaust.

Jackson's mother lived in the one-block apartment building that sat atop a hill overlooking the pasture fields on Peachwood grove, 5911 Peachwood Grove. Jackson had memorized the address. It was ten stories tall, fifty rooms per floor. Each room a replica of the tiny one next and above it. The doors had no locks, because who would ever rob fellow family members. But Jackson knew that wasn't the truth. These men who his mother worked with were not her family. No, only Jackson and his unknown father were her family.

Trina arrived on the bus. She got off last. The rest of her colleagues made a beeline straight for the door. To Jackson, it looked like she had had a rough day. *It couldn't have been due to me*, thought Jackson nervously.

Trina made her way towards the door. She had a strange day at work after that weird kid accosted her in front of work. After that, she couldn't think of anything other than him. *Didn't they keep kids at the Institution*, asked Trina. How did hers, if it was hers, get out? Was she in trouble? And what did the kid mean that she wasn't really happy? Wasn't happiness work? That's what she thought, or at least that's what she had been taught. When you work, you have fun. It's not fun to goof off until work's done. But she wasn't happy. Trina knew that. She had known that long before that kid had come up to her. Before she tried to be happy with Jack, Matt, fresh coffee, morning pills, and evening yoga. In the end, it didn't do anything. She still didn't feel happy. She didn't know exactly what happiness felt like. But she knew it didn't feel like long cold nights huddled up in front of her sole window and warm wall. A flicker of movement caught her eye. It seemed like it came from the bushes that lined the building. Trina had a good guess of who it was. She stared at the sky, darkened by plane's exhaust, just wishing that the kid would go back where it was safe for him, back to his real family.

"You can come out," said Trina with a sigh.

The bushes ruffled, surprised that Trina had seen him.

Jackson emerged from the bushes. His arms were covered in twigs from his day spent listening to the sounds of rush traffic that only seemed to exist to give police a job to do and the smells of hard sugar donuts.

"How did you see me?" asked Jackson.

"You stuck out," replied Trina.

Jackson looked around the parking lot. "You know it's all a lie, don't you?"

His mother did her own glance of the parking lot and shrugged. She looked back at Jackson, who was now busy brushing twigs off his arms. "You should come inside before you get me in trouble."

Jackson nodded. "Do they still work after nine?"

"Some people do," Trina led the way inside.

The lobby was court and vacant, white and grey varnish-covered old brick walls. It could have been a hundred years old or built that morning. Jackson realized it was probably built that way. *One less distraction for the hard workers* thought Jackson stubbornly.

Trina walked over to the set of dual elevators. Just like the lobby, the city, the cars, the people, it was too timeless in its image. The metal doors slid open, fast enough to be efficient, yet with a slight creak that betrayed any thought that the elevator was futuristic.

Trina pressed the button for the fifth floor. A yellow light popped up behind the button as the elevator rode up into the massive building.

"How old do you think this elevator is?" asked Jackson. He admired the front panel for the button, which was clearly the oldest thing in the elevator with its many grease marks and worn metal.

Trina shrugged. The boy's curiosity was starting to bleed onto her though and she stared at the buttons. It reminded her of her younger years when everything was a mystery. Now she was twenty years out of the Institution and she was too tired to even think who had made the buttons she pressed on her elevator ride up to her apartment. But she could at least give the kid an answer.

"At least older than Mr. Hofryway down the hall, and he's less than two years from retiring age," said Trina.

Jackson whistled, impressed. "That's old."

The elevator stopped with a ding and shutter. The doors pulled apart to reveal a long hallway.

"Thirty-second door on the left, follow me," said Trina gruffly. This was the moment if she was caught with a kid it'll be over for her. Anyone of her neighbors would hear them coming down the hall and pop their head out to say hello. But she knew the chances of that were slim. Her neighbors were all tired from their days at work, they wouldn't get up from the couch or their lovers to see who she was walking with in the hallway.

At door 532 Trina pushed down the handle and led Jackson into her life for the last sixteen years.

Less than five hundred square feet, coated in the same white varnish as the lobby, built for one. The apartment had four rooms. A kitchen that was only separated from the foyer/living room by a narrow counter. In the middle of the foyer/living room was a table for one, a small recliner, and an in-wall TV. The third room was a bedroom down a tiny hall that would take someone less than two paces to cross. Across from the bedroom was a minuscule bathroom with a sink, toilet, and shower barely big enough for a human.

Trina sighed, back at her place of sleep. She went about her nightly routine. Put the briefcase containing that day's list of cows milked on the counter to be picked up the following morning. Fill up a glass of water. Make it two for the boy. Go to the bathroom, unable to do during the busy workday. Grab a quick heat meal from the fridge, purchased in packs of twenty-two that cost a third a day's work, and toss it in the microwave. Wait five minutes while flipping through the TV channels to find something to watch while she ate. Turn on the news to watch another day of propaganda, eat her meal in silence. Fall asleep in her chair at eleven. Alone.

But after step two, filling up a glass of water, the routine Trina had participated in since day one of her career was interrupted.

"Are these freeze packets?" asked Jackson excitedly. He held up a small blue rectangle that changed from purple to dark grey back to blue.

"Well yes," Trina said. "They're standard. In fact, they came out just as I graduated from the Institution."

There it was again, the dreaded place, thought Jackson.

"I suppose we can have two for dinner," said Trina. She ruffled through the quick heat meals and selected two meat meals. "Do you want meat sauce or sweet sauce?"

"I never know the difference," said Jackson, he had already put the freeze packets away under the sink. Though something still bothered him about them.

"Meats cheaper," muttered Trina. She slid the two quick heat meals into the microwave, selected the five-minute timer, and watched the shiny plates spin.

"Where do we eat?" asked Jackson. He had already noticed there was only one chair at the table.

"Well often when we have parties we bring over our chairs, but that rarely happens. And I can't go ask a neighbor for a chair," said Trina.

"Why not?" asked Jackson. He ran his hand over the table, feeling the well-trimmed wood worn down in one place by the cheap plastic bottoms of his mother's quick heat meals.

"Well because it would be awkward," said Trina, as if asking for help was some sort of curse.

"Well... ok," Jackson said. He ruffled his reddish-brown hair.

"You know what, I should have another chair in my bedroom for my desk," said Trina. She got up to get it. A glance over her shoulder showed the microwave had less than thirty seconds.

They ate dinner in the strange silence that accompanies paradoxes of society. Trina in her hardback wooden chair, which made her think of her work. She wasn't sure anymore if she liked the idea of work or not. Jackson sat in the large fluffy office chair, it's adjustable back great for leaning back and staring at the cheap ceiling above him.

The meat meal, as advertised, tasted great. But Trina had had it enough to know the exact sharp salty taste and soft tender taste that each part of the meat offered. Jackson, on the other hand, dug into the meal. Trina guessed it was the kids' first meal that day. The table was silent, apart from the two, mother and son, scrapping their plastic spoons against plastic dishes.

Trina raised her fork.

"How is the Institution anyway?" she asked.

Jackson shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know."

"Shouldn't you get your memories back, you're now an eleventh grader, and the white-out only works for so long. One more year and you'll join the workforce," Trina rolled her meat in the deep brown meat sauce that she suspected was more salt than meat.

"I guess," Jackson speared a piece of meat. "I mean we got some of our memories back. But I don't remember any of the kid's names from the years before. All I know are the kids in my grade."

"That's usual," Trina said. "You'll never remember their names. You'll remember the teachings though."

Jackson gave her a glance over the table like he already knew this.

Trina cleared her throat. "How is the technology in your classrooms anyway? I remember being so impressed by what I saw in tenth grade."

"It's pretty cool," Jackson admitted.

"Do they still have the wall mirrors and desktop displays? I remember v.11.2!" asked Trina excitedly. She felt young again.

"Huh?"

"Oh well, it was well a while back and I suppose technology has moved on--"

"No, I said huh because those are the things in our classes. We used them last year and just this year we got the upgrade to v.11.3." Jackson stopped talking. His father had stopped chewing, stunned by the news.

"Are you sure?" asked Trina.

"Mom--"

“Trina”

“-how long have you had those Freeze Packs?” asked Jackson slowly.

“Twenty years,” said Trina. “We were excited to get them because-”

“-We learned about them in basic advancements in engineering.” finished Jackson.

There was a stunned silence at the table.

“It hasn’t advanced at all,” Jackson concluded in stunned silence.

“That’s impossible, or should be,” said Trina.

“No,” Jackson shook his head, “if you keep every grade separated, then they’ll think everything you give them is new, even if it’s a hundred years old.”

“I thought it was strange that the Freeze Packets came out right as we graduated,” said Trina, “but then I stopped thinking about them when I went to work.”

“The only way to keep them from questioning is to keep them drugged on work,” said Jackson, reciting something he had thought about over long crawls through the vents.

The two sat at the table for a few more minutes in silence.

“So nothing I’ve ever used is new?” asked Trina.

Jackson shook his head.

“And there’s a good guess that at least a few other people have lived in this room before me,” said Trina. She gazed around the room, trying to imagine the previous occupants. But when she had arrived, the room had been sprayed down and brand new.

“They’ve probably also worn your clothes, gone to your work, and ate dinner and the same table.”

Trina regarded her son with surprise. She had thought of him as her son? She was surprised with herself. Was this kid growing on her?

She looked at his watch, half-past ten.

“It’s late,” said Trina.

“But!” Jackson complained.

“No buts. You’re lucky I even allowed you to come over,” said Trina. “I could have been caught.”

“Mom, just a few more minutes,” asked Jackson. He had come so far, just a few more minutes with his mother.

“No, I have work in the morning, and you have to get back to school,” ordered Trina.

“You know they’ll punish me,” said Jackson.

Trina bit her teeth, just like she did when her boss said something stupid but she didn’t say no.

Jackson was getting upset. “You know your whole life is a lie, so why don’t you do something about it?” snapped Jackson.

“Sometimes in life, that’s the best you can hope for,” said Trina somberly.

* * *

The next morning Jackson’s mother cooked him breakfast. It wasn’t much, just two quick meals, but there was something special about it. Trina stood at the table admiring her craftsmanship when Jackson came out of the bedroom.

Trina wore her usual underclothes, loose pajama pants, and a soft pink shirt, standard issue. Jackson looked like he had walked several miles in his worn grey Institution uniform and green jacket that he’d picked up from the side of the road.

“Aren’t you going to be late?” Jackson asked. He looked at the clock, half-past seven.

“I called in, said I was using one of my free mornings,” Trina pulled back the lofty recliner for her son to sit in. “Still means I’ll have to be in by nine though.”

Jackson picked up his food, a light curl of engineered steam rolled off the top. "This looks amazing," he said.

"Well, I hoped they didn't serve it back at the Institution," Trina laughed. It was a slightly nervous laugh.

"What's wrong?" asked Jackson. He held his knife and fork over a crispy salt bun.

"You have to go," said Trina.

"I'm not," Jackson shook his head.

"I don't care if you go, but they'll make you go. They'll send Police to find you and then they'll drag you back to the Institution to be seen again," Trina put down her silverware. She'd barely touched her meal.

"Then I'll stay here. They'll see how much better it is for families to be together," argued Jackson.

His mother shook her head. "As much as I know you are my son, and 'love' you for it, I cannot feel it. They give us pills shortly after giving you to the Institution. It helps us get back to work. Those Police will have taken the same pills. They'll just see you as an escapee from the Institution." Trina regarded Jackson very carefully. "Do they still tell you about distractions and undesirables in the Institution?"

Jackson nodded. He was still eating. Though the food was making a sour taste in his mouth.

"It's like that out here, only worse. Distractions aren't schooling and at most a strike, they're a capital offense. To distract another from work is to kill their career. They'll see you as killing my career and remove you from the environment," said Trina softly.

Jackson put down his utensils, he'd lost his appetite.

"But that's not all, is it?" asked Jackson.

Trina shook her head. "I have to report you. Otherwise, I'll be seen as undesirable. And maybe even if I do it, I can move into Justin's workstation, he's been gone for months now. I would have a whole view of the pens. I'd never have to get up from my seat!"

Jackson was stunned. "Would you?"

Trina picked up her son's plate for the last time. "You should go soon."

Jackson glared at his mother, slowly realizing this was not his mother but instead some coward who would turn him into the police at the first chance of advancing her career. A model student of the Institution.

"You coward," rumbled Jackson.

Trina looked back at the kid. "Sometimes that's the best you can hope for."

"I hope you know I don't love you," said Jackson.

Trina didn't even wince, or blink, or do any reaction of any sort. "I'm sorry."

She headed for the door. Grabbing her briefcase where she had left it. Swinging back on her work coat she looked at Jackson. "I'll give you five minutes before I call them." With that, Trina left the room but Jackson's mother had already left before her.

Jackson sat in the middle of the room, stunned. He knew what he would do. If he ran, he'd be caught. If he stayed, well at least it would be easy. No need to die while winded. He chuckled at himself. The Police would be here in three minutes, Trina lying to him just to advance her career.

Jackson thought of the previous nights' conversation and wondered how many things his mother had lied about. *None*. But in the morning, his mother was gone, and in his place woke up Trina. Same

body, same blood, same clothes, same smile. But a different person. His mother had only existed twice in life. When married to his father and last night in the small cramped apartment room.

Jackson heard the sound of someone coughing outside of his room. No doubt the Police, called in by Trina just a minute after walking out that door.

Sure enough, just a moment after thinking that, the unlocked front door was thrown open. Five armed officers entered, dressed in full riot gear with large canister guns in their hands. They began a search before being surprised by seeing Jackson sitting calmly in the chair. The officers looked at each other, trying to sum up the situation. The lead officer approached Jackson slowly, the rest of the officers trained their guns on the kid.

“Jackson Institution Cadet level 11?” asked the lead officer.

Jackson nodded. “Good morning.”

The lead officer looked at Jackson, trying to measure up what the kid had been thinking. “Before we tag you, I hope you know you’ve been the politest arrest I’ve had in months,” said the lead officer. He took out a set of cuffs. “You would’ve made a good front desk person, but then you ran away.”

Jackson sighed. “I just hope I’ve changed one of your minds today.”

The officers laughed, a sharp laugh like a group of hyenas. The lead officer chuckled and shook his head. “We’ve seen kids like you before, and yet we’re still here.” He latched the cuffs into place over Jackson’s hands, the cold metal bleeding into his skin.

The lead officer stepped back; standing exactly where Jackson’s mother had stood right before she was replaced by Trina the next morning. “Tag him boys.”

Jackson didn’t get to even ask what a tagging was before the officer’s guns fired at once. It seemed that bean bags pelted his skin until Jackson realized they were some sort of absorbent material. He looked down, his vision becoming washy, and watched as the blue die expelled itself from the bags and into his skin.

He couldn’t feel anything. He couldn’t move. He couldn’t breathe!

He felt himself being picked up by his arms and dragged out of the apartment. It felt otherworldly. As if he was watching it take place from someone else’s eyes. As if someone else was watching through him.

They passed Trina in the hallway, who was being patted on the back by the police chief. Jackson couldn’t move, but if he could he would’ve spat on the shoes of his former mother.

The police led him out of the building, hunters dragging away a wounded prey in shame. Two black trucks waited for them on the outside. Their backs humming like angry beetles in the day’s sun.

The police tossed him in the back of the second truck and slammed the doors shut, silencing his limp body in the pitch blackness of the hold.

What seemed like hours, but could have been just minutes later and the truck took off. Jackson felt the bumps of the road as they passed over potholes that had probably existed for generations, engineered just for the purpose of annoyance for the workers. Slowly time melted together. He didn’t know how long it was, but after a while, his head began to throb, maybe to the beat of the car, or from the tags, he succumbed to the darkness.

Jackson.

“The Supervisor and the Institution.”

Jackson was dragged into the Supervisors office. He'd been blindfolded in the car, to hide his eyes from seeing even more of the truth. The police had carried him up the stairs. The lip of his shoe bounced on every third step. Then there came the familiar smell of the elevator. The repairman must've been switching out the speakers because for once the metal compartment that smelled like lime did not sound sour.

The police tore off Jackson's blindfold, slapping him across the nose. Opposite to him, seated in a large leather chair was the Supervisor. He hadn't changed much since the last time they'd met, or the time before. He still had the grey stubble, the soft white hair that looked like a chloroform rag, and twitchy left eyebrow. But his eyes were different. On the first visit, they held a stern fatherly look. The second, they were disappointed. On the third visit, they were like a shark's eyes, something Jackson had learned about only because he'd snuck out.

Once the Police had dropped Jackson in the dark red chair the Supervisor waved them away. The door closed, and then it was just them.

For the first minute, the Supervisor said nothing. Jackson did not press him. This would most likely be his last conversation before they took him downstairs to Time-Out. He already knew he wouldn't say a thing when they laid him down on the silver cold mattress that had been used a thousand times before him for kids just like him.

The Supervisor stepped up from his chair. Jackson kept his eyes on him the entire way. The Supervisor walked over to the silver glass he always kept on the mantel. At the first meeting, Jackson had asked him about it and the Supervisor had brushed off the question. He felt as if the man was about to answer it.

"Delicate," whispered the Supervisor. He picked up the glass with his index and thumb. "Glass is so delicate." He moved over to his desk. Jackson watched him.

"Do you know why glass is so delicate Jackson?" asked the Supervisor.

Jackson shook his head. He wasn't in the mood for these games, but to save himself the time he was forced to play them. A macabre game of sorts.

"The glass is made of thousands of tiny little melted down sand particles. Each little one serving its own tiny purpose." The Supervisor bent down and opened his drawer, withdrawing a bottle of dark liquid that sloshed like seas that drowned men and dreams. "And when they all do their little job." He popped the lid off the bottle. An aroma of wood and berries filled the room. "The glass can do its job."

The dark liquid foamed, spurting bubbles. Jackson watched it with envy, his throat was dry. The Supervisor held the glass up to his lip and drank the liquid, staining his lips a dark purple. He held Jackson's gaze as the foamy liquid disappeared.

"And when it has done its job," the Supervisor took a little piece of cloth and cleaned the glass, "it can safely retire." He held the glass up for inspection. "But sometimes. A little nobody. A tiny grain of sand that just can't understand how to fit in, shouts." He put the glass on the table. "And then the glass falls apart."

For a moment Jackson expected the glass to explode, perhaps that being the Supervisor's plan on how to get rid of him after all. Nothing happened. The Supervisor just stared at Jackson, his eyes burning into Jackson's red hair.

"Why-"

That's when the glass broke. It didn't break to any hammer or fist, but to Jackson's voice. As if someone had coded it exactly to break when Jackson spoke. Pieces of the shrapnel glass embedded

themselves up his arms, but a majority landed on his shirt. The Supervisor laughed, his Adam's apple bobbing.

Jackson did not care. He did not flinch like he would have when he first came in here. He was sick and tired of the Supervisor's games.

"Why do you do it?" asked Jackson slowly.

"Do what?" asked the Supervisor.

"Lie." Jackson paused. Then he asked the same question he had asked his mother the night before. "Why do you continue working when you know your life is a lie?"

"A lie?" The Supervisor shook his head. "Truth and lies are just words. To a fish, the truth is that it cannot breathe out of the water, to a human it is a lie. Lies and truths just serve to best fit the society they are constructed around."

"But a fish is not a human, so they can have different truths, can they not?" countered Jackson.

"A society is always society. In our society, the truth is that children are out and work is in."

"Yet nothing is being made," said Jackson.

The Supervisor shrugged his shoulders. "Jobs, purpose, enrichment."

"Really? Then why has technology stalled?"

"Creative destruction. We put new technology in the game, it alters the jobs already there. We can't have that," said the Supervisor.

"So instead of letting nature take its way, you superimpose it? With what? A half-lie for a society that toils for nothing?" asked Jackson.

"The point is not arbitrary gain," said the Supervisor. "Humanity long-ago learned not to reach for the stars. This way, everyone can have a happy full life."

"Because you tell them to?" Jackson raised an eyebrow.

"Yes," the Supervisor said. "Everyone wants to make money, so they stop caring and that becomes their focus. When they make money, they are happy. And when they don't, well that doesn't happen anymore. The homeless are not undeniable. They serve their purpose. Either disgust or pity, but nevertheless they prompt people to look at the towers and imagine themselves in them. It's been this way for as long as it takes for a mountain to wear away to dust and it will continue to be this way until another mountain rises to replace it.

"Do you seriously believe yourself the first to speak out? There have been thousands before you, and there will be thousands after you. You are the sand grain that will not become glass. And thus you will break the glass with your voice and scare off the rest of the glass grains. No one wins. So we're going to remove you..." The Supervisor continued on speaking, but his voice was already becoming fainter and fainter.

Jackson felt his breath catch in his lungs. He saw it all now. The Institution was not a place, it was a concept. A society strung around work. Based on the principles of good ethics, long hours, and fruitful days. But in the process, the concept had changed. It saw itself unraveling at the edges. It stopped innovating. It stopped moving forward. It dug its chains into the ground and formed a concrete form, the Institution. Where generation after generation would file out to work and thus produce the subsequent generation. Until the past was forgotten, trampled under the feet of people looking at skyscrapers they would never reach. Moving from partner to partner, pumping out the next generations slaves like machines, until they became them. A self-sustaining society built on the foundation of forever staying the same.

Jackson rubbed his hair. A society where everyone looked the same, acted the same, dressed the same, no one complained. No distractions and thus a better work environment for all. The kids with the blond hair would be picked out, weeded away until only brown hair and eyes remained. Until there were no distractions. The populace would slowly churn away in its eternal loop of mice, all running after the cheese only one of them could get. An immortal rat race where humanity loses.

Jackson felt someone picking him up. *What was the Supervisor saying?* thought Jackson. But time felt as if it was slipping away. *Was this like what it felt to watch yourself die?* But he wasn't dead yet. The men loaded him back up in the elevator. They held him under his armpits. His stomach rose as they descended into the Institution. The men didn't realize it but probably men just like them had stood exactly where they were carrying a boy just like him.

The same rat race playing out time and time again, until the race had mastered the rats.

The elevator doors rolled open. The guards gripped on him tightened as they dragged him out into the hallway. Jackson felt his throat seize up. There was no escape this time. No Hazel or Bryan to be by, the Institution had seen to that. Like it would see to him.

He was defeated, he was going to die

Jackson forced his head up. There was a man in a white coat standing midway down the hallway. Jackson's head dropped, the weight of it all rolling over him like a wave dragging the drowned to sea. He stared at the man's shoes. Polished and clean black, reflecting the silence of the moment.

The hallway was quiet and dim, like the bedrooms when all the lights were shut out and the kids rolled over. A few lights were cemented into the ceiling, casting slight shadows down the man in the white coat's face.

The guards let Jackson down, his feet firming as they hit the ground. The guards moved away, the clock work was done, the race was over for Jackson. He looked up, trying to see the man in the white coat's eyes.

The man stared past Jackson, right through him.

"Wait," he commanded and left for the room. Jackson could do nothing else, all the exits were sealed, so he watched the man in the white coat enter Time-Out. He heard the ruffling of things being moved around in a drawer. Jackson smelled the white rags. His stomach rolled, an offset sea of fear that rooted him to his place in the hallway. His hands buzzed.

Was it all worth it? he thought. Jackson glanced up at the vents. He was standing where the cots had stood. Where the boys had laid one last time.

The man came back outside, grabbed Jackson, and led him towards the Time-Out room. His grip was soft, the wind that snuffed out the candles. The man's face was devoid of emotion, a blank slate, a gravestone marker waiting to be carved in.

The Time-Out room was sterile. To Jackson it felt inhuman. White walls, harsh lights, a desk with drawers full of identical needles- Jackson turned his head- and the cot.

The cot lay exposed in the middle of the room. A coroner's room, the burial opened for display. A sharp light hung over it, not a shadow formed on the cots surface for the bulb blasted it out. The man pushed Jackson down onto the cot, strapping bands around Jackson's arms and taking off his cuffs. The cot pushed into his back, the tight bands sapping Jackson's arms of circulation. A tingly feeling ran up his back.

Jackson's head started bobbing, his knees shook with desperation. *Was this it? What Hazel had felt*, Jackson glanced at the grate, *what we had watched?* Jackson would have thrown up if he could. His throat dry belched, pushing up hot air. Adrenaline rushed up and down his veins, determined to give his

body one last good show. Jackson felt spit up his neck, sharp stabbing needles sliding down his spine. Fear ran rampant in his body.

Was it worth it in the end? To stand up to the system, or should I have shut up like the teacher said? Jackson's mind raced, determined to find answers to questions he could never solve.

The man moved over to the counter and picked a needle up.

You can't beat it. Jackson realized. It's the system that keeps going. Keeps moving because the people move it out of a fake necessity built to solve a problem it created.

Jackson closed his eyes, ready to give one final thought, *Will anyone remember me in the end?*

The room was quiet. The final muffled noises Jackson heard was the man next to him. The needle he could only image. The body, the bags, the recycler, the trucks driving past his former mothers place of work, out of the city, out of the Institution. He would not have escaped, but at least his body would.

But what if he remembers me? Jackson opened his eyes. *Just one person.* The man was hovering above him, dabbing Jackson's left arm with an alcohol swab.

"Is this what they told you you'd be doing?" asked Jackson.

The man's eyes shifted over in his direction. But this time they did not glaze through him. They saw his face, his eyes, his slightly red hair. Under the bright light, the brownish red hair was visible to the man in the white coat.

The man's hands shook slightly. Jackson saw him back away and put down the needle. For the first time, he'd seen the boy on his cot and not the job. Under the harsh light and adrenaline to Jackson the man's hair had a taint of red in it.

The man tugged off the straps around Jackson's arms.

"Go home, I've killed enough kids today," said the man.

Jackson slid off the bed and stood there. He wasn't going to die. He wasn't going to be put on a stretcher in Time Out and dumped out into a recycling vent to the trucks below. He wasn't going to be forgotten. His hands couldn't stop shaking, he was in shock.

"I don't have a home anymore," Jackson shook his head. The man nodded, understanding.

"Come with me," the man said, steering Jackson out of the Time Out room where Hazel had gone, past the metal stairs leading to the lie of a life Bryan was living, and to a steel grey metal door marked "H.O.M.E."

The man opened the door. Behind it was a spiral staircase leading into the depths that the Institution had buried. The veins and layers that even the Supervisor did not have control over.

"Where are we going?" asked Jackson.

The man smiled. "We're going home son, we're going home."

Thank you so much for reading the Institution! I had a great time writing this book and am currently working on the next series set far out in space, BRISK, with a pilot book coming out next fall. If you enjoyed the book or wish to see more of my work then email me at:

["omnienterpriseglobal@gmail.com"](mailto:omnienterpriseglobal@gmail.com). There will be updates on when my next book will be released.

Now a disclaimer; This book in no way promotes anarchism nor the destabilization of government or society. Merely it hopes to shed light and give a warning to what I perceive as a threat to mankind's continued existence as a free species. The insanity of the rat race in the 21st century.

The point at which the Institution takes place is merely just a dot on the line. A brief peek under the carpet after everyone's walked on it to see the paths where humanity might go. In a sad state of affairs, I can conceive of an existence where society views happiness, success, and life itself revolving around work. As we trek down the long path that is history we are surrounded by mist. This story is an attempt to lift the lantern and reveal the edge for fear of walking off it.

This is not to say that work is not crucial to mankind when the very fact is that it is. People obtain pride, passion, and a feeling of accomplishment from their work. They can sit back and say "that's mine, I did that". That is a great feeling and an important one for the mental well-being of people. Where I draw the line in the sand that is the great beach of life, ever-shifting from the tide, is when happiness is lost at an exponential rate for work. The moment where you believe you are happy because you work, but in reality you are not happy. The point where success is not determined by what you did or who you are, but by what job you had, how much money you made. This is not to say that those two cannot be intertwined and entangled, but instead, the moment at which the latter overtakes the former. When the fact that society weighs and judges you like an onion at the supermarket instead of the person you really are. It is in my firm belief that one should value personal success over whatever society casts upon you. That until every man, woman, and child has decided that they would rather be happy as a mime on the corner of a busy street than a depressed CEO in an office tower, the Institution will never happen.

I did truly enjoy writing this book and I hope to see you again in the fall for the debut book in my newest series, set far out in Space, "BRISK". Until then, goodbye and have a great day!

Ananya Gomatam

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Maggie L Walker Governor's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Ed Coleman

Category: Humor

Of Normalcy and Robots!

Of normalcy and robots!

Our story begins on a dark and stormy night. Actually, it was quite warm. The sun was shining, even a couple birds were chirping. The day started normally, peacefully even; there is just a little bit of character death (don't worry, you won't like them anyway!).

Sarah Mary-Jane Greenwood rolled out of bed much like a caterpillar – her blankets blocked her view they were wrapped around so tightly, and her eyes bugged out of the top like a frog. She ran down the stairs, or, rather, she tried. You see, Sarah MJ was not one with the best balance – she actually had outstanding balance. She could hold her own on a trapeze wire without trying, as exemplified on the one day she visited the circus and caused the middle-aged trapeze mentor to rage-quit his job. There were tears, there was pulling of hair, glasses were stomped on, and leotards were ripped in half. Poor guy.

The reason our dear Miss Greenwood took so long coming down the stairs was two reasons. The first, of course, was because she felt that she ought to see how well she could balance coming down the banister (that girl really liked to test her body's equilibrium!). The second was a peculiarly odd dream she had last night.

Regardless, her mother and father were already in the living room and kitchen, respectively. There, on the couch with glasses so large they took up the length of the whole newspaper, was her mother, who, was indeed still squinting at said newspaper. The steaming tea next to her stimulated an aromatic, garlicky, fantastic, wonderful, fabulous, amazing, smell, a scent so dastardly delicious she had to waft a sniff.

"My my Gerome, you have out done yourself today!" This was the one nice comment that would come out of her mouth the entire day.

"Ah of course dear, anything for my lovely Karen." Clearly, Gerome was a simp, who was exactly where he belonged: the kitchen.

Gerome took to cooking early on in life. From the womb itself, his father and grandmother had taught him everything he needed to do to become a good housewife. It was almost as if the duties were written into his dna.

"Mother, father," Sarah Mary called, "I just had the oddest dream last night."

"Oh my," Gerome said, "Whatever could it have been? Do tell us."

From the ratted old couch, Karen let out a grunt of agreement, an affirmative sound so powerful it echoed the words of kings past.

"Well, I dreamt that... you guys had been replaced by robots!" exclaimed the poor Sarah Jane-Mary.

"Why ever would you ever dream of such a thing?" cried Gerome, pouring motor oil down his throat.

"Oh I never!" said Karen, while flipping through the newspaper at a speed likened to light. "Only such a mind like yours would be so utterly useless as to come up with such an idea."

"I just...". Sarah trailed off.

"Finish your sentence! We do not have time for mumbling!", Karen claimed.

"Aww, honey, did you pick that up from Mother Gothel? I knew that setting would be good for you," cooed Gerome.

For once in her life Karen was delighted, "Why yes, yes it is", she replied smugly. Karen took her blond hair, shook it around, and stepped up from the couch, yanking the plug out of her neck.

All the while, Sarah Mary Jane Greenwood had sat in her favorite stool at the white granite kitchen island, swirling around in her chair, legs swinging back and forth. The plug was the last straw. The cereal in her spoon dropped to the floor in unison with the clanging metal. Gerome and Karen's faces turned to face Sara while their bodies did not move.

Gerome and Karen's voices combined and swirled into one "Sarahhhhh, its time to charge sweetie,".

"Don't you want a taste of this sweet sweet motor oil, darling," Gerome smiled a smile full of teeth.

There were two seconds of silence. Then their cat, Muffles, started talking.

Kidding! Instead, he ran to the door and leapt out of the miniature flap specially made for his escape. Alone, Sarah Mary Jane trembled in her seat and glanced up at the two faces a mere hair's breadth from hers, with glinting, razor sharp teeth.

She looked at her cereal – the box, the spoon on the ground, the milk that was poured in before the cereal – and suddenly it hit her.

"Gerome, Karen, I guess today I must be a.... cereal killer,".

Silence. Karen turned to Gerome, Gerome remained facing Sarah MJ, mouth hanging wide open. At this point, Karen's neck had turned a full 420 degrees and surprisingly not snapped off!

Greenwood knew it was time to hit them with the final note. "Badum, tsss," she played the imaginary drums.

Sparks flew. From Gerome's mouth. He tried to croak out a 'no' of disapproval but it came out like a glitch on TV instead, distorted and pink. Karen was shaking her finger. Really, she was uncontrollably shaking her body like a disco dancer, sparking and short circuiting to no rhythm of her own. Sarah grabbed the remaining milk and splashed it all over the couple claiming to be her parents.

"Die, bitches!" she screamed as she raced out the door, following Muffles.

Gerome and Karen melted like the Wicked Witch of the West, never to be seen again (until the next dad joke!).

Narrator's Note: It seems that in attempting to create a character unlike any archetype, I have led her right back to another one. Good luck *balancing* this one out Sarah Mary-Jane.

Addison Grant

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Patty Smith

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Carol

Carol

I'd like to be able to write of my nana the way she was when I was little, a loving grandmother who'd do anything for those she kept close, but I think there's something to be said for who she was in her final months as her world and sense of self were in flux.

When I was little, she was nana. Nana was a short, fat, and sweet old woman who lived in one of those quaint brick homes with floral loveseats and porcelain figures standing next to photos of her grandkids on nearly every surface. Nana listened to Neil Diamond and hung Thomas Kincade paintings up on peeling yellowed wallpaper. Nana put up all of her Christmas decorations the day after Thanksgiving every year, complete with colorful porcelain village displays and figurines of Santa Clause that stood roughly three feet tall.

As we both got older, she became Carol. Carol was a quiet, skinny old woman who inhabited a hospital bed in the room that used to be our dining room. Carol was hooked up to a noisy oxygen machine at all times and needed nurses to come in every other day to help care for her. Carol barely ate, she mostly slept. Carol did not know who I was, she didn't know who she was, she didn't really know who anyone was anymore.

There is a limbo between my nana and Carol, where she wasn't quite my nana anymore but she still retained most of her sense of self. I lived with her for about three years before I met Carol. During this time, she spent her days on the couch watching the Golden Girls, pointing at the various characters and asking my mom "Is she still alive?"

"No, Carol," my mom would tell her. "She died a few years ago".

"Well, what about her?"

"Oh, Betty White? Yeah, actually, she's still alive".

"Good for her," my nana would say with a smile. "Good for her".

Despite the progression of her disease, Carol held on for those she cared about. The nurses had been saying she had about a week or so left before she'd pass, which was strangely just as comforting as it was gut-wrenching. I believe she made it a little while longer, whatever small part of my nana that was left in there gripping onto life with white knuckles and sheer will.

In her last few days, she was visited by her brother, George. He was the first person she had recognized as kin in months. I like to think that she at least remembered the story of how he slammed her finger in a door by mistake when they were young children, permanently disfiguring her nail so it grew in at an angle and always broke off in strange directions. My sister and I always loved when nana would tell us that one and show off her gnarly fingernail as if it were the most expensive diamond ring.

My cousins visited as well. My nana raised the both of them for a solid portion of their life, as their mother, my nana's daughter, ran off for a few years without any contact. The first visit, from my cousin Angelica, happened towards the end of the limbo period. My nana was able to tell that she was supposed to know who she was, and for the most part she pretended she did, but it was evident that she truly had no clue who this woman visiting her was. The second visit happened a day or so before Carol passed. Angelica's sister, Crystal, made the six hour drive up with her entire family. My nana spoke a bit to her, though she was under the impression that she was actually her own child, Crystal's mother. She referred to her as "Kelly" for the entire duration of their one short conversation, forgiving her for past wrongdoings and finally letting go of a decades-long feud.

I distanced myself from Carol. Seeing the look on her face of pure confusion whenever she saw me was too hurtful. Obviously, I regret the worlds of space I put between us. Entertaining all of the "what if"s I could come up with surrounding the entire situation would take years, there's no point in it really anymore. I can't make her come back and apologize to Carol for not being there, or go back in time and give my nana one last really good hug, no matter how much I wish I could.

There was no grand epiphany that I had after her death, something I thought I'd have which would give me wisdom

beyond my years as some sort of silver linings trade-off. My main takeaway-which came months later- was that grief is not the linear or cyclical processes like everyone had told me. The only way I can explain it is like a pain in your lower back. It shows up one day, fierce and stinging as it expands out to the nerves in your legs, shoulders, and neck. The pain fades eventually, getting better with over the counter medications or stretches or time, but it never really goes away for good.

I had never dealt with grief in this capacity. I've lost some pets and distant relatives and parents of friends, but I had never met death this up close and personal. She passed in her sleep, leaning over to one side with her head tilted back and her jaw slacked open; she used to take naps on the couch in that exact same position.

Agnes Hahn

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: St Catherine's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: John Morgan

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Learning to Lean into the Discomfort

"How has my addiction affected you?"

My father's hands sit casually folded in his lap, contrasting the position of his feet, which point at me. The question is unnaturally structured: a unique grouping of words pushing for a calculated answer. It's designed to make me feel uncomfortable, like when I confused a stranger to be my mother in a crowded shopping mall.

Sitting in a circle, strangers surround us. I feel their hot stares as I consider my answer. Silence. I take a trembling breath, "Your addiction took away my childhood." My swirling thoughts materialize: I comprehend what I lost.

The intervention had taken place earlier – a 4-hour blur of denial. Trailing behind my parents and the counselor out of the office, my shoulders slumped the same way they did after we put down Darla, our first dog. My dad would be going to a rehab center in Sundance, Utah. He covered up his fear with the enthusiastic insistence of subs from our favorite Coppola's Deli.

Sundance. The word lingers on my tongue. My daydreaming mind pictured a beautiful ray of sunlight. It felt like a place where I could be myself and not the overachieving perfectionist I had become.

Cover my brother's ears.

Hold him tight enough, so he doesn't hear the bellowing yells from downstairs.

Cover his eyes.

Talk to him loud enough to drown out the blow of a quick hand against a stubbly cheek.

The most toxic thing in my life is my alcoholic family secret. Ignoring my father's drunkenness at the breakfast table on a Thursday morning, still not sober from the night before, was better than making us uncomfortable. His eyes sagged halfway down his cheeks as my mom fumed over burnt toast and his disinterest. Some nights, he wouldn't be there at all. We had to wait for the *phone call* – from somewhere – maybe even the local jail.

But that only happened once or twice.

In the "ring of fire," stories of broken families fill my ears as the addicts repeat the same forced question. When it's my turn, I finally allow the pain to seep in. My dad begins to cry, I recognize my mother's sobs, glancing back to see her chewed-to-the-nub nails grasping at a tissue. Then, my gaze meets two dry eyes belonging to my ten-year-old brother, Will. We trade places, and I squeeze his hand to feel a piece of the innocence I crave.

Exiting the center of the circle, the inspiration to lean into discomfort hit me. The scorching stares of the witnesses didn't make me feel restless, turning from stone-cold to compassionate. We were there for the same reason; supporting a loved one who used substances as a hose to put out an internal fire. They saw the pain I kept inside for so long, right through my glassy eyes and runny nose.

Now, home is equivalent to my dad, mom, Will and I sitting together on our wrinkled, leather couch. Our only discomfort comes from watching Ted Lasso attempt to gulp down "pigeon sweat." It's something we can all giggle about; a TV character's discomfort. My dad's cheeks swell: I watch him laugh. They're red, but not from consuming alcohol. Today, he's purely joyful. So am I.

The ring's inner and outer circles encapsulate two phases of my life. Sitting inside forced me to embrace the caretaker role of my alcoholic family. Always tying the bright red laces of Will's shoes during his 'Skechers' phase. As a part of the circle, I learned to love myself through accepting imperfections. I embrace the uncomfortable and lean into change. It's been nice living on the outside of the circle. But I'll never forget how it felt to be on the inside, battling a denying alcoholic and an enabling mother. I'll remember the pain caused by silence and keep leaning into that discomfort a little more.

Rebecca Hatcher

Age: 13, Grade: 7

School Name: George H Moody Middle School, Henrico, VA

Educator: Mona Morris

Category: Novel Writing

Forever in Their Service

Brief summary:

This is a story about young Isabella, the daughter of Perma spies who failed and were caught. Now that she is 17, she must take up the job and spy on Imperia. Once she meets a handsome coworker, she begins to doubt her job, her nation, and what she believes. Will she be successful, or will her name join her parent's in failure?

Excerpt:

Prologue

Six years ago....

"On your best behavior, Bella," Sofia whispered, her hand sharp on my shoulder. Lucas' rough hand gripped mine. The two burly men walked on either side of us, silent and unforgiving. Neither of them had said a word to us as we walked down the dark hallways.

They brought us to the door and Lucas squeezed my hand tighter than ever. One man entered a code into a keypad and the door opened. They pushed us through and led us down dark hallways until we reached a door. The tall oak stood looking down at us.

"You have five minutes," the man said in perfect Spanish. We nodded eagerly. He opened the door and let us in. I shook off my siblings and ran into my mother's arms. "Isabella, oh I'm so sorry," she cried, speaking in English, unlike how she used to at home. I spoke mostly English because more people preferred English, but I always spoke Spanish at home. "Why are you here, did they..." I started. "Yes Bella, Perma lost two spies today," she whispered.

I scrambled to Papa. He embraced me, pulling me close. "Step up, our family can't fail. You must step up Isabella, when you're older" he whispered in my ear. "Me?! Why me," I cried out softly. "You are capable. I know what you have," he whispered. "Papa!" I cried. "Bella, I love you, if I see you here I'm sorry," he said, breaking away. Sofia took my hand and pulled me with her, her face wet with tears, just as mine was.

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Chapter One

The wait is over

I sat on the rough, wooden floor, my mother's favorite knife in my hand. I was waiting for the knock that would confirm my role that I had come to terms with. Perma was getting increasingly worried, and it was time they had ground support. My hair fell in my face, but I didn't bother to push it away. My gray eyes shone back at me from the knife's gleaming blade. I was only seventeen, and I grieved the loss of a normal life. Sofia and Lucas had been shipped out to a small town in America, better no one knew they were related to me. They were safer there, no one knew who I was and they couldn't be traced back to me. I had not spoken to them since before they left nearly two months ago. I had received a letter, but I could not respond. Sofia, 26, had gotten a job in a library and Lucas, 23, was enrolled in a trade school. I had been cut away from society, prepping to be caught.

A brisk knock brings me back to the small bedroom. I quickly replaced the knife and put the floorboard back. I closed the bedroom door behind me as I rushed to open the front door. A tall woman with laughing eyes and a serious smile stood before me. I raised my eyebrows and she pulled out her ID. I glanced at it and stood aside.

She looked me up and down and handed me a stack of papers. "Your service is required. Your goal, find out what they are doing with weapons. We have signed you on as the secretary to the weapons commissions. Go in, find out what state the weaponry is at, and leave. If you are caught, it is game over. Information first, you second," she said. I pushed back the fear and nodded. They really did not care.

"Please come with me when you are ready. Bring your own equipment, your parents knew how much you have and told us. Clothes will be provided." She said and went out to the hallway. I went into my room and put on my black catsuit. I slipped some tools into its pockets and others into a belt I pulled around my waist. I looked at myself in the mirror. I felt confident, whole. I slipped into my soft black boots and threw a few things into a backpack. I swung it over my shoulder and quickly tied my long hair up into a bun. I went out to meet the woman. She handed me two badges. The first had my full name, Isabella Santoro, on a government ID. The second one was Isabella Smith, an Imperia ID.

I clipped my Spanish ID on my belt and followed the woman to a black SUV. I ducked in and she sat shotgun. We drove through the dark, and smoky city, the sun barely peeking through the buildings and smog. When they stopped the car, I followed the woman into a room with a man I had known since I was a child, the foreign affairs minister.

"Isabella, so nice to finally see you," he greeted me

"I'm afraid I can hardly say the same to you, Thomas, if the world is in danger, and when I was here last you told me my parents were to be imprisoned," I answered calmly, though my voice carried a threatening undertone.

"Once again, I am terribly sorry, and I'm sure your siblings leaving for the US was a blow," he said softly.

"That is beside the point Thomas, how will I get to you?"

"You will have an earpiece," he answered.

"Alright, I'm ready. Give me my things and I'll be going," I said, standing straight.

"Alright Bell--"

"Isabella, or Miss Santro to you,"

"Isabella, someone will bring you to your plane, your stuff is waiting for you there,"

"Thank you,"

I walked away and resumed my stroll down the hall. The woman led me to a runway and showed me a plane. I climbed on and sat down in the simple cabin. There were some couch seats with seatbelts and a pile of things for me to look through during the flight.

I took a file folder from the pile and started reading it, and the next one, and a few more. I was tasked to never speak Spanish, only English. There was a large suitcase waiting for me. When I opened it, it was full of business clothes and had a folder of rules.

- 1) No dating anyone that you didn't know before
- 2) No babies
- 3) No marriage
- 4) Keep to yourself
- 5) English Only
- 6) Government badge from home is to be hidden in labeled compartment
- 7) Report each night
- 8) You will have an earpiece in at all times with someone there to listen to you
- 9) Wear the clothes we have given you
- 10) Spend little time with your coworkers

Okay, wow, I could totally handle that. I found the earpiece and put it on. I changed into a blue pantsuit when I felt the descent. I clipped on my new badge and picked up a large bag with some office supplies but most importantly some equipment.

When we landed, I strolled off the plane, using my stance to hide my insecurities. I was led to a car, and I slipped in. They drove me through tight alleyways and we finally came to a marble building. I get out of the car, and she hands me keys. "Apartment, down the street, room 115" she says and they drive away. I take a deep breath and walk up the steps. I open the small back door and walk in. Following the signs, I walk into my new boss's office.

I almost walk away when I see him. He was standing beside his desk, speaking with an older woman.

"Kira, are you telling me we're behind," he growled, his voice teaming with false understanding and kindness.

"Well, yes sir, but we're on it," she answered nervously,

"Go back to the factory, I have my new secretary to greet," he smiled, eying me. His hand beckoned me forward. I crept forward, and sat down tentatively. The fall sun streamed in through the window, brightening the room.

He was a large man, with a trim beard and small amber eyes. He wore a light gray suit and cherry red tie. His presence demanded respect, something I could appreciate. He sat down in the well-worn chair and opened a file.

"Miss Santro, thank you for signing on. Your job is to go through and process reports while you're at your desk and to assist me when I check in on the factories. Start with these, log everything into your computer." He dictated, handing me a heavy folder and pointing to a desk and computer on the other side of the room. I nodded quickly and strode over and sat down.

I opened the folder and began to enter in information. Some might want me to sabotage, but I needed their trust. I pressed a finger to my earpiece quickly, playing it off as if I was brushing my hair out of my face. I whispered weapon numbers as I entered them, pretending like I worked better when I read things aloud.

Once I stopped talking, I got a brief confirmation that they had gotten the numbers and I closed the call. I continued on with his dull paperwork, trying to gather info from the people in and out of the office, but they were asking him about deadlines rather than weapons.

As the sun sank lower, people began to file out. He soon leaves me alone. I quickly packed up and left. I hurried down the street to my new building. I climbed the stairs and unlocked my new front door. I found that it was fully furnished and stocked, they thought of everything. I put my clothes away and showered. I made myself some eggs for dinner before curling up in an armchair with a book for the night. Day one was over, it was on.

Chapter Two

Setting Alarms

The next morning, I woke up to my blaring alarm. It took me a second to realize where I was, but then the last few days came rushing back to me. What would my siblings think if they saw me doing this? Would they be proud, or concerned? I wasn't sure how I felt yet. I rolled out of bed and brushed my teeth. I rinsed off in the shower and put on a gray skirt and suit jacket. I brushed my hair and put it in a ponytail, pressing my earpiece in. I made myself a quick breakfast before putting on my coat. I grabbed my bag and slipped on my awful heels and began to walk to work.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the car from yesterday. I resisted the urge to wave, and instead enjoyed the cool, crisp air. I hurried up the staircase and unlocked the backdoor. I slipped in and shuffled to my desk.

He was there waiting for me, Mr. Romanov, his eyes roved over me before his face resumed a more neutral expression.

"Miss Santro, we have a factory tour to attend, your job is to write down anything I tell you to, put down your bag and take the notepad and pen over there, now," he ordered,

I could tell he wanted it done, so I rushed to put my stuff down and snatch the notepad and pen. He strode out the door and I scurried behind him. As we continued on, I realized we were using the front steps, emerging for all to see!

Two young men opened the doors and he, taking prideful strides, exited the building and began the march to the bottom. I followed behind him, keeping a safe distance. I pressed my ear piece, brushing back a loose strand of hair, and made sure he couldn't hear me.

"Touring weapons factory, listen to me until I tell you to stop," I whispered through pursed lips. I reached the bottom and ducked into the car. I watched the marble building be left behind as we drove through the bustling city. People were entering and leaving stores, restaurants, and office buildings at a surprising rate. I had never known someone to take a break from work and walk around town! We left the city, driving into the countryside. When a building came into view, he pointed it out as the factory. I nodded, excited for such a discovery.

It wasn't as exciting as I had hoped. This was only the beginning of places I needed to get too. All this place gave me was proof they were making bullets. Oh well, I pressed the earpiece off and got back in the car.

He snatched my notebook and reviewed my writing. He nodded along as he read my points and handed it back to me,

"You have excellent handwriting," he said absentmindedly. I nodded, unsure what to say to that. I stared out the window, wishing for my parents, or my siblings, or even just a

familiar face. I felt so isolated, alone. I had hoped the excitement would mask those feelings, but it only amplified them.

I was pulled quickly out of the car. On the way up I was handed a large stack of reports. "Enter these in Isabella," he commanded and turned the corner for a meeting, while I returned to the office. I placed the reports down, but instead of entering them into my laptop, I took a closer look at his office.

While it was nothing special, he had papers and reports strewn all over the desk and tables around the office. I walked around slowly, just in case there was something interesting.

I noticed a report on military support in terms of men, and was relieved to see how small it was. Then as I scanned the page I faltered, seeing the heavy recruitment plans. I shook my head, and sat down at my desk, and started entering in the numbers, but instead of talking as I did it, I stretched it out so that I would be able to take it home at the end of the day.

At five, I began to pack up my stuff, on my way out though, a younger coworker a few years older than me stepped in my path, Mr. Romnav was watching nearby. "I'm Ivan, one of the office heads, I was wondering if you would like to join me for dinner tonight?" he asked shyly. I remembered the rules, no dating, but this wasn't a date, was it? "I thought we could get to know each other, Isabella is it?" he said. I nodded.

"Come along then," he said and I followed him outside. He brought me to a small traditional restaurant. We sat down at a small table in the corner. While we were eating, we had wonderful conversations.

"So, how long have you been here?" he asked me.

"What do you mean?"

"You're not from here, you don't have the right accent,"

"I came here from America a few weeks ago," I laughed,

"Wow, why did you come here?"

"To serve Imperia, I have citizenship here, though my parents moved to America a few weeks after I was born, so I never developed an accent," I giggled.

"We've been targeted, word has it they were infiltrated by Spanish spies years ago," he whispered, leaning closer.

I sucked in my breath, should I be doing this, did the rules matter?

"It's probably true, but why would they come and spy on us?"

"No one knows," he said mysteriously.

After our "date" we walked outside together. "It was nice to do this with you, Isabella, maybe we can do something together soon," he said. "Call me Bella," I said and walked away. "Ok Bella," he called after me as I hurried off into the night.

I heard a beep in my ear and pressed the earpiece.

"Isabella, why haven't you checked in?" Thomas's voice asked me.

"I was with a coworker,"

"You're supposed to keep to yourself,"

"How will that help me?"

"Follow the rules okay," he sounded exasperated.

"We'll see," I played with my hair, and pressed the earpiece when I tucked it back.

I didn't plan on following that rule. It wasn't a practical rule if I could get information out of Ivan.

I got home and finished entering the number into their software, and then copied them into Spanish software. I was drained, tired. I expected this to be much more enjoyable, trilling. What did they expect or want from me? Should I learn more about their motives? Was I even doing this right?

Later, just before I went to bed, I pulled a small photo out of my bag, the last image ever taken of my family together. It was shortly before they were caught, and us kids didn't know what they knew, they knew someone was bound to be wary of them.

Lucas's smile, so soft and warm. Sofia's arm warped around my mother's. I was perched in Papa's lap, so happy and innocent looking.

But I wasn't innocent to the world, how could I be when I had so many weapons stored under my bed.

I kissed my finger and ran it along their faces. Lucas and Sofia, safe in America. Mamá and Papá rotting in a cell. I felt just as imprisoned, and I knew deep down I would end up imprisoned too, just once I had fulfilled my role.

I placed the image back in my bag and lay down, resting my eyes for what seemed like a moment, yet lasted through the night.

When I awoke the next morning, I felt oddly giddy for the first time since I came here. I almost looked forward to seeing Ivan. Did I really have a crush on him? I shook my head to get back in the game. This was my job, and I had to put personal feelings aside. I showered, and brushed my teeth. I brushed my hair and even curled it, my brain wanted to look cute. I put on a green dress and put on my coat. I snatched my bag and walked out into the cold Imperia wind.

When I came into my office, I placed the papers into his waiting hands. I sat down at my desk to go through files, when I heard someone knock on the door. Mr. Romanov jerked his head towards the door and I opened it. Ivan stood waiting with two cups of coffee. He handed one to me and smiled.

"Thank you," I smiled.

"Thought you would enjoy this Bella," he giggled.

I smiled before he walked away. I sat down at my desk and sipped my coffee as I did my work.

"He fancies you," Mr. Romanow said knowingly.

"I can see that sir," I answered, smiling. I really shouldn't be interested in someone, but still I had to admit I was really interested in him.

That night, after I uncovered absolutely nothing, I packed up and got ready to go home. As I was walking out, Ivan fell into step beside me.

"Goodnight Bella," he said, getting the message I wanted to go home.

"Night," I replied and hurried down the stairs and towards my apartment. I pressed my earpiece, "Nothing," and pressed it again. I entered my apartment and made myself dinner before I went to bed.

Chapter Three

So This is Love

Rather than waking up and hitting repeat, I started a new routine, going to work, hanging out with Ivan, then sneaking information to Perma. I had never been more stressed, but I was also very happy with Ivan. After a while I accepted that I loved him, and that I was going to break the rules. I mean, it's my life I'm living, not the Spanish government's life.

Nearly a month later, I had barely gotten anything out to them, and I was disappointed that I couldn't be as helpful to the protection of the homelands as I wanted. I was still giving daily reports and they were still pleased with my work.

Ivan had called last night and asked me if I wanted to go to a show with him. I accepted of course! I inspected my appearance in the mirror. I wore a silver dress and braided my hair into a twisted hairstyle on the back of my head. I put on makeup, and actually tried to make it look cute, before taking my bag and coat and meeting Ivan near the work building.

"You look beautiful, thank you for joining me," he smiled.

"Of course, I wouldn't miss it for the world, handsome," I replied. He wore a suit and tie, and I never saw him in even a sport coat.

He takes my arm and leads me to the large, brightly lit, building that held the stage for the ballet. **The Nutcracker** was written out on the screen in three languages. We practically danced inside and showed the ticketmaster our tickets before finding our seats, which were actually pretty amazing, having a clear view of the stage.

Without either of us really noticing, our hands drifted together and rested, connected, on the armrest. Neither of us would have stopped it though. We watched twirling dancers glide across the stage. They jumped and spun and landed perfectly. I was truly amazed at the smooth movement and the way their bodies took center stage. It was so unlike the traditional Spanish style of dancing that used clothing to enhance the performance where here they tried to limit it!

After the fantastic show, Ivan and I walked through the city's streets. This part of town was so much cleaner, more like a model than a city. We stopped at a harbor, the ships barely visible on the dark water.

Ivan and I made eye contact, and I saw a flicker in his eye that I had ever seen before. I smiled, my eyes widening. He leaned in and we kissed. I had never felt this way, all the butterflies in my stomach took flight and soared.

We broke away from each other, and for the first time, I felt like I belonged.

"I love you," I whispered.

The next morning I hurried to work. I stepped in the door and found Mr. Romanov speaking with Ivan. "Good morning," I said politely. Mr. Romanov nodded and Ivan walked over and pecked my cheek before taking a few papers from the desk and walking away. I sat down and began entering the numbers into the database, as always. It was monotonous, all I ever did was review numbers and punch them in. Was this really helping them? Was I even doing the right thing? Did I know the whole story?

No, I have not been led astray, Perma would never lie to one of her own. I have a task to protect mi familia!

I pushed my questions away, I needed to stay on task. I spent my day entering useless information into two databases. People were in and out of the room, whispering with Mr. Romanov. I had never wanted to know what they were talking about more than I did today.

At five, Ivan showed up at the office. We kissed and he gave a final nod to Mr. Romanov before Ivan led me away. We stopped at a little cafe for dinner before I showed him my apartment. We sat down on the couch together and watched a movie while cuddling. It had surely been a dream, I couldn't possibly have found the one!

He kissed me goodnight before leaving, since we had work tomorrow we couldn't stay up all night. I entered a few things for Perma before leaving the room to take off the yellow dress I had on today. I had one last thing I needed, the numbers from one last factory. I knew my trust was running thin, now that I was in a relationship, I didn't have much time until my secret was revealed, before I would want to tell him. I needed to get one last thing to Perma, and then I could just get out what I could when I could.

Chapter Four

Building Up Before Crashing Down

I pulled my catsuit out of the suitcase. I tucked my tools into the pockets, including a knife, grappling hook, and pistol. I let my hair down, brushing it out before pulling it into a flat bun. I pulled the black mask down and put on an older red coat to cover what I was wearing. I strapped on the black boots with small heels and caught a taxi to the edge of town.

I watched the city go by from the car window. The bright lights flashed by, quick and unimportant. "Where are you headed to miss?" the driver asked me politely. "Oh, just a spot to walk with a loved one," I lied, though I really was doing this for my family. "Hope you enjoy it," he answered as we pulled to a stop. I got out of the car and waited until he pulled away before starting the walk along the path to the factory. It had been pointed out to me a long time ago, though I had never been. I had my badge hidden in my pocket in order to gain access. I hoped the pistol could go unnoticed.

Once I got to the building. I looked around at the cameras. They all appeared to be easily moved, I could fix them. I quickly hid my coat near the building and pulled up the mask. I pulled stickers designed to cover cameras out of my pocket and climbed the scaling, running along the roof to cover the cameras. Once I was finished, I jumped down, landing softly in the snow. I went inside, my footsteps echoing through the halls.

I heard a soft beeping sound, and pressed my earpiece. "Listen closely, I have the last of what you need," I whispered. I crept into the dark room, a computer running a machine that seemed to be printing handbooks. I pulled out a flashlight and took a closer look. *Never fear, preparation for war is here! Twenty ways the Imperia will keep you safe.* I quietly read the title aloud.

I guided over to the computer that seemed to be running it and took a closer look. There was a small USB port that I could plug something into, and the software seemed to be completely focused on the books. I pulled out a flash drive and plugged it in for the people on the other side of the earpiece to inspect. Once I got my affirmation I took out my chip and took a look around.

I heard more footsteps, I was no longer alone. I quickly sent my grappling hook up to the loft in the ceiling and watched from there as two people came into the room. They held whispered conversations as I waited for them to leave. At one point, I accidentally made a small noise from hitting the wall, but not enough to be investigated. The woman looked straight at me for just a moment before looking away and exiting the room, leaving the man alone, except for me of course. I watched him carefully, and when he left I jumped down. The room was still dark, and they were out of earshot. The cameras had been covered, I was safe.

The lights all switched on at once. I ran to the door, but it closed shut and locked before me. As did the others. I panicked, and tried to hide, but the brights left me no shadow to conceal myself. Police came in, and locked eyes with me.

I was trapped.

My mission was over

I had been caught.

Two days later, I waited in my cell for a “mystery visitor,” though I knew it was an agent coming to get me. Maybe I would even get to speak with my parents! I heard footsteps and sat up quickly. Thomas himself walked into view, a tall handsome man if he hadn’t worn the expression that clouded his face. I drew back, the cynical grin with eyes feigning sorrow would never be a good sign.

“Ah Isabella, I see you took one too many risks,” he said, as if scolding a child.

“Only because I had no choice,” I answered.

“Oh but you did,”

“No, I knew what you needed,”

“It is of little importance, you have done well, we got the necessities from you,”

“Don’t you want more, you still need me,”

“One thing you never learned is that Perma never needs. We could have gotten more but we will work with what he have,”

“What are you saying, you have to let me out, I have to see my family again,” I cried out, panicked now.

“No, I don’t. You live and die for Perma, and she no longer requires your assistance,”

Epilogue

Truth Before Lies

"Bella, we have to speak with you, it's time you know the truth," Ivan's voice awakens me. I sit up quickly from the floor of my cold, damp cell. I have been here for nearly a week. Ivan had come once, but he hadn't said much of anything, just said hello and left.

I stood up and faced him, fearing what he was about to say.

"There was never a mystery surrounding your identity, we always knew you were a spy," Mr. Romanov's voice explained as he came into view.

"But, why didn't you stop me?" I asked, confused and in disbelief.

"We wanted Perma to get that information! Bella, haven't you realized? It was fake, all fake!" Ivan cried out.

"But, when you geared up for war they needed to defend themselves," I said, trying to get answers.

"Oh Bella, is that what they told you before they left you here to rot? I heard everything that man said. We only began prepping when our sources reported Perma was beginning to gather resources to expand their land power, by coming here." he explained.

"Perma is the devil in the closet, we are only trying to defend ourselves. We know everything, your relations with your parents, who you really are, it wasn't hard they spilled quite a few things." he added.

I turned my back to them. It all added up, Perma had a large military, they had always hungered for power. I whirled around, panting but pleased.

"We can protect your family, and you can lead our forces against the ones you once served. Once they take us, everyone will fall. You have to help us, you have considerable skill, if we hadn't known your identity already we would have never guessed," Mr. Romanov said.

I took a moment to consider the consequences of the choice I was able to make.

"Yes, I will join you, we will free the nations and its peoples," I said, straightening to my full height. They unlocked and opened the door to my cell and I flew into my love's arms. The truth was out, and the fight was on.

The people who had always insisted on hurting my family were going down in flames.

To be Continued

Molly Hutchison

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Collegiate School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Z. Thornton

Category: Short Story

Between the Fences

August 16, 1987

The garden- which Elizabeth had spent several years curating (long before Riley or Emmett ever entered her world)- was her sacred place. She could work for hours upon hours plucking this, cutting that, and just taking in the sights and sounds of nature. On that particular day, pungent aromas from the lilies and daffodils that lined her white picket fence wafted towards her as she knelt in the dirt. Elizabeth reached for the spade but was halted by the squeal of the garden gate as it swung open to reveal a short figure. His mousy hair covered his eyes, but there was no mistaking her little boy. He swept a tendril out of the way and scanned the yard before finding her and running over, as he trampled the pile of dead weeds she had just pruned. Just large enough to knock her off her feet, he tackled her and they rolled through the dirt, stopping only when they rolled over the garden hose.

It was only there amongst the tall grass, basking in the sunlight together when he was wrapped in her arms that she realized he probably had not bathed in several days. Instead of worrying, she drew him in tighter, embracing the dirt-covered boy and all of his quirks. She inhaled, and the sweet scent of daffodils and lilies was replaced with dirt and sweat from her sweet boy. His small body filled her arms nicely as they were just long enough to envelop him and swallow him up. Although Emmett had just turned three, his affinity for hugs had yet to cease. Elizabeth took great pride in the fact that she was still his safe place and that he knew he could always run back to her.

Elizabeth's eyes were shut, but she could feel that she and Emmett were no longer alone. She sensed another small human and could feel the warmth it radiated. The slow, raspy breathing hinted to Elizabeth just who it could be; Riley, her sweet little girl with asthma. Not missing a beat, Elizabeth reached up and drew Riley into her hug. As she nestled down next to Emmett, Riley sighed. All three were content in their company, bathing in the warm glow of the sun above. They laid there for what seemed like forever. They never spoke, but instead took in their surroundings; the flowers swaying gently in the breeze, the honey bees buzzing through the air, even the squirrels chattering in the trees. Each sight and sound was a gift to Elizabeth, a reminder that good things were still to come. That her children still loved her and would continue to come back to her.

Elizabeth knew that days like this would come to an end and would one day be replaced by brooding teens and silent dinner tables. Although there was a long list of things she needed to do, at this moment she could not remember any of them. All that mattered was her children.

After a long time, she drew back from the children so she could take a good look at them. Little Emmett had piercing blue eyes and the longest eyelashes she had ever seen. His chestnut hair was too long, but she didn't dare come near it with scissors. His little freckles painted his face like the constellations in the night sky. Elizabeth knew he would one day grow insecure of this feature, but she would make it her mission to relieve him of that embarrassment. Then there was sweet Riley. Although she was almost seven, the young girl sometimes acted as if she was much older. She loved her little brother and she cared for him like a mother. If ever he got hurt, she was the first to console him. She too had piercing blue eyes, but she took after her mother and had blonde hair. No freckles adorned her small face, but her rosy cheeks told Elizabeth that she had been running through the yard before joining her and Emmett.

As Elizabeth looked at her children, she saw only love in their eyes. These two precious souls lay before her, loving her unconditionally. They stared intently at their mother before tackling her once more in a hug. It was Riley who spoke first, "Mamma?" she asked, as she snuggled further into her mother's embrace.

“Yes, dear?”

“Daisy got out again. Emmett left the gate open.” She propped her head up on her hands and stared at her mother. Emmett did the same as his older sister and he retaliated, “I did not leave the gate open... It was Riley.”

Elizabeth was used to their quarreling, and she hoped it never ended. Though it was tough when her children fought, she knew it meant they still loved each other, unlike her and her brother, whom she had not spoken to in ten years. She stroked Emmett’s hair as she responded, “It’s okay, dear. Why don’t we go look for Daisy? She mustn’t have gotten far.”

As she stood to search for their missing dog, her two children clung to her waist. She grabbed each of their hands and led them through the open gate and out onto the cobblestone pathway. Emmett trailed behind in his red rain boots that he insisted on wearing even on the sunniest of days. Riley led the charge in her white sundress. She was barefoot, and, with her flowing blonde hair, she looked fit for the vast prairies of her *Little House* books.

All three of them knew just where to look for Daisy; the neighbor’s vegetable garden. Although Daisy was just a puppy, she had gotten into the habit of chasing rabbits into the neighbor’s vegetable garden quite often. Elizabeth constantly apologized to her neighbors, promising each time would be the last. Unfortunately for her, each time she thought it was getting better, one of her children left the gate open again.

Riley led the trio between the fences to the neighbor’s wrought-iron gate. Sure enough, it was wide open and their small border terrier was rolling in the tomato patch. Without skipping a beat, Riley ran and scooped up the little dog. She scolded it and returned to her mother, dog in hand. Elizabeth grabbed Riley’s free hand and one of Emmett’s as they walked back between the fences towards their own home.

As they returned to their yard, Elizabeth made sure the gate was closed. She led the group into the house and into the kitchen where she sat her children down to give them a snack. The blue chipped cupboards could have used a new coat of paint, and the old artwork on the refrigerator needed switching out. The dishwasher was full and needed emptying, and the pile of mail on the counter needed sorting. She eyed the open school supplies lists and made a mental note to deal with the shopping the next day. Deep down, Elizabeth loved her imperfect kitchen; second only to her garden. She felt the most relaxed when she was cooking or baking; the warm scent of homemade goods filling the air, drowning out the day’s sorrows. No matter the mess, the end result was always worth it. She felt no greater pride than when her children stuffed their faces with her creations, many of which were made from ingredients from her front garden.

Elizabeth turned to face her children. “What’s for snack today? We have goldfish, cheese sticks, applesauce, pretzels...” Elizabeth rattled off choices as she walked over to the pantry. She felt silly presenting these choices; she knew exactly what they wanted already.

“Goldfish and apple juice!” yelled Riley.

“Pretzels and milk!” copied Emmett.

She knew her children well. Elizabeth was just opening the refrigerator door when she saw a flash of blue through the front window. Her husband should have been home from work an hour earlier, but she was used to his tardiness. He worked late most days, but on Fridays, he was able to get off mid-afternoon. This was of course absolutely perfect as he could entertain the children while she tidied up around the house. Sometimes he took them out, whether it was mini-golfing or, every so often, even fishing. Some other times he took them on nature walks through the forest to collect flowers to put in a vase in the kitchen window; this was Riley’s favorite. Emmett loved when his father would take them into his study and read them stories from the big red storybook. Elizabeth hoped that today would be a story day as she too loved to listen to the stories as she cleaned. She loved hearing little gasps and giggles harmonizing with the melody of her husband’s deep voice.

As she poured a glass of milk for Emmett, Elizabeth gazed out the front window. Her driveway was empty; her car was in the shop getting fixed up for the third time that year. Her husband’s car was nowhere to be seen. The flash she thought she saw must have been a figment of her imagination. Her husband must have been caught late in a meeting and did not have time to phone Elizabeth first. She broke free of her daydream and handed Riley and

Emmett their glasses. Leaning back on the counter, she took in the sight; her two beautiful children eating peacefully together. Elizabeth took a moment to silently wish for days like that to never end. The children finished their snacks and placed their miss-matched bowls in the kitchen sink. Emmett tugged on his mother's shirt and asked, "Mamma? When's storytime?"

Elizabeth sighed and knelt down before her son. "Your father isn't home yet. Don't you want him to read to you?" "No, we want you to read," Riley chimed in, grabbing her mother's hand to lead her into the living room.

Elizabeth sat on the emerald green plush couch. She rearranged the pillows and grabbed a blanket to wrap them up in. Emmett walked into his father's study and stumbled back with the big red storybook in his hands. He almost toppled over as the book was nearly bigger than he was. Elizabeth scooped up Emmett and the book, placing him down next to her, and opened the book to the table of contents. The weathered book crackled as she turned the pages.

"Which one do you want to hear?" She asked as Riley pulled the blanket back and climbed under. "This one," Riley said and pointed to a number on the page.

Elizabeth flipped to the page and saw a picture of a lily at the top. She recognized the story. It was one they had not heard before, but she thought it was time.

And so, it was there, nestled between her two children, that Elizabeth opened the big red storybook and read them a story; her story.

April 9, 2019

It is the morning of what would have been my mother's sixty-seventh birthday. My book comes out today; a dedication to her and her life. She worked so hard to give Emmett and me a good life after my father walked out on us. Even at the tender age of seven, I could tell it took a toll on her. She was never quite the same; always looking out the front window, waiting for him to come back.

After my father left, she emotionally closed up. The warm and caring mother that I knew so well was gone. In her place was a cold, blank shell of a woman. She still cared for us, but even three-year-old Emmett could tell something was different. He was always asking when our father was coming home, and I think that made it worse. For her to be disappointing her children must have been very hard on her. As we grew older I tried to explain it to Emmett; that our father wasn't coming back and we shouldn't keep reminding her of his absence.

Our days of running through the yard playing or singing in the kitchen were over. They were replaced by silent dinners and cold afternoons reading by ourselves. I don't blame my mother for my melancholy childhood. I am proud of her for the way she overcame her own sadness and continued to provide for Emmett and me. This doesn't mean, however, that I don't wish for happier memories.

So, this story is essentially her "redo". This is my way of giving my mother the "happily ever after" she deserved. For once, I wanted to see what it would be like to have a happy memory of my mother at that time. Thus, *Between the Fences* was born; a tribute to my mother and to the memories I wish we shared.

Akina Johnson

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: St Catherine's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Julie Elmore

Category: Short Story

The Killer Sitting Next to Me

I felt like I couldn't move. Paralyzed throughout my entire body. It was the day. I never thought I'd have to experience this, but it was happening. I forced myself out of the bed. I walked over to the bathroom, feeling numb. The grief took over my entire body. I turned on the sink. Splashed cold water onto my face. My eyes were foggy as they were filled with the sadness of my sister. This was the last time I was going to see her. I walked out of the bathroom and slipped on my black dress. I picked out my earrings and necklaces and put them on carefully. I went back to the side of the bed and sat. I heard a voice from downstairs. "Maya, breakfast is downstairs when you're ready." I didn't say anything, just made my way down the steps.

"Eat up. Breakfast is a good one today."

"I'm not hungry, Stefan."

"I know Maya, but we've gotta drive from Columbia to Danville in a few."

"Fine."

I stared at the plate of bacon and pancakes. I picked up a piece of bacon and ate it. I pushed the plate back towards Stefan and walked back upstairs.

A few minutes later Stefan and I were in the car on the way to Danville from our home in Columbia. It was completely silent except for the sound of The Beatles playing on the radio. As I sat in the passenger seat, Stefan kept looking over at me with a sympathetic look on his face. He said in his typical soft sweet tone, "You know, just because she's gone doesn't mean you can't celebrate her life today. Amaya would want you to be happy even if it is her funeral."

I felt bad. He was right, but I didn't want to hear it from him. I just wanted to be alone. No one knew me as Amaya did. I lost my best friend and my twin sister all at once. I didn't want to think about it; just to go to the ceremony to be with my sister for the last time. I felt my eyes get heavy, and the sound of The Beatles singing "Here Comes the Sun" started to fade.

I jumped a little when I felt a few taps on my shoulder. We made it to the cemetery, and I slept the entire way there. We were in Danville. I hadn't been here since the end of high school when I was packing up to go to Harvard for college. That was almost ten years ago, and I was back for the first time in what seemed like forever. It was a typical winter day; the sky was white and the trees danced with the cold breeze. Everything was still the same, not changing one bit after all these years. It was like I'd never left home.

Stefan asked, "Are you ready?"

I responded, "I guess," and got out of the car. As we walked to the cemetery, the air made my body feel frozen. Chills went up to my spine at the thought of my sister being dead. The authorities never gave us many details. Just said they found her dead in her apartment. There was a short investigation until they eventually realized they'd never find the killer. As I walked I thought of this and my sister.

When we reached the cemetery, something felt off. It was like I was there, but in another world. For a split second, I thought someone was watching me. With all of these things going through my head, I still tried my best to clear my mind because the day was about Amaya, not the things running through my head. While I sat, I looked around. Everyone was filled with grief. The dark clouds above us didn't make me feel any happier. When the ceremony started and a few of my family members spoke about Amaya's life, my eyes began to get blurry and tears welled up in my eyes. I knew I had to pull myself together, so I wiped my eyes before the crying became endless. As I looked up, I noticed that Jason, Amaya's husband, was acting strange. He wasn't paying any attention to the ceremony and he wasn't written in the program to speak about Amaya. Maybe he made the same decision as me and chose not to because he wasn't ready.

When the time came Stefan and I walked to Amaya's casket filled with grief knowing that it would be the last time we'd see her. We were the last people to see her because we wanted to spend as much time that we had left.

Although I was supposed to be in the moment with Amaya, all I could think about was her husband Jason. He was just being so... odd. He wasn't present during the funeral, and it didn't even seem like he cared. I also noticed that during the viewing he didn't even look at Amaya, who was his wife. Amaya had mentioned the marital issues that the two were going through. She had done something terrible. Cheating. She truly regretted it and thought they could move on from it. But they didn't. Jason started to get angry. He was always yelling at my sister and arguing with her over even the tiniest things. Amaya only told me, no one else. She'd call me in the middle of the night crying, wishing that the fighting would end. The temper would die down. That everything would be normal again. She told me all this, but I never mentioned it aloud because it wasn't my place to get involved. Jason. His temper, his yelling, his compulsiveness. I'd always known that he wasn't okay in the head. Even when we all found out that Amaya was dead, he didn't seem to care. He just acted like it was any other person. He stayed out of it and tried to avoid talking every time it came up. Honestly, I was surprised that he even came to the funeral.

All the avoidance. The uncontrollable temper. Everything. He didn't acknowledge Amaya ever after that day. The carelessness regarding Amaya's murder... It was all making sense. Oh my god. It was... him. It was Jason! My sister, dead in her house, no way to find the murderer. It was right in front of my face the entire time! I looked over my shoulder and saw him standing in the back row of chairs staring me down.

I knew it was time for me and Stefan to leave. We thanked the funeral home services and made our way out of the cemetery. As we were leaving, Jason was out of my sight, and I had no idea where he'd gone. As we reached the car and I began to open the door, a hand pushed my door closed. I looked up fearing that it'd be who I thought it would be. Jason.

"I'm sure the drive home is going to take forever. Would you care to join me for a drink?" Jason asked.

"Oh, I'm sure we'd love that, right Amaya?" Stefan said, trying to add happiness to his voice.

"I was thinking that it would just be the two of us, Amaya. You know, we did know Amaya best, and she'd want this, right?" Jason said, with a stern tone in his voice.

I was terrified. The look in his eyes made me feel like he was up to something, and I didn't want to know what it'd be. The terror of what he was capable of. I didn't know what to do until the words slipped out of my mouth

"Sure, I'd love to."

Instant regret. This may have been the worst decision to make.

"Sounds good to me. I'll be waiting here Maya." Stefan said, clueless to everything.

"Alrighty then! We can take my car since it's my treat!" Jason excitedly said.

I made my way to Jason's beat-down, rugged old-school car. When I looked over at him, he wasn't paying any attention to me. I grabbed my phone and texted Stefan.

"Track location. Send police to bar. Don't freak out."

God knows sending the text was risky, but I had to do it. For Amaya. I looked back at Stefan. He didn't have his phone in his hand. Would he see the message? Oh no! The funeral. He had turned off his phone for the funeral. There was nothing I could do now but hope that he'd turn his phone on eventually. I shoved my phone back in my purse and opened the car door. As I sat in the passenger seat, the car reeked of days-old food and was filled with half-drunk water bottles. Jason got the car key from his back pocket, put the key into the ignition, and put it in drive.

As we drove down the road, slower than ever, Jason made small-talk.

"So! Long time no see. How've you been, Maya?" he asked, with an egotistical smile on his face.

"I know what you did!" I blurted out.

Jason's face went from a petty smile to a resting face as straight as a line.

"Oh, I know you know. I saw all the messages between you and Amaya. All those late-night phone calls. I know everything," he said.

"So you know that I know you killed my sister?" I said sternly, yet dreading the true answer that I was thinking of.

"You know something, Maya? You know too much. Too much can put you in danger," Jason said.

I didn't say a word. Just kept my mouth shut. We were only a few blocks away from the bar but I was still so scared. Was Jason even going to the bar? Was he going to kill me just like he did Amaya? Two blocks away. Jason kept looking at the road, and to his rearview mirror. Road. Rear-view mirror. Road. Rear-view mirror. Road. I still didn't say a word. There was no radio in his car. I glanced at where the box should've been, but there was nothing there. It seemed as if it had been taken out of the car, or broken. I looked back outside the window. Down the street. As my heart was racing, I heard the indistinct sound of sirens. Stefan. He got my message and sent the cops to the bar. I was finally met with a sense of relief. I didn't want to be stuck in this car with Jason if he was the man who murdered my sister. As we were eye view of the bar, which was now surrounded by cops, Jason began to slow down, and take his foot off the gas. Was this finally it? Was he going to confess and give up? Just as we got closer to the bar I said to Jason,

“See, it’s over for you. You were never going to win. You lost.”

Jason chuckled. I couldn’t believe that he was laughing when the possible worst moment of his life was about to happen. His laughter grew louder and louder, until he jammed his foot onto the gas, bolting past the bar. Next thing I knew we were going down the street as fast as Jason’s car could take us, with herds of police cars chasing behind us.

Hilda Joseph

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: J R Tucker High School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Kayleigh Conner

Category: Dramatic Script

Script

Hidden Persona

[Scene 1]

[The scene opens on a dimly lit, empty street. Every window on the block is dark and closed off. The entire neighborhood is asleep on this winter's night, except for one high school girl]

STELLA

(Exhales sharply and thinks aloud) It's so cold, I should have come out another night. (Continues to think aloud) (Shakes her head) No, I can't keep putting this off, I have to finish the night segment on my blog. My viewers are counting on me.

[She walks further away from her apartment building and almost disappears into the unlit side of the neighborhood. The only thing visible is her shiny camera reflecting off the one street lamp.]

[Suddenly, Stella shrieks so loudly]

[A deeper and unfamiliar voice follows her scream:

Shut up punk, just get in the car.]

[Her muffled cries for help and the starting of an engine remain the last sounds of the night.]

A VOICE OFF STAGE:

And...CUT!

[Jace, a curly brown-haired, high school senior, enters the auditorium stage with a clipboard and pencil in hand. The lights turn back on, and the stage sets are quickly taken down. A whole group of crew and cast come out to the front.]

JACE

Nice work, guys! Stella, you nailed that shriek. (Points to Derek who was the unfamiliar voice) And Derek, you got the timing correct this time!

STELLA

(Almost blushing) Thank you, Jace.

DEREK

(Grins profusely) Thanks, Mr. Director. (Playfully salutes him)

JACE

(Faces everyone in the crew and cast) Okay everyone, next rehearsal is this Friday. Make sure to wear all black so we can test out the new lighting the coding club made for us! See you guys soon!

[Everyone starts cleaning and packing up their belongings and heads in different directions. Stella spots her mother and younger brother standing at the entrance of the auditorium. She makes her way towards them.]

STELLA

(Confused) Mom? (Looks at her brother) Silas? What are you guys doing here?

MRS. TRENT

Hey sweetie, we wanted to stop by and watch your rehearsals. Your brother suggested.

SILAS

No I did not. (Rolls eyes)

MRS. TRENT

You're doing great! (Gestures to the stage) Everyone is doing amazing actually!

STELLA

(Smiles) Thanks mom. (Looks at Silas) What did you like about it Silas?

SILAS

I liked it when the guy kidnaps you. (Starts laughing)

MRS. TRENT

(Scoldingly) Silas!

STELLA

(Laughs with Silas) Oh wow.

SILAS

(Looks at his mom) I'm kidding mom, don't freak out. (Looks at Stella) Stell', that was pretty impressive. Guess you learned acting from all those times you pretended like your homework was done.

STELLA

(Annoyed) So you woke up this morning and chose violence?

MRS. TRENT

(Shakes her head in disbelief) You two, cut it out!

[Jace walks by Stella, Silas, and Mrs. Trent]

JACE

(Excited to see Stella) Stella!

STELLA

(Her eyes meet Jace) Jace! (Her heart flutters)

JACE

(Looks at Stella's mom and brother) And you two must be her mom and brother. I'm Jace, it's nice to meet you guys.

MRS. TRENT

Hi Jace, nice to meet you too! Wow, you're such a poised and polite young man.

[Jace grins eagerly and waves goodbye, and Silas rolls his eyes. Meanwhile, Stella is too lovestruck to talk or move.]

SILAS

Mom, can we please leave now?

MRS. TRENT

(Knowingly looks at Stella and smirks) So...is he coming home for dinner tonight?

STELLA

(Snaps back into the moment and starts to jumble her words) Huh? What, him, no. I don't even know him. Pft, dinner. You're so funny, mom.

SILAS

(Stares blankly at his sister) Yeah, I think now's a good time to leave.

[Mrs. Trent, Silas, and Stella leave the school auditorium where Stella's play rehearsal was happening. Mrs. Trent and Silas get into Ms. Trent's car and drive home. While Stella drives back home in her car.]

[Scene 2]

[At the Trents' home, three cars are parked in the driveway. The kitchen-dining room light shines brightly through their partly open windows. Mr. Trent just arrived home, and all four of them are about to eat dinner.]

MR. TRENT

(Takes a seat at the dining table next to Silas) Now kids, I want you both to be more aware of your surroundings the next time you walk alone from school or when you're by yourselves. (Nods head in Silas's direction)

SILAS

Dad, I'm always careful. (Takes a sip of his water and accidentally disproves his point by spilling the rest of the water on his clothes) Uh, oops.

STELLA

(Rolls her eyes at Silas) What's the matter dad, is something wrong?

MRS. TRENT

I think your dad is just giving you both a reminder, it's always good to put it out there.

MR. TRENT

(Finishes giving Silas the look) Yes, your mom is right. But actually, there is something wrong as well.

MRS. TRENT

Oh dear.

STELLA

What happened dad? Kill the suspense.

MR. TRENT

(Eats a spoonful of his mashed potatoes first and then starts talking) Well, I was speaking with our lovely neighbor Mr. Drummer, and he was talking about a few break-ins in this neighborhood. He cautioned us to be careful.

SILAS

(He sharply draws his attention to his father) What? Break-ins? In our neighborhood?

[Both Stella and Mrs. Trent raise eyebrows at each other]

MR. TRENT

(Nods head in agreement with Silas) That's exactly what I thought. But I still told Mr. Drummer that we'll be careful and that our high home security system would let us know if anything was the slightest of trouble. (Takes a sip of his water) However, Mr. Drummer continued. (He looks around at his family) This part might be a bit skin crawling, Silas, but I need you to pay attention.

SILAS

I always pay attention (Grins eagerly)

MR. TRENT

(Ignores Silas's arrogance) Mr. Drummer's sister called him on one of the nights of the break-in and told him that her son was having constant dreams about Mr. Drummer getting hurt. To top it all off, that following morning was the day Shrikan, his cat, died.

MRS. TRENT

(Worriedly) Oh my God! That poor man!

STELLA

Dad, that's unfortunate for Mr. Drummer, but what does that have to do with the break-ins?

SILAS

Yeah! And why did you specifically mention that I have to pay attention?

MR. TRENT

(Sighs heavily) His cat's death was not natural. (Pauses) He was killed.

STELLA AND SILAS

What?!

MRS. TRENT

Mrs. Drummer told me that Shrikan died last week because of old age. (Concerned) What are you saying? Was he sick so he had to be put down in that way? Or did a car hit him accidentally?

MR. TRENT

(Tries to calm his wife) Honey, they didn't tell anyone the truth at first because they did not want to alarm anyone. Mr. Drummer decided to tell me now because he realized it's better that he spread awareness of the situation to prevent it from happening to anyone else.

SILAS

Prevent what from happening?

MR. TRENT

When they reported it to the police, they knew it wasn't going to count as a big deal. But apparently, it became the missing lead for the break-in cases because whoever hurt Shrikan was involved with them also.

STELLA

(In bewilderment) Okay, dad. I understand the lesson. Lock the doors. And be safe when walking alone. Got it. (Mouths to herself: WHAT)

MS. TRENT

(Shakes her head in confusion and disbelief) This is a lot you're throwing at us. But we needed that reality check. You kids have been slacking off in taking things seriously.

SILAS

(Gets up to leave the dining room) I still don't understand how this concerns me, but I'll be safe.

[Stella, Silas, Mr. and Mrs. Trent all leave the dining room and go their separate ways.]

[Scene 3]

[A little later, Stella is in her room talking on the phone with her friends]

STELLA

You will never believe what happened today! Jace was totally flirting with me during rehearsals.

[HALEY (Her friend on the phone): Omg, no way! You mean *the Jace Ruiz*?!The coolest and most popular guy in our school?!

STELLA

(Nods her head with pride and smirks) Yep, the Jace Ruiz.

[HALEY: Well, did you flirt back? What did you say? What did you guys talk about?]

STELLA

Uh...I-

[HALEY: Girl, don't tell me you just stood there.]

STELLA

I...yeah..I just stood there.

[HALEY: (Groans in frustration) NO, you lost your chance to be with *the Jace Ruiz*!]

STELLA

No I didn't! (Argues back in defense) I still have a whole week of rehearsals left with him and then two whole show nights to make it up!

[HALEY: And thank God for that, because you need all the time in the world. You also need my help, but you never ask.]

STELLA

Yeah, last time I asked for your help, I ended up babysitting some dude's twin brothers.

[HALEY: (laughs out loud in memory of the story) That was hilarious! Ah, good times. (Pauses) Well, I got to go soon, have you got any other updates?]

STELLA

No, it's been a pretty uneventful week--(pauses) Actually! On second thought, my dad was talking about a few break-ins in my neighborhood and how our neighbor's cat's death was somehow mysteriously tied to the break-ins.

[HALEY: Girl, what?! Why didn't you tell me sooner? This is way juicier than your non-existent love life.]

STELLA

Okay, yeah, yeah, yeah, I get it. (rolls her eyes)

[HALEY: Haha, but stay safe though, and let me know if anything happens. Love you, bye!]

STELLA

Bye Haley, love you too. (She hangs up the phone)

[Curious about the break-ins, she decides to do research on her laptop through several news websites and blogs. She finds a few sources and clicks on the links.]

(Thinks aloud) This news website is useless. It doesn't even cover our side of the neighborhood. (Continues to type and research different sites. Soon, she comes upon a blog post, and she clicks on it) Okay, this is more promising. They have a description of the possible culprits. That's helpful.

[Just then, Stella's door swings open and Silas walks in]

Don't you know how to knock?

SILAS

Oops, my bad. (Shrugs his shoulder)

STELLA

What do you need?

SILAS

Help me with my English homework.

STELLA

No, I'm busy, go away.

SILAS

You always say that!

STELLAS

What are you talking about?! I always help you!

SILAS

Ugh, I knew I should have dropped out in 7th grade last year.

STELLA

Why are you thinking of dropping out for one mere English homework?

SILAS

(Distracted) Ooh, what're you working on? (Looks at her screen and gasps) Is that information on the break-in?

STELLA

Shush! And yes, I'm curious.

SILAS

I'll help. Try searching for something like black cat shrikan.

STELLA

Nothing's going to show. Probably just some random black cats. (Searches for "black cat shrikan" anyway)

[An image of Shrikan in the arms of Mr. Drummer pops up. Next to the image is a link to an article. Stella clicks on it. The website opens a page with multiple pictures of Shrikan and haunting words next to each one. Some even spell out "BAD LUCK" and "GET RID OF THIS CAT." Stella and Silas look at each other in silent shock.]

[Silas becomes the first to break the silence.]

SILAS

Dang, what did the cat ever do to them?

STELLA

This is so strange. Look at the date this was published, it was way before the cat's passing. Has anyone even bothered to look at this bizarre blog? Who even created it?

SILAS

(Takes the mouse pad and scrolls down) It's an unknown publisher, but their blog motto is "yes sir" with an emoji saluting.

[A brief silence]

STELLA

(Eyes open wide in realization) Wait a minute...Derek always says-

[Suddenly an ear-piercing shriek from downstairs interrupts her.]

SILAS and STELLA

(Looks at each other in concern) Mom!?

[Silas and Stella race downstairs. Meanwhile, Mrs. Trent slipped on a pool of water next to where Silas was sitting at the dining table. She is on the ground, and Mr. Trent is helping her get back on her two feet.]

STELLA

Mom! Are you okay? (Rushes to her mom's side and then angrily looks at Silas) Look what your dumb self did! You spilled water, didn't clean it up, and mom had to suffer for your mistakes.

SILAS

Mom, I'm sorry. Are you okay (Sheepishly walks towards his mother)

MRS. TRENT

I'm okay, guys. Thank you for your concerns. I should have paid attention.

MR. TRENT

Your mom is a strong woman. (Gently squeezes Mrs. Trent) But what are you guys doing up this late on a school night?

SILAS

(Blurts out everything) Dad! Stella and I found a blog that was created way before Shrikan passed away with different threats and images to get rid of the cat!

[Both Mr. and Mrs. Trent raise a concerned eyebrow at Silas.]

STELLA

No, it's true, he's telling the truth. Shrikan was being targeted for a while.

MRS. TRENT

That's odd. Honey, do you think it's because he's a black cat and he's just superstitiously known for bad luck?

MR. TRENT

Maybe. If what the kids are saying is true, then we need to tell Mr. Drummer. This became more than just a dead cat situation

SILAS

One could even call it a cat-astrophe!

STELLA

Now's not the time. (Annoyed)

[Scene 4]

[The Trents arrive at Mr. Drummer's driveway. All four of them wait patiently outside the Drummers' door. After a couple of minutes, the door opens and they are greeted by Mr. Drummer and his wife.]

MRS. DRUMMER

How can we be of help this evening?

MR. DRUMMER

Is something wrong?

[Once they were invited inside and were all situated, Stella and Silas explain the blog that they found and all the pictures and threat messages that were written around Shrikan. Mr. Drummer and Mrs. Drummers thank them for their empathy and their alertness to details online.]

MR. TRENT

We're very sorry you both had to endure this.

MRS. TRENT

If you guys need any help or assistance, please feel free to call us, we don't mind.

[Just as the Trents were getting ready to leave, a voice called after Stella behind her. It was Derek.]

STELLA

(Sharply turns around) Derek?! What are you doing here?

DEREK

(Looks back and forth from Stella to the Drummers) Mr. and Mrs. Drummers are my godparents. I sometimes come to visit them.

MR. DRUMMER

We love having him here, he's very quiet and unproblematic.

SILAS

(Quickly and in an accusatory manner) Wait a minute, did you create that blog?

DEREK

(His gaze drops) Well, I'm not supposed to tell anyone this...but yes, I made the blog. I overheard you guys talking about it, and I just couldn't keep it in anymore.

STELLA

Are you for real?

MRS. DRUMMER

Derek, sweetie, what are you trying to say?

[Everyone else is in shock]

DEREK

I'm telling the truth. I made that blog to throw people off. I didn't want anyone to find out that we...well...that we...

killed...Shrikan...

ALL but DEREK
WHAT, YOU KILLED HIM?!

DEREK

It was an accident, I swear! (Jumbles frantically) Jace and I were practicing our lines for the play together that night. He was trying to help me get the timing right for that kidnapping scene we were working on earlier today, Stella. Shrikan kept getting in the way, so we decided to pretend that you were the cat and used it as a reference.

MR. DRUMMER

Derek... I- (stops talking in disbelief)

DEREK

I- I'm sorry. I think I squeezed Shrikan too hard. I didn't realize it then, but he let out his last breath.

EVERYONE but DEREK

(Gasps)

DEREK

Jace and I did not know what to do. So he told me this brilliant plan to hide his body, fake the break-ins, lie about his passing date, and create a blog after this happened to throw people off our trail. (Sighs) But I couldn't hold it any longer.

MRS. DRUMMER

Derek. (Speechless) What couldn't you have told us the truth?

MR. DRUMMER

Young man, we're calling your guardians and letting them know this is unacceptable. You brought everyone here to fear, and that is not right.

DEREK

(Drops his gaze) I know, I'm sorry.

MR. TRENT

And who is this Jace? He sounds horrible, we must notify his parents as well.

[Mrs. Trent, Stella, Silas, and Derek look at each other knowingly]

STELLA

He's the director for that play I've been working on, dad (Her gaze drops down too) I've lost respect for him after hearing that.

MRS. TRENT

(Reassures Stella) It's best we give both Derek and the Drummers some space.

[As the Trents exit, the Drummers thank them again for their concern and willingness to be involved]

[Scene 5]

[The audience gets up to give a standing ovation to Stella's school play. Mr. and Mrs. Trent are in the audience with Silas as they cheer the loudest for Stella. She became the new stage director, and for her first opening night, she ran through her character's parts and her part as the director perfectly. Jace and Derek, on the other hand, received some in-school suspension and were not allowed to be in the play.]

[Once Stella finishes up backstage, she heads towards her family.]

MR. TRENT

That was wonderful, Stella! I'm so proud of you! (Gives her a gentle squeeze

MRS. TRENT

(Hugs Stella) It was beautiful, sweetie!

SILAS

(Smiles eagerly) I'm proud of you, sis.

STELLA

(Smiles back at her family) You all are the best.

[Haley and a bunch of Stella's friends and castmates walk up to her family and congratulate Stella]

[END SCENE]

Hidden Persona

[Scene 1]

[The scene opens on a dimly lit, empty street. Every window on the block is dark and closed off. The entire neighborhood is asleep on this winter's night, except for one high school girl]

STELLA

(Exhales sharply and thinks aloud) It's so cold, I should have come out another night. (Continues to think aloud) (Shakes her head) No, I can't keep putting this off, I have to finish the night segment on my blog. My viewers are counting on me.

[She walks further away from her apartment building and almost disappears into the unlit side of the neighborhood. The only thing visible is her shiny camera reflecting off the one street lamp.]

[Suddenly, Stella shrieks so loudly]

[A deeper and unfamiliar voice follows her scream:

Shut up punk, just get in the car.]

[Her muffled cries for help and the starting of an engine remain the last sounds of the night.]

A VOICE OFF STAGE:

And...CUT!

[Jace, a curly brown-haired, high school senior, enters the auditorium stage with a clipboard and pencil in hand. The lights turn back on, and the stage sets are quickly taken down. A whole group of crew and cast come out to the front.]

JACE

Nice work, guys! Stella, you nailed that shriek. (Points to Derek who was the unfamiliar voice) And Derek, you got the timing correct this time!

STELLA

(Almost blushing) Thank you, Jace.

DEREK

(Grins profusely) Thanks, Mr. Director. (Playfully salutes him)

JACE

(Faces everyone in the crew and cast) Okay everyone, next rehearsal is this Friday. Make sure to wear all black so we can test out the new lighting the coding club made for us! See you guys soon!

[Everyone starts cleaning and packing up their belongings and heads in different directions. Stella spots her mother and younger brother standing at the entrance of the auditorium. She makes her way towards them.

STELLA

(Confused) Mom? (Looks at her brother) Silas? What are you guys doing here?

MRS. TRENT

Hey sweetie, we wanted to stop by and watch your rehearsals. Your brother suggested.

SILAS

No I did not. (Rolls eyes)

MRS. TRENT

You're doing great! (Gestures to the stage) Everyone is doing amazing actually!

STELLA

(Smiles) Thanks mom. (Looks at Silas) What did you like about it Silas?

SILAS

I liked it when the guy kidnaps you. (Starts laughing)

MRS. TRENT

(Scoldingly) Silas!

STELLA

(Laughs with Silas) Oh wow.

SILAS

(Looks at his mom) I'm kidding mom, don't freak out. (Looks at Stella) Stell', that was pretty impressive. Guess you learned acting from all those times you pretended like your homework was done.

STELLA

(Annoyed) So you woke up this morning and chose violence?

MRS.TRENT

(Shakes her head in disbeliefs) You two, cut it out!

[Jace walks by Stella, Silas, and Mrs. Trent]

JACE

(Excited to see Stella) Stella!

STELLA

(Her eyes meet Jace) Jace! (Her heart flutters)

JACE

(Looks at Stella's mom and brother) And you two must be her mom and brother. I'm Jace, it's nice to meet you guys.

MRS. TRENT

Hi Jace, nice to meet you too! Wow, you're such a poised and polite young man.

[Jace grins eagerly and waves goodbye, and Silas rolls his eyes. Meanwhile, Stella is too lovestruck to talk or move.]

SILAS

Mom, can we please leave now?

MRS. TRENT

(Knowingly looks at Stella and smirks) So...is he coming home for dinner tonight?

STELLA

(Snaps back into the moment and starts to jumble her words) Huh? What, him, no. I don't even know him. Pft, dinner. You're so funny, mom.

SILAS

(Stares blankly at his sister) Yeah, I think now's a good time to leave.

[Mrs. Trent, Silas, and Stella leave the school auditorium where Stella's play rehearsal was happening. Mrs. Trent and Silas get into Ms. Trent's car and drive home. While Stella drives back home in her car.]

[Scene 2]

[At the Trents' home, three cars are parked in the driveway. The kitchen-dining room light shines brightly through their partly open windows. Mr. Trent just arrived home, and all four of them are about to eat dinner.]

MR. TRENT

(Takes a seat at the dining table next to Silas) Now kids, I want you both to be more aware of your surroundings the next time you walk alone from school or when you're by yourselves. (Nods head in Silas's direction)

SILAS

Dad, I'm always careful. (Takes a sip of his water and accidentally disproves his point by spilling the rest of the water on his clothes) Uh, oops.

STELLA

(Rolls her eyes at Silas) What's the matter dad, is something wrong?

MRS. TRENT

I think your dad is just giving you both a reminder, it's always good to put it out there.

MR. TRENT

(Finishes giving Silas the look) Yes, your mom is right. But actually, there is something wrong as well.

MRS. TRENT

Oh dear.

STELLA

What happened dad? Kill the suspense.

MR. TRENT

(Eats a spoonful of his mashed potatoes first and then starts talking) Well, I was speaking with our lovely neighbor Mr. Drummer, and he was talking about a few break-ins in this neighborhood. He cautioned us to be careful.

SILAS

(He sharply draws his attention to his father) What? Break-ins? In our neighborhood?

[Both Stella and Mrs. Trent raise eyebrows at each other]

MR. TRENT

(Nods head in agreement with Silas) That's exactly what I thought. But I still told Mr. Drummer that we'll be careful and that our high home security system would let us know if anything was the slightest of trouble. (Takes a sip of his water) However, Mr. Drummer continued. (He looks around at his family) This part might be a bit skin crawling, Silas, but I need you to pay attention.

SILAS

I always pay attention (Grins eagerly)

MR. TRENT

(Ignores Silas's arrogance) Mr. Drummer's sister called him on one of the nights of the break-in and told him that her son was having constant dreams about Mr. Drummer getting hurt. To top it all off, that following morning was the day Shrikan, his cat, died.

MRS. TRENT

(Worriedly) Oh my God! That poor man!

STELLA

Dad, that's unfortunate for Mr. Drummer, but what does that have to do with the break-ins?

SILAS

Yeah! And why did you specifically mention that I have to pay attention?

MR. TRENT

(Sighs heavily) His cat's death was not natural. (Pauses) He was killed.

STELLA AND SILAS

What?!

MRS. TRENT

Mrs. Drummer told me that Shrikan died last week because of old age. (Concerned)
What are you saying? Was he sick so he had to be put down in that way? Or did a car
hit him accidentally?

MR. TRENT

(Tries to calm his wife) Honey, they didn't tell anyone the truth at first because they did
not want to alarm anyone. Mr. Drummer decided to tell me now because he realized it's
better that he spread awareness of the situation to prevent it from happening to anyone
else.

SILAS

Prevent what from happening?

MR. TRENT

When they reported it to the police, they knew it wasn't going to count as a big deal. But
apparently, it became the missing lead for the break-in cases because whoever hurt
Shrikan was involved with them also.

STELLA

(In bewilderment) Okay, dad. I understand the lesson. Lock the doors. And be safe
when walking alone. Got it. (Mouths to herself: *WHAT*)

MS. TRENT

(Shakes her head in confusion and disbelief) This is a lot you're throwing at us. But we
needed that reality check. You kids have been slacking off in taking things seriously.

SILAS

(Gets up to leave the dining room) I still don't understand how this concerns me, but I'll
be safe.

[Stella, Silas, Mr. and Mrs. Trent all leave the dining room and go their separate ways.]

[Scene 3]

[A little later, Stella is in her room talking on the phone with her friends]

STELLA

You will never believe what happened today! Jace was totally flirting with me during rehearsals.

[HALEY (Her friend on the phone): Omg, no way! You mean *the Jace Ruiz*?! The coolest and most popular guy in our school?!

STELLA

(Nods her head with pride and smirks) Yep, *the Jace Ruiz*.

[HALEY: Well, did you flirt back? What did you say? What did you guys talk about?]

STELLA

Uh...I-

[HALEY: Girl, don't tell me you just stood there.]

STELLA

I...yeah..I just stood there.

[HALEY: (Groans in frustration) NO, you lost your chance to be with *the Jace Ruiz*!]

STELLA

No I didn't! (Argues back in defense) I still have a whole week of rehearsals left with him and then two whole show nights to make it up!

[HALEY: And thank God for that, because you need all the time in the world. You also need my help, but you never ask.]

STELLA

Yeah, last time I asked for your help, I ended up babysitting some dude's twin brothers.

[HALEY: (laughs out loud in memory of the story) That was hilarious! Ah, good times. (Pauses) Well, I got to go soon, have you got any other updates?]

STELLA

No, it's been a pretty uneventful week--(pauses) Actually! On second thought, my dad was talking about a few break-ins in my neighborhood and how our neighbor's cat's death was somehow mysteriously tied to the break-ins.

[HALEY: Girl, what?! Why didn't you tell me sooner? This is way juicier than your non-existent love life.]

STELLA

Okay, yeah, yeah, yeah, I get it. (rolls her eyes)

[HALEY: Haha, but stay safe though, and let me know if anything happens. Love you, bye!]

STELLA

Bye Haley, love you too. (She hangs up the phone)

[Curious about the break-ins, she decides to do research on her laptop through several news websites and blogs. She finds a few sources and clicks on the links.]

(Thinks aloud) This news website is useless. It doesn't even cover our side of the neighborhood. (Continues to type and research different sites. Soon, she comes upon a blog post, and she clicks on it) Okay, this is more promising. They have a description of the possible culprits. That's helpful.

[Just then, Stella's door swings open and Silas walks in]

Don't you know how to knock?

SILAS

Oops, my bad. (Shrugs his shoulder)

STELLA

What do you need?

SILAS

Help me with my English homework.

STELLA

No, I'm busy, go away.

SILAS
You always say that!

STELLAS
What are you talking about?! I alway *help* you!

SILAS
Ugh, I knew I should have dropped out in 7th grade last year.

STELLA
Why are you thinking of dropping out for one mere English homework?

SILAS
(Distracted) Ooh, what're you working on? (Looks at her screen and gasps) Is that information on the break-in?

STELLA
Shush! And yes, I'm curious.

SILAS
I'll help. Try searching for something like *black cat shrikan*.

STELLA
Nothing's going to show. Probably just some random black cats. (Searches for "black cat shrikan" anyway)

[An image of Shrikan in the arms of Mr. Drummer pops up. Next to the image is a link to an article. Stella clicks on it. The website opens a page with multiple pictures of Shrikan and haunting words next to each one. Some even spell out "*BAD LUCK*" and "GET RID OF THIS CAT." Stella and Silas look at each other in silent shock.]

[Silas becomes the first to break the silence.]

SILAS
Dang, what did the cat ever do to them?

STELLA

This is so strange. Look at the date this was published, it was way before the cat's passing. Has anyone even bothered to look at this bizarre blog? Who even created it?

SILAS

(Takes the mouse pad and scrolls down) It's an unknown publisher, but they're blog motto is "yes sir" with an emoji saluting.

[A brief silence]

STELLA

(Eyes open wide in realization) Wait a minute...Derek always says-

[Suddenly an ear piercing shriek from downstairs interrupts her.]

SILAS and STELLA

(Looks at each other in concern) Mom!?

[Silas and Stella race downstairs. Meanwhile, Mrs. Trent slipped on a pool of water next to where Silas was sitting at the dining table. She is on the ground, and Mr. Trent is helping her get back on her two feet.]

STELLA

Mom! Are you okay? (Rushes to her mom's side and then angrily looks at Silas) Look what your dumbself did! You spilled water, didn't clean it up, and mom had to suffer for your mistakes.

SILAS

Mom, I'm sorry. Are you okay (Sheepishly walks towards his mother)

MRS. TRENT

I'm okay, guys. Thank you for your concerns. I should have paid attention.

MR. TRENT

Your mom is a strong woman. (Gently squeezes Mrs. Trent) But what are you guys doing up this late on a school night?

SILAS

(Blurts out everything) Dad! Stella and I found a blog that was created way before Shrikan passed away with different threats and images to get rid of the cat!

[Both Mr. and Mrs. Trent raise a concerned eyebrow at Silas.]

STELLA

No, it's true, he's telling the truth. Shrikan was being targeted for a while.

MRS. TRENT

That's odd. Honey, do you think it's because he's a black cat and he's just superstitiously known for bad luck?

MR. TRENT

Maybe. If what the kids are saying is true, then we need to tell Mr. Drummer. This became more than just a dead cat situation

SILAS

One could even call it a *cat*-astrophe!

STELLA

Now's not the time. (Annoyed)

[Scene 4]

[The Trents arrive at Mr. Drummer's driveway. All four of them wait patiently outside the Drummers' door. After a couple of minutes, the door opens and they are greeted by Mr. Drummer and his wife.]

MRS. DRUMMER

How can we be of help this evening?

MR. DRUMMER

Is something wrong?

[Once they were invited inside and were all situated, Stella and Silas explain the blog that they found and all the pictures and threat messages that were written around Shrikan. Mr. Drummer and Mrs. Drummers thank them for their empathy and their alertness to details online.]

MR. TRENT

We're very sorry you both had to endure this.

MRS. TRENT

If you guys need any help or assistance, please feel free to call us, we don't mind.

[Just as the Trents were getting ready to leave, a voice called after Stella behind her. It was Derek.]

STELLA

(Sharply turns around) Derek?! What are you doing here?

DEREK

(Looks back and forth from Stella to the Drummers) Mr. and Mrs. Drummers are my godparents. I sometimes come to visit them.

MR. DRUMMER

We love having him here, he's very quiet and unproblematic.

SILAS

(Quickly and in an accusatory manner) Wait a minute, did you create that blog?

DEREK

(His gaze drops) Well, I'm not supposed to tell anyone this...but yes, I made the blog. I overheard you guys talking about it, and I just couldn't keep it in anymore.

STELLA

Are you for real?

MRS. DRUMMER

Derek, sweetie, what are you trying to say?

[Everyone else is in shock]

DEREK

I'm telling the truth. I made that blog to throw people off. I didn't want anyone to find out that we...well...that we...killed...Shrikan...

ALL but DEREK

WHAT, YOU KILLED HIM?!

DEREK

It was an accident, I swear! (Jumbles frantically) Jace and I were practicing our lines for the play together that night. He was trying to help me get the timing right for that kidnapping scene we were working on earlier today, Stella. Shrikan kept getting in the way, so we decided to pretend that you were the cat and used it as reference.

MR. DRUMMER

Derek... I- (stops talking in disbelief)

DEREK

I- I'm sorry. I think I squeezed Shrikan too hard. I didn't realize it then, but he let out his last breath.

EVERYONE but DEREK

(Gasps)

DEREK

Jace and I did not know what to do. So he told me this brilliant plan to hide his body, fake the break-ins, lie about his passing date, and create a blog after this happened to throw people off our trail. (Sighs) But I couldn't hold it any longer.

MRS. DRUMMER

Derek. (Speechless) What couldn't you have told us the truth?

MR. DRUMMER

Young man, we're calling your guardians and letting them know this is unacceptable. You brought everyone here to fear, and that is not right.

DEREK

(Drops his gaze) I know, I'm sorry.

MR. TRENT

And who is this Jace? He sounds horrible, we must notify his parents as well.

[Mrs. Trent, Stella, Silas, and Derek look at each other knowingly]

STELLA

He's the director for that play I've been working on, dad (Her gaze drops down too) I've lost respect for him after hearing that.

MRS. TRENT

(Reassures Stella) It's best we give both Derek and the Drummers some space.

[As the Trents exit, the Drummers thank them again for their concern and willingness to be involved]

[Scene 5]

[The audience gets up to give a standing ovation to Stella's school play. Mr. and Mrs. Trent are in the audience with Silas as they cheer the loudest for Stella. She became the new stage director, and for her first opening night, she ran through her character's parts and her part as the director perfectly. Jace and Derek, on the other hand, received some in-school suspension and were not allowed to be in the play.]

[Once Stella finishes up backstage, she heads towards her family.]

MR. TRENT

That was wonderful, Stella! I'm so proud of you! (Gives her a gentle squeeze

MRS. TRENT

(Hugs Stella) It was beautiful, sweetie!

SILAS

(Smiles eagerly) I'm proud of you, sis.

STELLA

(Smiles back at her family) You all are the best.

[Haley and a bunch of Stella's friends and castmates walk up to her family and congratulate Stella]

[END SCENE]

Vier Julien

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: St Catherine's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Julie Elmore

Category: Short Story

Sanity'll Be Gone Come Winter

A certain bittersweet nostalgia tugs at my heart as I stare from the edge of a flower-strewn cliff, my frail, olive-toned figure towering above what was once a bustling Vermontian city. I remember the taste of warm green tea, of maple syrup from the local farmers market, and the crunch of crisp fall leaves that piled up by the corners of my neighbors' lawns, leaves that I was always apt to jump into. I smile at the memories, at the cider donuts, the clouded breaths, and the warm hugs; however, my eyes don't seem to do the same. My eyes tear up and cower in the same manner that I always did at the thought of confrontation. Now, that need to worry no longer exists. It's calming at best and a detriment to my already-dwindling sense of community at worst.

I'm a survivor in a world that's been overtaken by foliage to the point of human extinction. I hardly know what happened other than what I could gather from the final alert sent out. I don't know how everyone died, I don't know if I'm the only one, I don't know why there are flowers growing from my skin, but I'm still here. Somehow, I'm still here. I'm unable to decide whether fate loves or despises me. I simply decide that it doesn't exist in an attempt to protect my own sanity.

Sanity. Sanity'll be gone come winter. Humans can't survive like this, right..? Not properly. I remember the radio dramas I watched of horrors, of apocalypse and of armageddon. Funny how someone so seemingly prepared would feel so dizzy all of a sudden. Dizzy at the fact that the line between fiction and reality has been blurred beyond repair? Dizzy at the sheer loss of hope? Not even I can tell.

A sharp, sudden rustle of the bushes lying behind my feet snaps me out of my thoughts. The eerie silence in the air is something that I haven't come to accept quite yet. Impulsively, I back up until dust showers the grassy, moss-padded cliff face. I don't dare look down for fear of falling to my death. There may not be anything to live for anymore, but clinging onto my old impulses is the only sort of comfort I can get my hands on. I brace.

Instead of some horrific flower-creature, out jumps an unassuming sprite around my age, medium height, stocky albeit half-starved, with long, curly ginger hair and brilliant hazel eyes. They dawn an old, oversized white hoodie that was clearly the only thing in their closet that hadn't been overtaken by flowers. Holly leaves poke into their left sleeve, desperately clinging to the cotton. A pocket knife is attached to their necklace and smeared with mud. If I weren't completely flabbergasted, I'd be able to infer that it was something that they used to cut through branches. For the time being, my traumatized mind has other ideas, however. I act accordingly. My stance drops to a defensive one, and I begin to shiver with horror. My brain hardly has enough time to realize just who the intruder is.

"Nononono, don't jump- Stop, stop, I'm not going to hurt you! Wh-What reason could I possibly have to hurt someone?" Despite the blunt nature of their words, their familiar voice is twinged with empathy, as if they know just how it feels, and as if they recognize me in the same way that I recognize them. As soon as they realize that my brown gaze is fixated on their pocket knife, they yank the necklace off and toss it to the ground. Silence fills the vicinity once again as I try to find words. Words to describe how nervous I am, words to make me any less confused than I already feel. Slowly, ever-so-slowly, I step forward. The world becomes nothing more than a blur around me. I want so badly to fall onto the ground and begin crying my eyes out in mere disbelief, and yet I don't.

"See? No harm. Sorry for scaring 'ya, Bea.." They raise their hands up briskly to show that they're not holding anything. As soon as they realise that they just subconsciously said my name, they freeze. Finally, I fix my posture as best I can despite them being the only thing in sight that isn't blurry.

"Willow..?" My own voice is a whisper. It's a pathetic, tiny whisper that breaks as I speak it. Willow, my childhood friend. A childhood friend just like this stranger, hair always messy, voice stuttering, face twinged with deep understanding. My vision still isn't particularly clear, so my mind decides to take its place. Rather than an exhausted young adult, my mind forms a happy-go-lucky kid in front of me, staring in shock, their favorite red flannel jacket tied around their waist. I blink, and already blurry shapes change around me. Bright colors swirl and churn in my peripherals, making me dizzy. Disconnected and confused, my breathing becomes heavier. Just as I'm about to fall,

the still shape of the other survivor suddenly comes to life and meets me in a warm, loving, strikingly familiar hug, holding me up so that I don't collapse. I bury my face into their shoulder as the tears begin to pour. All I can decipher is a few repeats of my name and the words, "we're gonna be okay."

"Willow," I repeat, voice cracking. "How in the world did you survive..?" A dream-like aura fills the air. Sudden relief makes me sleepy. Neither of us let go of each other. Considering our collective social depreciation, neither of us want to.

"I..," They quickly cut off. The emotion in their voice is so blatant that hearing it hurts me as well. "I know as much as you do, Bea. I don't know what happened, and I really don't think anyone still here does, all aside from that one know-it-all gal from elementary science class." They give a sad laugh. I chuckle under my breath. I vaguely remember her. Always raising her hand, always cutting in over everyone. Somehow, the memories only make me more upset. How come that kid, brilliant in every way, likely died, meanwhile I'm here, alive and well? I don't know how to respond, so I pull away from the hug and keep my hands resting on their shoulders. We stare at each other for a few minutes, nearly spacing out, until I break the silence.

"What do we do..?"

"We reminisce. There's nothing more we can do, right? Everything's so... Uncertain." They sigh. "I dunno, I'm doing my best." The lack of that familiar cheeriness in their tone just about breaks my heart. They sound just as tired as I am. We're in the same boat, right? Not wanting them to feel any sadder, I speak.

"Remember when we used to press those maple leaves?" A few more moments of my gaze searching theirs, and I start to tear up again. I keep my smile in an attempt to provide some sort of comfort. The world still spins around me, so I grip onto their shoulders for stability.

They nod, suppressing laughter. Gratitude in the form of relief sings their voice. "Course I do! 'N then there was that day in the summer. We tried to tap that same tree with a screwdriver and a bucket. How old were we, five? We thought we were so cool."

"Those were the days, weren't they.." I whisper. I look out upon the sun-bleached landscape. It's beautiful, it's so beautiful, but it's void of any familiarity that it once had. The pain that weighs down on my shoulders thinking of those poor people who died stabs me right where it hurts. Despite the attempted change of subject, I'm still in an immense state of mental distress, one that I hardly bother hiding. After all, who's still there to hide it from? Willow?

Willow's voice lowers to a whisper. They sound as if they're at some party, needing to go yet not knowing how to say it. "I know nothing's alright right now, Bea. I know it, but what I also know is that you have so much potential to be a hero for what remains of this blasted world," they mutter in a certain pleading tone.

"We're still so young, what did we even do to end up here?" I shiver.

"I know. I know it's unfair, I know that someone with a better grasp on adulthood should be in this position, but Burlington doesn't have that chance." Without another word, they hug me once again. "Bea, listen to me. I can't stay, I'm already dead, but you have a chance. Go to the City Hall. Other survivors have already been chatted with about the matter. I'm only here because some weirdo force chose me to go speak to you. Go to the City Hall on Church Street. It's safe there, okay?" They look to be suddenly fading out, panic manifesting in their stiff posture.

I take a deep breath and nod in acceptance. "Such skillful prophetic delivery, Willow," I mumble affectionately, too exhausted to react with much more. They having procrastinated for a good ten minutes just to talk to me one last time makes me feel fuzzy inside. I want to shut my eyes, I want to object, but I know that objection will both put me in danger of being overtaken by flowers and make my old best friend's advice futile. At that moment, I realize that the holly leaves aren't attached to Willow's sleeve, they're protruding from their skin. Furrowing my brow, I softly smile, ignoring the confusion that bubbles up in my chest. Without hesitation, I hold Willow close, comforting my teary-eyed friend with a gentle song of fall leaves and rolling New England hills as they disappear into nothingness.

Natalie Koehn-wu

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Maggie L Walker Governor's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: John Piersol

Category: Short Story

The Flower-shaped Crack

I stared down at the sidewalk below my beat-up vans. There was a large crack running diagonally across my path, splitting and fracturing into more cracks. If I blurred my eyes slightly, I could almost see a dolphin shape. I shivered a little in the cold morning air and tucked my hands even more tightly into my sleeves. I had forgotten gloves.

"Annie. Annie! Are you listening to me?" I looked up from the dolphin crack to my visibly frustrated sister. It was obvious that she had been trying to get my attention for a while. I studied her face, looking for a clue of what I had missed. Nothing. Sighing, I shook my head at her. She threw her hands up in frustration, "Why do I even bother trying to talk to you anymore? You can walk home the rest of the way by yourself, little snot." And with that, she was practically jogging towards home, leaving me behind.

I didn't bother trying to catch up or even apologize. It didn't really matter. Nothing did. Plus, I hadn't spoken for around a year, or 362 days but who's even counting. Not me. Certainly not me. Because nothing mattered. I kicked a stray rock into the dolphin crack. I had been wrong before, it definitely looked more like a flower. We had been halfway to school this morning, running late, when it had been canceled. There was a blizzard on the radar, predicted to be one of the worst storms to ever hit the good ol' town of Winston, Montana. So I was meant to be walking, more like running home. Home to our stockpiled canned goods. Home to our safe-room in the basement. Home to a fracturing family, absent parents, and an ever-angry sister. That didn't sound like fun. So instead of walking down that gray sidewalk, I turned to look across the street. Trees. I loved trees. So I crossed the street, just to look more closely at them of course.

I had lived in Winston, Montana my whole life but never before had I done something like this. I had a schedule, a set path that I followed every day without fail. This was strange for me, out of character. I had probably passed these same woods a thousand times going to and from home. Never before had I gotten this close.

When I stopped walking, I was close enough to reach out and touch a tree but still on the edge of the forest. Something rustled nearby. I froze. Bigfoot? Luckily, no. A cute little twitching nose, soft floppy ears, and a fluffy cotton ball tail. A brown rabbit stared at me from the underbrush. It had big brown eyes, someone might even say intelligent eyes if they believed a rabbit could be. I definitely didn't, I knew in that head was absolute fluff where the brain should be. Still, it continued to stare and I stared back. If rabbits could talk, this one would be having a conversation with me. I guessed it would go something like this.

"What are you doing here, stranger?"

"I'm not sure. I just wanted a closer look at the trees."

"We both know that's not true. You could see the trees just fine from the sidewalk. Tell me the real reason why."

"I suppose I wanted something more than what I have now. Life is gray, rigid, boring. When I used to dream as a young child, I always thought it would be more... I'm not sure. Just more."

"There's nothing wrong with that, Annie. For too long you have settled for unhappiness, unwilling to chase what you want. Today is the day you change that."

"How?"

"You already know how. Just follow the buttercups."

I blinked. The rabbit was gone. Buttercups? It was the middle of winter. Somehow I had moved and was standing directly on the tree-line. One more step and I'd be in the forest. I took a deep breath. The cold air burned my lungs. What was stopping me? I started walking.

The forest in winter was beautiful. Why I had never come before was a mystery to me. On the trees, water had frozen into small crystal beads along the branches. The dim light from the sun behind the clouds made them sparkle brilliantly, throwing light along the forest floor. I felt like I was walking on the bottom of the

ocean.

I followed a path created by the animals of the forest, winding and turning through the trees. There were smaller paths branching off from the main trail which reminded me of my flower crack from the sidewalk. Other than my soft footsteps, it was blissfully quiet.

I had first stopped talking as a challenge to myself. Before, when I used to talk, people always told me to be quiet. I had too many ideas, too many words, too many things to say. It annoyed people. So one day, I decided to stop talking and see if it would make people happier. I didn't think it would last long. I used to love talking. But the more time I stayed quiet, the more I learned to listen. Eventually, I realized that maybe being quiet was better. When you're quiet, people say lots of things around you that they wouldn't say if you were loud. So I stayed quiet, I listened, I let other people talk, and I learned that nothing matters. People suck, they will always suck. Friends talk bad about other friends. Parents cheat. Nice kids aren't nice. It's just about listening hard enough to hear their lies.

I stopped. In the middle of the path, sprouting from trampled grasses and dead moss; a singular buttercup. It waved cheerily at me in the wind, not seeming to know about the impossibility of its existence. I looked further up the path and could barely believe what I was seeing. A line of buttercups through the center of the trail stretched as far as I could see, disappearing behind a bend. To make sure I wasn't hallucinating, I bent down and gently plucked the buttercup by the stem. The small yellow flower sat in my palm. I held it up to my face and could feel the way the individual leaves tickled my cheek and could even smell it when I brought it to my nose. If this was a hallucination, it was a strong one. I had come this far. Tucking the buttercup in my pocket, I continued walking.

Around the bend, the trail of flowers kept going. The temperature since I had entered the forest had only dropped. I could barely feel my hands even after shoving them as deep in my pockets as I could. My teeth chattered but still, I pushed on. Then the snow began to fall. It came down quickly, ballerinas in white tutus swirling and twirling in the wind in an ancient dance. Soon it had blanketed the ground in a dusting and was blowing hard into my face. I could barely see the buttercups anymore and when the wind picked up again, I began to crawl. My hands burned in the snow, trying to find the trail of buttercups.

This only worked for a few minutes before the wind and snow, sleet and hail were coming down so quickly that all I could see when I opened my eyes was white. My hat blew away and after a few more moments scrambling around in the snow, I pulled my hood over my head, curled into a ball, and began to cry. As soon as my tears rolled down my cheeks, they froze.

Into the wind, for the first time in 362 days, I whispered, "Please don't let me die." It was blown from my lips before I even finished, lost in the mayhem of the storm. So I repeated it again, louder this time, "Please don't let me die." The words seemed to hover for a moment outside my mouth before also being swept away. One more time, I screamed as loudly as I could, "Please don't let me die! Please!" Who I was screaming to, I didn't know. I wasn't thinking, only hoping for a miracle.

Then my miracle came. Strong arms were lifting me from the ground, pulling me from certain death, and throwing me over their shoulder. In any other situation, I may have kicked, I may have screamed. There was a stranger carrying me away. But instead, I relaxed. I could see nothing with my jacket hood over my eyes but I had a feeling deep in my stomach that things were going to be alright.

Soon enough, the stranger was slowing down and I was gently placed back on my feet. Before I could move my hood to see where I was, I was tugged forward. Behind me, I heard the soft sound of a door closing and the delicious feeling of heat. I brushed my hood back and looked around for my rescuer.

I was in a cozy log cabin with a roaring fire in the large fireplace before me. By the door, a woman was unbundling from her many layers of scarves and blankets. I watched as her face slowly emerged, then arms, torso, and legs. She was short in stature, round, and reassuring, with coffee-toned skin and deep brown eyes. They were familiar to me for some reason.

"Well, are you just going to stand there freezing or go warm up by the fire?" I realized I had been standing and staring at her and quickly sat on the floor by the fireplace. The furniture in the room included a small, rickety bed, a dresser, and a stove. Across the floor, a large knitted rug was spread along with many small piles of books. When the woman had finished unwrapping herself, she moved across the room to sit a good distance away from me on the floor. "So are you going to tell me why you were out there in the cold all alone, child?" Before I could stop myself I was already answering, "I-I'm really not sure." My voice was scratchy from lack of use. "I just wanted to take a walk in the woods, and then there was a rabbit, and I followed some buttercups, and it started snowing and..." I trailed off. I sounded insane. But when I looked up, the woman was only smiling.

"It sounds like you had a difficult journey to get here. Is there a reason you wanted to be in the woods? Looking for something?"

"I don't think so. Or actually, yes." I looked away from her to the fire. "I haven't spoken in almost a year."

"Ah, I see." She said. "You had given up."

I looked back at her. There was still no judgment on her face, only understanding. "I wouldn't say that I'd given up. It's just that people aren't worth my words. I've listened to them all and realized the idea of a good person is made up. All people are bad."

The woman sighed. "It's not that simple, really. Life isn't black or white, it's made up of grays. People are never fully good or bad but if you're only looking for one thing in them, that's all you'll ever find."

"That's not true, I gave people plenty of chances to reach my expectations, and each time they failed them." I couldn't help the indignant feeling that began to rise up inside me. "You haven't heard the things I have. If you had, you would know the truth. People lie, they cheat, they steal."

"Ah, expectations. Those are tricky things. Expecting people to fit your idea of good is exhausting, impossible really. People will never be exactly what you want them to. But that doesn't mean they're bad. Yes, they lie, cheat, and steal but they also create, love, grow." Her brown eyes were filled with timeless knowledge.

"Instead of expectations for people, simply let them be. Appreciate their good and allow them room to grow."

"So you're saying there are no bad people? I should care for all of them?"

"Oh, not at all. There are certainly people that stray on the darker side of gray. Not everyone deserves your care but having no one to love makes life harder. Look for the light in people and allow yourself a chance to open up and really experience life."

"And if I get hurt?"

"Well, that's part of life. You pick yourself up and keep moving, knowing that for a short time you got to have someone to care about in your life." I nodded, yawning. The long walk was starting to catch up on me. The woman handed me a warm blanket. Just as I was closing my eyes, I could have sworn I heard her say, "Sweet dreams, Annie."

I had never told her my name.

When I woke up the next morning, I stretched and sat up. For a moment I thought I was back in my room at home but quickly remembered the events from the night before. Yet when I looked around the cabin, it was different. There was no roaring fire, no furniture, no knitted rug, and most importantly no woman. The cabin looked like it had been abandoned for years, decades maybe. I was definitely going insane. Then I remembered how long I had been gone from home.

I quickly pulled on my boots near the door and was out the door in less than a minute. Somehow, the snow from last night was already melting away and I ran as quickly as I could through it. The animal trail had been covered by the snow. I had no idea where I was going but kept running. Eventually, I somehow arrived at the edge of the forest and then was back at the sidewalk. When I looked for the flower crack, it was gone.

I was panting and tired but managed to make it the rest of the way home. When I opened the front door, my parents and sister were already there waiting for me. Instead of scolding, I was surprised when they all rushed to hug me.

"Oh, Annie where have you been? We were so worried. You've been gone for days, w-we thought that you... the blizzard." My mother was crying into my hair, and there was a feeling of warmth growing in my chest. They had been worried? I smiled and burrowed closer into the hug.

I told them all that I had gotten lost in the blizzard and found a cabin to stay in until the snow melted enough for me to get home. The rest, I left out. I was sure I had been hallucinating from the cold.

Later when things had calmed down, I was sitting on the couch with some tea when I felt something in my pocket. When I pulled it out, I was surprised to see a small yellow flower. A buttercup, perfectly intact. I smiled.

Nitya Kumar

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Douglas Freeman High School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Meredith Swain

Category: Critical Essay

Jump off the Societal Bandwagon

Jump off the Societal Bandwagon

Tomatoes are squashed to make tomato juice. Play-Dough is kneaded to make different creations. Singular Legos are put together to make a Lego kingdom. What all of these day-to-day items have in common is that one singular aspect is changed to make something unique. When a tomato is squashed, the skin is left out, and only the juice is drunk. When play-dough is kneaded, the original structure is bent, prodded, and poked. When legos are combined, the singular lego loses its value. Society squashes the tomatoes, kneads the play-dough, and combines the singular legos. Similarly, people are silenced and are bent to make different choices. They are herded together to lose individuality, dreams, and imagination. Through an analysis of the examples of adult and child perception of life in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's novella *The Little Prince*, one can begin to understand the sacrifice of dreams that occurs in order to make way for the typical goals of adulthood. When leaving the realm of childhood, dreams are often squashed in order to achieve the ideal adult perception of success, which is imperative to recognize so that one can save themselves from jumping onto the bandwagon that is adulthood.

Childhood dreams, imagination, and creativity are left behind when moving into the reality of adulthood. When babies are born, they look at life as an amusement park; everything is exciting and new. As they grow into the toddler years, they develop curiosity and seek knowledge from the world. Their senses of desire and thought begin to form. The importance of these desires should not be understated; dreams, imagination, and creativity are a vital part of life. They allow people to develop original personalities and interests. When children become teenagers, the way they perceive the path of life changes drastically. They exit the blurry-eyed fantasy of wishes and desire and accept that if they do not step up, then they will pay for their childhood mistakes in adulthood. Dreams and imagination are turned in for the rougher weapons of reality and cynicism, which is where the problem begins to develop. Some argue in favor of these traits and principles by saying that when they attempted to carry their childhood dreams into adulthood, many warned them that they were too naive for their age; however, this argument is simply a product of modern-day community thinking. Our society has made children grow up faster than they are ready for, thus training them to leave behind their dreams from the start. For instance, if a ten-year-old still wants to play pretend, the people around him will immediately label him as naive and will pressure him into growing up in the name of "the real world". Even though children move into "adulthood" at the age of eighteen, society really begins to pressure teens into "growing up" from the age of fourteen or fifteen. Adults weigh children down with talks of "welcoming them into the real world", "stepping up", and "making career choices" at such an early age. They blatantly overlook the fact that sixteen and seventeen-year-olds are killing themselves in order to meet the ridiculous societal standards of success. While going through this process, kids are leaving behind their imagination and creativity. An example of the damaging process of growing up in today's society is when the railway switchman in *The Little Prince* answers the Prince's question when he asks where the people are all going. The switchman says, "'They are pursuing nothing at all,'... 'They are asleep in there, or if they are not asleep they are yawning. Only the children are flattening their noses against the window panes'" (Saint-Exupéry). To this statement, the Little Prince replies, "'Only the children know what they are looking for,'... 'They waste their time over a rag doll and it becomes very important to them; and if anybody takes it away from them, they cry...'" (Saint-Exupéry). The conversation between the switchman and the prince is a prime example of the difference in life perception in adults and children. Children have a dream, a set goal. They grow attached to that one dream, in this case, the rag doll, and when they lose that dream, they lose themselves. However, the adults are on an endless chase which ends with them closing their eyes on their dreams. College Board, Henrico County Public Schools Speciality Centers, and College Applications are all real-life examples of societal institutions urging children to mature and surrender their childhood ambitions at early ages. The College Board and the stressful college applications process is one of the main factors

which plays a lead role in teenagers' mental health depletion and starts degrading professions that might not be looked at as "high-earning jobs" in society. Almost everyone who goes through the process of taking the SAT and applying for college states that it was unnecessary pressure and it is causing a problem of all students wanting to go through the manufactured "college" line and choosing relatively same majors. Similarly to the college admissions process, Henrico County Public schools located in Virginia have a high school admissions process where middle school students apply to different high schools in the area for a chance to attend the "medical, education, law, or global economics centers." By trying to mimic the college admissions process, middle school students are being robbed of their childhood and other creative opportunities because either their parents or peers are persuading them to apply to one of the speciality centers, which end up boxing students into heavily studying only certain subjects, which does not make children well-rounded and ready to face the world around them. Evidently, society constantly demands that children must leave their dreams and imaginations at the doorstep of adulthood, which closes the windows for children who still strive to dream.

Most teenagers aspire to meet society's perception of 'perfect' success, losing their passion in the process. Society's way of success includes going to college, getting a degree, and securing a job that brings in a steady income. These jobs are usually seen as tedious and boring to children and teenagers, as they conflict with the children's true passions and desires; however, the nine-to-five jobs are usually shown in a better light to teenagers in society because of the pressure to make money. Painters and music teachers contradict society's point of view of the perfect lifestyle by doing what they love, but sometimes it can be difficult to pay the bills, especially if only one person works and provides for the family. Today, rarely do people think about choosing their passions as their careers. It is an almost absurd idea in our modern world to follow a dream overdoing things that will make one seem more appealing to employers, and to a further extent, society itself. A prime example of the damaging effect of society's perception of success is seen in privileged children around America. A well-off child whose parents can afford to send them to extracurricular activities learn music and art, but those skills are usually for college applications to differentiate themselves from others rather than true passion. By using their many extracurriculars to boost their college resume, and moreover, their chances of getting a good job, children are submitting themselves to the power play of society: pretend over passion. The question at hand is: would someone rather work a typical society standard job and be depressed or follow their dream and be happy? Wealth and making money is a definite necessity to live life without dependence, and independence is a must in modern society. The almost primitive want for wealth spawns a cycle of madness and sacrifice - soon, adults lose sight of their passion that once meant the world to them. Saint-Exupéry portrays the cycle in *The Little Prince*, when the narrator states, "Grown-ups" never understand anything by themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them" (Saint-Exupéry). As a child, the narrator loved art and had real talent. The adults in his life, who had fallen prey to the modern monster, never understood his raw talent and instead told him to focus on his schoolwork so that he could grow up and fit society's meaning of success. The narrator states, "So then I chose another profession, and learned to pilot airplanes" (Saint-Exupéry). The narrator could have been a brilliant abstract painter, but the adults made him give up his passion because they wanted him to blindly follow society's perfect lifestyle. *The Little Prince* portrays how modern society makes children lose focus of their dreams by using adults as a guide by stating that adults never understand the passion and that children always have to show them pure imagination and creativity through actions. Many children have dreams to be movie stars, professional athletes, or astronauts in their youth and they try their best to explain to their parents, but the adults never understand. They discourage the children by saying that they will never make it in the "real world", and are better off succumbing to a more idealistic view in the eyes of others. Because of society grooming children to choose others' opinions over their own from the very start, children blindly lose track of their passions and dreams.

Finally, modern society teaches children that their dreams are not fitting for the life of adulthood by influencing their choices. Children are raised with the principle that they need to meet society's expectations of them, whether it may be in the familial perspective or the occupational perspective. As Bottari states, "Every aspect of life is defined by the ability to make choices. The decisions made, whether consciously or unconsciously, determine the course one travels and the resulting experiences. If no decisions are made, no actions are taken. The resulting actions of decision making are what defines life." At the end of the day, people have to consciously make a choice about what they want to pursue and what they are willing to give up. If not, they may lose their chance to change their life, for better or worse. The problematic issue in choices today is that many choices are made with the thought of society in mind. When making life-influencing decisions, people will choose the 'proper and perfect' way over their passion. This process often backfires, and people are filled with regret and doubt that blindsides them yet again when making another decision. For instance, in the *Little Prince*, the Prince regrets his decision of leaving his rose. He says, "I ought never to have run away from her... I ought to have guessed all the affection that lay behind her poor little

stratagems” (Saint-Exupéry). The Prince realizes that he should have stayed with the rose out of his love instead of doubting her love towards him. The rose just had her own way of showing her affection, but the Prince was riddled with doubt because of society’s display of love and ran away because of it. Additionally, towards the middle of the story, the Prince meets a drunkard. During one of their conversations, the drunkard states loudly, “Ashamed of drinking!” (Saint-Exupéry). The tippler was not happy with what society had planned out for him, so he turned to alcohol for solace. He realizes that he should have been who he wished to be, not what others saw him as. If society had raised the tippler differently, he would not have been fed up and filled with regret. Obviously, society ruins people with its perception of the ideal life, and its effect on people is harmful at best, but fatal at worst.

Therefore, it is important to hold on to one’s passions so that one does not leave their childhood dreams behind and listen to modern society when entering the realm of adulthood. Children should make their own decisions based on what they love to do, not what society deems as tolerable. By understanding that passion is infinitely more important than whatever a ‘perfect’ lifestyle offers, children learn to protect themselves from the scrutiny of others. In *The Little Prince*, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry makes it extremely clear that children should follow their passions and know-how to save themselves from the societal pressures of growing up.

Lileana Lewis

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

Poems From A Low Place

Poems From A Low Place

Skin of papery petals, white japanese wisteria
your breath is intoxication at its finest
drawing me in as if it won't be the death of me
death of you

Buttercups paint pollen kisses under eyes
a sea of yellow across cheeks and nose as if
Van Gogh's *Starry Night*
wasn't Van Gogh's but mine

Eyes blue forget me nots
as if you could ever be forgotten
wish I could forget opalescent blue meeting my dusty brown
give it meaning like death does life

Sunflowers grow from soul
climb from between lips to kiss breath
stalks of thick green entangling with veins
your heart is the sun and the flowers live for you

Fingertips held by purple clematis
kissing everything you touch
everything is met with feathery petals
hiding bloodsucking thorns, ripping palms

Flowers are you and you are flowers
a tangle of petals and leaves
you kiss every person you meet with a large sunflower
it's only fitting we send you back with one in your hand

Pepper Maranto

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

Angel Graves

Raphael

There seemed to be a silence in the world with God's children gone. The wind blew across the meadow as the honeysuckle scent carried itself through the graves. The blissful meadow around me was filled with ancient trees, blooming flowers, and climbing vines. The almost heavenly field did nothing to lighten the remorse I felt. The remorse was highlighted by the fresh mounds of dirt I had to dig. I used the magic because it came easily from the disgrace that filled my soul. Magic doesn't come from nothing, for me, it just happened to boil from remorse. The sweet scent hit my nose as my eyes read over each intricate stone the names were highlighted by the gentle moonlight. Michael. Uriel. Gabriel. Azrael. Raeguel. Remial. The names all rolled off my tongue effortlessly as I remembered my beloved kin. It was my fault, they shouldn't be gone. Angels deserved better than this. That mortal had taken them down like a scythe to wheat.

The graves held no physical bodies, but instead, the paradise of flora around me held the spirit of my siblings. I looked over each grave and I could still hear Azrael's deep voice, Michael and Gabriel's constant squabbling. I could see Uriel's childish eyes. Even Remial and Raeguel's swords as they fought, pretending to be warriors in battle. Though many cultures considered us monsters, we were really all similar to mortals. Our bodies were stronger, the other difference was our lifesize wings. Apparently, I wasn't strong enough.

We were supposed to all be ok. This was supposed to be an easy task.

Each memory hit with defining clarity, crashing into me with an emotion I hated to even slightly feel. The guilt, the remorse, the disappointed feeling I know they have. I fell to my knees in front of the six graves, knowing in my mind there should have been a seventh. There should have been another grave, the seventh grave should've been mine. I had to watch the life of my sisters and brothers drain from their eyes as my gift of healing failed. As I failed. As Lucifer left too, the selfish excuse of a brother was gone as soon as the war began.

I felt the soft brush of wings unfold from my back. The cream-colored feathers entered the corner of my vision, but tears blinded me. The wings, once being a sign of holy favor, now felt like weights against my back pulling me down. Angels weren't supposed to cry. They were supposed to be strong. They were supposed to be fearless and be masters of fate and fury. The hands, swords, and eyes of God.

I didn't know this would happen. I didn't think that I would let this happen. I didn't think he would leave to get all the glory and leave us behind so easily. But I guess that's what happens in War. I guess that's what happens when you make a deal with Lucifer.

□□□

Lucifer

(about an hour after Raphael)

I looked over the graves as emotions mixed in my chest. If God could see me now, mourning the siblings I had been "unworthy" of. The siblings I couldn't stand beside because of my independent nature.

Lucifer. The Rebellious Son, The Cursed Fallen Angel. The Prince of Darkness. The Fault in Humanity. It was all just Me.

Thinking back I remembered them all. God's children were high in numbers. I had many many siblings but the six that fell that day were the closest I'd ever had to an actual family. Father didn't really *love* any of us, he only cherished his beloved humans. Their souls were all around me, almost haunting me with guilt.

The apple blossom and roses mixed with lilies and honeysuckles. It smelled like *them*. The sweet scent that mortals craved to breathe in, the smell of Angels was different from God. The smell of Angels was bittersweet, bitter as a reminder of Father. Yet still sweet like the siblings I remember.

I stood strong but knew the tears and anger were coming on stronger. The salty marks of grief came before I could stop them. Sorrow and torment, guilt and dishonor. All things I had mastered to manipulate mortals with. Still, I remember everything so readily. Michael always insisted I could regain my place with everyone, that I was capable of good. I may have been a fallen angel, but that didn't mean I was pure evil.

Azrael was always so kind with his cold and distant demeanor. The Angel of Death had an equally introverted personality to the depressing job he shouldered. Uriel was like a younger brother who I always needed to protect from any harm. Gabriel was hyper and the most creative, the beautiful messenger of God. Remiel and Raeguel were my right and left-hand warriors, always by my side in battle. Remiel was a tomboyish sister who was always the cunning master of battle, and Raeguel who had a wit sharper than the knives he carried.

My black raven wings sprouted from my back as I put a cigarette to my lips. The wings were a reminder of my banishment, a reminder of the holy favor I hated. Once white as snow, they turned black as I fell into the hellfire. The cigarette lit automatically when my eyes rested on their graves. I pulled a breath in trying to let my stress go but it failed immediately.

In front of my eyes, flashes of screams, feathers, and scarlet blood haunted me. I clutched my head in pain, it ached from the incomplete memories. I couldn't remember a single thing and I didn't even know why or how. How could I leave my siblings to die? What power could make me forget loyalty and the duty I had to them?

In my mind, I went through what happened. I remember they came to me for help, desperately in need. They put my exile on pause while they needed me. My banishment contracts were their wages and that caught my attention. They explained simply, a mortal man by the name of Jericho Winters lost someone very close to him. I felt empty gaps in my head but for some reason, I knew the name vaguely.

They needed my help to squish the man out of existence, a chance for battle and war, of course, I agreed readily. That's where things get...fuzzy. I know the battle was on Earth which didn't make a difference but Uriel questioned Raeguel's "bring the battle to him" mindset.

The Angels that were left were battling foul creatures and clearly paid mercenaries. Nobody knew it but apparently, Jericho had found the true source of Angel Steel. Angel Steel was the exact metal used to make Angel Blades. (Trust me they weren't very creative naming everything as it was all Father's choice to make something to give humans a "fair chance". And now that fair chance would lead to our demise.)

He forged bullets and after only moments into the battle, only eight of us were left.

I recall flying in the sky, Michael and myself back to back slaying monsters together. Suddenly, in the middle of the battlefield, I heard a gentle droning of a song. Over the yelling, screaming, growling, and clanging of blades my ears were suddenly filled with singing. A note pierced through the entire desert and I could feel the song thrumming through my bones and immortal soul. Every fiber of my being begged me to leave, find the source of the song and make it never end. I fought it, I needed to stay and protect my kin. The melody made shivers course through me to the tips of my wings. The chorus that the symphonic voice belted cleared my mind except for the song. I didn't care what the words were, I just needed to be there now. Closer to the song.

I flew away to find the source. My mind blanked out from there except snippets of faces and blights of fire, swinging cages, and blood. All things that stain my mind but that horrible melody still stays, lingering like a bad habit. When I woke from the trance, a woman was dead beside me. We sat in a palace of stone that was run down and clearly broken from hundred-year-old wars. She had a twisted grin on her face. She had robes of silk and numerous amulets for many spells, my mind immediately registered her as an enchantress. Jewelry adorned every inch of her body as well as cursed tattoos. She was young and would've been sinfully beautiful if she were still alive. Her eyes looked glassy and she was completely gone, dead. I remember staring at her in horror, I may be the king of hell but I never killed somebody without reason. I eventually got out of there as fast as I could.

I remember finding scars all over my body, wounds I don't even remember being opened. I flew for a while, seeing the remnants of the brutal battle and I flew for longer even then. Time seemed immeasurable, I didn't know how long I was out or how long I'd flown around. With every glance at the battlefield and the dead bodies, shame stabbed my soul with razor blade precision. Eventually, I found their graves, and here I stood. Pondering my next move.

The meadow around me seemed to hold its breath waiting for my next move. I could burn it all down, let my rage go and everything go down with me, watch it all turn to ashes just like how that cursed mortal treated my siblings.

Snipping the threads of life like a master of fate. It wasn't right or just at all. Or I could fly away, fly far far away to where none of this happened. Make myself forget everything. Or I could-

The thought snuck into my head easily, six impossible ideas before breakfast were my usual. But this was beyond impossible. No. It was implausible. It was inhumane. But they weren't human. And neither was I. I threw the cigarette down and crushed it under my dress shoes.

"I'm sorry brother. We need you back." I felt fire brew in my chest as heat spread throughout my body, the fiery magic spread in giant spheres of fire. Magic didn't come from nothing, and though guilt riddled me for some reason the magic didn't feel remorseful. The magic felt like it was filled with life and its own being. Back when we were

small and just learning our powers, each Angel had a gift they were tasked to master first, and eventually as we grew more talents would manifest. I remember when I was little God gave me a small ball of fire and told me to play with it. Thinking back, he told me I held the fire of life. Could this be it again?

The tips of my fingers bristled with pins and needles, every nerve in my body burst with fiery fever. I yelled as the fire burned me, it shouldn't but it blazed my skin. I shut my eyes as the tailored suit smoldered while the fire grew to about the size of my head. I let it grow until suddenly the crimson fire grew bigger than I was. Shooting upward my wings carried me nearly thirty feet in the air. The fire was now as big as a mortal home, the crimson and golden ribbons of fire licked my skin. With pain shooting through every nerve a single gust of my raven black wings sent the fire down into the graves. The fire shot straight through the ground without burning the lush flora, I could hear a rumbling beneath the earth as it brewed. My mouth opened in screams of pain and cries of fury. I floated with the wind current for a minute as I looked down smiling. Six sets of wings came up from the stone graves in blurs of feathers. My clothes were blazing tatters and my skin was red and aggravated from the fire that hadn't gone out. I blinked a few times as the flames burned me still, the smiling face above me looked heavenly. Heavenly like the brother I'd lost. The sapphire sky blue eyes and beach blonde hair reminded me of better times. Younger times. "Michael?" The name rose off my lips as the fire moved to my wings, the feathers burning easily. The pain was almost unbearable as the cold wind currents blew around me, I was almost numb from the sheer pain. The burns steamed as the cold wind touched my sensitive skin.

"You did it, Lucy. I knew you could." Michael's kind voice matched his sky blue eyes. His face swam above my head but Azrael, Uriel, Remial, and even Raegal's face came into my darkening view. I looked at them with admiration, taking in their faces as my limbs slowly shut down. I felt my raven wings flop down as Michael caught my falling body. Then my mind went blank as my body was still burning.

Gabrielle Marshall

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Steward School, Richmond, VA

Educators: Mary Hopkins, Daniel Spiziri

Category: Poetry

I survived

I survived

Pondering is a daunting scheme.
When I marched from sun's and moon's farewells
thinking only brought sorrow.
I was stripped of everything, yet
thoughts were the only possession they could not swindle.
There was no right from wrong,
only a dripping whip and a star-shaped patch sewn to my uniform.
I'd rather be grateful for my wooden shoe wounds,
than be dangling in the air like my resting brothers.
It mattered to no one that
our soup was made from the profit of our own bloodshed.
I was broken, used, starved, harassed, alone-
but alive.
I endured and succeeded the labyrinth only defeated by some.
I dodged the rain of bombs and worked endlessly for not just me,
but for my people, my parents, my losses, and my sacrifices.
I rose from ice beds coating the forest floors.
No matter if I had been crumbling from thirst, I could not,
I would not give up.
Not after this.
I would not leave this earth branded with the number
184828
signifying my defeat.
I would be branded with the number
184828
signifying my defiance.
I will not be owned silently.
I am
184828.
I survived.
(Testimony Natan Gipson)

Anya Mathew

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: George H Moody Middle School, Henrico, VA

Educator: Mona Morris

Category: Poetry

Bubbles

I'm trapped in a bubble
Always watching the blue, green, purple, pink swirls outside
But never getting to feel

This bubble I live in is like my cell
As I walk it walks with me
Acting like a wall
Never once letting its tactic fall
Never once letting me escape its pressuring grip
To breathe in the sweet swirls dancing with the wind

When it finally breaks the sky looks different
My lens is different
The sun finally rises with orange streaks shining in its hair
Red eyes fixed on making night turn to day
Extending a thousand wishes through its rays

When the bubble breaks it shatters
Though the thin pieces are like knives lying delicately on the ground
Playing its role as the danger well
The shattering still is better than just a pop
I get to see the flashes of the colors in this world be reflected
Instead of being blurred by clouds trying to block the rays and fade the streaks

Though the pieces are scattered it tells a story
Little by little
Piece by piece
Streak by streak
It's better to work and punch and kick the bubble
All to see it shatter
Then leave it there and wait for it
To finally
Pop

Selah Miller

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Open High School, Richmond, VA

Educator: M. Victoria Carll

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

The year I went crazy.

I walked in circles. In big circles around my house or around the barn. In little circles around the fire pit. I watched my feet and I talked. And when I got bored of one circle I would make a new one. One circle after another, day in and day out. I walked the mile from my front door to my mailbox and back. The mailbox was too tall for me to see inside so I could only reach my arm in to feel for the mail. I felt like a big ugly vulture circling around the depression that had settled over my house.

I began to love my circles and my stories. So much that I preferred them to talking to real people. In my stories I could make everyone be nice to me. I could be special. And that's when I realized it.

I was going crazy.

My mom always told me that it was her dream to raise a bunch of kids. I don't know if that was ever true, but when I was 10, she got bored of being a parent. She started telling me her dream was to be a midwife. So she got an apprenticeship an hour away. My oldest two siblings had escaped the cycle of endless dishes and teaching younger kids homeschool math and english. Which left my 14 and 15 year old sisters to raise the 4 youngest children. I don't know if you know this, but teenagers are typically discouraged from having kids, they don't make very good parents. We tried to get along but when you leave a bunch of kids, in the middle of nowhere, with a whole farm to take care of, things become pretty tense. I had a ton of siblings and a million pets, but I felt completely and utterly alone.

In my loneliness and boredom, I began to tell myself stories. Stories where my mom wanted to be my mom, where my sisters were free to just be my friends not my caretakers, where I wasn't isolated from kids my age. At first they were in my head but it became easier to say them out loud. No one was ever around to listen to me, so why not talk out loud. I would write myself into stories I had read. I would make up scenarios where people wanted to listen to me talk. I would look at pictures from movies I had never seen and make up what was happening in them. I would write completely new stories. And I would walk.

Of course I didn't tell anyone I was crazy. I didn't like talking to them on a normal basis and what would I even say? "By the way, mom, I'm insane." No, it was better kept a secret. If it was a secret at least I wasn't hurting anyone else.

I thought maybe if I wrote down the stories instead of talking to myself I wouldn't be crazy anymore. But I didn't have the technology to type them and my hands cramped up when I tried to hand write them. So I stuck with being crazy.

I walked and walked and part of me hoped no one would realize that I was crazy. And part of me wanted someone to realize and give me the attention I had been aching for. And part of me thought that they must know. I mean, wasn't it obvious? I walked in circles and talked to myself all day long. What sane person does that? And of course, if they did know, it would explain why they didn't want to hangout with me.

So I went on walking in my crazy circles, and talking my crazy stories, and no one ever mentioned it. And no one ever has. So no one knows I went crazy that year. And maybe they never will. Sometimes, when I walk places, I catch myself talking aloud and I shove the words back inside, but I still tell myself crazy stories.

Madison Mocello

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Manchester High School, Midlothian, VA

Educator: Rebecca Lynch

Category: Poetry

I am from the letter "s"

I am from the letter "s,"
The letter I cringe at like a child eating vegetables.
It implies plural,
More than one.

From the two parents that were never together,
And the scattered days I spent
Switching
Back and forth
Back and forth

I am from the schedule,
Saturdays I get dad
Weekdays I get mom
One parent
At a time

I am from the sets
Two wardrobes
Two pairs of shoes
Two chore lists
Two dinners

I am from the letter "s,"
From the days I spent
Wondering why I count one
Instead of two.

Faith Myrick

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educators: Gail Giewont, Patty Smith

Category: Flash Fiction

Gods Hunger Too

He could consume the world if he did not feel as the humans did. His stomach was shriveled in on itself, twisting into a knot only the Earth with its crunchy crust and gooey magma could untangle. Unlike the others, though, he could not bring himself to devour the planet the humans so adored. His fellow deities crushed planets between their teeth like children did with gumballs. They swallowed down hydrogen oceans and inhaled ammonia as if it was the sweetest fragrance. Whole planets, universes, gone in order to satisfy their hunger.

Earth was his planet to swallow up, but since he refused to do so, he observed it. The humans, they amused him. They built their little cities, named them cute things like Chongqing and São Paulo, and lived out their lives scurrying about their business as if nothing else mattered. He never understood why his little ants enjoyed hurting each other so much, though. Even the others like him ingested the worlds quickly so their inhabitants would not suffer. Savoring the meal came after every life winked out. Humans, however, seemed to take pleasure in torturing others. He may have not understood them, but he did not blame them. Seventy-three years was not long enough to comprehend there were better things to do than harm someone else.

The longer he refused himself, the more his hunger grew. The other deities laughed at his pillow-soft heart and taunted him with their recent consumption of places named Kepler and Pegasi. He turned a deaf ear to them and watched as the humans built up a tower so high, they might have been able to caress the sky with their blood-drenched hands.

For centuries he lingered over Earth, its unseen observer. His hands grew gnarled as the old oak, his legs no longer supported him, and yet he stayed. For the humans, their hunger would have disappeared by now; their poor little bodies would have given in to the call of the beyond but not his. He only grew clumsy in his starved state, crushing the cities he once loved under his bent hands. Deities that once teased him begged that he just end it, consume the planet and end the poor humans' suffering.

"They are dying, can't you see? You aren't a hero for causing them so much pain," the others cried, shaking his shoulder. He did not know their voices. Soon, he did not know much else except his hunger. It was his companion after they left him, after the humans and their cities crumpled into the dirt. One day he woke to the sight of Earth, stomach rumbling in what the humans might have called thunder at one time. He didn't understand why he hadn't eaten it sooner.

Emily Nation

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Patty Smith

Category: Humor

Bring Your Kid to Work Day

Bring Your Kid to Work Day

Oh hey, hon! Where's your dad? You don't know? Oh, no... sorry hon. I haven't seen him. Where'd you lose him? Break room? Ah, well then I guess he's gone forever. Oh, shit, sorry. That was insensitive, wasn't it? I was kidding! I'm sure he'll turn up. You know, maybe. Alright, there's no need to cry. No, seriously— hush. You'll attract bears. I mean— you'll attract... office workers? Normal corporate things? Doesn't matter. You want to go home? Yeah, sounds about right. I guess you have to get out of the labyrinth— I mean... office building. Yes. That.

Look, all you need to do is defeat the eldritch god that guards HR. And don't listen to Mary, she'll try and tell you it's my fault we've got an angry elder god storming around in the hallway but it really isn't. How was I supposed to know what that incantation did? What do I look like, someone who can read elf? I'm just a normal demon. I mean receptionist. Anyways-- We don't do things like learn languages. They're far too boring and not knowing other languages hardly ever causes issues. The eldritch god thing has only happened twice. Alright, it's happened at least five times. Yeah okay it's a weekly occurrence. But this one's chill! I named him Ralph and his weakness is blueberry muffins. Just toss a muffin away from the door and you can sneak right past him.

Anywho, once you make it into HR, there's a secret trapdoor under Nancy's desk, but you'll want to avoid Nancy. She doesn't like people using the trapdoor because she plans to trap us all in here and eat us one day. Yeah honestly she's such a hoot. But she makes these *really* good gingerbread cookies for the holiday party, and they're definitely just to fatten us up but we just collectively decided to ignore it. They're that good. Right, so, trapdoor! Lucky for you Lucy has recently taken to hanging from the ceiling by her toenails. We think she's asleep like a bat. We have observed that she awakens upon exposure to light, so maybe ditch the light-up sketchers.

So! after you climb down the ladder, or slide down, whatever floats your boat, you'll be in the janitors closet.

Alright, listen to me. Listen to me *real good*. DO. NOT. TOUCH. THE. DOORKNOB. Simply imagine that you are no longer in the janitor's closet, and you'll fade out of the reality. Touching the doorknob allows for the spirits of lost children to all enter your body at once and they'll feed on your spleen. Not fun.

So after you leave the janitors closet, you'll be in our lobby! And then you're almost out! Hooray, hoorah, glorious day. You will want to avoid Dave at all costs. He's just annoying. He's got one of those voices, you know? Snivelly. Really gets on your nerves. Most humans get on my nerves. They're hideous and rude and way too easy to make into smoothies. Oh, except for you, dear. You're very... not smoothie material. Don't cry! You definitely would not go well with bananas.

Right, be on your way! Sorry your dad got eaten by bears! I've got a smoothie to finish.

Laci Powell

Age: 15, Grade: 11

School Name: Manchester High School, Midlothian, VA

Educator: Rebecca Lynch

Category: Poetry

Dandelion

Dandelion

My dearest Dandelion,

As I brush your gentle lemon petals
among the buzzing in this lone mountain field,
admiring the many others planted in your wake,
I wonder why you are criminalized.
A pest, a weed,
awaiting execution by shining blade.

Not me,
no, never!
I admire you, growing old and white,
providing for your kin,
who buzz, and bellow
in the humid light of day.

You tell me if I am in love,
tainting me yellow;
I wonder,
if perhaps,
we are the same.

Dandelion—
You are so small,
so insignificant to the average eye,
yet you guide me through rugged terrain,
and picket-fence suburban hell.

I am sorry I couldn't do more.

The callused flesh of my hand is
forced to orchestrate your untimely death,
my arms ache as the push-mower plows down your friends,
your family,
your children.
I am unsure how to proceed:
So I push around you.
You live another day.

Marcel Rose

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Flash Fiction

The Blade is Yours

Free us.

End us.

Help us.

You press yourself against the filthy bathroom door. It found you again. How did it find you again? Its whispers are getting louder and louder. You feel as if your head is about to explode. Why you? Why out of all people has it chosen you? You think of calling for help, but what would you even say? You decide trying to explain to the teenage 7/11 cashier that a haunted knife is following you probably wouldn't end well.

Use us.

It's never said *that* before.

You attempt to pull the door open. Maybe if you keep running it'll leave you alone. You just want to be left alone. You get the door open about half an inch before the dagger begins to glow a brilliant gold and float above the ground. It twists and turns itself in a manner that could almost be described as majestic, before flying towards your head. You brace yourself for the impact, but it never comes. You wince as it lodges itself into the door, millimeters away from your ear.

The blade is yours

Claim it or become claimed by it

Just like the rest of us

Marcel Rose

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

Quaker Oats

One minute and forty-five seconds left
We're watery and translucent beige flakes of maple
and brown sugar clumps sinking to the bottom
Your eyes never waver from mine
Challenging me
A quiet bubbling interrupts the humming silence
One minute and fifteen seconds left
We stand a little straighter
Rising up within our bowl
Popping and squelching onto the walls
The hum turns into a growl
And you grab me by the collar
The milky white spreads
the bubbling gets louder
The sugar breaks apart and floats up to the surface
Thirty-five seconds left
Our eyes go wide
The growl turns into a scream
A sweet aroma fills the air
Strong and sickening
Your grip grows tighter as you pull me in
While I shake and cry and my skin grows hot to the touch
Splattering sounds echo throughout the room
Ten seconds left
We shatter

Mason Rowley

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Flash Fiction

How To Make A Pizza

1. Go to walmart and buy: Roma tomatoes, fresh mozzarella, red pepper flakes, basil, pizza dough, low-moisture mozzarella, salt, pepper
2. Go home
3. Remember that you forgot the tomatoes
4. Waste 30 minutes and \$15 in gas money to go back to walmart for tomatoes
5. Get back home
6. Fill pan with oil and add tomatoes
7. Gently crush tomatoes with spoon
8. Decide that for shits and giggles to slap the last tomato as hard as you can
9. Put burn cream where the screaming hot tomato juice hit you on the arm, idiot
10. Preheat oven to 450 degrees
11. Slide in pizza stone
12. Remember you don't have a pizza stone
13. Ask your google home "where to buy pizza stones near me"
14. Google tells you recipes for pizza scones
15. Give up and look it up on your phone
16. Drop phone in sauce
17. Freak out
18. Flip the phone out of sauce using spoon
19. Splash more hot tomato sauce all over your arms.
20. Give up on your phone
21. Cut basil because you've come this far you aren't giving up now
22. Add basil to tomato sauce
23. Add salt and pepper
24. Cover to let sauce simmer
25. Throw your lukewarm pizza dough into your brownie tin sprayed down with PAM because you could not give less of a shit if you tried at this point
26. Pour in your probably burnt sauce into your stupid pizza
27. Drown the thing in shredded mozzarella
28. Slice off a piece of the actual mozzarella
29. Try a piece
30. Freak out because you've never had fresh mozzarella before and it's really good
31. Eat the whole thing
32. Walk down to the local grocery because you need more mozzarella and there's only so much gas on planet earth
33. Get lesser mozzarella
34. Cut thick globs onto the pizza
35. Throw the whole thing into the oven for an hour
36. Watch another episode of The Walking Dead
37. Wake up 3 hours later because you were running on 2 cups of coffee and the promises of pizza
38. Realize that the house isn't usually filled with smoke
39. Run to kitchen and pull out pizza
40. Forget oven mitts

41. Drop pizza
42. Cry
43. Order pizza from Pino's

Mason Rowley

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Short Story

In and Out of Patience

For the first weekend in a year, we have no band practice. Jamie's mom is dragging him out of town for college tours and we don't have anyone lined up, so I'm on my own for a Sunday. It's odd, y'know, to be in my own room at noon, and not in a lukewarm garage with friends.

I've got a list of things I should do longer than the time I've got and a list of things I want to do that's absolutely blank. I brush my teeth. I jack off. I practice Gang of Four bass riffs. I sit on my roof with a cheap spliff and a stereo blasting an Unknown Pleasures cassette. I generally embrace my post-9/11 ennui in full stride. Thoughts pass my mind. I could be talking to the girlfriend I neglect or the mom who's necking fifths of Hennessy with this week's walking dildo.

Zel drops by at, 3. We play Mortal Kombat, we roll another spliff, we discuss the way the band's going. I think he can tell that I'm chronically bored.

"You got anything to do in your room?" He asks. He's just making conversation. I'm bouncing a rubber ball off the wall and into my hand again.

"That thing's a fucking pigsty. Don't go in," I reply.

He goes quiet for a moment.

"D'you wanna clean it?" He asks.

I stop my passive ball fondling and turn to him.

"Is this a genuine offer?"

"Fuck, what else we gon' do today?"

I open my mouth to object and close it again.

"Why not." I say, and begin walking up the stairs. I can hear his feet hit the steps behind me as I open the door.

It's only upon swinging the door open that I realize how bad the room really is. Pigsty was a fucking understatement; it's the kind of mess that makes the average hog reach for Febreze. I'm surprised we haven't been condemned.

Zel enters the room and does two things. First, he whistles in the stereotypical impressed way. Then, he inhales and is hit by, frankly, raw stench. I hear him gag behind me.

"Jesus fuck, man," He says, in between wheezes.

"What? It's not that bad," I lie.

"Bro, you're living in fucking squalor. This is some real Dickens novel shit, you know that?"

He walks around the room, grabbing random objects and placing them back down. A bottle of pills on the dresser. A vinyl box filled with records, sorted at one point, now slumped over and bending. Assorted clothes in varying degrees of washedness. He gets on his hands and knees and looks under my bed, eventually grabbing a shoebox.

"What's in this thing?"

"Uh... journals, I think?" I say. I'm praying I'm right, 'cause that box is either journals or hand-me-down Playboys (yuck) and I don't know which one would be more embarrassing at this point. He lifts the lid to reveal several composition notebooks, adorned with stickers and scribbles. I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding. Thank god.

"Oh-ho-ho. Jackpot." Zel says, cracking open the first one he sees. He reads quietly for a few seconds, before flipping the page, then flipping it again.

"Man you were horny. Your handwriting is ass, by the way. Some of this doesn't even look like English." He says.

"Yeah, it's to keep prying dickheads-" I snatch the notebook out of his hands, "from my private thoughts."

"Sure, like people want to read this shit," he grabs another journal off the bed and cracks it open, "Did you just transcribe a whole Jay Reatard song here?"

"So what if I did? And you seem real eager to eat this shit up," I snap back.

"Yeah, cause I gotta have *something* new to bully you for. You wanted to fuck Monika?" He stares up at me in amazement.

"Yeah, so what? What's wrong with her?"

"She's ugly as fuck, notably." Something about his tone weirds me out. Zel is blunt, yeah, but never harsh. Never mean if he can avoid it. There's something violent about the way he says it though, he spits out the word 'fuck' like he's hoping it'll hit her straight on the forehead, soaked in phlegm.

"Well so was I."

"No, you weren't, man. You've always had weapon-grade honey dips at your door." He's basically abandoned reading the journals at this point, and he holds his current volume slack at his side. He uses it for occasional gesturing, and when he does I can see a scribbled Dead Kennedys logo on the corner of a page.

"Since when?"

"Since that fly-ass white chick in 3rd grade who was throwing you signals."

"It was 3rd grade."

"Yeah, and she ain't wanna play house with nobody but you. That means something where I'm from."

I chuckle. "You literally live a block away from me."

"A block makes all the difference, my brother. What about that chick you're with now?" He gestures, jabbing the book out at me like he's making some sort of grand accusation.

"We're barely together. We haven't talked in days."

"Please don't tell me you're letting a chick like that slip through your fingers," he mock-pleads.

"She says I'm a raging narcissist, that I'm a 'bundle of character flaws held together with shit knots in red flags.'"

"Damn, she went Shakespearian on your ass. Thinking about it, maybe you are. I oughta head down there and help her ease the tension." He throws in a thrusting motion because apparently he thinks I'm dumb.

He ducks the rubber ball I pitch at his head. It knocks a light off my shelf and sends books flying.

"Are we gonna clean my room or are you gonna keep reading my shit?"

It takes three, four-ish hours to get my room in a manageable place. It's still not totally clean; for our own sanity, we decided no one's touching the closet or moving any major furniture, but it was still a fruitful endeavor. I find clothes I forgot I had, lost memorabilia, twenty bucks, stuff like that.

"Well that was fun," Zel says, taking a seat on my freshly-changed bed.

"Man, I didn't know a bedroom could smell good," I reply.

"Whodathunk?" Zel replies.

We sit there in silence for a second, taking in the dying light outside and the fruits of our labor.

"I'm bored," Zel says.

"Yeah, me too."

"What now?"

"I have got no idea." I lay back on my bed and stare at the ceiling. The stucco dots attract my attention and I find my eyes darting from one dot to another.

"What about your chick?"

"Why do you think about my girlfriend more than I do, Zel?"

"I don't know man, why do I? Maybe cause you bagged a fucking 9 and have chosen to ignore her."

"You don't know shit about my relationship, man."

"Nah... I'm pretty sure I do though." Man, he's starting to piss me off.

"Oh really, Einstein? Please, explain it to me."

"You're a depressed basket case with a persecution complex and you think she's being prying, probably because she asks you how your day was and shit. So you gotta take it all personal and get pissy. Really, you should just be happy someone in this world cares about you man. That's a rare-ass thing." He seems earnest for once. He's sat up on the bed and all.

"Yeah, well... you don't know shit man." It's a half-hearted reply. I know it the second it leaves my mouth.

He wants to continue it. I know he does. But I've said my half in such a way that he knows it'll go nowhere.

"Whatever," he says. He lies back.

We chill for a little while longer.

"Y'wanna head to Little Kingston? Get some of that prime ganja, mon." He says it in a, frankly awful, version of Jamaican patois. I can feel Bob Marley cringe from beyond the grave.

"You may have dreads like a rasta but you suck at the accent." I hope he can hear the grin in my voice.

"Seriously though, let's do something."

"What do you wanna do then?"

“Is anyone performing at Marnie’s?”

Marnie’s is the local music venue. They’re all about building up the community, so they’ve got an open mic almost every week and local acts perform daily. The owner, Marnie, is trying to make Okaga into the next Seattle, or at least that’s what it feels like.

“Nah, I think her husband got sick so they shut down for the week.” He says.

“That’s rare.”

“Yeah, and inconvenient. Movie?”

“Nah, the matinee ain’t showing shit.” I say.

“Why do you give a shit about the matinee?”

“Because I always end up being the one paying for shit.” I snap at him.

“Damn, ok.”

We lounge around for a few more minutes, absentmindedly scrolling through our phones.

“Yo,” Zel says, sitting straight up. I ignore him, because he’s probably just gonna show me a stupid Twitter meme and wait for me to laugh. He swings his arm down and hits my chest.

“What do you want, dick?” I ask.

“Check it out.”

“I’m not looking at any more-” I start to say, but then I actually read what he’s showing me. Miguel’s, the local donut place, is officially 24 hours.

“Old man Miguel’s got the shop open?” I ask.

“Looks like it.”

“Do you have your car?”

“I have my board.”

I shine a grin at him.

“Then what are we waiting for?”

Mason Rowley

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Humor

Buttermilk Jesus

The junker rounded my street corner at six-ish. You could tell from my house he was here because his engine sounded like a scene from Saving Private Ryan and the tacky, peeling orange and black paint was blinding from any distance. I didn't really know this guy, some friend of Kenan's, but he was my ticket down to the campsite for the weekend so I had to trust him. The beat-up bus pulled up right in front of my house, where I stood clutching a duffel bag filled with clothes, half a can of Off, a Gameboy, and other miscellaneous odds and ends.

The front doors swung open, revealing what seemed to be hippy Jesus; a long, flowing beard, tie dye tee-shirt prominently displaying his band's logo, hair pulled up into a man bun, and sweatpants. No shoes, although I could see a pair of male Birkenstocks sitting by the center console.

"Hello there!" he exclaimed while hanging out of his gutted and converted school bus.

"Uh, hi." I said, reaching out to shake hands. He grasped and shook like a madman, and although he didn't smell like weed, I nearly got stoned just touching him.

"Come on in! Me casa su casa." He turned back into his bus/house and walked inside. I followed him, reluctantly. First thought: if I hadn't gotten high yet, I sure was now. The whole thing was a hotbox, and even if my mysterious driver hadn't sparked up recently, it was soaked into the upholstery, imbuing anyone who entered with a love of Harold and Kumar movies and a sudden need for an entire package of Oreos crumbled up and mixed with Nutella. Second thought: Oh dear God I still don't know this guy's name.

"Uh, hey, what's your name again? I never really got it from Kenan." I said while taking a seat on a cot which seemed to double as a couch and then triple as a table and then, judging by the hollow poles, quadruple as a storage place for more weed.

"Oh yeah. Call me whatever. Javier, Mikhail, Ash, Gary. Hell, a lot of people call me Buttermilk Jesus."

"Buttermilk Jesus?" I asked, trying to turn on the tv sitting opposite from me, one of the old boxes with a VHS player built into the bottom. After a bit of fiddling, it finally turned on, playing a middle section of what appeared to be a homemade self-help movie. There Buttermilk Jesus sat, burning incense and talking about "chakras" and "Cthulhu" and other such stuff. He then turned to his cot couch and started mixing some kind of concoction, before what appeared to be a naked woman came into frame, drank said concoction, and lied down on the cot. I now took up permanent residence on my bag, placed on the floor.

"Yeah, I used to drink exclusively buttermilk. Odd phase of my life, to be honest. I've mellowed out a lot." He replied, strapping into the driver's seat and sputtering the engine to life.

"Uh-huh. Hey, where do I strap in?" Not a seatbelt was in sight, nor any more VHS tapes, meaning that the only thing that he watches is his own meditation. Is it self-self help in that case? Whatever.

"You don't. Feel the road man, you'll know when to brace. By the way, do you like Squid?"

"Like, the food?" A quick glance at his "kitchen", which consisted of a Dollar Store cooler and a camp stove, and I knew I didn't want anything to do with his cooking.

"No, like the post-punk outfit, man. You are behind the times bro." He punched his glove box, the door gave out and revealed a collection of homemade cassettes. He slid one into the dinky radio encased in cheap upholstery and noise started blasting through the jerry-rigged speaker on the dashboard.

"On the road again..." he hummed as the van began drifting down the street. This was gonna be a weird ride.

Mason Rowley

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Flash Fiction

Okaga, CA

The party is insane. Cheap beer, pulse-pounding trap, and an awkward mix of juniors, seniors, and whatever other stragglers were in the area. Some kid skates off the roof into the swimming pool. Another idiot swan dives onto the ping pong table and snaps it in half. Once we enter, it's a free-for-all. Sam puked his brains out in the upstairs bathroom. Ashley and Alex got it on in the hot tub. Xayah did a *lot* more lines of coke off the back of her cell phone than what seems healthy. I'm kicking ass at Smash Bros in the living room. Then, we're all in the van speeding off 'cause Zion and Jackson have beef and Zion hangs with the Crips and is headed for his car and no one wants to see if he's going for the door or the trunk.

Now we're cruising down the coast back home. Some Frank Ocean song is on the radio. Sam is leaning out the window, feeling the breeze and the moonlight on his face. I think Ashley and Alex are knocked out in the back-back. Xayah is insisting that she doesn't need water but that's a lie. I'm driving, looking out for cops cause I didn't entirely avoid the beer. I don't think I'm in the other lane but this lane looks like that one and the lights are pretty and then a hand from the back seat is shaking my shoulder.

"Dude, pull over, let someone else drive. You're wrecked." Sam says, blowing the hair out of his eyes. He's not up front but his breath still smells like beer and his hair is falling over his eyes in a real gentle way, golden curls over pools of honey. I want to kiss him.

I scan the signs we pass. There's an In-and-Out up ahead, so I wave him off and keep cruising. He slumps back in his seat, clicking the seatbelt. That might have been the wrong move. Whatever. Who else is gonna drive? It's not like he's less sloshed than I am.

The parking lot is empty, so even my drunk ass can find a parking space. The van doors slide open and we spill out onto the concrete. Alex has finally woken up, so he goes inside and gets food for everyone. Meanwhile, Xayah has climbed onto the roof of the van. She's staring at the stars and shouting out constellations when she finds them. She's wrong most of the time. Ashley has also stirred from her sleep, and has been making sure our parents know we're staying at her place. Sam has taken out a speaker and now is thumbing through a playlist.

We sit, post-drunk, post-post-tired, barely lucid for a while. Then, Alex has returned, and is distributing food. I bite into the double cheeseburger and there's tomatoes, which usually aren't a problem. Tonight, though, they disgust me. I pick them off, and then in a weird show of grandiosity, I pitch them onto the highway. An 18-wheeler makes 'em paste on the road. I turn back to the van, lock eyes with Sam, and a chuckle rises in my throat. He joins in. Something soft is playing through the speaker, autotuned vocals and bedroom hi-hats. I sit down next to him; he has ketchup on the corner of his mouth. I motion toward it with my thumb, he wipes it away and turns back to his burger. There's a blush in his cheeks. I'm tired of waiting.

I lean in and our lips lock and the world ends and begins and there's fireworks and it's a very sappy moment. I go to pull away but he reaches for my face with a delicate touch and pulls me back in. I feel like I'm going to black out. Finally we realize we've been forgetting to breathe, and there's a tingle in my spine as he pulls away. The world feels pink and purple and blue and orange and the breeze that was so soft is biting all of a sudden so I slide closer to him. He steals a fry from the bag at my feet and his head is on my shoulder and Xayah finally gets a constellation right and Ashley motions for all of us to get back in the van 'cause her mom is blowing up her phone. We all pile in back home, back to Okaga, back to dilapidated skate parks and stuffy suburbia; shoving skeletons in closets and bones in backyard holes; white-washed fences, grey concrete, and black grip tape.

Mason Rowley

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educators: Cindy Cunningham, Gail Giewont

Category: Flash Fiction

Rusty

Papa always told Mikhail to fear the forest. Papa was a wonderful man, with a voice like a gramophone and warm hands worn from years of cobbling. Yet, whenever the forest became a topic, his voice would drop into shallow whispers and hushed tones, like just saying the name of whatever fear lie in between the pines would bring it knocking on the door.

When Mikhail was younger, the question was an obvious one. So much space right outside their door and he couldn't access any of it. Mikhail finally breached the question, one night after they had stuffed their faces with the best bratwurst they had ever had.

"Why don't we go into the forest?" Papa had dropped his expression, joy replaced by something between anger and fear.

"Why, Mikhail," Papa said, setting his pipe on the nearest table and standing up. Fear collected in the boy's stomach as the imposing figure came ever closer, saying no words. The joyous spark usually in his eyes was replaced with pure charcoal.

"We don't go into the forest, Mikhail, because the trees," Papa inched closer and closer, until Mikhail could smell the leather of his overalls and see the calluses on his hands.

"The trees, they squeeze!" Papa shouted, grabbing the shrieking Mikhail and spinning him above his head. The child screamed in delight at the twist, playfully hitting his father's shoulder until he put him down. Mikhail understood that this was a game, yes, but it stifled any other forest conversation for a few years.

The next time Mikhail asked was when Papa had to help in the war. Mikhail was older now, taking up cobbling as a hobby and making money fixing boots here and there. Mikhail was to hold down the business while Papa fought. As Papa polished his boots and readied to leave, Mikhail once again asked.

"You never gave me a straight answer Papa. Why do we not go into the forest?" Papa had stopped shining. He looked up at his son, his eyes dead.

"I was not kidding when you were a boy Mikhail. The trees, they're unnatural. They live. No matter what happens while I'm away, I need you to promise me that you will never enter those woods."

Mikhail hesitated, shifting his weight from one foot to another.

"I promise." A simple lie, told with his fingers crossed and his teeth gritted.

Papa responded with a nod, turning back to his boots silently. While his question was still not fully answered, he figured it was a good idea not to bring it back up. It slipped from his mind completely with time.

It was far past the war's end before Mikhail thought about the forest again. Papa was long gone at this point, serving the Fatherland with honor and dignity. Mikhail had expanded the cobbling business, buying new space in Berlin. He needed to escape the town, the feeling of unease whenever he passed his father's grave.. As he packed his belongings, he remembered the forest.

It had been gnawing away at him, without his knowledge, and the thought of it bubbling back up finally spurred him on.

Mikhail stepped into his small backyard, holding Papa's old rifle and wearing his worn-out boots. The old man was probably scared of a mountain lion. Before he left, Mikhail had to conquer his fears. He took his first tentative step in.

He should have listened.

Mason Rowley

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Cindy Cunningham

Category: Short Story

Neat Neat Neat

A three egg plate, all scrambled, with toast, strawberry jelly, and sausage. That's what Corner Boy orders after school, when he's finally worked up the confidence to walk inside, choose the stall to the left of the bathroom on the far wall, and has polished off a cup of cocoa. At least, it's what he gets during the winter months.

I jot it down, give him a nod so he knows I got it in, and turn back toward the kitchen. I nearly collide with a balancing act of plates but narrowly slip by. The ticket gets run through on the rotating wheel and spun toward Chief in the back.

"Corner Boy?" he asks. He doesn't look up from his own balancing act, a flat top speckled with eggs, bacon, burgers and pancakes.

"Who else?" I grab the kettle, scoop some Swiss Miss, and top the newly-christened cocoa with a mountain of whipped cream and a smiley face made with chocolate syrup. It's a nice touch he never asks for, but he lights up like a christmas tree when I set it down in front of him. I move down the line to the booth in front of him.

Two guys are sitting there, mildly overweight, mid 30s, construction gear. I assume they're patching the roof across the street. One is noshing on a plate of fries while the other nurses a coffee: two creams, three sugars.

Coffee turns to me and does the little eyebrow flick that signals he wants to ask me something. I don't know why he can't just say it, but whatever.

"Can I get you fellas something?" It's how he wants to start it. I say my line, all sweet like he wants, and then...

"What do you think of this new curfew in town?" He follows up with the real discussion topic. Fries rolls his eyes and grabs the ketchup bottle.

"Don't make the poor girl talk about that. You fish for her opinions every time she comes over."

"I just like talking about things. Is that a crime?"

"No, but it's annoying."

"Yeah, says you," he turns back to me, "Curfew. Go."

"I'm not the biggest fan of it, but whatever gets us through the crime wave faster." I say. You don't want to get too in-depth or political. That's how you lose tips. Vague statements that waver both sides.

"Exactly. Whatever it takes." Coffee turns back to Fries, like I'm a grand authority on curfews and not a 16 year old server. Fries rolls his eyes again and turns to me.

"We're fine dear. Thanks for asking." I take the hint and turn my way out of the conversation. It's a slow day, no one else in my section to check up on, so I head to the kitchen and wait for Corner Boy's food to come up.

You would expect Chief to not be a talkative person with all that he has to manage, but I think it soothes him. He's a madman around the griddle, salting and peppering and tasting and pulling those eggs right before they're gonna burn so they've got the best kind of crisp. He's large, both height and weight, and has a birthmark on his forehead that looks almost like a four-leaf clover. He dabs the sweat away from it regularly with the raggedy towel draped over his shoulder.

"Gotta keep my luck up!" He says, spinning around to open a device and slide a waffle onto a plate. With the reggae music going in the background, it almost looks like a dance.

He's juggling unrecognizable breakfast platters, sliding them off to the side for later completion while cracking wise about his family.

"...in between rounds, amiright? Could always use another spatula." I catch the last half of a joke, probably at his son's expense, as he slides a plate across the divider that I recognize. I grab Corner Boy's platter and walk out onto the main floor.

There's another set of customers in a booth near the door, and two gentlemen at the counter looking over the menu. The one in the booth looks frazzled; a white lady, roughly 25, but with one of those faces you can't really guess. She's got a set of thick, coke-bottle Lennon glasses that magnify her eyes a good bit. She's got a laptop out

and is frantically typing away at it.

I walk to Corner Boy's table and place down the tray. He grins and reaches for the salt and pepper shakers by the napkins. I've never seen someone drown a plate of eggs in pepper like Corner Boy.

I step away so he and his food can be alone and walk over to the newest patron. Jane (she looks like a Jane) is still typing away at what looks to be essays as I approach.

"You ready to order?" She doesn't hear me, I don't think. Her earbuds are in and I can faintly hear indie music pouring out of them.

"Ma'am?" I heighten my voice a bit but to no avail. I finally tap her on the shoulder and I swear she jumps a foot tall.

"Sorry!" She near-shouts.

"You're fine! You're fine. What can I get you?" I put on the sweet voice and all is forgiven. She's loose now, unscrunching her shoulders and reaffirming the frames onto her nose.

"What would you recommend?" She asks. Usually, that's a vanity question; the person's already made up their mind, now they just need someone to confirm it as right. Something about the way she says it, the stresses on the syllables, makes me think it's genuine.

"I think we've got great breakfast sandwiches, personally. I'd get the ham, egg, and cheese sandwich with hash browns." I figured it'd take me a moment to think about it but the suggestion just stumbles out of me.

"That sounds heavenly. That, please. Oh, and can the hashbrowns be extra crispy?" She says it like it's some grand request, like if I don't accept it she'll shrink into nothing.

"Can do." I flash a grin at her, and she responds in kind. Her teeth are gapped in the front.

I walk back, slide the order onto the spike and cater to the two men at the counter. One wants steak and eggs and I catch him sneaking whiskey into his coffee after I drop it off. The other gets a toasted english muffin and a pad of butter, and once the check comes he throws a wad of cash on the counter and runs off with the muffin in his mouth.

The day goes on and on. I drop a carafe of coffee and it shatters on impact with the ground. I get three orders wrong, I take too long getting change, one bitch of a woman whines and cries her way into a free meal. Corner Boy is still in the corner, longer than he normally stays, ordering the occasional odd and end so we don't tell him to move: a plate of fries, another hot chocolate, a Cuban sandwich. He sits there, scribbling in a notebook and watching it all happen.

It's when I go on a bathroom break that he leaves. I'm in and out in three minutes but like a phantom he's gone. I go to clear his table, and in between the ketchup bottle and the table is a 5 dollar bill and a drawing of me, balancing plates and blowing a stray hair from my eyes.

Mason Rowley

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Short Story

In and Out of Patience

For the first weekend in a year, we have no band practice. Jamie's mom is dragging him out of town for college tours and we don't have anyone lined up, so I'm on my own for a Sunday. It's odd, y'know, to be in my own room at noon, and not in a lukewarm garage with friends.

I've got a list of things I should do longer than the time I've got and a list of things I want to do that's absolutely blank. I brush my teeth. I jack off. I practice Gang of Four bass riffs. I sit on my roof with a cheap spliff and a stereo blasting an Unknown Pleasures cassette. I generally embrace my post-9/11 ennui in full stride. Thoughts pass my mind. I could be talking to the girlfriend I neglect or the mom who's necking fifths of Hennessy with this week's walking dildo.

Zel drops by at, 3. We play Mortal Kombat, we roll another spliff, we discuss the way the band's going. I think he can tell that I'm chronically bored.

"You got anything to do in your room?" He asks. He's just making conversation. I'm bouncing a rubber ball off the wall and into my hand again.

"That thing's a fucking pigsty. Don't go in," I reply.

He goes quiet for a moment.

"D'you wanna clean it?" He asks.

I stop my passive ball fondling and turn to him.

"Is this a genuine offer?"

"Fuck, what else we gon' do today?"

I open my mouth to object and close it again.

"Why not." I say, and begin walking up the stairs. I can hear his feet hit the steps behind me as I open the door.

It's only upon swinging the door open that I realize how bad the room really is. Pigsty was a fucking understatement; it's the kind of mess that makes the average hog reach for Febreze. I'm surprised we haven't been condemned.

Zel enters the room and does two things. First, he whistles in the stereotypical impressed way. Then, he inhales and is hit by, frankly, raw stench. I hear him gag behind me.

"Jesus fuck, man," He says, in between wheezes.

"What? It's not that bad," I lie.

"Bro, you're living in fucking squalor. This is some real Dickens novel shit, you know that?"

He walks around the room, grabbing random objects and placing them back down. A bottle of pills on the dresser. A vinyl box filled with records, sorted at one point, now slumped over and bending. Assorted clothes in varying degrees of washedness. He gets on his hands and knees and looks under my bed, eventually grabbing a shoebox.

"What's in this thing?"

"Uh... journals, I think?" I say. I'm praying I'm right, 'cause that box is either journals or hand-me-down Playboys (yuck) and I don't know which one would be more embarrassing at this point. He lifts the lid to reveal several composition notebooks, adorned with stickers and scribbles. I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding. Thank god.

"Oh-ho-ho. Jackpot." Zel says, cracking open the first one he sees. He reads quietly for a few seconds, before flipping the page, then flipping it again.

"Man you were horny. Your handwriting is ass, by the way. Some of this doesn't even look like English." He says.

"Yeah, it's to keep prying dickheads-" I snatch the notebook out of his hands, "from my private thoughts."

"Sure, like people want to read this shit," he grabs another journal off the bed and cracks it open, "Did you just transcribe a whole Jay Reatard song here?"

"So what if I did? And you seem real eager to eat this shit up," I snap back.

"Yeah, cause I gotta have *something* new to bully you for. You wanted to fuck Monika?" He stares up at me in amazement.

"Yeah, so what? What's wrong with her?"

"She's ugly as fuck, notably." Something about his tone weirds me out. Zel is blunt, yeah, but never harsh. Never mean if he can avoid it. There's something violent about the way he says it though, he spits out the word 'fuck' like he's hoping it'll hit her straight on the forehead, soaked in phlegm.

"Well so was I."

"No, you weren't, man. You've always had weapon-grade honey dips at your door." He's basically abandoned reading the journals at this point, and he holds his current volume slack at his side. He uses it for occasional gesturing, and when he does I can see a scribbled Dead Kennedys logo on the corner of a page.

"Since when?"

"Since that fly-ass white chick in 3rd grade who was throwing you signals."

"It was 3rd grade."

"Yeah, and she ain't wanna play house with nobody but you. That means something where I'm from."

I chuckle. "You literally live a block away from me."

"A block makes all the difference, my brother. What about that chick you're with now?" He gestures, jabbing the book out at me like he's making some sort of grand accusation.

"We're barely together. We haven't talked in days."

"Please don't tell me you're letting a chick like that slip through your fingers," he mock-pleads.

"She says I'm a raging narcissist, that I'm a 'bundle of character flaws held together with shit knots in red flags.'"

"Damn, she went Shakespearian on your ass. Thinking about it, maybe you are. I oughta head down there and help her ease the tension." He throws in a thrusting motion because apparently he thinks I'm dumb.

He ducks the rubber ball I pitch at his head. It knocks a light off my shelf and sends books flying.

"Are we gonna clean my room or are you gonna keep reading my shit?"

It takes three, four-ish hours to get my room in a manageable place. It's still not totally clean; for our own sanity, we decided no one's touching the closet or moving any major furniture, but it was still a fruitful endeavor. I find clothes I forgot I had, lost memorabilia, twenty bucks, stuff like that.

"Well that was fun," Zel says, taking a seat on my freshly-changed bed.

"Man, I didn't know a bedroom could smell good," I reply.

"Whodathunk?" Zel replies.

We sit there in silence for a second, taking in the dying light outside and the fruits of our labor.

"I'm bored," Zel says.

"Yeah, me too."

"What now?"

"I have got no idea." I lay back on my bed and stare at the ceiling. The stucco dots attract my attention and I find my eyes darting from one dot to another.

"What about your chick?"

"Why do you think about my girlfriend more than I do, Zel?"

"I don't know man, why do I? Maybe cause you bagged a fucking 9 and have chosen to ignore her."

"You don't know shit about my relationship, man."

"Nah... I'm pretty sure I do though." Man, he's starting to piss me off.

"Oh really, Einstein? Please, explain it to me."

"You're a depressed basket case with a persecution complex and you think she's being prying, probably because she asks you how your day was and shit. So you gotta take it all personal and get pissy. Really, you should just be happy someone in this world cares about you man. That's a rare-ass thing." He seems earnest for once. He's sat up on the bed and all.

"Yeah, well... you don't know shit man." It's a half-hearted reply. I know it the second it leaves my mouth.

He wants to continue it. I know he does. But I've said my half in such a way that he knows it'll go nowhere.

"Whatever," he says. He lies back.

We chill for a little while longer.

"Y'wanna head to Little Kingston? Get some of that prime ganja, mon." He says it in a, frankly awful, version of Jamaican patois. I can feel Bob Marley cringe from beyond the grave.

"You may have dreads like a rasta but you suck at the accent." I hope he can hear the grin in my voice.

"Seriously though, let's do something."

"What do you wanna do then?"

“Is anyone performing at Marnie’s?”

Marnie’s is the local music venue. They’re all about building up the community, so they’ve got an open mic almost every week and local acts perform daily. The owner, Marnie, is trying to make Okaga into the next Seattle, or at least that’s what it feels like.

“Nah, I think her husband got sick so they shut down for the week.” He says.

“That’s rare.”

“Yeah, and inconvenient. Movie?”

“Nah, the matinee ain’t showing shit.” I say.

“Why do you give a shit about the matinee?”

“Because I always end up being the one paying for shit.” I snap at him.

“Damn, ok.”

We lounge around for a few more minutes, absentmindedly scrolling through our phones.

“Yo,” Zel says, sitting straight up. I ignore him, because he’s probably just gonna show me a stupid Twitter meme and wait for me to laugh. He swings his arm down and hits my chest.

“What do you want, dick?” I ask.

“Check it out.”

“I’m not looking at any more-” I start to say, but then I actually read what he’s showing me. Miguel’s, the local donut place, is officially 24 hours.

“Old man Miguel’s got the shop open?” I ask.

“Looks like it.”

“Do you have your car?”

“I have my board.”

I shine a grin at him.

“Then what are we waiting for?”

Mason Rowley

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educators: Cindy Cunningham, Gail Giewont

Category: Short Story

Where Is My Mind?

"Flew The Co-Op" is the name of the diner we stop in before we head to the venue. Well, I say that as if they aren't right next to each other. The venue is actually doing preshows and shit right now, noticeable by the rumbling of the wall next to our booth. It shakes around the photos on the wall, portraying legends sitting right here and ordering food. Iggy Pop devouring a plate of waffles, shirtless as ever. Kurt Cobain smoking a cig and ruminating over a cup of joe. Henry Rollins staring daggers over a plate of bacon and eggs.

I gesture towards an open booth. The place is pretty damn crowded so we muscle our way through technicolor mohawks and spike-laden battlejackets. Instruments clog the walkways, loose drum sticks and guitar picks strewn about. The scent of cigarettes is a low smog in the air, burning our noses.

We take a seat in the only open booth, toward the back. Two menus are dropped off by a hurrying waitress after a second or two. The menus are covered in flavor text (heh), talking all about the "historic brick building" and the "staple of any Seattle visit." We snicker at the cliches and flip-flop between the options, making simple minded chit chat. Then Party Girl speaks up.

"So uh," and she pauses to sip her coffee, "how did you guys meet in the first place."

I wave an available waitress over and she nods in response.

"Oh jeez. That is something I haven't thought of in a while." Oliver says, dropping Splenda into his warm tea.

"No coffee?" She sips again, and tilts her head. Her lipstick leaves little black marks all along the rim of the cheap mug.

"Stimulant," he replies simply, and she nods in acknowledgement. He twirls the spoon around in the boiling water once, twice, three times, taps a rhythm on the edge, and lays the spoon back down.

"Tracing back the history of the band is, well, confusing."

"No it isn't," pipes in Jamie, on his second Mountain Dew.

The waitress makes her way over. I place an order: a plate of hash, a fried egg, two slices of Texas Toast for the yolk, and two sausage links. I gesture around the table, asking silently if they want to order yet. I get shakes no.

"Can I smoke in here?" I ask. She shrugs in response.

"If it's so easy, then why don't you explain it?" Oliver takes a drink of tea.

"Can do, easy peasy. So I got in trouble with this teacher, right?"

I butt in. "Mrs. Sonderberg."

"Oh yeah, Mrs. Sonderberg," Jamie says, like he knew the whole time, "Over some random bullshit."

"Random bullshit?" Oliver interrupts this time.

"Yeah, random bullshit."

"You tried to sneak a drum pad into your exams."

"It's boring as shit after an exam. What else was I supposed to do."

"Jesus Christ, just let me tell it."

"Fine, Mr. Big-Dick Oliver thinks he can tell a story better than I can."

"I know for a fact I can tell a story better than you can." Oliver directs his attention back to Party Girl as the waitress comes back with my food.

"So first thing you need to know- yeah let me get the reuben and a side of fries- is that ol' Jamison here and I were in the same English block. This was back in ninth grade, so we didn't even know who these two were yet." He swirls his mug in Zel and I's direction and takes another drink.

"Yep! He sat in the row behind me."

"Yeah the whole class was set up into horizontal rows. Jamie here sat ahead of me, and yet somehow I could still smell his yuckmouth."

A rogue sugar packet is launched from Jamie and hits Oliver straight in the forehead. Oliver gives a death stare

and looks back. I've worked my way through a few bites of hash and half an egg.

"Anyway, we were no more than acquaintances by the time the end of the year rolled around and we weren't on track to really knowing each other. Then this dumbass-"

"Who are you calling a dumbass?"

"You, dumbass. Anyway, I'm finishing up this exam and I hear this noise in front of me, hollow as the daytime-"

Zel stops eating his french toast for a second, "Is that even a real phrase?"

"What?"

"Hollow as the daytime. You just come up with that off the dome?"

"I heard it somewhere."

"Where the fuck would you hear a nothing phrase like 'hollow as the daytime?' Does it even mean anything?"

"It'll mean my foot up your ass if you keep interrupting me." Oliver snaps back.

Zel puts his hands up in a 'don't shoot' motion. I chuckle and motion for the Tapatio.

"Anyway, if you guys can *stop interrupting*," he side-eyes Jamie and resumes, "I hear this hollow tapping in front of me. Tikka-tikka-tokka-tokka," he mimics the drum sticks in his hands, "and it turns out Jamie is, no shit, drumming in the middle of the fucking exam."

"Really? You thought that was a thing you could just do?" Party Girl wipes her mouth of food debris and turns to Jamie

He downs his *fourth* Mountain Dew and grins like an idiot. How the fuck does he down that much sugar and stay that skinny?

"Look, not my proudest moment. Anyway, I had to sit in the hall after that, but after class Ollie here-"

"Don't call me Ollie."

"Don't call me dumbass. He came up to me and asked me if I was a drummer. I told him yeah, and he said he sang and had a guitar and asked if I wanted to jam."

Party Girl looks confused.

"Wait, you don't play guitar. Zel does, and this still doesn't explain how these two got there."

Oliver grins and motions for the check.

"Ooh, observant. Well, I think our companions here could tell that half themselves."

Zel cracks his knuckles, "Yes I can. You see, we were somewhere around Okaga, on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold..."

"Oh no," I said, "You are not quoting *Fear and Loathing* at her."

"Why not?" He's grinning like a wolf in the sheep pen, so I motion towards my pocket.

"I'm going for a smoke." I nod toward her.

"Care to join?"

"Of course." She scoots her way past Jamie and gets out of the booth. I stand up, cig already in my lips, and throw a couple bills on the table for a tip.

"Go see about soundcheck."

"Aye aye."

Audrey Ryland

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: The New Community School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Aaron Webb

Category: Poetry

Reminiscent Stone

I once visited a place I hadn't been to in a while. The familiar stone wall stood strong, waiting for my cold embrace once again. Leaves cascaded down in random increments covering the earth in scarlets and oranges. My breath could be seen from a mile away. The sight of it reminded me that I was, in fact, alive. I watched the regulars saunter across the thawing field that once held so many unwilling gym students. Beyond the overgrown metal bondage that's been restraining mother nature for decades stood a line of defensive soldiers; ancient trees. Their color more vibrant than ever at the beginning of Autumn. Sunlight faded in and out as clouds blew by in some sort of a hurry. I was accompanied by three friends. Each one came into my life in a different but necessary time, all equally and uniquely important. The blue from her eyes, the red from her hair, and the sound of his voice all now reminded me of the time we sat upon the cold stone wall. Except this time my embrace wasn't cold, it was warm. Red, orange, and green.

Kylie Semo

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: St Catherine's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: John Morgan

Category: Poetry

My chickens were mauled while I was at a birthday party

Her limp body rested on a bed of feathers
and she wore the dried blood like a blanket.
The others managed to escape while she
lay in her bed, unable to wake up.
Who didn't latch the door?

The two missing, we assume are dead.
One named after a fascist dictator.
The other, after a stimulant drug.

The Pope lost her eye in the battle.
It's been 2 weeks, yet we still frequently hear her
wailing for her dead sisters.
The high-pitched squawk echoes inside the walls
where the fox pierced her eye with its claw and
plucked it out like one of those olives in martini glasses.

Who didn't latch the door?
My mother claims security cameras would've stopped it.
Does she understand that a piece of plastic can only watch?
She blames my father and now
they're getting a divorce.

Kylie Semo

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: St Catherine's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: John Morgan

Category: Poetry

Walking Alone

The stumbling, sweaty mass of people hopping from
bars to restaurants to the convenience store on the street corner.
Lampposts light disgruntled faces of college men trying to cross the busy street.
Lights from bars that are squished together and filled
with crowds crammed in a line until they flow onto the sidewalk.
Squeezing past a rush of drunk finance brokers tripping
over their untied shoes and announcing to strangers the number of
women they'll sleep with this weekend.
Each brick building, awake for the masses,
stained with vomit and graffiti.
The bakery line jittering with friendly excitement,
As the sweet scent of hundreds of freshly piped cannolis,
coffee cakes, and lemon squares the size of a small child's face,
overwhelm tourists, desperate to try everything.
You would think this place was safe.

Two. Two. Four. Six. Three. One.
The understood rule of packs tightening the grip
of their hands, that are intertwined with each other.
Tightening the grip of my own fingers locked with another.
Yet, there's one girl walking alone, with airpods stuffed in her ears.
Long strides, determined on making it to her destination.
And I couldn't help but wonder if she didn't make it home.

Annabel Tang

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Maggie L Walker Governor's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Ed Coleman

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Here's Your Payment, Uncle Sam

Here's Your Payment, Uncle Sam

I wish I could think the way that my mom does. For her, everything is a matter of fact. Her actions are logical and calculated, unlike mine, and her mind never seems to spiral or feel the terror of the world that I do. For her, there are no sieves of anxiety that thoughts must pass through; no worries about success or grades or self-worth. It's always been go, go, go.

It was this matter-of-fact thinking that led her to leave Beijing with my dad in 1998, when they were 24 years old, and fly seven thousand miles across the Pacific Ocean to Cincinnati, Ohio, for medical school, amidst a foreign country and language. It is difficult for me to even wrap my head around how someone could give up their life and family like that. I ask her about it, and she always gives me the same answer—she came because it was better here than it was back home.

I know she hates the narrative people that I paint of how she built a life from nothing. *You're overdramatizing it, Annabel. A lot of people do what I did; a lot of people have it much harder than I did.* In part, I think that is true—she was not a refugee. She could afford the plane ticket that took her life across the world. She learned English. She went to medical school. She bought a house in the suburbs of the West End of Henrico County in 2010. She made it. She is the one percent now.

But that doesn't take away the past. It doesn't erase the memories of growing up dirt-poor in Shijiazhuang with no father, or the memories of being yelled at to *go home* by white strangers on the streets of Cincinnati in 1998, or the torture of constantly being forced to audition in this country and to prove that she loved it enough and was worthy enough to stay here. I know the past stayed with her.

In December of 2016, I saw the past haunt her for the first time. It was the only time I have seen her truly afraid, when the four of us visited Chicago over winter break and a man on the street shouted at us to *go home*.

Do you ever look at your parents, and you see the mortality in them? At that moment, it was like time froze. I was eleven years old and I looked at my mom and I saw all five-feet-four-inches of mortality and fleeting-ness inside her. Suddenly, the woman who had flown across the ocean for a better life and raised a child during her residency and, to me, seemed infallible, was afraid. It was the same fear that she felt when strangers on the street yelled that same phrase at her when she was in her twenties in Cincinnati, but this time the circumstances were different. They were different because that man had broken the wall of belonging she had held up for so many years. They were different because now she was a doctor and she lived in Glen Allen and went to fancy dinner parties and had convinced herself that she was American enough that no one was supposed to say those things to her or her family anymore. They were different because now she had two daughters who relied on her; daughters who believed in the authentic goodness of America and didn't know what the phrase *go home* meant, because this country was the only home they had ever known.

I looked at my mom, and, just for a second, I felt the paralyzing terror she had tried to bury away for decades. I felt the American Dream Tax she paid for being here. She was scared, and I was scared, and even though we could speak two languages—more than that man could speak—neither of us could open our mouths to say anything back to him. Instead, we walked past the shouts of *go home* and willingly handed over our money for the American Dream Tax, because if you want to stay here, you pay it. There you go, Uncle Sam. You put your head down and you pay the tax and you keep walking. You be the bigger person and you go back home and you let them call you whatever you want, because if you ignore the men on the street who yell those things, you can keep rising. You can keep rising up and up the convoluted, Sisyphean social hierarchy of suburban America until you've got a nice house and two decent cars and you can afford to pay private school tuition for your youngest daughter. You can keep rising until, one day, they finally accept you as one of them. You can keep rising, and then maybe there will be no one left who questions your existence here; there will be no one left who yells at you to go back home.

That is the way life here works for her. Again and again, she passed those tests of belonging; I watched her do it without batting an eye. That was how she turned her life and mine around in a decade. But for me, it is different. I was born here. I didn't grow up in poverty in Shíjiāzhuāng. My lights don't go out at 10 PM every night. I'm in AP English Language and Composition at a magnet school in Richmond, and I know how to write research papers and do literary analysis, and I have the audacity of equality. Life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness—it says it right here, in my AP Government textbook. Why do I still have to prove my patriotism? Why do I still have to say, *I love this country, please believe me, please let me stay?*

It is hard to have these thoughts infiltrate your mind. When I was younger, I used to always feel like we were alone out here in the United States. I had only met most of my family members once because they lived halfway across the world; I didn't even know some of their names. I wondered how promising this country must have seemed for my parents to leave their lives and everything they knew behind. I wondered why my mom never spoke about her old life or where she grew up, and why she never went back to visit her family more than two decades after she left.

But one day, it suddenly became clear. I understood it all when she asked me, *Are you happy, Annabel? I want you to be happy, more than I want you to be successful. That's why we came here.*

I understood, then, that I had never been alone. I had 妈妈 and 爸爸 and Natalie, and I had my best friends, and I had my whole life and my entire identity here, whether I knew it or not. I understood that she paid the American Dream Tax to push the needle forward, into a future where the tax did not exist. I understood that the reason life was so matter-of-fact for her was that she wanted me to see it that way—to understand that I could be happier here, to understand how incredibly lucky I was, to understand that it was only here that I could read books and write essays about freedom and equity and better places. I understood that she didn't want me to live the reality she did, and that she knew here I could eventually find belonging.

Taylor Veney

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Cindy Cunningham

Category: Humor

Pros and Cons of Working at Super Mart

On my 17th birthday, I got my first job at a gas station. Getting the job was pretty easy because they were running low on cashiers and the manager is my mom. Being a cashier at a gas station requires a lot of patience. A single shift is eight hours and you have to do chores like taking out the trash and making coffee while also ringing up people at the cash register. Since I have been working there since February, I have compiled a list of pros and cons of working there.

Pros:

These are the things that I enjoy about Super Mart. They may be small or may sound boring, but they make me happy at work.

Ms. Sue:

- She is like seventy-years-old and she is super cool. She's like your typical Black, southern grandma. She attends church every Sunday, and will always offer you food if you're working with her. It might be because I like talking to older people, but I admire the way she goes about life. She is respectful of other people and is scared of absolutely no one. She does think women shouldn't wear baseball caps because her late husband told her that it is a "man's hat".

Emptying the parking lot trash:

- Emptying the parking lot trash is my favorite chore to do at work, because I am away from the cash register, I am not standing in one spot, and I am alone with my thoughts. Before I go out, I put two gloves on and carry two rolls of trash bags. We have to push the trash bags around in a barrel, and I feel like I'm in *The Fast and Furious: Tokyo Drift*. I have mastered the art of dodging cars with it and squeezing into tiny spaces. I love having to Olympic toss the trash bags in the dumpster after I finish getting them all. It makes me feel strong.

Stocking the drink cooler.

- This is another task that allows you to be away from the cash register. It's cold in the cooler so I wear a jacket and some work gloves. I bring along my phone and AirPods so I can listen to music. It's fun stocking the cooler because it is like I am playing an extreme game of Jenga and ISpy. It is satisfying filling up a row of sodas in the cooler. We have to fill up the soda crates before we stack them on top of each other. It takes me a little longer because I will move all the crates around just to have two of the same soda beside each other.

Free fountain drinks and coffee

- Every employee at Super Mart gets to have free fountain drinks and coffee. Sometimes you get a little thirsty while saying "Hello" all day so having the free drinks is pretty cool. And also who doesn't like free things? I usually drink Pepsi, Sierra Mist, fruit punch, or lemonade from the soda fountain. If I get coffee, I get a small cup and try to disguise the taste with a bunch of french vanilla creamer and sugar.

Billy:

- He's pretty cool. He calls us everyday for tank readings. We have to print off a tank monitor report and read

him back the ullaage for each dispenser. And when you're done he says "Thank youuuuu" like he's slowly opening a door. Last week he played a prank on me, I was working with Tammy instead of Ms. Sue that day, and she picked up the phone. She had put Billy on hold to finish ringing up a customer so I decided to finish the call for her. When I took him off of hold, I said hello so see if he could hear me and then he said hello back like he couldn't hear me. We went back and forth with our hellos for a little bit, but then I noticed that when I stopped with my hellos, he would stop too. I soon noticed he could hear me just fine, he was just messing with me.

Cons:

These are the things at Super Mart that I hate. These things make me want to permanently shut down the gas station for good. Sometimes I pray that the store's power shuts off so we don't have to do half of these things. The old men:

- The old men that come into Super Mart do nothing, but play the lottery and flirt. They are always around Ms. Sue's age, but want to take me on a date. When I first started working, I was excited to get a nametag because I thought it would be cool. Name Tags are not cool because the old men will start calling you by the first name all the time and it is creepy. All they see are my eyes and big ass forehead, but for some reason you think I am cute. Get your old ass away from me! They swear they're going to take me on a date with the money they win off of their lottery tickets, but let's be honest. Where the hell are we going to go with the \$5 you won off of a scratch-off ticket. Are we going to share a Big Mac or something? Get away from me, you bozo!

The lottery machine

- I hate when people come with like 30 tickets and I have to stand there and drop all of them in the machine. The machine stops at my chest so picking up tickets to drop them in causes your shoulder to hurt a little bit. I don't understand how these people are able to spend like \$100 dollars on the lottery anyway because they never come back to cash them. Whatever they do for a living that allows them to spend that much on lottery tickets at least once a week, I want them to tell me because I want in. I also hate when they spend hours scratching tickets at the scratch off machine because they usually go over there when I need to mop.

The men's restroom:

- If you use the men's bathroom, I want you arrested. I don't care if you do it or not, but in my eyes you are guilty by association and I want you charged. Why do they pee on the floor? Why? By the urinals, there's always a puddle. And then the floor gets sticky because they step in it and track it around the floor. You don't know how to use the bathroom? How can sick individuals stand the smell of old urine? Also we know y'all don't wash your hands. There is no way you all use the bathroom in two minutes. It is gross and we are all judging you.

The women's bathroom:

- Some women need to lose their potty privileges. I thought we were better than the men, but I couldn't be any more wrong. We don't leave pee on the floor, but we do leave used pads on top of the toilet paper dispenser. I hate going in there and seeing menstrual products thrown all willy-nilly in the trash cans and I hate seeing paper on the floor. Let's get ourselves together ladies!

KFC

- Colonel Sanders is my number one enemy. There is a Kentucky Fried Chicken attached to the gas station building. You can walk inside the KFC by using the doors inside of the gas station. Since KFC is short staffed, they lock the doors so that they only have to focus on the drive thru. Customers will come in all the time to quiz us on how to get into the KFC and we have to tell them to go through the drift thru like there isn't a sign on the door. Then they ask us when the inside will open, but I don't know because I do not work there.

It is such an annoying and repetitive piece of my daily dialogue. I started to stop telling people to go through the drive through because they'll figure it out in a few minutes.

When customers don't speak:

- I hate when I greet a customer and they don't say anything back because it gives me the same energy as not saying bless you when someone sneezes. It feels like they want me to burn in hell. Why can't they just say hello or wave or smile? Something? Then I hate when I tell them to have a great day and they don't say 'you too'. Then it becomes really personal because I just passed on some good vibes and you can't return the energy. Why do you hate life so much to the point you can't say two words. I always take back my farewells when they don't say anything because I don't like when people ignore me.

WASHINGTON, ALEXIS

Alexis Washington

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

Undeserving Afro

Dear Mother,
You say it's a blessing
my thick, luscious
afro
You worked so hard to keep me
beautiful
Scrubbing it
with soapy bubbles of shampoo and conditioner
I'm nice and clean
Spritz it
with your bottle of who knows what
I'm looking shiny
Gel it
with your bottle of icky sticky product
I'm not frazzled
Decorate it
with extensions and dyes and
I'm beautiful

You did all this to keep it pretty
Yet, it was with such a
firm technique
Gripping it
tighter than you ever did me
I'm crying
Pulling it
harder than you did my father
He's leaving
Detangling it
better than you did my mind
I'm anxious
Drying it
faster than you did my tiny, cold, sweat-covered body
I'm alone

For my hairitage
You did so much
But what about me
If I cut it all off
my blackness stripped
from my scalp and veins
Where
will your love lie

In the ground
with our ancestors and the culture they created
or with your daughter
The one you created.

Audrey Weisenberger

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Henrico High School Center for the Arts, Richmond, VA

Educator: Nicholas Ingraham

Category: Poetry

Abuse

The sun is always dark when your eye is black
If light cannot penetrate the dark armor we don
And the gold of hope is masked by the purple of our skin
How can we dry the mud in which I sink
We sink
We think walking where roads are paved is easy passage
Look down at the glass chains clinking with each step forward
Remind yourself why the purple of your complexion represent royalty
Realize the ebony of your eye is enchanting
Convince yourself he paints you these colors to make you more beautiful
We are so full of fear
That endless isolation constantly creeps near
The loneliness crowds our ears and drowns out what we must hear
And the sheer attraction of love that kills us fills us
An endless asphyxiation of hate and passion chills us
It is the fog after gentle rains that keep us here
Holding within their mist the shadows of women before us
Voices screaming together pitched too high to comprehend
It is under the white veil of rain where I will stay
Beaten and bruised
Battered and broken
Deaf and delirious
Hopeless and helpless
Praying and pushing through
To the other side
Where we know
Where I know
the sun must shine

Audrey Weisenberger

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Henrico High School Center for the Arts, Richmond, VA

Educator: Nicholas Ingraham

Category: Poetry

Empty Screen

In my mind I create a perfect reality
Of falling through an endless blue
So dark my hair seeps into its lack of color
All I can see is my hand reaching for a light
3000 lightyears away
Dots of red surround my view
Merging with purple to create
You
And through my newly muddled vision
I know that you see me
But do not listen
Years ago I promised my mother
Not to cry over a lack of love
Yet every night
Dots converge and doorways swirl
Forming a shapeless face that breathes your breath
And cries my tears
I hate myself for hating
Such a beautiful person
But I hate even more when I see
Nothing on the screen of my phone
For hours
Why do you refuse to see my face
Or refuse to let me see yours
It must be the latter because you used to think me pretty
When we were together, there was a corner of your mind
You no longer missed
That corner has been filled
With a light
3000 lightyears away
You float in my perfect reality of dark blue
While I hold myself down
In an empty screen