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Who  
we Are

# Who We Are

**By Heraldo Martinez**

Who We Are by Heraldo Martinez  
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Book Cover by Heraldo Martinez

*For those who aspire to become  
better than those who have been  
written*

## Author's Note

Surrounded by white walls of my room adorned by posters of my favorite shows. My left foot begins rocking against the wooden floor. My body sways with the movement of my chair as I hold a pencil against my head.

The choice I am about to make felt as if my life built up to this moment. It felt as if the rest of my life would be determined by this moment. The moment I chose to follow my dream. The dream of creating a world that captivates an audience leaving them wanting more. Yet, fear overcame me. Failure is highly likely, harsh criticism will entail, and maybe everything will be for nothing.

At a young age I knew ~~+~~we will all die and be returned to the Earth from where we came.

One day, while walking on a suspended bridge over a highway. I thought about what would happen if I jumped off. My problems would go away, no longer would I have to think, and I can enjoy an endless slumber without worrying about the struggles I was experiencing at the time. It is my belief we all have a similar thought at some point in our lives. If you have not, God can strike me down. The only difference is most of us go through life without ever saying these thoughts out loud. Seeking help, but not asking for help. What keeps us going?

I did not jump. The thought dissipated as quickly as it arose. Why? Well, if I am going to take my own life, I want to do something crazy before committing the act. The prerequisite of my crazy act also needs to have helped someone. I might not get anything in return, but if I could pass away knowing I helped someone, even a little, then my life was worth living.

Face IT. LIFE can suck, yet we all live another day. As a smart man once told me, “life is misery, but you don’t have to be miserable.”

This may sound absurd to some, but it is because life is miserable that it is worth living. Anything done in life requires sacrifices and struggles. The question is what is worth striving for? Is it becoming the best athlete, making music, helping medical research, helping a community, or doing something unimaginable? Our goal can be as great as spending time with our children by sharing a meal around the table with no distractions. Because after a long day of work, seeing someone waiting for us at home can be one of the greatest joys of life. Most of us take it for granite.

I can only guarantee one aspect of life. That is, we have at least one life and it is the one we are currently living. I am not afraid of dying, but I am afraid of not doing my best to make my dream come true. Maybe I will pass away before I make my dream a reality, but I will die peacefully knowing I truly tried. The first step is living in the moment and not putting anything off. The only person that can answer the question “did you live a fulfilling life?” is yourself.

My dream is to make a book unlike any other. I want characters that laugh, cry, love, and demonstrate life is worth living.

I will leave you with this. If you are not afraid to live in the moment nor afraid to learn then you will be able to live any life you want.

# The Beginning

Disorientation befalls my mind as I free fall. A stinging tingle hits my eyelids as they struggle to remain open. My mind wanders.

*Just a little bit. Just a little bit of your love for me.*

With eyes shut, I listen to the tune keeping me alive. As I listen, distant forgotten images resurface. Images of people living together and talking. I cannot put a name to anyone. But each image brings a tear. If only I knew I would never get to say goodbye to them.

*Goodbye to who though? I don't know.*

Gaining more strength, I open my eyes again. In front of me is a portrait I cannot touch. For who knows where my arms are. For whatever reason, seeing her makes me want to sing a tune.

*Just a little bit. Just a little bit of your love for me. To show you care. For in this world there is no time to spare. Miss you, our families, and the ones we share. If you get lost I will be there.*

I felt as if chanting these words would make the person in the image come to life. Still, I cannot touch the portrait nor speak with it directly, but I continue singing anyways. For a moment I can almost swear the image is smiling back at me. We exchange no words, yet I feel connected to the person. As I sing, I feel like there is a silent voice I cannot hear singing alongside me and I feel at peace. With my eyes closed again, I feel someone's back press against mine. Afraid to turn back, I continue singing wishing their warm touch never fades.

A tear slides down my cheek as a HEAVY drowsiness starts overtaking me. *I want to stay awake just a little longer. Please... jus- just a little l.ooo...n...g.....e.....r.* My surroundings darken as I fight an

invisible force to remain awake. I feel great pain falling asleep like my heart is held in a vice grip. For a single moment my eyes open one last time to see ---

*Will you look for me again? I'll be-*

*will you remember?*

*Can't forget. Remember, remember ... Please remember. I want... I want to remember... I want to ... because I...I, I... Unable to prolong the inevitable, everything ceases.*

White. That is all I see. Consumed by grogginess, I am surrounded by an infinitesimal white space all around.

*Where am I? Who am I?*

Arising from my deep slumber, all I see is white with no end in sight. Initially I think I am in an infinitesimal white space, but perhaps it is not white space. Perhaps it is an infinite white canvas so big and so wide it dominates my entire perception. Unable to move and without proprioception, I wait in space.

I wait. Then wait a little longer. Then a little more and at some point, I no longer know how long I have waited for. Maybe a minute, a day, a month, or even years have passed. How could I ever know, I have nothing to compare it to. How ~~would~~ can I measure it? Suddenly, the canvas in front of me comes to life. At first, all I see are a few black dots appearing and disappearing from the white canvas. I continue to wait for who knows how long. Maybe decades. With nothing else to do, I begin to think. Thinking about the concept of measurement and the dots. Where did they come from? Why are they there? Where am I? Who am I? Am I really alone?



What if the flat dots could stack on top of each other with the smallest dots on top?

The more I think, the more the dots begin to change. The dots begin to mesh. Forming shapes of different sizes. Perhaps “blogs” are a better word for them. They combine, rearrange, disassemble, and repeat this process. Forming combinations of images and colors that are ineffable.

As the lines, no blogs, no shapes, as the thingies move across the canvas, I can find no pattern, no coordination, no nothing. They feel like they want to convey a meaning, a message perhaps. I cannot comprehend them. I can find no pattern, no direction in their movements. Continuing to think, ponder, and wonder I continue aloof.

Then it happens. All colors drain.

The black thingies begin forming what look like “shadows.” They seem to be signaling to each other. As if one shadow were inviting the other to come over. No, perhaps they are inviting me to come closer. I take a step towards them. Then I take another step, then another. My heart starts beating again, picking up momentum as it races faster and faster as I get closer and closer to the shadows calling me. I reach out in desperation as I am almost there. Almost touching the canvas, almost knowing where I am, almost answering my first question. Is it really a canvas or is there something beyond? *Just a little more.* The moment I am about to touch a black shadow, a stream of light and color engulfs my vision.

## The Boy on the Farm

The illumination of a bright light blinds me. Dawn had arrived. I squint my eyes slowly as they adjust to the light source penetrating my windowsill. Dawn always has the nerve to wake up with its morning brilliance. I pull my blanket over myself. *One more minute.* The door to my room swings wide open. My father marches through the curtain covering the entrance of the door.

Even if *you* wake up early it doesn't mean you have to wake *me* up too. It's Temcus for Pete's sake, no for my sake. Whether it is a school day or a rest day, my father would never fail to come into my room and play a game of tug-of-war using my blanket till he succeeded in pulling the blanket away from me.

Speaking to me in a harsh annoyed tone he says, "Get up you can't sleep all day. It's 6am for crying out loud."

"I know it's 6am, what exactly do you want me to do at 6am on Temcus?"

"What do you mean, what? When I was younger I had to get up at 5am, not 6, every day to go feed my pigs and goats. There were no breaks. Temcus was just another workday. If the animals didn't eat, they wouldn't get fat and if they didn't get fat then I wouldn't eat."

"Hurry up, breakfast is almost ready."

My father begins walking out of my room. I hear the *click\*click\** sound of the stove igniting. He threatens me from the kitchen.

"Hurry up unless you want a cold bucket of water poured on you!"

I would stay in bed if it were not for the fact that he meant what he said. Calling him on his bluff, I once found myself wrestling him over a bucket of cold water when I decided to sleep-in. The worst part is that the food would always be ready until 7am. Despite this I knew two things. One, my father in his bizarre way had good intentions. And two, it is because of my father that I learned that the world can be a fucked up place. It is also because of my father that I learned about *that* feeling. A feeling that first came into being because of him. I cannot put a single name to what I felt, but it felt like a heavy rainstorm over my heart. Like I was feeling something I wish I never had to.

My whole world consists of only me and my father. I am an only child with no knowledge of any other family members. My father tells me my mother passed away due to complications at my birth. Both of my parents' families live in the same distant land but they fled feeling unsafe. Later, I would learn why they fled.

Out of eight days of the week. Sanctus, Odiosis, Cibus, Medio, and Octo would be school days. No classes were held on the days of Dies and Cetera. Instead, I would spend these days at home helping to clear, plow, and cultivate the fields with my Dad. We rest on Temcus. That is how it was until my father started his own business. My father would always say, "We work to live, not live to work."

He tells me that we work enough to have food on the table and to have some excess as a safety precaution. He would tell me that there are many people who dislike working out in their field, but he loves it. At least he used to. He loves seeing the fruits of his labor. He loves being able to walk through the meadow and hear the birds in the trees which remind him of his grandmother. He can tell I don't mind it, but he also knew I did not love it either. That might be why he always pushes me to learn in school.



# Migrant Girl

*HAAA!\* ARGH!\* MMMM!\**

I wiggle and squirm to break free. Tears build. I try screaming, but the best I can do is give a ARGH!\* and MMMM!\*. I can't escape. He is that much stronger than. I feel powerless. My heart *screams* for help. *Someone help. Anyone... help.* I feel something slither towards my inner thigh. *Whimpers\* Why am I so weak? It's not fair.* All I can imagine is wanting to dig my nails into his neck.

*BANG!\**

“Fuuuuuuu fudge brownies!” I wrap my arms around my head. It got smacked against the wooden floorboard of the wagon. “Sandra are you alright?,” asks Pa with concern.

Pa looks away from the road and turns to me. He had been the acting coachman since late last night. Ma wakes up to my scream, it takes a moment for her to register what happened. She kneels next to me, moving my head onto her lap. She gently massages it. *What was I dreaming about?*

*Thump\* thump\**

The wheels of the wagon wobble against the jagged road. “Don't worry honey we are almost there” utters Pa.

I do not know where we are heading and I *hate* it. I *hate* not knowing, I *hate* being a kid, I *hate* being powerless, and I *hate* not having control. I *hate* that we left my Abuela/grandma. I cannot help, but reminisce about my time back home. Or about the tantrum I threw before we left.



I remember smoke would rise from our red tinted mud brick house as we heard our animals shouting from their make-shift stalls. Looking around, I can see a small fire burning on our stone counter. Dried meat hung from our ceiling and we held a religious portrait nailed to the mud brick wall. Walking outside, I can see our kitchen utensils hanging on tree branches near our water barrels and cleaning tub. Our home sits on a patch of dirt surrounded by a spread of trees. From a distance, we can see people walking on the nearby dirt roads with their bulls, horses, and mules heading to or returning from the plaza.

When nightfall arrives, we can see the cosmos with its glistening lights. Lights so high and seemingly out of reach. It makes me think about how much is out there beyond our imagination. On a scale we can also wish to fathom. Every time I try to comprehend how vast space is I am overwhelmed by its sheer magnitude and the amount I need to learn before understanding its vastness in its entirety. My fascination with space comes from the moment I began perceiving it without knowing it.

I kept finding myself thinking about the same question. “If there is so much out there to learn and understand for what is known; how do we learn and understand about something that is not known and beyond our imagination?”

After years of thought, my conclusion is reality is dependent on our imagination and understanding. The bridge between these two realms (reality and imagination) is created by the actions we do with our body.



CREAK\*

My eyes slowly open when I feel a slight incline of the bed. Turning my head around I make out my Pa sitting on the edge of the bed. He is putting on his work boots. Out of the corner of my other eye, I can see the clock read 5:02 am. Pa makes eye contact with my sleepy self.

“Sweetie, go back to bed. You need more sleep to grow strong and healthy.”

I feel another incline on the opposite side of the mattress too. Ma sits up and smiles the same way Pa smiled at me a moment ago and pats my head.

“Go back to bed sweetie and when you wake up breakfast will be ready.”

Dazed and turning my head downwards, I shake my head side to side and hop out of bed.

“Let me help you cook Ma. Pretty please. I promise to help. Both of you always tell me teamwork makes a dream work.”

Ma turns to Pa and they both smile with a slight shrug of their shoulders. She tells me, “okay you can help me, but it won’t be easy, it’ll be a mission only the toughest can accomplish. I will be ruthless and may yell only because I want to keep you safe. Cooking can be dangerous, especially for children. Knowing this, do you still want to learn?”

“Well, it’s like how Papa always says, ‘how can anyone ever learn if they are always afraid’ but it doesn’t make sense because Papa wants to learn a game called Poker but he says he’s afraid of playing it because of you Mama.”

“Well, your Pa is a smart man.”

I felt like they were joking around and keeping me out of it. They looked at each other with playful smiles and chuckled at my discontent. I miss these days of being six years old and sleeping with them.

Day in and day out. For all eight days of the week. I would open my eyes, shake my head, and hop out of bed. I cannot remember when I started, but at some age around nine or ten. I began my day at the same time my parents did. In the morning, Pa heads out early to tend to our animals while Ma preps breakfast. We wait for Pa to return home to eat a warm breakfast together as a family. After breakfast, we all head out to the fields and work until lunch time. After lunch, we get back to work. We work and take care of our animals till late into the afternoon. With a long day of work behind us, we boil large pots of water to take baths. Occasionally, we treat ourselves with sweets after bathing. Drinking sweet herbal tea or eating fresh fruits. We do not live a great life, but we do live a good life.

While in school, I can only help my parents early in the morning or after finishing school work. Personally, I prefer working on Dies, Cetera, and Temcus with my parents. As the rascal I am, I would try to ditch school to come home early and help with our fields. This is one of the few times my smiling parents would turn on me. They would reprimand me for not going to school. I would ask myself why are they so angry? Why send me somewhere that wastes our time? I know what I want to do and that is to help my parents work by learning the trade and techniques of agriculture. Can't they see that?

I do not understand school and dislike being forced to sit down all day. I have never been a child that can sit still. I love running around and spending time with others. In school there is no time for those



activities. I can hear teachers say “learn this, learn that ..., learn, learn, learn” nonstop. Then I would ask “why”? They reply saying, “it is good for you.” Great, but that did not answer my question. Many of my questions go unanswered. For example, part of our curriculum requires us to learn about our religious text, so we can get closer to God. I do not know who this “God” is but if he is making us read 2,000 pages then I do not like him. Being myself I ask my teacher “how do you follow God?” The conversation went as follows:

**Teacher:** Hmm... Well you follow him by believing in him.

**Me:** So, if I believe in him and do awful things is that still following him?

**Teacher:** Well no, you need to be in his grace. You do that by being kind, forgiving, and a hard worker.

**Me:** Then would killing thousands of sinners be awful?

**Teacher:** Yes.

**Me:** Then why does God do it?

**Teacher:** Who are we to question what God does?

**Me:** You just said it's awful to kill thousands of people. Yet, it's okay if God does it?

**Teacher:** Where did you hear God killed thousands when we know God is all loving.

**Me:** In the second chapter of the Holy text it said after multiple attempts to save sinners God chose to eradicate them crying for the small group of believers who had to suffer for the fault of the many. Have you actually ever read it by chance?

**Teacher:** Okay class! That will be it for today's reading.

I never said I am an awful student. School just did not interest me. I learned to read because my parents would read to me as a child. At home, we only have a few children's books and the Holy text. As I grew older, Pa would always save a few cents to buy me a book. He

kept asking if there are any books in particular that I would like reading. I told him several times to save his money for himself. He works hard for it after all. I see no reason for wasting his money on needless books. Again, being myself and getting bored. I chose to read the Holy text from time to time. I became bewildered by adults when asking them questions about the Holy text and they had no response. Most adults with reluctance admitted indirectly to never having read it. From those who read it, only a handful of them follow its teachings.

I can tell most adults do not like me asking so many questions. Many of my questions are not even about religion. They are questions about them. Asking them why they do what they do.

I really do not care for religion or contemplate its teachings because I believe it is a waste of time. "Why am I put on this Earth?" I do not know. "Be kind or go to hell." Shouldn't we be kind regardless. "Fear God or face his wrath." This God sounds like a tyrant. People worry about going to heaven or hell, but why? We do not know if they really exist so why does everyone worry? "What does it all mean?" I guess only God would know if he did exist.

I felt like my parents are the only ones who listen. They would ask me if I really do care about religion. I said no. They said it's okay to care about some things, but if I do not care about religion enough then I should not vocalize my thoughts. They said it is dangerous. I did not understand what they meant. They also said they want me to refrain from vocalizing my opinions when it comes to religion even if I do care for it.

This is the first time I remember they showed concerned expressions. I did as I was told but asked them "what would happen if I did care enough to vocalize my ideas." They said, "well if you care about it and believe it is important then you should go for it." I

am very fortunate to have my wonderful parents. As time passed, I recognized many parents would outright forbid any such action.

I did not care for religion or school. Although, my perception of learning did change after an eventful evening when I saw the sky for the first time.

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We are busy throughout the year, but we find downtime during winter. We use most of winter to prepare for next year's harvest. Quite frankly, I find this time boring since we are not working. I mean what is there to do if you are not working?

I close my eyes and think about this while sitting on a bench in front of my family's modest home. I get rejuvenated by the shade of a nearby tree. The tree cools the wind brushing against my skin. Momentarily, I stop thinking about what is on my mind. I sit there taking the sounds in.

“Do you hear it sweetie?”

I open my eyes and look up towards Pa who takes a seat next to me. He looks out towards the sky.

“Do I hear what? The birds? And what are you looking at Pa? The fields are empty. There is nothing around here to see.”

“And here I thought you said you love agriculture and don't need school.”

Getting defensive and irritated for some reason I give a pout. Pa smiles when I do.

“If you love agriculture, you would love looking out onto your fields and seeing the hard work you have done. But right now, I am not

looking at the fields.”

“Then what are you looking at? There is nothing else.”

“But there is. There is a lot to look at. It’s a matter of wanting to look or not.”

Growing more irritated, I demand Pa to tell me what he is looking at. Pa smiles again and lets out a small laugh. Swoosh\* The door behind us swings open. I hear Ma's light footsteps as she steps out with a large bowl.

“I cut up some fruit we grew and tossed in some other fruits we traded for.” Inside the container are strawberries and melons.

“Hey Mama, Pa isn’t telling me what he is looking at. There is nothing to look at, yet he claims he is looking at something.”

Ma lets out a smile and says, “well if you love agriculture then there is a lot to ...”

“Yeah, yeah if I love agriculture then there is a lot to look at. I feel like both of you are making fun of me.” I fold my arms and look to the side.

“Okay fine, I will tell you. Some people will appreciate it more than others. I am looking up at the clouds. You can say they are just masses of gas and there is no point in looking at them, but I use my imagination to see them as something else. Everyone will see something different and that’s what I love about them. We are limited only by our imagination. I like the feeling of awe they give off.”

“Papa, if you like the clouds so much why didn’t you continue learning about them instead of farming?”

Pa had an expression I have not seen before. His face looked stumped, surprised, and apologetic all at once.

“Hmm.” Pa took a pause collecting his thoughts together.

“Well sweetie, you can say I lacked vision. I viewed the clouds and stars from the ground. When I should have envisioned myself in the night sky watching them up close.”

Pa could see the question mark on my face, so he continued.

“You see, as you grow older you learn more about the reality of the world and it constrains you under its limitations. That’s why some naiveness is good because you do not put yourself under limitations nor fear.”

“So Papa, do you love farming?”

“Haha (*laughter*), farming is very tiring and hard work. I would be lying if I were to tell you I want to do it every single day. Although, I never get tired of seeing you and your Ma eating a meal every single day. That’s why I have strength for another day.”

“You see Sandra, your Pa and Ma are very happy because we have each other and you. We may not have much, but we at least have food, shelter, and something to wear.”

“There are moments I enjoy farming too. When I get tired, I look up at the sky and make out the clouds. I think of what I am seeing and start putting a story together. That’s how me and your Ma met. Every time I thought of a story, the first person I wanted to tell it to is your Mama. That’s because I fell in love with her.”

“I am the luckiest man alive, or at least one of the luckiest ones because I found your Ma and we both love spending time together.

And we both love you.”

“We tell you to go to school because we want you to open up your horizons and learn a little bit of everything because it diversifies you. In the future, if you really love agriculture and want to follow in our footsteps you are more than welcome, but don’t worry about taking care of us and having that limit what you do. You can take care of us by doing something you, not us, want to do.”

“It’s like what your Papa said. We’d rather have a short life living the life we want and part of that is seeing our only child live the life they want. It is sad that everyone is going to die one day so why not live it. There is no right or wrong answer on how to live life. It is only a question of how you want to live it.”

“So how do you want to live it?” asks Mama.

*How do I want to live?*

I don’t quite understand. Aren’t I living already? They must be telling me all this for a reason.

Papa homes in on me with his big arms and squeezes the air right out of me.

“Oh Pa, how am I supposed to live when you’re clearly trying to kill me right now.”

“Oh sweetheart, I’m just trying to give you a strong hug while I still can.” *Moments like these are precious. If only she could stay my little darling forever, but moments are not forever. We never know when we can lose someone. I will continue hugging her because at least she will always be my little girl.*

“No Pa, this is how you give a proper hug.”

I give Pa a big hug as tight as I can muster. I start laughing and soon I hear Ma laugh too. We all laugh as loud as can be. Looking back, it really felt like a fantasy. Where did the time go?

## Boy's Childhood

“Oh no, the lava shark is coming back! Watch out Captain!”

Using both arms for balance, I wobble across the thick tree branch. As I put one foot in front of the other, I inch closer and closer to my Captain's iron fleet.

“Don't jump Captain! The Betty will survive,” I yell to no avail. A look of desperation surfaces onto the Captain's face. Having lost hope he lunges himself onto a nearby rock. *Snap\** In midflight the mega shark that had been circling us gobbles him mid-air. Looking down, I see my Captain being taken deeper and deeper into the lava. Captain is as good as dead now.

Underneath me, all I see is the red-orange gelatinous magma pulsating. Its heat is suffocating enough to make me get light headed. *Thud\** Losing focus for a split second, I lose my balance and fall belly first onto the tree branch. Debris is knocked off the branch as I hold onto it for dear life. Looking below me, I see the lava shark with its dark luminous scales circling me. It must be waiting for its prey. Waiting for me.

This is it. THIS IS HOW MY LIFE ENDS. Closing my eyes shut, I hold tighter and tighter to the branch for dear life.

...

*Woof. Woof. Ruff.*

I hear Tom, our dog, barking. Which means my Dad returned home for lunch. Jumping awkwardly off the branch, I ran towards the noise. “Dad you're back.” Seeing him, I run into his open arms as he hugs me tight. On our farm, it is only the two. For most of my childhood it felt like Dad and I were the only ones in the world. Not until we settled into a home did I start recognizing there are other people besides ourselves. With the uncertainty of where our next



meal would come from we had no time to think of others. Having a home now, which is really only a makeshift shed, I find peace. Since I was born, Dad worked long hours in manual work to afford the land we live on now. That said, all we have to our name is this patch dirt and an old portable gas stove which saved us for years. I thank God for that. Not until I grew older did I get a room with a draped curtain.

Most of the time I am left alone at home because I cannot handle the farm work yet. Tom keeps me company during those times. I love Tom. Tom had been a stray roaming a town. He must have been abandoned. Seeing him always alone made me toss my food rations at him while Dad was not looking. Otherwise I would have hell to pay. Starving does not bother me, but seeing someone else starve does. Since then, Tom kept following us through the towns we traveled through. At first, Dad was always there for me. Taking me to his job sights as needed. I never felt alone. As he bought land he began cultivating more capital for business ventures. Fast forward, now Dad has no time for me nor do we live in a shed anymore. Without Tom I would have no one to keep me company while Dad is away.

I cannot remember a time when Tom was not part of my life. I do not know what I would do without him. Who else would I share my thoughts with? Who else would listen to me when I talk about the fun adventures I had today? About how I am enjoying learning my multiplication table. Or about how I do not understand how a simple stove works, but it is fascinating trying to figure it out. How can someone create such contraptions? I do not believe they are exceptionally smarter than anyone else, yet how do they create?

I cannot remember a time when Tom was not part of my life. I do not know what I would do without him. Who else would I share my

thoughts with? Who else would listen to me when I talk about the fun adventures I had today? About how I am enjoying learning my multiplication table. Or about how I do not understand how a simple stove works, but it is fascinating trying to figure it out. How can someone create such contraptions? I do not believe they are exceptionally smarter than anyone else, yet how do they create?

Dad manages the farm till evening and returns for breakfast and lunch. On this occasion, Dad returned after three days. He tells me he had business to attend to in town. We usually go into town together, but on rare occasions he goes alone. I do not understand adults, but they must do things for a reason right? Sometimes it means adults will disappear for a few days leaving a note and food behind. The usual.

I do not complain. It would not fare well for me even if I did.

He does tend to speak in a harsh tone, but when we do play together we laugh. He carries me on his back when I can no longer walk. He teaches me to give food to strangers and our neighbors. He is no stranger to working. Of course, what I do not like is how he will smack me if I do not practice writing or if I complain about the food. Which is understandable. I cannot be ungrateful for food when there are people who go hungry night after night. I learned to suck it up and eat what I am given. Where did those times go?

As there are good times there is bound to come bad times. For now, I'm happy to see my Dad come home.

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“Hey Ross! Come here!”

Running into the kitchen, I see a bowl of beans and small strips of beef on the kitchen table. “Yes Dad. Did you call me?”

“Yes. I left some food for you on the table. Make sure you eat it. I’m going to bed, I feel so tired.”

“Oh, okay Dad. Thank you. Umm... hey... hey dad before I eat can I help you take off your shoes?”

“If it wouldn’t be too much trouble.”

Brimming with a smile, I rush to my Dad who sits down on a nearby chair. I untie the brown laces of his work boots covered in dirt. I yank them off as best as I can. They’re quite heavy. Then I remove his smelly long black socks, tossing them into the laundry basket.

“Thank you. You practicing your times table as I told you?”

“Yes Dad. I learned all of them. Even the 11’s and 12’s.”

“That’s my boy. I’ll quiz you on my next day off.”

He pats my head then stands up. “Good night Ross.”

“Good night Dad. Have sweets dreams”

“You too.”

I do what I can for Dad. I cannot work yet so doing this is the least I can do. He does so much for me. I don’t know if he means it when he thanks me, but I always find comfort whenever he says it. Those words are very comforting. I do not know why, but they always are. I eat my meal and toss a chunk of the meat outside to Tom. Tom is usually only given the scraps, but when no one is looking I toss a piece of meat to him. I love meat so I am sure Tom would love it even more.

I spend the rest of the evening cleaning up the kitchen and storing our food away. Putting away the plates (the ones I can). I would love to go play but these tasks have to get done so I rather get them done now rather than later. Deep inside me I have the premonition that one day I will not clean plates because more urgent and important matters will take my time. I always question this feeling that has no logical explanation and more so when I know I have no ambition. Because in life what is there really to pursue?

Once I complete my tasks, I tiptoe to the backdoor making sure I do not make any sound. Opening the door, I let Tom inside. Dad does not like Tom sleeping inside. He says dogs belong outside, but when I start thinking about how Tom must be cold out there I cannot stop myself from opening the door. I always hide Tom in my room and wake up early to let him out.

The only night Tom does not sleep inside is on Cetera night. Dad stays up late on Cetera nights drinking alcohol as he stares at the fire knowing tomorrow is Temcus. Dad and I spend most of Temcus together doing chores around our home. We wake up early so we can get the chores done while there is still light outside. He makes me help him with preparing our meals, cleaning laundry, and doing some yard work among other chores. Even though I cannot do farm work yet it does not stop Dad from teaching me how to do it. He makes me carry buckets of water to and from the river up to our home. They are small buckets so it takes a very long time to make the trips needed to fill our barrels. There must exist a better way to bring water. Every moment during each trip to or from the river I think, think, and think some more about different solutions. I consider what is feasible or how I can make a plan feasible.

Unlike my Dad, I am not one for scenery. Dad loves carrying buckets. I do not think he likes carrying buckets more like he likes

walking by the river and through the valley. As if he's recalling something. I am not sure. As for me I do not care for the scenery and much rather think about ideas and resolutions to issues running through my head. While having these thoughts I forget all about the buckets I am carrying. By the time I realize where I am again, I am done filling our barrels with water.

The most important aspect of my thinking is making sure I do not repeat a question inside of my head. Rather, I try to think of actually answering a question otherwise I will go nowhere.

The hard part for me is acting on my ideas. There was one time I did try to act on an idea. I was curious to see if the shape of a bucket would change the amount of water we could carry. My aim was to reshape a bucket to perhaps make the load lighter. I began thinking of how I could ever measure it. Perhaps I can try to use a scale to measure the weight of the water in each bucket or I can come up with another proper way to quantify the amount of water inside each bucket like using weight displacement.

Then I recall walking by a windowsill in town. Through the workshop's window, I see someone heating up glass. The craftsman began bending, extending, and shaping the glass. Running with this experience, I thought the same idea can be applied to plastic buckets. Let's just say I destroyed our buckets. I can remember bits and pieces of that day.

“Ross! What the hell do you think you're doing!”

Dad furiously stomps towards me as I back away. He reaches for my ear and yanks it, piercing his nail right into it. “What the hell do you think you're doing, boy.” In a quick upward-downward motion he lifts my head and yanks it down to the plastic I burned. With my face in the dirt he yells, “You think this is free?”

“No Dad, I was ... *ow*, that hurts ... I was just tryin- ” (slight sobbing)

“Quiet.”

I don't recall much after that. Well that'd be a lie. I remember all of it. I just rather not recall how he dragged me to a shed as he began unbuckling his belt. Or how I vividly remember each *whoosh* of his belt as it hit my flesh. Or the droplets of blood that ran down my ear.

My Dad is a good man. He's just scary sometimes. Like when I make a mistake, embarrass him, or when he's had a bad day. I really want to test my ideas out, but I began to instinctively be frightened to do so. Fearing getting beat again.

After each beating, Tom would come to me cuddling right next to me. Comforting me knowing he cannot do anything. Tom tried defending me a few times, but each time he would get smacked by a broom or nearby shovel. The last time he defended me was when Dad was about to hit him with a shovel, but I ran towards him covering his body with my own. Through my sobs I whispered to Tom “please stop Tom it's okay” hic \* For the first time my Dad just walked away.

What gave me peace of mind was I wouldn't get whipped daily. Just from time to time. Most of the time it would be getting pulled by the ear, but it must be for a reason. I must have acted up.

Dad is a great man after all.

He's the reason for everything we have. We are not distinguished or rich but we certainly have more than most people out there. A stove, heated water, land, and workers. But all I really need is good food and a roof above my head. If I have those then I would say I have more than enough.

He is a great man, but is stubborn as a mule.

As Dad's business grew he began working alongside city officials. Unpaid of course. Dad helped push through initiatives such as the creation of new roads while most people argued for crop subsidies. He is a man willing to argue with the whole town if needed to get what he wants. The setting does not matter to him. And boy did he know how to get under people's skin. Some arguments even broke out into physical fights. In the end, Dad would get his way. He did succeed in getting a portion of city funds to get funneled into building better roads.

Despite his arrogance, my Dad is very social. He talks to anyone who gives him the time of day. Cracking jokes and always offering to help cover the costs of any festivities he is invited to. He donates what he can to the church and buys toys for other children.

He's never bought me a toy. Why is he buying toys for other kids? I have never received a single gift from you. Why are you so nice to them and not me? Over the course of a few years I came to recognize I did not earn a single cent of our fortune. Dad earned it, not me. Since he earned it he has the right to decide how he spends it. Besides, what is there to complain about? Maybe I do not get the toy I always wanted because Dad says money is tight, but I get a lot of other things like good food and a room to myself. A lot of children he does give toys to have never received a single toy in their lives. Some of them have been abandoned while others have families who have no money to spend on luxuries. As for me, the best gift Dad has given me is allowing me to keep one of the best dogs in the world. What else is there to want?

Through the trust and respect he has garnered he convinced people around him to lend him money including local officials by using his land as insurance. Land is not a big of a deal, there's plenty to go

around. Most people would not take land as insurance. The difference is that my Dad has land near the local river and in town.

I would not describe my Dad as wise. Cunning is a better way to describe him as a person.

In town, he opened a small inn. He does not run the inn of course. Most of the time he rents the units to educators who come to teach in nearby towns. Their stay is practically free. He says educators are important. His only stipulation is they maintain the property. As we walk through the town, he says one day people will come all around to visit here. That's when he will start raking it in. Who in their right mind travels. What is there to see in the world? Our roads are terrible, there's nothing to do here. Everyone only works on their farms.

“Hey Dad, don't you think it's kind of crazy to expect people to come here one day?”

“WHAT I find crazy is someone who likes burning property.”

Looking down, I stay silent.

sigh\*

“Look son, if you want to make something out of yourself you need to take risks. If you do not take risks you will stay where you are at. If that's fine with you then so be it. But if you want to do something then go figure it out. It's fine by me if you do something or nothing at all. Whatever it is, make sure you work.”

“so So why do you hit me when I tried to change our buckets to see if we can carry more water?”



Dad looks away and there is a moment of silence. “We are almost in town. Remember that we hav-.”

“Why, why do you hit me? You didn’t even let me explain! EVERY time I try to do something sigh\* every time I try to explain to you what I am doing you never listen. Why Dad? Just the other day-”

“SHUT UP! When you can buy your own stuff then do what the hell you want! So long as you live under my roof you will do as I say! And if I want to beat you, I’ll beat you because you deserve it. You ungrateful moron.”

“When we get into town we’ll buy what we need. You better make damn sure you don’t break anything we buy or you’ll get it when we get home.”

“Yes, Dad.”

Deep inside I felt something. Whatever it was, the feeling dissipated. He’s right, everything I have is thanks to him. It’s not like he’s against what I do. If I ask for a book he’ll buy it for me. If I ask for a toy he won’t buy it. If I ask for tools he’ll let me borrow them. I don’t ask because sometimes he yells at me asking why the hell do I need them for. So at some point I stopped asking. Despite all this I still loved my Dad and greatly respect him. Isn’t that strange. It’s only a handful of times he’s hurt me so why do I remember them the most?

Inhales\* I think of all I have and what Dad has taught me. Nothing educational. More morals than anything else. When he does something I don’t like, I think about how I will avoid doing it when I grow up. People say you become like those around you for better or worse. As for me, I try to consciously pick the best qualities of people and embrace them. As for the bad qualities I try to catch myself

when replicating certain actions. Maybe that's why anger is not aroused inside of me.

When Dad hits me I never retain anger or resentment towards him. Never do I linger on it. All I think about is how I will not do this to others. How I will be better. How I will do better. I have a bad feeling that if I ever cave in something deep inside me will break. It's one thing to have no anger inside of you and another to pretend there is none. As of right now there is none. That's why I can go to school and smile as I play with my friends who slander me behind my back. Slander me for looking like a goof, for excelling in class, and for the wealth my Dad has.

“How lucky is he?”, “I wished I were him”, “He doesn't even try”, “so fucking annoying”

Each and every time, I take a breath then wish them the best. I am sure they have problems of their own. If it ever gets to me, I remind myself there are people in the world who have it worse than myself. People who are starving, but everyone ignores them. People begging for beatings to stop. People who are all alone. People suffering from war. At a young age I had the thought that there is always someone who has it worse than myself.

I have clothes on my back. Nice clothes at that. Good food. No excellent food! I got meat, when meat is a luxury for others. I have the ability to learn. Dad is a lot of things, but he does provide. I'd be lying if I were to say I did not question whether providing justifies mistreatment.

Looking back I do not think I got beat excessively, but I did get mentally hurt enough that I am not sure anymore. All in all I still do not hate my father, but I sure wished things were different.



## School Days

Spring turned into Summer and Summer into Winter. Through the seasons, I read more and more. I began reading from the small selection available at school. It was rarely an issue of finding a book to read. Most of them were collecting dust anyway. Most children do not glance at the books and much less read them.

Teachers spent their time trying to retain the attention of their students. While students spent their time playing. My guess is most children here believe education will never help them. All they know is field work. They get locked into the thought they will work with bodies their whole life. That is how their adult life will start and end. Maybe that's why they play around so much. Enjoying the time they have as children before they have to get to work. That is the expectation they have for themselves.

“Hey Sandra, come play with us.”

“Hmm... not right now, but thank you for inviting me.”

“Come on, you always say that. Leave that book it's no good. Come have fun with us.”

“I really can't, sorry.” I look away and continue carrying on with my book.

I don't like talking to most people anymore. What they talk about seems to have no value for me. I feel awkward when they ask for my opinion about pointless topics.

Yesterday, the boys talked about who would win in a fight a cow or horse. Like who cares? I have no interest in talking about it. It is completely fine if that is what you like, but I have no obligation to go

along with it. They would turn to me asking for my opinion. I'd give an awkward chuckle and reply "Who knows?"

I am sure my classmates give me odd looks for reading instead of playing along with them. The thing is, I find a book more interesting than most people. I have noticed there are mainly two types of people I give my time to. One, anyone who gives value for what they know or people who have good intentions.

I don't really know if someone has good intentions or not. I just feel it. Is that odd? Well this is only elementary school. I'm sure things will change when I enter middle school.

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School wise, not much has changed. I still feel school goes too slow. I am surrounded by people I'd rather not be surrounded by. What has changed are the conversations.

My classmates went from playing to horsing around. As time went on other changes began emerging. Each year it felt like boys and girls became more distant from each other. Not having spoken to boys that much anymore, I have no idea what they talk about. As for the girls, many of them talk about their hair dos and who is getting with who. Gossip mainly.

Girls will sometimes give me remarks as "Sandra you got such a pretty face. You gotta let me do your hair" and I'd reply "no thank you I like my hair the way it is." They always look flustered as if rejecting their offer was not a response they were expecting.

Other than a new classroom, not much changed. Our class is very plain with painted blue walls and cement flooring. The teacher tells us the color blue makes students feel more at ease. As for our desks,

they face a chalkboard in front of the room and are evenly spread out. My favorite part of the classroom is our bookshelf.

Being in a small school, our grade levels are intermixed. Apparently, grades are not intermixed at the high school level. Not everyone continues their education into high school because education starts costing money. Some parents, wanting their children to continue their education, send them off to nearby cities. Many parents send their children to live with close friends or relatives.

So here I am sitting with a bunch of sixth and eighth graders. Well at least the year is almost over.

“Hey Sandra. How are you doing?”

“Good I would say.”

“That’s great! Hey guess what? I saw a ladybug on my way to school. Well I am not sure if it was a ladybug. It didn’t have any spots. Oh, that reminds me I read the astrology book you recommended. I honestly do not understand how people came up with some bizarre ideas. But I find them interesting. The more I read the more questions I have. How about you Sandra? Wait before I forget... hmm I forgot.”

The girl talking to me excitedly is Phoebe.

Phoebe arrived during the second half of the school year. Apparently she moved here from a few towns North. She wouldn’t tell me why she moved. All I know is she is staying with her Aunt. Phoebe is a petite girl with short black hair. She’s always wearing a uniform consisting of a white collared shirt and long blue dress. She tends to scoot her desk next to mine. She reminds me of a cute little chick. You know, before they turn into our chicken meat.

“What are you reading Sandra?,” asks Phoebe, noticing the open book on my desk.

“Oh... ah a book about biology.” I reply with a genuine smile. I sometimes want her to leave me alone. Yet, we get carried away talking about what books we read and what we learned. *Oh no. Not again.*

“What’s so funny?”

I did not want to talk because a group always forms around me when I do. It is like people are attracted to talking as a mosquito is attracted to light.

“Oh nothing,” I reply.

“We were talking about what book Sandra is reading, but yesterday we talked about lions and chimps. Oh and we also plan to read a fiction book this week. Sandra didn’t want to but I convinced her. I also remember...” Phoebe sure does talk a lot. The girls stand there nodding their heads to what Phoebe says. Seeming to care less and less the longer Phoebe spoke. One girl even rolled her eyes.

“So next Saturday some of us are getting together to prepare for my sister’s seventeenth birthday. Phoebe I’ll see you there right?,” said Elizia. Elizia is a social brunette. Quite popular among the boys.

“Yeah of course!,” responds Phoebe.

Elizia turns towards me and asks, “How about you Sandra?”

“Umm... I want to check in with my parents first.”

“Well let me know by tomorrow, okay?”

“Alright,” I say as they walk away. I’ll have my parents go along with my little lie of them needing my help on that same day.

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“Okay, class it’s lunch time. Make sure to come back in an hour.”

CREAK\*

Ringling through the class is the sound of chairs scraping against the cement floor. As everyone congests the exit, I make my way to the bookshelf. Huh...? I did not realize I read all the available books. Bummer. Finding no books, I head towards the bathroom. Before going inside, I hear small echoes in the restroom as shoes tap against the tiles.

“ I can’t believe Sandra. She acts like she’s all superior.”

“I know right. Why do the boys even like her?”

“The other day I invited her to my house so we can do each other’s hair and she said why would I ever do that.”

“She’s mocking us. I just wanted to get to know her.”

“She’s so fake. Hanging around only when it’s convenient for her.”

“I know right, what a bitch.”

I just did not want to do my hair. It will get messy when I go back home to work on our fields anyways. Besides, I like my hair the way it is. Plus, not doing my hair saves me from the hassle.

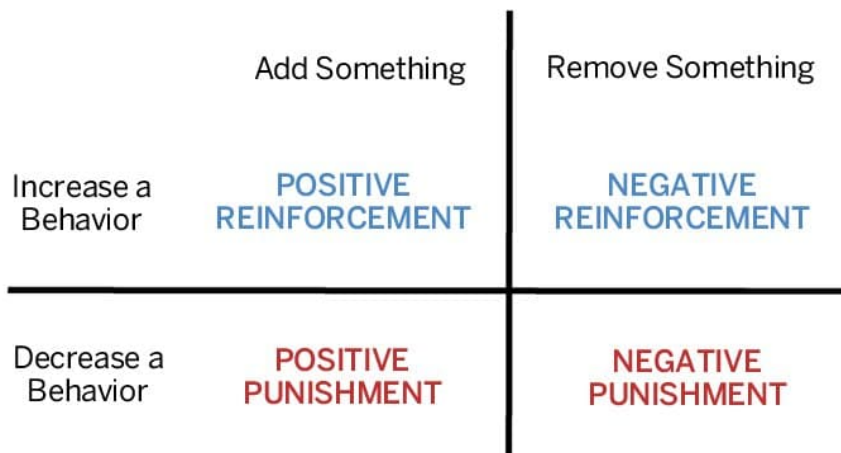
Getting to know these girls at a personal level is not in my interest. They are very mean at times. Well, children are mean in general. This makes me recall reading a journal of someone’s thoughts on



human development. He mentions how children have no filter and attributes it to their upbringing. Wanting to prove his idea, he conducts something called a “long-term observational study.” In his abstract, not sure what an abstract is, he details wanting to discover commonalities among his participants.

He found most “polite” children come from stern or caring parents. Stern parents educate their children on how to act. Making sure their children say “please” and “thank you.” Physically disciplining their children when they fall out of line. In contrast, caring parents focus more on the “why.” They talk with their children about how they spent their day on a regular basis. When their children show signs of resentment, anger, misunderstanding, or any negative emotion they ask their children questions and offer alternative perspective(s). Of course he found outliers. Not sure what an “outlier” means either. From the context, an outlier seems to mean anything out of the norm. He uses the following chart to make sense of the pros and cons of each form of parenting style.

### OPERANT CONDITIONING



A lot of what he wrote did not make sense to me. There are many foreign vocabulary words. I went to my teacher to ask her what the words in the journal meant. She said the journal I am reading is an

ancient text. Many of the words may have morphed over time and any complimentary texts are scattered or lost.

“How did you find these books in the first place? It’s rare to find any of them on the marketplace and if you do they cost a ton.”

“That’s a great question Sandra. You see, I come from a scholarly family. They have taken great pains to ensure the preservation of these books. I, myself, am not even sure of how old these books really are. Some of the books are not even the original. They were rewritten by hand.”

“You mean you rewrite all these books by hand in your free time!?”

“Heaven’s no. Dear Lord no. They have been in my family for so long that I could not throw them away. They have emotional significance. To avoid having them collect dust in some corner of my home I have them here in case any student wishes to read them.”

“Mrs. Sayu, can't you make a good amount of money by making copies?”

“It’d be too much work Sandra. The books here would not sell at a high price. The books that are in demand are no longer in my possession.”

“What were those books about?”

“Oh, the books were about physics and advanced mathematics. No idea why though. There is not much use for those topics. One of my great, great, great, .... great grandparent is said to have taken those books to a new land he believed will value them more. No one cared about those books during his time.”

“Why?”

“For the same reason you came to speak with me. You came because you did not understand the content of the journal you read. People during that time did not understand what was written in those books. They did not understand the language or symbols. At least that is the story I was told.”

“Where did they get sent to?”

“Who knows. My guess is they got sent to some land in the South. To tell you the truth, you wouldn’t be able to get your hands on them now. They cost too much. There is a rumor going around about those books being tightly secured.”

“Why, I thought those books are useless.”

“No clue. With that, you now know as much as me.”

I stood there for a moment not knowing what to think or say.

“Thank you Mrs. Sayu.”

“You are very welcome Sandra. Come to me at any time if you have any more questions.”

“I will.”

My interaction with my teacher made me understand how we can learn from others. *Maybe I should start talking to others more to learn what they understand.*

Coming back to the present, I take a step back from the restroom and wait for the other girls to come out. Hahaha\* I hear the girls’ laughing together when they come out.

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I have trouble understanding how people interact. Being unsure how to go about it, I observe people from a distance. I view how people make use of gestures, use their tone, body language, and facial expressions. It's insane how much goes into communication.

Lately, I have been attempting to jump into conversations with other girls. Love it or hate it, I cannot get better at speaking without practice. I'd rather not talk, but I have a gut feeling telling me I need to learn how to communicate. Even with people who may dislike me or disagree with my personal views. I want to learn how to hold a conversation and how to control the flow of said conversation to extract the information I need from people.

I have seen my Papa do it best. He can hold a conversation with just about anybody. He changes his language and expressions depending on who he is speaking with. That's the level I want to get to. I have seen some girls occasionally guide the conversation to topics they prefer to talk about too.

Wait... now that I think about it. Am I throwing a wrench into the conversation by talking about what I am learning? No way. Then again, I do get odd looks when I speak. Phoebe never minds though. Maybe that's why I like talking to her.

Despite trying to talk, I cannot find myself hanging around the girls in my class for too long. I just can't. I understand how to act, but knowing and doing are completely different. I know I should accept an invitation to someone's house with a smile of appreciation, but instead I respond with a "no" because I just don't want to do it. I do not want to spend time with someone who holds different conversations than me. Conversations that have no value. There are some girls willing to hear what I have to say. I appreciate it, but I know they would rather talk about other topics other than books.

Most girls just end up talking about which boys they have a crush on or their ideal man. This would explain why most girls in my small town get married and have kids around the age of sixteen. It's as if they are trying to look good for guys so they can come over to talk to them. Don't get me wrong, I like guys too. I think some look pretty cute. Even had a crush on one or two before. However, I began to realize many cute boys are pretty mean too. Not mean in the way girls are among themselves.

They lie to get what they want from a girl then break her heart when he is through with her. Of course, there are girls who fall for it. I don't blame them entirely. I am sure we all want to meet someone who will treat us right. The problem is everyone wants the "total package." They want someone with brains, looks, and confidence. Who doesn't?

I am sure there are boys out there that are truthful and close to being a total package. The problem is we just don't know who it is. It is just so hard to tell. Papa tells me if anything is perfect then there is something hidden. I believe no one, boy or girl, is a total package. Everyone has their pros and cons. Take me as an example, apparently people think I am cute, yet I am unable to hold a conversation with any boy.

I get frustrated with my inability to interact. I try to learn from others. That is why I observe my classmates. I watch how they interrupt, respond, and speak to each other. For each observation, I ask myself why people respond differently to the same comments and questions. My habit of avoiding people does not help in the least.

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It is after school and I am waiting for a certain little chick.

During lunch, Phoebe told me to meet her down the road from school. She said she has something important to talk about. I wonder what she wants.

*Pant\* Pant\** “He- Hey Sandra... I caught up to you. You sure do walk fast. I thought you were already going home and forgot about me. You could have waited for me so we can walk together.”

“Oh, I just didn’t want anyone to overhear us. I made my way over here unsure if you were going to share any sensitive information.”

“It’s nothing like that. It’s just ah... the thing is... you see...hmmm.” Phoebe fidgets, casting her eyes down and her voice becomes inaudible.

*Maybe I am being a bother to Sandra. Maybe I shouldn’t. Mmm... but I do want to ask her. Should I ask? She’ll probably say no. Then again, I cannot assume... I should have never brought it up. Oh what do I do now? Hmmm.*

I clearly see Phoebe has something on her mind. I give her time to sort her thoughts. After a brief moment, Phoebe takes a deep breath and steps closer to me. With a serious lit up face she says, “Hey Sandra I do not know how to say this, but I really would like you to come to Elizia’s home. I know you don’t want to, but... I mean I’m going... what I am trying to say is I don’t think I’ll enjoy myself as much without you. And when you aren’t around the girls boss me around and make me run errands while they dress each other. When it’s finally my turn they —”

SILENCE

“You know what, it's no big deal. Um ah... I.. I think I should go.”

“What do they do to you?”

“Just forget about it. I don't know what I am saying.”

“Hmm.” I will leave it alone for now.

“Phoebe if you don't like being with them then why are you going in the first place?”

“I don't know,” says Phoebe.

I really really do not want to go. Argh... Ugh..

“Fine, I'll go for a bit.” Hearing the news from me, Phoebe's droopy face blossoms.

“Yes! It'll be so much fun. Thank you. Thank you,” she says with both of her fists clenched in the air as a boxer. Yes Sandra is coming. She's coming! “You won't regret this,” she says pointing back to me. We split ways as we head for our respective homes. “See you tomorrow!”

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Elizia's home is not far. I find the entrance to her home by following a trail of dead grass. As I walk, I think about how mysterious dirt paths are. Religious people will say these dirt paths are God's sign. Stating that he will make a path where one did not exist before. I believe some of God's followers see signs when there are none. I believe dirt paths arise from people trampling over the grass of their so-called Lord for a long period of time. Which makes me question the following: if God creates beauty how can God allow it to get trampled over by another being he also created. That makes no sense.

Maybe God is not good or bad. Maybe we project our beliefs onto God and use his name to justify our actions and to impose our wills

and beliefs onto others. We start creating a sense of superiority and/or duty. Maybe what God really is, is existence. Or maybe we just exist. Let's say I am wrong. Then when is God wrong? Either way, the real danger is not knowing why we believe what we believe.

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All I know is I currently exist. Since I currently exist, I will enjoy life however I want to. Right now, I enjoy life by spending time with my parents.

Going back to the grass. I want to prove through reasoning that there are events which have no deeper meaning. Let's say I decide to lay down somewhere without moving. I will be fine unless someone steps on me. If someone steps on me it will hurt, but I will survive. Instead of walking over me, if said person ran over me the pain I would receive is much greater due to the transfer of force from their foot onto my body. Now, if many, many, many people walked on me over the course of a single day in all likelihood I will be gravely injured or dead. Much like the grass.

On silent walks, I think about these topics and before I know it, I arrive at Elizia's home. I hear voices inside as I knock on the wooden door held by a makeshift hinge. Through the cracks, I see an arm unhooking a small rope from the inside. Opening the door, I see Elizia with a bright smile greeting and welcoming me inside.

“Hey. Welcome Sandra, glad you came. A lot of the other girls didn't think you would. Except Phoebe. She was all like ‘she's coming, she's



coming, I know she is, she promised me!’ It was so cute.”

“Is that so?”

“Reminds me of the last time. We were all like ‘wouldn’t it be fun to see how scary we can make someone’? We kept it between us though.”

“Us?”

“Yeah us.”

“Who is ‘us’?”

“The girls. Well everyone except Phoebe.”

“We told Phoebe we wanted to try something new and she said she was okay with it.”

“You told her you would make her look scary?”

“Well no, but she knew what we meant.”

“You mean you expect her to know something you never told her.”

“Well yeah. I just told you we asked her if we can try something new. Are you even listening to me Sandra?”

I take a deep breath before speaking again. “You are pretty dumb. How can you expect someone to know what’s going on in your head? You assume everyone knows what you know.”

“Isn’t that what you are doing now? Assuming I know what you know.”

*(sigh) She’s not wrong.*

*Hmm... How can I explain the situation to her? Hmm... well-*

“Geez, take a joke.” My train of thought is cut off before I can explain my frustration to her.

“We told her we will give her the best makeover today. To, you know, make it up for the last time. We are not monsters, Sandra.”

Irritated I say, “isn’t that we came for. To help each other with our makeovers?”

“Geez Sandra, why are you always so serious? Come on, relax a little. We’re here to have a good time and talk. Don’t worry we’ll take our time. We tend to run short on time because there is not enough makeup or space for everyone to do it at the same time. It does not help that Phoebe *always* decides to go last.”

I really want to give it to her. *Not worth your time. Not worth your time.* That is what I tell myself to calm down. I do like Phoebe, but I cannot be the one to defend her. She has to learn to defend herself. What will happen if I am gone one day?

I would like to say I am knowledgeable for my age. Despite my knowledge, I cannot understand Phoebe. If someone treats her poorly she smiles back. I’d be infuriated. I do not understand her nor her reasoning of wanting to hang out around these people. Why she does it is beyond me.

Why am I even here to begin with? Phoebe is not family and we have not known each other for long either. There isn’t much I know about her except that she likes books. So why am I here? The time I am giving here is unnecessary.

“Sandra, you made it!” says Phoebe rushing towards me. She opens her arms and swings them around my neck. I pat her on the back a

few times to reciprocate her hug. Then the voice of my Dad/Papa starts ringing inside my head. “Sandra, remember whenever you give a hug make sure to give an embrace.”

“What do you mean give an embrace Papa?”

“What I mean is put your emotion into it. There are some emotions we may never convey. By embracing someone we are sharing the emotions we have for them.”

I take a breath and open my arms to hug Phoebe properly. “Hi Phoebe.”

“Se- See I told you Sandra would come. I told you.”

“Alright ladies everyone is here. Let’s get started y’all.”

Everyone makes their way into the neighboring room. There is a large table with makeup scattered about. I see eyeliners, lipstick, earrings, and makeup of course.

“Why are there so many accessories?,” I ask.

“Come on Sandra. It’s not everyday we get to dress up. Don’t tell me there isn’t ANYONE you want to dress up for.”

“Girl if I got your looks I’d dress myself up every day.”

“You got it going on. I like your style.”

“Plus, we get to dress you today! I can’t wait.”

“Alright ladies, before we get started let’s give Phoebe her makeover.”

“Yezzss!”

All the girls start ushering Phoebe to the VIP chair as they untie her hair.

“So Phoebe, is there anyone you like?”

Phoebe starts dotting her eyes left and right. Looking towards the ceiling with her eyes as her face turns a flush of pink.

“No... not in particular.”

“You’re lying, who is it? Tell us.”

“No, no one really. They are distant so... it would never come true.”

“You never know Phoebe, maybe you’ll meet someone at the party.”

“Maybe.”

“So there is no one at school you like?”

Phoebe looks down. After lifting her head, she looks saddened and replies with a soft ‘No’.

“Wow, Phoebe for a chattermouth you sure are quiet today.”

“Let’s leave Phoebe alone for today. So Abey I heard you...”

The girls continue talking. One thing I took out of the experience is learning something new about Phoebe. She is a chatterbox, but gets shy when talking about romance. Who knew that out of all of us Phoebe may have had a lover already.

I can see why there are girls that like this setting. We get to chat about not only romance, but also personal experiences and problems. We could do this regardless, but I guess people feel more at ease when they have a reason to speak with others.

In the mirror, I see Phoebe's face light up as everyone shares their story. Everyone conversates, but everyone also ignores Phoebe.

"Hey Phoebe, how about-"

"Hey Sandra just to let you know Phoebe does not talk much during makeover sessions. She doesn't like sharing for whatever reason. We tried."

"Yeah, we told her we don't like her keeping secrets, but she said there isn't anything to share."

Now is as good a time as any. "Phoebe told me about how-" Phoebe's eyes light up as she knew exactly what I am about to say.

"Hey Sandra... It's not a big deal. It's just fun and games."

"It's not just-"

"Sandra **please**. We can talk about it another time."

"I don't know what this is all about, but let's leave it for now. Hey Sandra you gotta understand Phoebe. She doesn't like to disclose too much. That's why most of the time she chooses to go back and forth from the kitchen making sure everyone has drinks."

I cannot see my face, but I can tell my face became emotionless as I held back what I wanted to say. I want to stand up, but I can hear Phoebe stopping me.

"There you go again Sandra with your serious face. Come on, lighten up."

Recollecting myself, I close my eyes. Opening my eyes again, I turn my expressionless face into a smile. "Sorry about that. These

situations get me tense. I'm not exactly sure how to act. If you don't mind, can I sit to the side to take time to understand these makeovers?"

"You're still too serious Sandra. This is coming from a place of love, but make sure not to get so serious or you'll frighten some suitors who come your way."

Tongue click\* "I'll think about it," I said.

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*Laughter.*

After the mood begins to settle down, the girls resume gossiping and laughing together. Looking in the mirror, I see Phoebe's face sparkling with excitement. She is smiling ear to ear as she sees everyone talking, laughing, and having a good time. For whatever reason her smile made me smile. Observing, I cannot help but make associations between them and a recent textbook I read. The same textbook I presented to my teacher.

One section of the text speaks about dominance and hierarchies within the animal kingdom and within the same species. The scientist spoke about his research findings. He found out that female hamsters synchronize their menstrual cycles towards the most dominant female within the group.

Like the researcher, I observe how there is an unspoken hierarchy in this group of girls I am with. Ranging from who determines group activities to who is allowed to speak the most. I see who cooperates in sharing accessories and the time they put into each other's makeup. I notice the ones with the most influence tend to have a "prettier" face, supple body, and have more confidence in what they say.

Many of these girls seem to want a good man. They speak mostly about the guys who have the most land to his name. Putting an exclamation mark if they are also successful farmers who rake in large amounts of crops each year. Having a great body and personality is an icing on the cake.

*Like why?*

Why are these girls so interested in meeting a guy? It's not like I wouldn't want it too. My fear is becoming too dependent on him. Becoming useless if he left me in this world by myself. I don't want that. Don't they understand that a family who brings in a lot of crops are also the people who have more mouths to feed.

Not that I am *as* interested in finding a partner as them. If I do choose a partner I want them to demonstrate they can stick through the good and the bad. You know, be a team. Maybe my parents set the bar too high.

This, again, takes me back to what I read in my textbook describing lion prides. Each pride has only one male lion with rare exceptions. Researchers discovered that there is a hierarchy order among lionesses (female lions). A mother who gives birth to the top male lion is automatically sent to the top of the totem pole after their son. The hierarchy order is then determined by who is born first. More interesting, lionesses adapt in determining whether they want male or female offspring.

Avoiding excess details, female lions can lose their cub if a male lion sees their child as a threat. They only see them as a threat if they are a male. This means a mother does not have to fear losing a child after giving birth if they only have daughters. The downside is they will not be at the top of the hierarchy among the females.

Even if multiple male lions are able to fully grow, only one lion can reign at the top of the pride. Any disputes are settled through natural violence and strength. Along with reigning over his pride, they are responsible for protecting the pride and creating offspring. Like anything else, there are legendary exceptions. There is only one account where a male lion lived a long life by sharing his pride with his two brothers. They did not share the same lionesses, but they did share the same territory. Historically, male lions reign at the top only for three years before they are ousted and die a miserable death by starvation. Makes you wonder why brothers do not choose to believe in each other. If they did they would be capable of a lot more success. These thoughts run through my head while I am unaware of time still passing by. Before I know it, I hear someone calling my name.

“Hey Sandra, it's your turn!”

“Oh, my bad I was lost in thought.”

“Okay, whatever that means. Come on Sandra you’ve been spacing out for so long that you are the last one left to have a makeover.”

Standing up, I come to the chair and sit in front of the mirror.

“So Sandra, there isn’t anyone you like right?”

“Hmm... no not in particular.”

“Well, can you at least tell us if you have a type?”

“I guess that’s alright. Hmm... I’d like them to make me feel safe and secure. Telling me everything will be alright. But I also want someone who is willing to tell if something is wrong when I ask them for real. Everyone needs someone. If they have no one I’d like them to lean on me when I ask them to. Cause you know, aren’t we



supposed to play on the same team? Most importantly, I want someone who it feels natural to talk with and not someone I feel like I am forcing myself to talk with. That's about it."

"And you haven't found anyone like that yet Sandra?"

"No."

"Guys try to talk to you, but you never give them the time of day. So how do you know if the guy you are looking for is not already nearby?"

"Ughhh, I am just not all that interested."

I hear someone take a deep breath somewhere in the back of the room. I hear the girls murmuring among each other. Abey approaches and says, "Hey Sandra can we fix up your hair."

"Sure. I don't mind," I say.

The girls continue giggling and chatting. *Clip\* clip\* clip\** I hear the sound of my hair being clipped. In the mirror I see Abey smiling. "Oh no, my bad Sandra. I didn't mean to. My hand slipped. I cut off a bit too much of your hair. I feel so bad. Let me try to fix it up."

I stand immediately. *What should I do? Should I call her out? Or should I use this as an excuse to leave.* I ponder the consequences of each choice.

"It's no big deal. I will have my mom fix it."

"No Sandra, let me fix it to make it up to you," says Abey.

"No, I will just go home now." I quickly make my way through the girls and open the door before any objections are raised. My hand

stays on the door handle for a few seconds. Taking a deep breath I say, “Hey Abey, stop being a BITCH and a liar.”

I turn my head and make direct eye contact with Abey. I do not want to threaten her or intimidate her. I just want to make it clear I will not sweep things under the rug or be messed with. If I allow her to believe she can get away with it once it will never stop.

*BAM\** The door slams shut behind me and I start running home. I did it!

Before I knew it the makeover session ended.

## School Days Part II

The morning air numbs my face as the air pushes against my face. I hear my ragged breathing. Haaa\* uhaaa\* uhaa\* With no sun out, I question why I am out here in the cold.

“Hey Dad, why are we jogging?”

“Because it’s good for you.”

“But it’s freezing out here, Dad.”

Before the break of dawn my Dad made me run behind him in the middle of winter.

*Why? Why is it so cold?* I see the smog from my breaths.

“Keep running. You’ll warm right up. Hey Tom! Tom! Come here.”

Tom, who is ahead of us, starts running back towards us. Tom slows down and walks towards me. *Clap\* Clap\** Clapping his hands, Dad points his index finger towards the road ahead. Signaling to Tom that he is free to run again. Dad sure is making Tom get his exercise, but Tom’s happy. He loves running all over the place.

“When we get home make sure to write four complete pages.”

*Four pages? Why so many?*

“Why am I writing so much?”

“Why? Do you have something else to do? Or would you rather work with me out on the fields?”

“No.”

“Then get it done or you know what will happen.”

“Okay Dad.”

At times, I do not know why I do as Dad tells me. I am sure he has his reasons I just do not understand. I feel like he never explains it to me. Why should I write? Why should I run? Every time I ask he replies with ‘just do as I say and stop asking so many questions’. I will continue doing as he says. I just want a good explanation so I can understand. With time I understood his reasoning, but going through the process is a lot harder without knowing the why behind it. I continued doing my best and excelling. Even though I want a kinder Dad, I wonder if I would try this hard if I did not fear him. It never occurred to me to ask myself the question “would I go through this suffering if I had a choice?” Right now I have no choice.

Growing older, I am fortunate to have a reason to continue moving forward, but I lament those who do not. Through the years, I came to realize those without a ‘why’ become stunted in their growth when fear disappears.

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As a kid not old enough to attend school, I remember playing with Dad a lot. He would chase me or play hide-and-seek. I can remember it like yesterday.

“Ross, hey Ross come here. Now where are you hiding?” I giggle as Dad looks everywhere for me. I am hidden under our tarp. I cannot believe he cannot find me. Given we live on the streets, I cannot roam too far away. Dad keeps me company on his days off. Playing with me as much as he can.

“I guess I have no choice but to lay on top of this tarp,” says Dad as he gently places his head on top of my stomach. I cover my mouth

with my hand to stop myself from laughing.

“Boo!” I scream.

“What was that?,” says Dad with a surprising yell. He lifts his head off of me.

“It’s me, Dad. I was under the tarp the whole time.”

“You don’t say. Well you made the bull angry. You know what that means. You get the horns.”

He starts chasing me on his fours like a bull. I run around the streets laughing at how fast I am. He is unable to get me. When he finally does catch me, he rubs his hair against my belly and it tickles. On days I feel down, I cannot help but remember these days. It is hard to remember now because of everything in between. Where did the time go?

Despite the warmth, I instinctively know I am forgetting something important about those early days. Like a dream we forget about when we wake up.

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Years pass and I find myself crying. Dad beat me again. I found myself locked in the shed that got rebuilt. Now, no light enters. Trapped in darkness, I close my eyes to avoid seeing the scary shadows surrounding me. I curl up into a ball and hug myself while shivering. Cold. It’s so cold inside the shed. My eyelids glow a light red when the door to the shed reopens. Dad sat down with his back facing me.

“Hey Ross, I’m sorry I hit you. But you gotta understand I do that for your own good. If you continue playing with metal and firewood you

will burn yourself. Metal can get hot.”

“But Dad, I was curious to see when the metal would melt. Is that so bad?”

*Sigh.* “Not really, but I don’t want you to get hurt. You’re the only child I have. What would I do if something happens to you? You’re all I got. I want you to know if I hit you, it is because I care about you. I don’t want to see you hurt. Ross please don’t be heating up the metal. Please.”

“Okay Dad.”

Dad sure cares about me. Thinking back, heating up the metal is pretty dangerous. I should know better.

“Remember to take a shower now. After you get out I will have food ready for you on the table. Come on now, let’s get to it.”

“Okay Dad.”

I make my way to the bathroom to take a shower. Coming out, I smell smoked pork sausage, rice, and vegetables. I sit down and reach for my spoon. Slap\* Dad gives a small slap to the wrist and I pull my hand back.

“Remember Ross, we have to give thanks.” Following his guidance, Dad and I close our eyes.

“Thank you God for the food we have here today. Thank you God for giving us another day of life and the air of your greatness. Thank you for the blessings. Thank you God. Thank you. Please watch over us and keep us away from doing evil, from straying away from your path, faith, and beliefs. You know all and see all. Thank you and please bless my son.”

After a pause, we open our eyes. I go straight to eating the food Dad prepared. We talk at the table and I tell him all about the make believe adventure I had yesterday.

“Hey Dad, one day I will be the one cooking for you. You’ll see.”

“I’d like that,” says the best Dad in the world.

*One day.* One day I’ll do more to give back to my dad who works so hard. God give me strength till the day when I can walk on my own.

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I do not complain about Dad’s behavior. I heard enough of his stories to understand he had a much rougher life growing up. By comparison, what he does to me is nothing. On the first night he told me about his childhood, he was sitting in front of our home which was under construction. Sliding the door open, Dad looks at me as he pops a cigarette into his mouth.

“Hey Dad, whatcha doing?”

“Oh, hey Ross. What are you doing out here in the cold? Get back inside or you’ll catch a cold.”

“Can I stay out here with you?”

“Sure why not, but go fetch your sweater first.”

“Okay Dad.”

I run towards my room and get my warm sweater. Running towards the front I trip and fall. I get back up quickly and start walking towards the door again. Opening the door I see my Dad still staring at the night sky. I walk beside him and sit myself right next to him. I sit there in silence.

“Hey Ross, have I told you about my own Mom? You see my Mom wasn’t the nicest. Sometimes I’d come home all beat up. The kids would bully me for being a bastard. During those times, being a bastard was as bad as being a demon. Except being a demon is much worse in my opinion. When I tried telling her what happened she’d beat me with a broom yelling, “why the hell are you causing trouble!” She’d smack my head real hard. *Haha*. I don’t think she once worried about me. That’s why it is good not to have a family sometimes. There is no one to hurt you. When you are alone you have no one to worry about except yourself.”

The first couple of thoughts that run through my head when he says this are:

*Does he not want me?*

*Am I a burden?*

*Why is he here if he rather not have family around?*

He takes a breath from his cigarette before continuing with his rant. “Hey Ross if anyone tries to mess with you. If they try to punk you. If they try to hurt you make sure to hurt them back. Even if you get beat, make sure they know you will fight back. Make sure to tell me too and I’ll hit them myself if I have to. I’ll even go to their parents to tell them they have to educate their child. If nothing changes I will educate their parents too even if I got to beat it into them. I don’t care what threats they make. ‘Reporting it to officials.’ *Pfft*. I’ll tell the officers their child beat my child too.”

“Okay Dad.”

“Okay what?”

I freeze up when I see Dad’s eyes filled with anger. I fail to reply.



His facial expressions soften as he shakes his head and looks down. "I'm sorry Ross. I don't know what happened. Just make sure to tell me if anyone messes with you."

"Okay Dad, I will tell you if anyone messes with me."

"There are times when I am hard on you, but know it's because I care. Okay Ross? Whatever I do I'll make sure I don't do anything my Mom did. There was a time where I'd come home crying after getting beat up by the boys at school again. Instead of being there for me, she would whip out her belt screaming, 'men don't cry! Let me give you something to cry about!' My Mom was a heavy drinker too. On nights she felt like it, she would come into my room throwing beer bottles at me. Ranting about how I look exactly like my father. She would beat with a belt until I stopped whimpering. On days she did not want to stop hitting me, I'd run out and hide between the bushes and trees until she went back to sleep. Throughout the night she would yell, 'Hey Shane where are you?! You good for nothing! Come out here! I'll beat you harder if you don't come out!' That is how she acted most days out of the week."

"I am not like her. I'd be dead if it weren't for my Grandma. She'd come looking for me once my Mom was gone. She'd come and tell me to sleep with her in her room. Comforting me by telling me she wouldn't let her daughter through the door no matter what. I remember the screams 'you god damn bitch' 'open the god damn door' 'you bitches'. My grandma kept consoling me telling me 'don't you worry son go to sleep' 'nothing is going to happen' 'I'm here'"

Dad took a sip of a beer he'd been keeping on the side. Dad isn't much of a drinker, but he'd drink a beer every now and then.

"Remember Ross, there are times you have to stand up as a man because running away is not an option. It's getting late now, you

gotta go to bed. Make sure to read and brush your teeth before going to sleep. You got that?”

“Yes Dad. Understood. Good night Dad have sweet dreams. May God bless you.”

“Okay Ross, good night. May God bless you too.”

My Dad would tell me a multitude of his childhood stories. None of them seemed happy. Most seemed like terrible experiences. *Dad sure has been through a lot. I haven't suffered at all.*

Before going to sleep I get on my knees and pray towards the sky. God thank you for another day of food. God thank you for a wonderful father. Thank you for the air and thank you for everything. I can never thank you enough for what you have given me. Please watch over my family and help my peers through their struggles. Thank you and I hope I see another day.” I open my eyes and snuggle into bed. I jump out of bed remembering Tom is waiting for me at the backdoor.

“Tom, Tom!” Tom comes running inside as he snuggles right next to me.

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Having grown older, I start attending school. *Laughter* from the children on the courtyard can be heard from a distance. The first years of school are great. Nothing to complain about besides occasional cheating in games we play. As a child I tried playing with everyone, boy or girl. I'd always smile knowing I will see my friends at school again, but somewhere along the line my smile disappeared. I thought my friends were the most fun people in the world. Now I realize there was never anyone around me.

At school we had a relay race. Being a lap ahead of a friend I wanted to surprise him by jumping on his shoulder. Before I could scare my “friend” another friend jumped on his shoulder. He got pushed away immediately with a sour look.

“My bad, I thought you were Ross. That guy is so annoying. He never stops talking. He says the dumbest things at times. I don’t get how someone like him is doing so well. I don’t get it.” Instead of defending me, my other other friend agreed to what he heard. I never quite understood it. How can people talk behind each other’s back? Given they are only a few feet away from others. At least do it in a private space with no one around. To me, I can hear everything with my trained ear. I can distinguish who is speaking and filter out unnecessary noise.

Each morning I would train my ears by walking with my eyes closed. I would play a game with myself trying to identify where I am by hearing nearby sounds. Of course I would open my eyes from time to time to make sure I do not fall or bump into anything. Maybe that’s how I trained my ears. Or maybe I trained them by listening to Dad’s snoring. Indicating when I can let Tom inside. It may have not been the best idea to listen into conversations of nearby classmates a couple meters away from me. But that is normal right? Regardless, I hear most conversations going on around me. Some conversations hurt. I sometimes hear classmates say:

“Ross is such a teacher’s pet.”

“Ross, Ross, Ross my parents can’t stop comparing me to him.”

“Why can’t you be like Ross.”

“Must be nice having anything you want.”

“He’s so annoying.”

Their words would hurt me inside. I didn't like it. After the race, I sat at home thinking. *What did they find so annoying about me? Am I really doing something strange? Is there anything I can do better?*

Throughout my childhood I tried conforming to people. Acting differently depending on who I spoke with. Acting like I did not care with some. Playing sports with others. Or only talking about their problems and not mine. I allowed others to have victories over me. Whether those victories came from beating me in a relay race or a test, a win is a win and a loss is a loss.

Doing so, I began to get slower. I meant to give way to others, but instead I became someone I am not. I lost myself. The person I portrayed to them became their reality and mine as well. I played a fool like a fool.

Soon I found myself sitting alone under a tree during breaks. I could not connect with anyone. Not a teacher nor a friend. For why would I want fake friends? I tell people what I think and it never turns out well. I knew my way of thinking is different when I came to understand not everyone can imagine a lava shark. At this age, I can still picture sharks and words on the wall. My mind has the ability to create imagination then superimpose those thoughts into reality. Except, I am the only one who can see it. I can imagine being underwater as easily as I can create a city in the sky. But no one will believe me unless I make it into a reality they can perceive too. So they can see what I see. But that sounds like too much work. Makes me wonder how there are people in the world who pursue impossible dreams and find a way to make it into a reality. As far as I know, those are the people who carry the world on their back.

I know this is true because I once asked others if they saw what I saw. They gave me odd looks and said "what are you talking about Ross there is nothing there?" Then I would ask them if they can

imagine things in space. I got different answers. Some would say they had an active imagination growing up, but not anymore. Others looked stumped. I now believe there are people who never had an imagination to begin with. Which means God blessed them with other gifts. Gifts I may never have.

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After being in school for a few years now, I question why there are boys who like getting into trouble. Walking around the halls, a few of them call out to me. “Hey Ross, can you come over here and help us clean?”

The boys who call out to me had gotten in trouble for poking the girls too much. Now they are being punished by cleaning the cafeteria and the areas around it. I almost got dragged into their mess too, but our teacher asked if I was among the boys who teased the girls. I said no. The girls also denied my involvement. These “friends” who call out to me never talk to me unless they need something from me.

“Come on Ross, aren’t you my friend? A close friend.”

“No, I don’t really want to help you all clean,” I reply.

“Come on. Be a pal.”

I could say no out of spite for being called a teacher’s pet or because he really is not my friend. I said no because I just did not want to help them clean. Besides, it is annoying that they only talk to me when they want answers to our homework assignments.

“Ross, this isn’t like your usual self. Are you okay?”

I walk away annoyed. *I'm not acting like myself? What does that mean? I am the same person I was yesterday. I'm just choosing not to help anymore. Why do people enjoy judging my actions when it doesn't benefit them? People are weird.* I am more weird because as I think about this I found myself turning around. Walking past the boys, I reach for a broom and dust tray.

“Ross you're awesome! Thanks for helping.”

I do not care for their praise.

“You're welcome. No problem.”

Why did I decide to help? Was it because I would appreciate it too? Or did I do it because all the girls would notice me alone during break. Or worse they'd invite me to play. Did I do it because I had nothing else to do? I have no friends to play with. No one who listens to me. There is no one I like talking to. *So why am I here? Why am I living?*

As I approached the end of primary school I had less and less people to talk to. Till one day I found myself on a bench all alone with no one close by. All I hear is laughter and people talking from a distance. Having been alone, I no longer care about fitting in. Why should I talk to boys who only talk about stupid and pointless topics? Which bordered on being offensive at times. I didn't want to participate in their chatter so I would stay quiet when they asked for my opinions. Some tried to loop me in, but I would shrug them off. It got more senseless as the years continued.

Each day I sat alone, I wished I would meet someone who likes talking to me and I like talking to them. Someone who wants to learn. Someone who I can call a real friend.

Not wanting to come home sometimes did not help with my loneliness. Some nights I wish I had my mother in my life. I wish she were alive so that when Dad beat me I had someone, anyone, who would hug me when I am in pain. Someone who I felt cares for me.

*Sob\* Sob\** Some nights I cry myself to sleep. Then at some point I stopped crying. Realizing no one is coming to save me. Each night I tell myself that if I find anyone I care for I will make sure I am there for them. There to protect them. There to love them. There to teach them.

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Entering middle school, I am old enough to begin helping Dad with our fields. I do not help as much as I thought I would. Most of the work is done by his hired hands. He tells me I am only there to get my hands dirty. The work is repetitive. So much so that to a certain extent I can put myself on autopilot.

While on autopilot, I observe my actions and think of the overall goal of my work. I consider how much work I can accomplish within a given timeframe taking into account max output and minimum input. I then make calculations of how much of our crops sell and trade for. I contemplate at what point can I justify paying someone else to do my work. More importantly, how do I even get there? What work has to get done before I can pay someone? Also, why would they want to work for me in the first place?

Over the years, Dad made purchases for machinery to make farming more cost efficient. In exchange for borrowing Dad's equipment, workers get paid pennies for helping him out on his land. Plus two free meals. Dad eventually paid his workers a living wage as better jobs came to market. Which meant Dad had to give competitive wages to retain his labor force. To me, I know we can give more. I

also know there are experimental farming tactics we can use. Some are worth trying while others are sinful. At least according to Dad.

When I told him about my farming ideas he said, “Ross you better not bring me any more nonsense. Cross breeding plants? That’s crazy. The Lord gave us food and taught our ancestors how to cultivate. Yet, you want to pervert his teachings and create monstrosities.”

“Yeah, but Dad if we do this we can find plants that need less water. Plants that have new tastes, Plants that-”

“That’s enough Ross. Enough is enough.”

I can never get anything through his thick skull. I gave up trying to because he never listens. One day I will do it my way. An idea I want to put into practice is crop rotation. I read about it from a book I got at the school’s library. The idea is antique and already in use, but there are two versions of it. All I wanted was to share my idea with my Dad by telling him what I learned. I wanted to see him smile and say he is proud of me. Not once has he said it. Yet, I already know what he will say. Like a broken record he will tell me, ‘so what,’ ‘that’s nice,’ or ‘I don’t have time right now.’ ‘That’s nice’ would be nice if he was not ignoring me while he said it.

Instead of going to Dad, I go to Tom. I tell him all about my ideas to which he barks at and licks my face. Of course he does not understand what I am saying. He probably only understands my excitement. And that’s good enough for me.

I do not like thinking about it, but sometimes I wonder how my life would be if Tom was not in it. Having him here makes me feel safe. His soft fur keeps me warm during winter nights. His unconditional love keeps me going. With him I have less fear. Having his company



lets me sleep at night in peace knowing I am not alone. For an empty house is scary.

Everyone wishes to have a home of their own, but staying alone inside one is scary. With no one around, the darkness of the room grows darker and each small echo puts my nerves on edge. *Did someone break in? Will someone kidnap me? Are those shadows, ghosts, strangers, or devils? Will my life always be like this?* My heart sinks at the thought of being alone forever. That is why I fear the darkness. Only when Tom is around do I lose fear. I think Tom can get scared too, but by being together the fear subsides for both of us. Knowing someone is with me gives me strength. If I need to leave the room at night I always run. I fear walking through the hall at night when I go get Tom. But I fear leaving him alone in the cold even more. Whenever he stays outside I always worry about him. I sometimes hear him make his way around our home until he is right outside my room. With metal bars on my window, I cannot invite him inside. I find it crazy that a thick concrete wall is what separates us from being together.

*Maybe it would be better if Dad didn't come back some nights.*

I feel terrible when these thoughts surface. *I am an ungrateful son. How can I think these things about my own Dad? I'm the worst. Maybe all I deserve in life is work and misery. Maybe this is why no one likes me.* I sleep at night and think about how sinful I am.

I glance at our Holy Bible on top of my bookshelf. I have considered reading it multiple times, but it is so thick. There is no way I will ever finish reading it.

Falling asleep, I feel a warmth embodying me. I feel a soft press against my cheek. The warm sensation rubs off me. I cannot feel much else. My hands and arms do not feel the same. It is very hard

to distinguish my dream from my memories. Sometimes I have these dreams where I try remembering something important. When I wake up I never remember what made me warm nor the dream itself. Instead there is an itch that will not go away. I can almost remember, but not quite. As I open my eyes, my arm reaches out trying to grasp something before I wake up. Looking up, all I see is my ceiling.

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We have money now, but that was not always the case. Growing up we did not have much. We moved from town to town as Dad looked for work. For the first couple of years we lived out on the streets. We had nothing to our name but a stove, a tarp, and three blankets. One of my first memories is traveling across a desert. I can also vividly remember Dad gasping for air as he swam across a long river trying to keep me above his head. In his pocket, Dad carried only a few gold coins. None of which he spent. He gave everything up in the hopes of buying new land in a new nation we knew nothing about. With nothing else, we had nowhere to go. Nowhere to run to. There was no one nearby to help us either. In a foreign land and with our inability to speak with anyone, it feels like we are the only ones in the world. Living in the streets, I would worry about the shadows I saw at night. For the most part, we traveled alone. Occasionally running into someone who spoke our language. Dad made it a mission to learn this nation's language. To accelerate his learning he prohibited me from speaking our native tongue as time progressed.

As we traveled, I could tell Dad was very suspicious of everyone. Most days we had very little food and water. We did not dare to ask our fellow street men for food because they also have grumbling stomachs. When Dad began securing jobs more easily he made it a habit to feed someone homeless from time to time despite having very little money. Before that, we'd search through trash bins for

scraps of food. Each day was a challenge. We never knew where we would go or when we would find food. There were a lot of unknowns. Out on the streets, I noticed full grown men would have stressed out faces regardless if they have work or not. As a kid I did not know any better. I thought my life was typical. For many it still is.

When I would show a concerned face my Dad would always tell me, “everything will be alright. I will figure it out.” And you know what? Everything did turn out well and alright. For these reasons, it is hard for me to see Dad in a negative light. I can only remember my kind father. The father that carried me on his back and who never let me know about his problems. Now that I am older, I believe most people can get comforted by anyone telling them everything will be alright. One way or another, humans do figure out how to survive. Despite Dad’s words, I understood our situation. I, of course, felt terrible for being incapable of helping him. I am only a hindrance. Yet, I felt no stress because there was nothing I could do. Why stress about what we cannot control? Most of the stress we experience only exists when we do not influence what we can control. That is my thought and belief. What gets me through tough times is my conviction, my faith, and my mentality.

As a child not even three years old yet. I would make calculations for surviving. Taking note of our resources. Even thinking about the possibility of Dad dying this very second. What distance is left to cover on our journey South? How much water do we have left? How can I secure funds as a child? Begging will not cut it if I want to have a home. How many days can we go without eating? As we traveled through the desert on our way to the large cities in the South, I would ask our guide about what food can we gather. He would point out a few herbs here and there, but not many because it is a barren desert. My Dad and our guide would drink a yellow liquid. Unlike

them, Dad told me to only drink from a clear bottle. Except sometimes I do not have that luxury.

Remembering my past is strange. How could I go from a child who can wake up at any time to someone who lies in bed for too long. I had been through so much. Where did that person go? I know if I was that person back then I can still be that person again. I did it once. I must be able to do it again. Physically I will not be the same person, but mentally I can be. But what drove that mentality at that time? What pushed me to make calculations? I did not even bat an eye at the thought of Dad dying. *Am I a bad person?* During that time, I could imagine Dad laying flat on the ground taking his last breath and I would not have felt a thing. Eventually I would cry, but while I am in a crisis. I know it is not the time to curl up into a ball. I know that person is still inside me. I know he is. Sometimes he still comes out, but I pretend he never does.

*Bam\* Bam\* Whisp\* Whoosh\** Dad hits me with his belt. Its rough leather rubs against my skin. With each whip I hear the air go *whoosh*. I cry and let tears fall after getting hit twice because Dad would not stop until I did. The thing is it didn't hurt. After a while each whip and slap felt like nothing. That's when I felt the monster inside. The same one I felt when I was in the desert with my father. I don't know if I like it. It's very hard to turn it on. Turning it off is much easier, but it can take a while. The monster could do more and be more, but it felt like it came at a cost. The cost of possibly losing happy moments if I fall into the deep end. My care for others also diminishes when I open the monster's cage. Sure I can do what I want, but I had the intuition that there is no point to being that person. Being under the control of someone else or more like something else. Releasing the monster is not awful if I have it under my command. Making me think *how can I control it?*

These thoughts come to haunt me. As I grew I felt like I wanted it more and more. I want to have my own freedom. My own control. I want to have the ability to tell Tom he can sleep inside if he wants to. I want to use this creature to take me to another level that allows me to provide food to at least those I care about. But it all requires work.

What is prompting these thoughts? I think helping people would be great, but it requires a lot of work. I do not know if I can keep up or if I even want to. Helping everyone seems like slave work because it is never ending. It would be easy if everyone helps and is willing to put in the work. I began realizing some people are more willing to put in more work than others. And I recognize some people work smarter than others too.

For example, one of our contracted workers works from 5am to 6pm. His name is Greg. Like Dad, Greg works long hours too. Perhaps only working three hours less than Dad. So how is it that they both work similar hours, but Greg has a smaller home and lower pay than us? Honestly, I believe Greg is a much harder worker than Dad. Greg is also starting to work extra hours to purchase his own land. In contrast, Dad is starting to work a little less as time passes and dresses better too when he goes into town.

To think this is the same man who slept under tarps. *What is the difference between them?*

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With academics becoming more important, I find myself sitting across a stack of books on my desk. At home, I wait for my personal tutor. I do not understand why I have a tutor in the first place. Disregarding my feelings about it, I comply with Dad's request to get tutored. To make the tutor feel better about getting paid, I would sometimes act like I do not know something. They would even

believe me which I find dangerous. How many other people could I fool if I wanted to?

At a young age I realized it is not difficult to fool children or adults. I can also tell if someone is lying by the tone of their voice, facial expressions, and what they say. At times I feel like a fool for believing that my Dad had no clue I was hiding under a tarp.

*Childish.* When I lie I add truths to avoid being caught as a liar. I even fooled my Dad a few times. Four pages as if! To avoid writing so much I would rearrange notebooks and memorize which journals I have shown him already. Dad catches on to my tricks. So much so that he began marking the pages I have shown him already with a star. I'd then strategize for what length of time he can retain his memories. Making note of the days he had the most work. I'd tilt my journals and fold the page corners so he'd mark an additional star to a page that he already marked. I tested out my theories with my teachers first. I would ask them questions that seem to have no value. In reality, I wanted to test their memory retention to see what I can get away with a few lies. I limited my lying to only avoid reading a book or writing. Anything beyond that seemed dangerous. Ironically, I have trouble lying. I can only tell the truth really.

Dad no longer makes me copy pages. Now my time is spent with a tutor. They come over and "teach" me for an hour or two. I do not like being tutored because they go too slow. To get ahead I would ask my tutor "What are we covering next week?" They'd tell me and I made sure to read ahead and teach myself. Most of the material was easy. If I never did prep work I would probably see a tutor more than once a week. I did my work ahead of time because all I wanted to do at home was to play with Tom and fight the alien invaders, navigate the oceans, and build a fortress.

Dad is a religious man. When I was younger we would always go to church the day before Temcus. He loves having discourse with everyone there. Especially the Father of the church. They would go back and forth with their arguments. They of course agreed on the most important concepts and ideas such as:

“The Father of the home is the one in charge of the family. They need the strength to hold them together. God created him first and gave him great abilities.”

“Women should be silent before their husbands and may discipline their children if they stray from God.” *Which I do not completely agree with. If he is a great man, sure.*

“God is all loving, all knowing, and all powerful.” *Some philosophers would say God cannot be all three. I believe most people do not understand what God really is. God is not meant to be understood, but failing in trying to understand God is a folly.*

They continue going into the idea of how God sends messengers to show his greatness. His benevolence. He slays the wicked and rewards the virtuous. He is the only Judge of us. God sure is great isn't he.

One lesson my Dad did teach me is to pray each night before going to sleep. Before heading to bed himself Dad would enter my room and ask, “Ross did you pray yet?” Of course I always do. Dad told me to. Praying comes easy when I have so much to thank God for. Even when I slept on the streets I would thank God for life, I would thank God for my Dad, and for the warm blanket I had. Today I thank God for good health and great food too. I end my prayer by asking God to help those around me.

It never occurred to me that I was mistreated. I mean I am being fed right? I am being taken care of. Sometimes I am alone, but I got food and all the books I would want. What else is there?

Would anything really change if my Dad was gone? Of course it would. When he leaves it means I have to take charge of myself. Then again if I am all alone would I really want to live? I don't know. It's scary. I don't think I would live long. I would just go hungry and when my body stopped moving that would be my end. I would no longer have a reason to live. Cause why would I live to work in a field I never wanted to work. To work day in and day out to only arrive to an empty home. I have no one. Maybe despite how my Dad is, I still love him. We have good memories together. Despite the bad memories I fear being alone more than being hit by him from time to time. Yet, I questioned even that thought.

I began seeing more beer bottles and cigarettes scattered around our home. I began seeing my Dad more often at home drinking. I don't know why, but I don't like it. While thinking this Dad came home. From the hall he yells, "Ross, Ross! Come out here! I said come out here God damn it!"

"You got till the count of three. ONE! TWO! THREE-!"

"Here I am Dad. I was cleaning up the kitchen. What is it that you want?"

"I just wanted to know where you were and-" *hic*\* Help me take off my shoes."

Approaching my Dad, I can smell the cigar smoke coming from his clothes. As well as his beer breath. I want to ask him if he is okay, but I am afraid. Afraid to look at him in the eyes and ask. Fearing he'd yell because he has yelled for asking in the past. Sometimes he raises



his arm and I instinctively raise my hands over my head to only then get smacked on my sides by his heavy hand. It's not that I didn't care no more, but I feared getting hurt more than I cared.

I could feel it. I could feel something itching to get out. *How did things turn out this way?*

# Bystander

*Whispers\**

“How much longer will she be here?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe until she enters the ninth grade.”

“You should have never told your sister her daughter could stay with us. She's completely useless!”

“Shhh! Keep your voice down. You'll wake her up.”

“Margaret, if she's not out of here by the end of summer I'll take her to a nearby town and leave her there!” The screams of my Aunt and Uncle can be heard from my room. My nerves tell me to go and leave this home. *But where can I go?* If I left, would I go back to my parents? Doesn't matter, everything will stay the same. Why? Why does my family not want me? What did I do to deserve this? I want to leave.

Maybe. *Maybe* I should not have been born.

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I still have to go to school. My Aunt registered me to attend the school her youngest daughter attends. Each morning her daughter told me, “Hey Phoebe don't talk to me at school.”

Maybe things are not so bad. I mean, I still have a place to sleep. Having to make my own bed and meals will benefit in the long run when I have to live on my own. Just keep at it Phoebe! You got this!

The first couple of days are rough, but everyone seems nice. *Don't be alone.* Just gotta keep talking. People like smiles, right? *Don't be*

*alone*. In the back of my head, I can sense a thought setting off an alarm, but the alarm gets blurred. Something doesn't *feel* right?

A couple of days pass and I manage to make some friends.

“Hey Phoebe, do you want to come over and play?”

“I’d love to!,” I reply enthusiastically.

I'd go to the homes of different friends to avoid going home.

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*Shoves* to the ground. “Where the hell have you been!?,” says my Uncle pulling out his belt. *Swoosh*. I can hear his belt slashing against my bare skin. He pulled down my pants to make sure the belt hit my bare body. I saw my Aunt and cousins standing to the side. Looking and staring in silence. “I am not hosting a whorehouse here! Don’t be coming past sunset.”

“Okay Uncle. I understand.”

“Then why do you continue coming home late?”

For a moment I thought he cared about me. Cared about me staying out late.

“What do you think the neighbors will think of us? Do you actually care about anyone else other than yourself? Oh, and you can bet that I know why you’re here. I did some digging and you better believe I know your secret. So you better keep your filthy hands off my children. I don’t want you speaking with any of them.”

“Yes sir.”

“WHAT? Did you say something to me! I can’t hear you! Speak up!”

“Yes! I understand.”

Maybe not today, but one day things will get better.

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A few weeks pass by. My eyes cannot help, but catch a glimpse of her. She sits behind me. I have not been able to catch a full view of her. All I know is that she is so beautiful.

I am always staring at the back of her head when she is not looking. I see her always returning and retrieving books from the bookshelf. What captivates me is her polished sleek blonde hair that cascades over her shoulders giving a summer’s glow. I bet most classmates want to talk to her, yet she’s always alone.

“Hey Phoebe let’s go. Lunch is gonna be over if we don’t start heading out.”

“Coming. Sorry,” I say as I try to take a quick glance behind me.

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After school I sneak away from my friends and run back to the classroom to catch my teacher before she heads home. I am about to enter when I hear voices from behind the door. Through a nearby window, I look into the classroom and see “the” girl. She is talking with our teacher. I am so nervous I cannot walk into the classroom now. I decide to wait outside the classroom till she leaves.

I have been waiting outside for a while now and it does not seem they will leave anytime soon. Maybe I *should* go home for today.

*No, Phoebe you gotta wait. Let’s count to 300. When I get to 300 I will walk inside no matter what. 1, 2, 3, 4, ..., 201, 202, 203, ..., 284, 285. My heart beats faster and faster as I approach the 300 mark. Be ready, go*

in on 300 no matter what. I begin envisioning walking into the classroom. *Don't think*. Don't think, just walk in at 300. Not 301, 300.

292, 293. "Thanks Ms. Sayu. I'll see you tomorrow." I hear the girl finishing her conversation and I panic. I look to my left and right. I decide to hide behind the corner of a wall.

*Door opens.\** Hearing the door open, I wait for the sound of her footsteps to get quieter. Turning the corner, I see Ms. Sayu locking up her classroom.

"Ms. Sayu! Wait, can I get a book?"

"Oh, hello Phoebe. Of course you can," says Ms. Sayu unlocking the classroom door. We both walk inside and she asks, "Hey Phoebe you are welcome to come in any time during the school day too."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry for wasting your time. I should go."

"Wait Phoebe, I'm not mad at you. Please come back."

I hear Ms Sayu's voice from behind me. I slowly turn towards her voice.

"You are NO bother. Please come in. I only wanted to tell you that you can come in before, during, or after school. If you come more often I'd be happier. Sometimes I may leave early, but if you tell me to expect you after school I can wait longer. Almost no students stay past school hours, so I tend to leave right after I wrap up my lesson plans. So long as I know you are coming I will make time."

"Are, are you sure?"

"Yes Phoebe, I am sure."

“Hey Ms. Sayu ab- about that girl.”

“You mean Sandra?”

*Sandra.* So that’s her name.

“She is a little different. She comes every so often to check out a new book or to ask any questions that are on her mind.”

“What kind of questions? How is she like?,” I ask with curiosity.

“I’m not sure what she likes exactly. I do notice she enjoys being alone which is a little odd. Most people want to intermingle. She has messy hair most of the time and detests getting it done. Such a shame because she has beautiful hair. She seems to enjoy reading about topics she never knew about before and she is a runner. She does not participate much except during relays. She goes all out during relay races. Makes you wonder where she pulls all her energy from.”

“She likes books, huh.” I am not a good runner, but I bet I can read a book. Or so I thought. While under the moonlight and with everyone passed out, I try reading a book I got from Ms. Sayu’s bookshelf inside my room. Opening the book, I could not get past the first paragraph. Now that I think about it. When was the last time I read?

The last book I read had simple sentences and colorful pictures. With each page having only around two to four sentences. Not a gazillion. I felt unpleasant bringing back each book I failed to read. I would lie to poor Ms. Sayu telling her I read them all. I thought I would be able to read at least one of them.

“Wow Phoebe, that is the fourth book this month. Way to go!”

“You know me. I love to read,” I reply with a small chuckle. *Why am I lying?*

“Hey Phoebe I notice you only come here after school. Is there a reason for that?”

“I’m not sure. I think I do it because some of my friends do not like me reading books. Yesterday, a friend saw me carrying a book and she asked me if I want to become a teacher. I told her ‘no.’ She then gave me an odd look. She said, ‘are you stupid? Why are you wasting your time with books? Books have never helped me or anyone in my family.’”

After saying this Ms. Sayu stays silent for a minute. She then says, “Hey Phoebe I think you are a pretty smart kid. You do things despite having no idea what to do, but remember you don’t have to do things alone.”

What does she mean by ‘alone’?

“Phoebe go get me the book you put away. Let’s read it together.”

“We don’t have to do that. I already read it Ms. Sayu.”

Of course I did not read the book. But I don’t want her to find out that I can’t read. I just don’t. Maybe it is because I don’t want to look stupid in front of her.

“Come on Phoebe. There are a lot of words I don’t know either. Maybe we can help each other. Do you think you can help me a little?”

I nod my head. Ms. Sayu stands up from her chair and approaches the bookshelf. She grabs the book I just put away.

“Hmm. Phoebe can you help me with this word that says ‘context.’ I don’t know what it means.”

“Ms. Sayu, you don’t know either?”

“Well let’s see here. It says, “the context of the book entails documentation of creatures living in a moist environment located in remote areas.” Wow, those are a lot of big words. I’d be surprised if you or any student knew any of these words. Documentation isn’t a word I encountered until I began studying about how to become a teacher.”

“Really Ms. Sayu? You didn’t know what that word meant?”

“Hey Phoebe, no one is perfect. Do you know how I classify someone who is truly smart?”

“No. Who do you consider being smart?”

“A smart person continues thinking and does not assume they are the smartest. They listen to the perspective of others, even those they disagree with. They listen for the purpose of growing their understanding. Most importantly, they are willing to get perceived as a fool if it means learning something they are unfamiliar with. It can be a slippery slope because if they continue growing and learning they will start gaining confidence and believe they know best. Sometimes they do know best and sometimes they don’t. Even when an opposing party is wrong they must be saying what they said for a reason. Whether they are right or wrong is a different conversation.”

“Ms. Sayu I don’t mean to interrupt, but why are you telling me all this?”



“Who knows? Maybe you will understand my words as you grow older,” says Ms. Sayu shrugging her shoulders.

“Moving on, the word documentation means writing information with the intention of presenting it to others. When you do your homework it is a form of documentation. I keep all your assignments as a record, a memory of the work you have done. With these documents I create a paper trail to track your progress throughout the school year.”

“Now Phoebe, what does documentation mean?”

“Umm... it means the collection of homework assignments.”

“Hmm... That’s a lot better than what you knew before right? Tomorrow I would like you to come here and explain to me what the word ‘documentation’ means. And I want you to use a different example other than homework assignments.”

“Umm... I’m not sure I can Ms. Sayu.”

“We will give it a shot anyways.”

“Sure, I guess that’s okay.”

“Let’s go back and break down the sentence. “the context of the book entails documentation of creatures” now what does this mean? Do you know what creatures are?”

"Yes, they are like animals right?"

"Yes, they are like animals. Now what do you think documentation of creatures means?"

"Uh. Papers about animals."

"Yes! Yes Phoebe. This book has pages about animals. By using the information we know, we can use the [context/what we know] to figure out what is written or said."

"Now in your own words what does the following mean?"

'the context of this book entails documentation of creatures'

"It means, 'the information in this book has pages talking about animals'."

"Bravo! Yes Phoebe that's exactly what it says."

"Ms. Sayu if that is what it says, why write it using confusing and different words?"

"You can say a lot of things differently. The words you choose and how you say them affects how others perceive them. We can influence how people view us by what we do and say. With enough skill, we can influence the behavior of the masses. Maybe you want them to agree with your beliefs or perhaps you only need them to do what is required. You do not need to tell the truth, you only need to move them as you wish. Not that I would know."

"For instance, isn't that the reason you always smile Phoebe? To look friendly because you want others around you."

"I- I don't know what you mean," I reply and instinctively take a step back.

"Hey Phoebe it is not a bad thing, but most people who smile also want others to feel good. That is so nice of you. I was only trying to explain the fact that people can perceive the same experience differently."

"I see," says Phoebe. *I cannot help, but want to talk to her more. Phoebe seems so heartbroken. Why is there only so much I can do? Why? If only*

*I could do more.*

"You asked about Sandra earlier, right?"

"What about her?"

"I am not sure if she is smart or not. What I do know is that she does not care what anyone thinks of her. She is cooperative, but she does not hesitate to shrug someone off if she disagrees with them. Her sense of mentality allows her to do whatever she wants. In combination with her curiosity to learn, I am sure she will give someone a run for their money. All that is left is for her to discipline herself to use what she has learned and put it into practice. Books will only take you so far. What matters is not what you learned, but how you decide to execute. Go all in or you will fall short."

"She can't be that dangerous right?"

"Well that depends on what dangerous means to you. Danger is sometimes good and sometimes bad."

"You're not making any sense again Ms. Sayu."

"Sorry. I got a little lost in thought there. I just want to make it clear that you can come to me at any time. If you feel like you need help please tell me. You got it?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

*Sigh.* "Phoebe do you think you can stay after school from time to time? I still need help reading this book."

"If you really need my help I guess I'll have to," says Phoebe brimming from ear to ear. *When was the last time I smiled without faking it?*

“It is a promise then. I will see you here from now on,” says Ms. Sayu holding out her pinky finger.

As a teacher, I sometimes detect children with troubled homes. When I find them I do not know what is the best way to help them. Maybe with Phoebe the best I can do is to teach her how to read, write, and speak. I hope what I teach her helps her make something out of herself. Especially in *this* country. Days like these make me remember the words of my colleagues.

"Make sure not to get too involved"

"The best we can do is educate them"

"That's a problem kid they are not worth helping"

"Some are far gone. We can extend a hand but if they don't take it there is nothing we can do"

"All troubled kids just seek and want love"

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Weeks pass by and I continue coming to Ms. Sayu's classroom after school. She made me learn several weekly words. Making me recite their meaning, telling me to use them in a sentence, and forcing me to rewrite each word ten times over. Unlike at home, I felt security at school.

*Slap\** “God damn it Phoebe! Why are you bringing books home? Did you actually have parents who raised you? Don't you know you don't need this?” Holding a hand against my cheek, I hold back my tears to avoid getting hit by my Uncle again. “Instead of stuffing your nose in a book, go learn something useful. Your place is not **inside** a classroom, **it is** in the kitchen. If you were useful you'd come home and cook for all of us. Not prancing around coming home late from school you piece of shit.”

“Rob-.”

“What Marge?! You want a good smack too?” My Aunt who tried intervening stands back again. “Let me tell you something. If there is a fool of a man who takes your hand, your only job will be to pleasure him and cook for him. Nothing else. *Hah\** Not like someone would ever take you.”

Turning his head back to my Aunt he tells her, “Marge you know where we gotta take her? We gotta take her to church. She’ll learn real values there.”

I hate church. Church is always the same. The following week comes and my Uncle takes me with his family for the first time to church. I sat on the far side of the bench with them. He and my cousins give me scornful looks as they have remorse sitting with me. In front of the congregation is a man standing in front of a podium giving a long speech. According to Ms. Sayu, I believe people call this person the preacher or was it the Father or the priest? Either way, I understand [squat/nothing] of what he says. The preacher goes on to say:

“As God commands in passage IV line 23

‘And we shall hold women in contempt because they came after man. Therefore, they are second only to man. She will devote her life to the man of the household in good and bad times. She may not speak if man commands it.’”

What does devote mean? Or how about the word contempt? What does that word mean? I want to ask my Aunt or Uncle what those words mean. When I turn towards them my Uncle gives me an intimidating stare and I immediately dart my eyes back towards the speaker.

The endless speech lasts forever. After taking a short break everyone begins singing and dancing. With music playing everyone comes together. A few boys dressed in robes pass around hand drums to me and others. I shake the drum which is actually a little fun. Unlike this church, my church back home did not sing much. *Maybe this time things won't be so bad.*

Or perhaps my arms being in pain from hitting the drum so much should have told me otherwise. After the speech and singing the gathering began winding down. People say their goodbyes and head home for the rest of the afternoon. *Good. Time to go.*

"Hey Mr. Cornel." The preacher from earlier comes over clearing his throat.

"I heard you had a little problem on your hands. I think I can help you," says the preacher as he gets behind me and holds an arm over my shoulder.

"Yes Father. I don't want others to know. I didn't know where to turn. But at confession I thought I could confide in you. Do you think you can cleanse her?"

"Don't worry Mr. Cornel. I believe I can. She won't be a problem anymore. I can send her back home when we are done."

*I don't know who this man is, but I don't like him. I feel uneasy. I want to go home. Without being able to say a word, I see my extended family head out. Please don't leave me here.*

"Come here child. Everything will be okay. Just do everything I say and it will be alright. We will have you back to your family soon enough. The speaker pulls on my wrist as he leads me to another room in the church.

"Come sit here in this chair. Make yourself comfortable. We are going to conduct a ritual. I will be right back. I have to make sure everything is locked. We cannot have spirits wandering about."

He leaves and I can hear the sound of the door being closed. *Get out.* I get frozen in place. *If I leave he will tell my uncle and I will get beat for sure. Even if I never wanted to see my family again, there is nowhere I can go. How'd I pay for my next meal? Where would I sleep? What clothes would I wear?* A load of thoughts run across my mind. Next thing I know I hadn't moved an inch. I hear light footsteps get louder and louder. The door cracks open.

"Hey Phoebe, the preparations are almost done. Take a seat on the chair beside you." He walks close pulling the chair from behind gesturing for me to sit. He then goes and opens a closet door pulling out a blanket. He lays the blanket onto the ground.

"Phoebe, I need you to take off your clothes."

*What?*

"Come on Phoebe. I can't start until you undress."

"Mr. why do I have to um-"

"Just do as your Father commands. I am only trying to help you. Through me our Lord and Savior will use his eternal love to cure you of your illness. Your uncle told me about your sin. I have decided to cleanse you. Stop being so stubborn and undress."

"No, I don't want to? Please, I want to go home."

I cannot tell if the speaker is frowning or if he's gone cold. He walks towards me and grabs the lower half of my shirt and starts pulling it over my head.

“I’m doing this for your own good. Can’t you understand that?”

“Stop! Stop! Let me go. You’re scaring me.”

He pushes me to the ground. I turn and try to run away, but he yanks my leg and grabs hold of my stomach with his arm. He presses all his weight onto me. He forces his other hand under stomach and reaches for the button on my trousers. I cannot loosen his grip; it's too strong. Can't even budge it.

“I said let go!” I start squirming and kicking my legs.

He turns me around and starts reaching for my waist. He tries pulling my pants down and unbuttoning them. As he holds my hip with his other hand.

“I said let go!” I continue squirming and kicking.

“Hold still.”

I continue kicking and swinging my arms around. My elbow hits something hard, but I continue doing it.

“That’s it. I had enough!,” he says as he grabs my ankles and twists my legs over forcing me to lay on my belly again. He puts pressure on top of my body with his own weight. “That’s better. Now Phoebe let me show you a good time. I want you to feel pleasure. As a messenger of our Lord and Savior I can cleanse you so hold still.”

He holds my arms together with his left arm. I feel his right hand pressed under my belly slowly reaching inside my jeans. *Get off!* I hear myself groan as I shake violently. My eyes tear up. *I CAN'T move, he's too heavy. I can't fight back. There is nothing I can do. Maybe I really do deserve this.*



“Fine I understand,” says Phoebe.

“Do you now?” He starts releasing his pressure and slowly sits as he tells me to undress again. I slowly lift myself using my arms to stand up. I reach for the button on my pants. Then something screams at me. *Run!*

I try running away again but he grabs my arm before I can run past him. “I said let go!”

I cannot describe my feelings. I just know this isn't right. This is disgusting. If I told the speaker to do what he is doing to me right now with another man. I know what he would say. *Disgusting.* They'd feel revolted. That's how I feel as this adult man is trying to touch me. There is no pleasure. Why can't they understand?

His grip is too strong. I bite into his hand as hard as I can. Feeling small bones I bite down hard and yank my head away aiming to tear off his flesh until he lets go.

“FUCCK, YOU BITCH!,” says the speaker as he pulls his hand off my arm. When I try to run away again, I make eye contact with him. His eyes narrow, his fists clench, and I see a tinge of red on his face. Before I could take two steps I hear a *THUD\** from my face hitting the floor.

“That's it. I'm done being nice.” The speaker's grip tightens even harder than before.

*Don't cry. Don't cry. I want to cry.* whimpers\*

“Why'd the hell you do a stupid thing like that?”

*Whip\* whip\* whip\** “Get your sin out.”

“How about your sister? Can't we ask her to take care of her?”

“Why'd we have a child like you? A good for nothing whore.”

I can hear my past speaking to me. As the tears start falling, I cannot tell what my face looks like. Through the tears I start feeling anger. *Why? Why God do you claim to care for your children, but you don't care about me. Am I really sinful? Oh is that it? God were you ever real to begin with.* I should feel angry towards the world. There is no real reason as to why we live. What an awful joke. I don't know if I should laugh, cry, or feel anger. There is no point to any of it. If there is no meaning to any of it let me tell them what I have to say.

“Hey speaker, you're like my father, but neither of you are fathers of mine. Oh wait, don't tell me you do this all the time with the little boys dressed in the church's robes. Does no woman find you appealing that you resort to having your fun with children? What is more sickening than me is you Father or does the word pedofiler sound better to-”

BAM!

“Do you like little-”

BAM!

I don't know what I'm saying or why. His fists hit my face, covering my face with numbness. There are twinkles of pain traversing my face. I try not to register the pain otherwise I will start crying again.

“You are a good for not-”

BAM!

“Must be tough fighting a little-”

BAM!

There is a moment of silence.

“That’s better. I guess you just need some traditional education. Phoebe let’s try this again. I promise I won’t be rough. Don’t force my hand.”

That’s a good idea. Maybe I should let him do as he pleases. It doesn’t mean anything. It will be over quick. Gotta find my happy place until it’s all over.

“Yo- You still didn’t answer me. Do you like doing it with little boys as much as little girls who can’t defend themselves? Why? Is it because no one really likes you because you are a piece of filth.”

I turn my head away fearing I will go paralyzed if I stare into his eyes. I don’t know how I could say what I said. Maybe I didn’t want him to touch me. Or maybe I have been angry for so long that it wouldn’t stop. Or maybe there is no point for any of this. Like why? My life isn’t great. No one has- Oh is that it? I just want to die. I want him to continue punching me so it can all end.

I’m sorry. I’m sorry Ms. Sayu.

“Fine, I’ll teach you some manners.” The speaker drags me to a pillar and ties my chest against it. He walks away, but comes back with a whip. SLASH\* WHOOSH\* I hear the sound of the whip ripping the air and hitting against my bareback. FWOOSH\* “Aargh.” *Whimpers\** I start whimpering as the whip hits against my skin.

“Now say you’re sorry.”

“I’m sorry!” *FWOOSH\** “Please stop mister. I’m really sorry!”  
*FWOOSH\**

“Why are you sorry?” *FWOOSH\**

“I’m sorry for making fun of you. I’m sorry for saying you play with boys. I’m sorry for biting you. I’m sorry please let me-” *FWOOSH\* FWOOSH\**

“Aaa immm I-” *FWOOSH\* Whimpers\** The speaker lets a volley of whips fire and I could feel water running down my back. I lost track of how many whips I heard. I lost my voice yelling for him to stop and that I am sorry. Eventually all I heard was the whip hitting my back. At some point I feel the ropes loosen. As I lay face down on the concrete floor a piece of fabric lands on top of my head. I hear footsteps walk away and the door open.

After laying there for a period of time, I lift my head up. In silence I use my tattered arms to lift myself. I find my clothes on the ground and start dressing. I do not see the speaker and sigh in relief. I start heading out of the church to my uncle’s place. I enter a shed where we keep the sheep. I lay there crying until the sun went down among the sheep.

*Never.* I’m never going to church again. If I get beat that’s fine. I’ll get beat either way. I just don’t want anyone to look at me like that again.

How could I be defiant? I’ve never been like that. If only that were the real me. But no. I’m still a scared little girl that cannot do anything. There is no one who loves me.

# Departure

When we are young we believe everything will last forever. Good or bad. Not until we have lost do we cherish what we had. We can never understand what it means to lose a parent. Until we lose one. We cannot understand how it feels to lose our child. Until we hold them dead in our arms. Nor do we understand what it means to curse at the world until the world takes away everything we care about. For then what is there to live for? What is there to fear?

Given nothing, we have everything to gain.

∞ ∞ ∞

“Did you hear what happened in Vinh?,” asks Ma.

“No, what happened,” replies Papa.

“Apparently, the river overflowed after the long heavy rain. A lot of the homes near the river got washed away or are three feet deep under water. What a terrible tragedy,” says Ma, looking like the tragedy happened to us and not to complete strangers.

“We got most of the crops done. We should have time to spare to head over tomorrow to see if we can help” says Pa.

“We should bring some buckets and shovels. They might come in handy. We can pack some extra lunches too. At least anything we can spare,” says Mama.

*Spare?* I don't think we have much to spare in the first place. Why are they both keen on helping complete strangers? We are not rich by any measure. Why help people who have never helped us? When Pa was struggling and Ma fell ill I remember him going around the plaza asking for anyone to help him with his fields. He had nothing

to give them except food. No one came. No one. Pa at the time never dared to tell Ma about his troubles and his poor crop yield. He tried keeping her away from the fields and from working. Ma did not know much because Pa's larger field is so far from our home. He told Ma to only attend to our animals and to make food.

I understand it sucks having water destroy your home and fields. Despite that, do we have any real reason to help? Are my parents helping people so they can help us in the future? That would make more sense. Then again, that motive does not sound like my parents. Why? Why are they helping? I do not understand their reasoning.

Wait. Did those people help us in the past and I am not aware of it? Or maybe my parents want them to help us as compensation. Oh there is also-

“Hey Sandra. Sandra. Hello San-”

Sandra looks tranced as I call out to her. Then suddenly her face becomes alert. As if a bubble burst.

“Phoebe. Did you say something?”

“No, not really. You looked out of it so I wanted to make sure you are okay.”

“I'm okay. I was lost in thought,” I reply to Phoebe as she cocks her head to the side with a look of surprise.

Phoebe is too adorable. Her small frame, but soft skin makes me want to hug her all the time. Of course I don't. She might find it uncomfortable. Plus, there are many judgmental people around. I wonder if I had a younger sister would I want to hug her all the time too.

After the makeover session I began feeling more comfortable around Phoebe. Maybe it was after I gave her a hug. I cannot put my finger on it. Thinking back, why did I go to the makeover session? How did this little girl convince me to go? I never like to go to socials, but I went. Why? How did we even start talking?

As we walk home together I ask, "Hey Phoebe how did we start talking?"

Phoebe pauses where she stood and I look back. "You know, I'm not too sure. I remember noticing you before, but you would always be somewhere else. It is like you were not there. Not present. Although, I do remember the first time you said hello to me."

"Not present? What does that mean?," I ask.

"I cannot explain it. It was like we saw you, but your mind was consumed by a book or you would stare off into space."

"That does not sound like me." *Then again she might be saying this for a reason.* Phoebe would not lie. She has no reason to. "Well, when did I first say 'hi' to you."

"We were in Ms. Sayu's homeroom. You came in one day to check out a book. You said hi and left right away."

Now that she mentions it... I am starting to remember.

∞ ∞ ∞

Today we find ourselves exercising outside before school lets out. With school out, I walk back to Ms. Sayu's room as everyone else heads home. I want to exchange my book with one on the bookshelf.

Opening the door, I see Ms. Sayu with another student through the doorway. Who is she? She has a small frame and short straight hair.

She is wearing a long uniform navy blue dress with white stockings and a white shirt under her suspenders. She's small with no apparent ample chest, yet I think she is pretty. I'm not into women, but she'd be someone I am sure some people would like. People who like petite women. Although, she does have small legs and arms that will make farm work difficult. Well she's a woman so maybe she can stay home if she marries into a wealthy family. I see some women like that. Staying at home. That is not the life for me. I always tell Papa, just watch one day I will be one of the biggest land owners around. Then I will rake it in. Pa being Pa says, "that's great sweetie, but remember you gotta be smart about it. Also, you gotta only let people you trust know about this. That's if you want anyone to know at all."

"But why Papa? Why can't I tell everyone?"

*Sigh\** "I wish nothing more than for you to shout your dreams at the top of your lungs, but we need to understand how our society operates. Maybe someone will change it, but until then I am gonna ask you the same question."

"Which is?"

"Have you found someone you like?"

"Papa, not this again. I told you I'm not interested in anyone. I don't need anyone. We weren't even talking about that."

"Maybe, but I will continue asking. Do you know why?"

"Yes, Papa. You care for me and you would feel more at ease knowing someone is there for me."

"Exactly. It's a cold and lonely world out there, but it is a little less scary if there is someone who has your back. Having someone you



care about can fill the void and bring happiness to your life. I know having your Mama in my life has made my life ten times, no, a hundred times better. I want the same for you if you are fortunate to find someone like that.”

“I know Papa. It’s just I have found no one I like.”

“That’s a shame. Although, I am a little happy too. Happy you have not found anyone yet. It means there is no one to take you from us. That and I don’t want you to find someone just to find someone. When you have a partner and you do not both like each other rather than happiness you will both find it miserable. There are ups and downs in every relationship. It’s no different for me and your Mama.”

“Really? You and Mama had ups and downs?”

Looking down then up, Papa said, "We did. At first we both planted, plowed, and harvested the crops. Those are happy times. *Chuckle\** Not because of the work, but because we could enjoy spending the day together."

"So everything was good, right?"

"Well we chose to have a kid. Best decision we ever made. Except it comes at a cost. When a mom carries her child in her belly she will feel feeble during and after pregnancy.”

“Why?,” I ask.

“Nurturing a baby in the womb is like carrying light buckets of water all day. At first, carrying the buckets is light work. Then as the sun goes down, the buckets want to go down. Having to hold onto the buckets even when they beg to get dropped is painful. Soon the light

buckets feel like the heaviest boulders. A mother has to go through worse pain for hours and days to deliver her baby into the world. "

"Pain? Did I cause Mama pain?"

"Look here. You cause neither me or your Mama any pain whatsoever. If you want to blame anyone, blame our suffering on the choices we made and will make. You too, do not blame anyone for your suffering, but yourself. Live the life you want as best as you can."

Papa continues, "You know what else. There are days I work all day forgetting what it is all for. But when I come home and see you and your Mama. Everything makes sense. Sandra, we love you. Ask your Mama and she will say the exact same thing."

"Papa, I believe you. So how did you guys have problems?"

"Remember how I said 'we both harvested crops together'?"

"Yes Papa, I remember."

"Walking on the mountainside I would see rocks. Too many rocks. Before she was pregnant with you I did not worry as much. Except when she got pregnant the rocks got bigger, at least to me. I kept staring at the rocks in front of her worrying she would not see it and trip. I kept preparing myself to catch her if she fell. She never fell. The weeds got longer, stairs got smaller, and the rustle in the bushes never stopped until we got home. I felt, for once, like I had something to lose. I pleaded with your Ma to stay home and care for the house until you were born. She would not have it." *Haha\**

"You and your Ma are similar like that. Never wanting to hear someone tell you there is something you cannot do. I remember her personality would bring quite the stir. People kept their distance

from her because girls thought she was too much. Boys thought she was rude and sleazy. I thought she was a bit brazen and free spirited. I loved it and fell in love with her."

"So Ma had her way and you did not like it?"

"It's not that I did not like it. I never thought your Ma was weak, but I understood nursing a baby is hard work requiring constant energy. And oh boy did you have a lot of energy. You still do. The thing is, I want to avoid seeing people I love and care for suffer. If I can prevent it by working extra hard then that's what I'm gonna God damn do. I want to work hard, so your Ma can focus on raising you, teaching you, and being with you. I know your Ma is tough, but at some point everyone needs help. Carrying a baby, especially as they get larger, is like carrying a bucket all day. It takes a toll."

He looks at Sandra and smiles.

"As her belly got bigger and bigger, I began begging her to stay home until you were born. She gave a big fuss saying it's no big deal and the work is too much for me to handle on my own. Eventually she started feeling pains and agreed to not work until after giving birth. I began working longer hours and working harder. We did pretty great for a while. Your Ma began nursing you and I was bringing in enough crops for a while."

*Sigh\** "I thought I could do it. I thought I could give your Ma more. I mean my dad gave my Mom more. She never had to go to work, but then again. *small chuckles\**... It is really funny when I think about it. My old man told me you are no man if your wife has to struggle as much as you. He always told me I was not good enough."

"What does your dad know, really. I like you and that is all that matters."

*Laughter.*

Pa wipes his eyelid from laughing and continues, "It's funny you say that. Your Ma said the same thing after we got married. At the start, I wanted your Ma to stay home, but she was not having it. When I went to the fields she would tail right behind me. I told her to stop, but she said 'I'm going to work and you just happen to be walking in the same direction'. The few times she did listen, she brought lunches for both of us after completing chores around the house. Yet, doing all that she still insisted on helping me. It made me feel worse. Every time I reached for the shovel she held she would pull it away. She asked me why she couldn't help. I told her

'As a man I am responsible for working to take care of both of us. If it's not enough then I have to figure out how to do more.'

'Who the hell told you that,' said your Ma.

'My father of course,' I told her.

She said, 'That's stupid. Your father is stupid. You are a great man that makes me laugh and cares for me. That's all I want. I would not have married you if all I care about is living a cozy life. I care about you so why does anything else matter?'

After she gave birth to you, everything was great. I was bringing in enough crops without your Ma's help. Crops were growing and rain was plentiful. Your Ma could fully focus on taking care of you for the first couple years. She still brought me lunch each day. She took care of breakfast and dinner too. Not because I told her, in fact I cooked for myself before meeting your Ma."

"You can cook Pa? I have never seen you cook."

“You bet I did. Nothing like your Ma though. I only knew how to cook simple dishes. Your Ma, on the other hand, knows plenty of recipes from your Abuela (grandma). Your Abuela made sure she knew how to cook otherwise family recipes would get forgotten. I love her food, that's why I never cook anymore. She's great. Not all women are like her. I got lucky by liking her. Now I eat great food each day.”

"She is a pretty hard worker, *huh?*," I said rhetorically. [Rhetorically means asking a question that is not meant to get answered. Rhetoric is your ability to speak]

"On top of that, she even started cultivating a small garden in front of our home. That's why we have trees around here. Plus a patch of corn fields. She did that all while bathing you and teaching you how to read and write."

“Is that why I see you cleaning plates and tidying around the kitchen at times?”

“It's the least I can do. Isn't it?”

“I guess so. So when did you and Mama get into an argument again? Doesn't seem like you have argued with each other much.”

"I think it was the year when there was not much rainfall. Harvesting became a lot harder because crops grew smaller, dying away most of the time. Things looked bleak. All I could do was work harder and longer to seed more plants. That took time."

"So Ma got mad because you could not bring enough crops?," asked Sandra.

"Not exactly, I tried hiding the bad condition of our fields by jogging home before your Ma came to bring me lunch. The fields were not

the problem. She did not know about our problems yet. She was mad because I could not spend much time with either of you. I was working in the fields all day."

"I see."

"She got real mad when she came to our fields early one morning to see how much our crops shrunk. In a loud, not screaming, voice she told me 'why did you not tell me you need help? Why did you wait so long to handle this problem on your own? I thought we were a team. I'm not a child. This affects all of us. Sandra does not need to know this, but I do. Promise me you will count on me. Listen, I am not walking away from you. But I will if you keep secrets from me.' I told her I understood, but she insisted on repeating herself while looking me straight in the eye saying, '**I am not walking away.**'"

"I don't know what pushed me, but I asked her a dumb question before the conversation ended," says Pa.

"What did you ask her?"

"I said, 'is there anything that would make you leave?' She replied saying, 'If you ever decide to touch our daughter or physically abuse either of us. That's it. It ends there. I am okay with you not being the best. What I am not okay with is you not trying. Look around, if you were not a caring husband or father you would not have pushed yourself this far. Yes, you are a little dumb, but I know you have a good heart.'"

"What happened after that?"

"We began working together. Bringing you along since you insisted. But you know what. I really thought I could do it."

"Do what exactly?"

“Provide for both you and your Ma. Working in the fields is not an easy job. You and your Ma can say whatever you want, but I know it’s not easy. Farm work is tiring and hard. If I can prevent both of you from working out on the fields I would. Not because either of you are weak. Both of you are not. The reason is I do not want the two people I love the most to suffer. I feel less of a man if either of you two get hurt on the job.”

“Why do you feel so strongly about that Papa?”

“My father told me as a man you gotta defend and provide. You gotta provide food and shelter to your family. Just so you know, as a man I will always come forward to protect you and your Ma no matter the threat. I rather have my life at risk than either of yours. Even if both of you protest.”

“Why? We can protect you too!”

“Sandra, the first reason is I want to. Second, I am physically stronger and bigger than the two of you. I did learn something though. It took a lot of time, but I accepted your Ma’s help. It pains me, but I am happy working with both of you. I enjoy talking all day between breaks.”

I sat there continuing to listen to what Papa had to say.

“Having your Ma help made me realize a few things. The experience made me recognize your Ma is plenty strong herself and with another helping hand we had more crops. More importantly, we laughed out in the middle of the fields as we chatted away all day while farming. I think that’s it Sandra. That’s how you find someone special.”

“I do not follow. How does that help you find someone special?”

“When you find someone you can easily talk to for hours on end you know you found the one. They will stay with you and work with you. Eventually they will not become afraid of sharing their weaknesses with you. Together you will figure out how to become stronger because of them. Sandra, listen very carefully.”

“Yes, I am listening Papa.”

“No matter what. Do not stop trying, aim for the top, give it all you got, and keep a positive outlook. I’m not saying to have optimism. I am saying to think about the good not the bad. You may fall, but follow these principles and you will make it.”

“I am not following, but I will remember your words.”

*Sigh* “Many people fall short. They stop at some point. They stop trying and allow negative thoughts to creep in. ‘I can’t do it.’ ‘Too much work.’ ‘If I work hard and it all comes crashing then I will have wasted all that time and effort.’ If you let yourself quit and get consumed by negative emotions there is no way out. You will continue falling. Now, if you do **not** stop trying you **can** have the opportunity to get out and maybe you will succeed. It’s like the motto of our old ancestors.

‘Quien Lucha Puede Perder, Quien No Lucha Ya Perdio’

[‘Those who fight can lose, those who never fought lost from the start’]

No one is perfect, but I am happy to share those imperfections with my family. I am grateful for that. I am grateful for you Sandra. I am grateful for having your Ma. And I am grateful that despite the hard times, we have food on the table. Not the greatest food, but food nevertheless.”



Pa pats me on the shoulder then says, “How about it? Let’s head home and see if your Ma needs any help preparing dinner.”

“Sounds good Papa.”

∞ ∞ ∞

Lost myself again. What was I thinking about again? Oh yeah, whether I should walk in or not? Ms. Sayu seems preoccupied with another student. *Hmm*. I should walk in, get the book I want, then leave. That's it. That's what I will do. Making my decision I march forward. Ms. Sayu notices me as I march past the doorway.

"Good afternoon Sandra. Come in. Come in."

"Hello Ms. Sayu."

“What can I do for you?,” she asks with a tender voice.

"I came to check out another book," I reply. Walking inside, I approach them. My eyes wander to the student beside her. *What's her name again?*

Ms. Sayu senses the awkwardness of the atmosphere as Sandra stares at Phoebe and says, “Sandra this is-”

“H- Hi I-, I’m Phoebe. It’s ni- nice to meet you Sandra,” says Phoebe interrupting.

*Phoebe so that’s her name.* “Hello Phoebe. Nice to meet you." I extend my hand to Phoebe. Phoebe stares at my hand hesitating on what to do. A moment later she decides to shake my hand timidly. She then hides away by looking down into a notebook she held in her hands.

"Don't mind me," I say as I sneak between them to get to the bookshelf. I start scanning the available books. Usually Ms. Sayu

continues speaking with me, but her attention is diverted to Phoebe instead. I try to glance back, but turn my head forward again. *What am I doing? I came here for a book.* "Hey Sandra, need any help choosing a book?," asks Ms. Sayu.

"No, I'm good," I reply. I pull a book from the shelf without paying attention. Stuffing it inside my bag. Before leaving I thank Ms. Sayu then I turn to Phoebe and tell her, "I will see you around Phoebe." Without waiting another moment I head out and head home.

∞ ∞ ∞

Days go by since getting a new book. Usually around this time after school I plan out what I want to accomplish when I get home. Nothing big, only small details. Details such as reading for thirty minutes, reflecting on what I learned, and planning how on Terra I can improve our yield crop. I believe there are secret techniques that can increase the amount of food we can produce. I just do not know what they are.

When Pa plans the next harvest he ensures not to use certain plots of land. Curious, I would ask Pa why he does not use all of our land. He said the areas that produce better crops are areas neglected due to not having enough people to work the land. The soil does not dry up as much if they are taken care of. He noticed this after a few years of farming on his own land. To alleviate the soil, he began practicing what he called crop rotation to preserve the nutrients of the soil.

Having arrived at home I lay under the shade of a tree. I ask myself *why do some plants grow taller than others? Why?* I ask these questions unsure of how to proceed.

"Sandra! Sandra, are you around here?" I hear my Ma calling for me. I rise from the petate [a weaved flat blanket for hardened surfaces

made out of palm leaves], after staring at the sky for so long it seemed like a good time to get up anyways. "Ma! I'm over here. Mama!"

"It's time to eat Sandra! I made some pumpkin tea," says Ma.

"I'll be right there!," I yell back.

Entering our kitchen, I see Ma serving the plates. Pa should be coming home soon. I retrieve our eating utensils from the dry rack outside and put a spoon into each bowl. I hear the wooden kitchen door creak open and see Pa.

"What food did you make Kaori?"

"Pumpkin soup."

"Sounds delicious."

I question Pa's comments at times. I wonder if Pa really means it when he says 'delicious'. I, myself, am not a big fan of pumpkin. But we eat what we gotta eat. The times Ma does get all the ingredients she needs, the food is delicious. We mainly eat what we grow or trade for. Ma practiced many real recipes because her family was always invited to festivities such as weddings, baptisms, and coming of age ceremonies. Ma helps my grandparents prep a ton of food leading up to the day of a given event. Their payout was the celebration and food. You know, I asked her once, "Ma why don't we ask for money instead of the food? We could make a good chunk of change."

In response Ma told me, "Sandra what more can we ask except for this?"

"What is 'this'? What are you referring to Ma?"

"This, this event. This day. This family. The experience of being together. People have a hard time putting all this together. None of us have much so why not help instead of taking from each other?"

She is my Ma so I do not argue. Deep inside, I know I do not agree. Because she is my Ma I will respect her wishes.

I continue thinking. *At a festivity there are around a hundred people who come. We could charge each person ten cents (a dime). Hmm that would be one thousand cents. There are a hundred cents in a dollar. So ... we can make ten dollars. Instead of charging a dime we can charge a dollar. I am sure no one is poor enough to not afford paying one dollar. Doing this, we can make a hundred dollars instead of ten. How about charging ten dollars? No, that is too much. Might as well bring our own food to the party. Or get another chef who will cook for a cheaper price...*

That is enough thinking for now. I exit my mental mind space and start eating the food Ma made. We take our time enjoying the food and talking around the table.

"Sandra, I forgot to tell you. My parents are coming in a few days to spend some time with us. Make sure to help them with what they need. They are getting older. Tasks that are easy for us can take a lot of effort for them," Ma tells me.

"That's great! I get to see them each day. How long are they staying?"

"I am not sure. You know them. They love us, but they also love their farm," replies Ma.

"They could stay with us, no?"

"They can, but if it were me I would want to stay where I have fond memories. They raised me and my siblings on their farm. I love that

farm too."

"Why did you not stay there if you love it so much?," I ask her.

"Well I met your Papa and we want to have the experience of living on our own. I cannot speak about your Pa's family, but as for mine I would not be against living with my parents. Now that you mention it Sandra. I am not sure why there is a growing number of people who are too eager to move far away from their family. Especially if they have a loving family. If they have family like your Pa's then I would understand. Mine are loving. I am so glad they accepted your Pa with open arms and called him son right away."

"Is that why Pa calls grandma (Abuela) and grandpa (Abuelo) Ma and Pa. Even though they are not related."

"Yes, he does it out of love and respect. We chose to live here because your Pa wanted to prove his worth of having land he can call his own. And I did not want to go against someone trying to achieve their goal in life. I guess I let it happen and followed him here."

"How about you Ma? Did you have any hopes or dreams?"

"Well I am living one right now. Raising you."

"Besides me, do you have anything else you want?"

"She would love to open a small store selling food," says Pa interjecting in our conversation.

"Why don't you Ma? You are a great cook. What is stopping you?," I ask Ma as she darts her eyes thinking of what to say.

"I cannot tell you. I am not too sure myself. I mean we have a ton of crops that need weeding and harvesting. There is not enough time.

Maybe no one will buy my food and it will go to waste."

"Ma are you not the same person telling me to follow any dream I have? I know you can do it Ma."

"You are probably right. I should just do it right Sandra?"

"Definitely!," I tell Ma while I start stuffing her pumpkin soup inside my mouth.

My parents continue talking as I eat my food. After eating Pa tells us a story by the fire. He is a great story teller. Being with my parents near the fire is the greatest time I have. We may not have much, but this is the best. I always look forward to the next story Pa has to tell.

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The next day arrives, I decide I should pay a visit to Ms. Sayu and return the books I borrowed. When school is over I come to the classroom after having ran a few laps. Again, looking through the doorway I see her again. *What is she doing here?* Do her folks not worry about her coming home late? She should not make them worry. I come late too, but not too late. I want to go home most of the time. School is a bore. I feel like everything moves so slow because we wait on students who need to catch up, but I never see those struggling classmates give an honest effort.

Wait... now that I think of it. I have seen Phoebe's relatives at a few festivities. Yet, I have never seen her there. Maybe she does not like going. Or perhaps she has not been in town long enough to have the opportunity to attend a celebration.

After seeing them, I decide to head home. I do not want to disturb them. There is always tomorrow. She must be coming here after

school only on occasions. Why would anyone want to come to school voluntarily?

The next day arrives and guess who I saw. *Phoebe*. There she is again. Why is she here? Why does she keep coming after school? Walking away, Sandra decides to return her books the following week.

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Sandra's elbow rests on her desk as her open palm holds the weight of her head. She grabs a book from her school bag and opens it.

*This is not so bad.* I decide to reread one of my favorite books from Ms. Sayu's collection. The book about Human Behavior Biology. There is a section that talks about chimpanzees. Despite being less "intelligent" animals, they have their own system of organization. Reading about them is quite fascinating. They are quite the gruesome creatures.

The book discusses primate warfare explaining why males kill the offspring of rival tribes. The chimps invade a tribe pursuing any young chimps in their way. Biting into their necks yanking their flesh as they screech to terrify their enemy. Displaying their fangs so no one dares challenge them. From history I read, human behavior carries similarities. Such as carrying decapitated heads on spears while the cavalry blew into horns to demonstrate their size and willpower.

I mean they are going to battle. Men must have a different mindset during a time of war. I know if I am in war, I cannot carry an idealistic view. Otherwise, I will get overwhelmed by human brutality which can cost me my life if I get distracted in the midst of battle. Instead, I would focus on the mission on hand. To me,

warfare should get avoided. Why do people go to war? This is a question I need to think further on before coming to predication.

The book further explains researchers witnessing acts of strategy. Chimps form patrol units near their territory and gang up on any creature getting too close with the exception of tigers. Reading about animals made me realize the natural world is brutal. I wonder how our ancestors could ever survive in the wild.

As fascinating as this book is. There are words I still cannot deduce. Ms. Sayu at times offers to help, but I prefer figuring this kind of stuff on my own. I do ask for hints and/or confirmation. I only do so on occasion when I have too much trouble understanding a passage. It's not like she has anything better to do. I see her leave early most of the time. I believe it is until recently that she is no longer leaving school right away. Being pulled away from my book, I start noticing the surroundings of our classroom. Then my mind drifts to new thoughts. One thought is becoming aware Phoebe is in this class.

*Where does Phoebe even sit?* Thinking about it, I cannot remember where most of my classmates sit. Nor do I know if they interchange chairs. Most of the time my mind is somewhere else. I turn slightly to see if I can see her. As I turn I notice Phoebe lift her head suddenly like a deer who got spotted. I quickly turn back looking forward as we made eye contact for a brief second.

A few weeks pass by. I am content with the amount of words I manage to deduce. Eventually I get tired of reading about the same topic. I decide to go to Ms. Sayu's classroom after school today.

There she is again. Looking into the doorway I catch Ms. Sayu's eyes. Phoebe slowly turns her head around. I duck away quickly. Why did I hide? She seems busy with Phoebe so I decide to head home for today.





Tomorrow arrives, there she is again. *Why? You know what enough is enough. Let's go in there. Leave the books. Then leave.* Walking inside, I greet both Ms. Sayu and Phoebe. Phoebe raises her hand slightly waving hello.

"Hey there Sandra. Glad you could join us," says Ms. Sayu.

"Good afternoon Ms. Sayu. Hello Phoebe. I came to return a few books I was borrowing. I will make it quick. I do not want to disturb either of you." I return all the books with the exception of my favorite book written by Robert Sapolsky.

Putting away the books, I glance towards Phoebe darting my eyes to the open journal on her desk. Thinking about why she comes here after school still stomps me. It bothers me a little and I do not know why.

"You coming here is no trouble at all. Would you care to join us by chance?," asks Ms. Sayu.

As I answer, my eyes find themselves trying to make out what is written in Phoebe's notebook. The same words are being written and rewritten. I remember children doing that kind of stuff in primary school so why are they doing that now?

"Umm maybe not. I should head home or my parents will worry if I come home late."

Phoebe looks at Sandra and traces her eyes noticing Sandra gazing at her notebook. Phoebe quickly covers the pages with her hands and says, "this is nothing umm- umm... I- I may- Uh-."

Fidgeting, Phoebe closes the notebook and starts gathering her belongings. In a murmur, I hear her say '*I knew this was a bad idea*'. Something about what she said did not sit right with me.

“Hey Phoebe you don’t have to leave. Wait Phoebe.” Ms. Sayu calls out to Phoebe with no success. Her words fall on deaf ears.

I stood there for a moment. For whatever reason I say, "I can stay for a little bit" out loud.

“Hey Phoebe, can I see that book? I have never seen a book like that. Do you think I can see it? Please?,” I ask.

Phoebe stands still. “So can I?” Unable to reply, I approach her from behind and gently touch her shoulder. “Can I see it, Phoebe?”

“Sure. I guess so.”

“You guess or can I?,” I ask in a gentle voice.

...

“Yes you can,” says Phoebe.

“Thank you.” I say reaching for the notebook held in her hands. I see scribbles all over the page. The same words are written over and over across the page. *Flip\**. *Flip\**. *Flip\**. I keep flipping the pages to find where she left off or if she skipped any pages. I cannot find any empty pages.

“Hey Phoebe, why are you writing so much?,” I ask, turning to Phoebe. Her face looks surprised again.

"Isn't Phoebe so studious! Phoebe always says she is not, but I know the truth. I know she is a smart girl. Aren't you Phoebe," says Ms.

Sayu enthusiastically.

“Ms. Sayu. I told you I am not. I cannot do anything alone. I couldn’t even read.”

Sandra's eyes dart downwards as she recollects past memories. After a pause she looks forward and says, "I don't remember much from when I was little, but I do remember glimpses. I remember my Ma and Pa reading to me every night from the Holy Bible from start to end. I remember Pa leaving early in the mornings while Ma helped me write words on a page. I do not know if she made me write a bunch of words over and over. What I do remember is the feeling of my fingers going numb after a while. I guess what I am saying is I couldn’t read either, Phoebe. I only learned because of my parents. They read to me every night. I was wondering why you wrote so much because I have never written much myself. At least not from what I remember. Or more like I did not have to as much when I grew older.”

“See. I told you I am not smart. I had to write so much to remember each word.”

“I am not so smart either. If it were not for my parents maybe you would know more than me right now. You have actually taken the time to learn after school. Who comes to work when they are not required? I do not know if you are smart, but I do know you are doing more than most people.”

Phoebe looks up to Sandra not knowing what to say. Before anyone can say a word Sandra snaps out of a trance realizing she forgot what day it is.

"Oh shoot, I forgot. I have to go home today." Gathering her bag she starts rushing out the door. Halfway through the doorway Sandra

turns back and says, "I will see you guys tomorrow."

She runs home and thinks to herself. *Why did I say that, now I have to come tomorrow.*

∞ ∞ ∞

*Wobble\* Jiji\**

Despite it being late, I stay awake in the middle of the night. Alert and anxious.

"Hey Sandra sweetie please sleep. We should try to get as much sleep as we can," says Ma. Oh right, we are not home anymore. I am in a carriage heading to an unknown country. I think it all began changing on that day. The day my grandparents came to visit.

The wheels of the wagon wobble against the jagged road. We are almost there. I am not sure where we are headed. All I know is we left everything behind. We left our possessions, family, and friends. My parents do not know this but I remember crying all night for days when learning we had to leave our only home. I do not know how many times or how long they spoke about leaving. Regardless, here I am with them.

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Running out of the classroom, heading home. Today is the day my grandparents will come to visit. They live a few villages over. They cannot come all the time given their age. I do not know much about my Pa's side of the family. All I know is that they are not on good terms. Not sure why? He mentions there is always a feud between family members. Members arguing over who cheated on who. Who the land belongs to. Who should have the responsibility of taking care of their parents.

Always arguing. He says I can meet his family if I want to. I do not so I have never met any of them except his older brother, but he left long ago. Not sure where he went. All I know is he left a few years ago to manage business and we have never heard from him since. He is the only family member my Pa really cared for. I would ask him what made his brother different. He would reply, "my brother was the only one really there for me. He is the only one that would listen to me and protect me. I did not care about anyone's approval for my marriage except for his. I will not tell him this, but he was more of a father to me than my actual father. I pray for his safety. I do not know where he is today, but I hope he is safe and doing well."

My Ma's side is much more calm and kind. There were still a few disputes on who would help take care of her parents, but as a family they resolved most disputes. Siblings who live closer to her parents came to visit them more often. Those who live farther away still visit them, but help more with providing food and a little bit of money here and there. There are no disputes over who should take care of them. The discussion is about how everyone can share the responsibility of taking care of their parents who carried them on their backs as children. Parents who made them meals and made sure they understood the value of family. Made sure they understood they are loved and will always be loved.

What made today special is not that we will see them, but that they will come see us. When they do come to visit they stay for a few days. We take a few hours off from farm work to spend as much time together as we can because we are not together all the time. With each day, it is getting harder for them to make journeys by foot.

Running up the dirt hill I see my grandparents speaking with my parents. I run up to Abuela first giving her a big hug. "Abuela you came."

"Look at you Sandra. I cannot believe how much you are growing. It's like only yesterday you were a tiny baby. You got so much energy. How it is to live young."

"What are you talking about Abuela? You are still young," says Sandra.

*Haha.* "Sandra, enjoy your life as much as you can when you are young. Go run and play. Go swim. Go do anything and everything because it will not always be the same."

"What are you talking about Abuela?"

"Sandra, one day you will grow old and your bones will ache. Your head will hurt. Before long you will realize time is short. I used to run around like you. Jumping around, climbing trees all day long. I did not know it would not last forever."

"Do you have regrets Abuela?"

*Laughter\** "A few here and there. More happiness than regret."

"Why happiness? You make getting old sound like a pain."

"It is a pain. It hurts each day, but isn't that life. You know what does not give me pain. Seeing you. Talking to you. Knowing I gave birth to a wonderful daughter who married a wonderful man. And guess what."

"What?," I ask.

"Now I have you. What is better than that?"

"I guess there is nothing better than me. Right Abuela?"

*Haha.*

"Hey now don't forget about your Abuelo," says Grandpa/Abuelo.

I give Abuelo a big old hug saying, "don't worry Abuelo I will never forget about you either. I mean who else will bring my Abuela."

We all laugh as we continue talking. I did not have much growing up, but I do have a great family.

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We all slept inside our mudbrick kitchen on blankets we brought in last night. Pa told stories through the night. We all get engrossed in the stories so much we lose track of time and fall asleep. Both my parents and grandparents snuggle with each other in their blankets. I smile imagining how we all look. I feel safe here in this kitchen.

We spend our days as usual with my parents going out to their fields, me going to school, and my grandparents helping with our meals. In the blink of an eye, the days pass by. Before long, my grandparents leave back to their own farm and I miss them already.

Pa has always suggested they come move in with us, but my grandparents always refuse. Insisting they want to stay on the land they cultivated and raised their children on. Gloomy, but deep down I can sense they want to pass away on their land. The reason is unknown to me.

During this time, I kept my promise and began staying after school. The first day I came, Phoebe is nowhere inside the classroom.

I ask Ms. Sayu, "Where did Phoebe go?"

"I am not sure. She usually arrives by now," says Ms. Sayu. Not wanting to waste her time, Sandra tells Ms. Sayu she is heading out. *How can Phoebe decide not to show?*

Walking home, I spot her. Phoebe is walking home in the same direction, shoulders slouched and head down. At first, I pick up my pace, but decide to slow down. Do I really want to talk to her? I only came because of the promise I made to myself. I do not owe her or anyone anything. Neither do I want to walk right past her.

*What have I done? Maybe I should have stayed. Then again... It's too late now. She spoke to me. She finally spoke to me, but I left. Why? Why did I-* Without realizing, someone from behind taps on my shoulder.

"Hey, Phoebe. Are you going home?," asks Sandra.

"No. I mean yes. Hello Sandra."

"Why did you not come to class? Did something change? Ms. Sayu must have thought you would come. She kept waiting for you."

"No. It's just that-. Is she really waiting for me? I mean I should go home," says Phoebe as she turns forward marching off again. Sandra reaches her hand and grabs onto it. Telling her to wait.

"Wait Phoebe. We should at least tell Ms. Sayu you are not coming or do you want to leave it like this? I can tell her for you." Phoebe jitters as Sandra holds her hand. Phoebe stands still, still not replying.

*Don't have these thoughts. Don't. It's not like that. How can I feel pleasure when I am making Ms. Sayu wait for me. I don't want to feel this. Not now. I should go back. Maybe not. What do I do?*

With no reply, Sandra tells Phoebe she will go back to tell Ms. Sayu herself. As Sandra turns Phoebe turns in her direction. Unable to decide, she says, "I will go back too." Confused, Phoebe thinks. *I know I will feel bad for leaving Ms. Sayu without saying a word. I owe*



*her that much. I'll go.* They walk back in silence as Sandra glances at Phoebe not knowing what to speak about.

Arriving at the classroom Sandra enters and says, "Ms. Sayu I found Phoebe. Oh, are you about to leave?" Ms. Sayu had been collecting her belongings. Noticing them enter she replies to Sandra.

"I can stay a little longer."

"I'm- I'm sorry. I'm sorry Ms. Sayu. I didn't mean to- I shouldn't have left." Ms. Sayu kneels when Phoebe looks towards the floor. "Hey, it's alright. I'm here, you did nothing wrong. Perhaps I put too much pressure for you to come. Hey if-

"No! No, I love coming here and talking to you," says Phoebe in a tender voice. "It's just- I- ..." Phoebe stands in silence until Ms. Sayu says, "how about we play a game and take a break from learning for today. We can play a card game. I can show you how to play. How about you Sandra? Will you join?"

"Sure," I reply, unsure of what happened. Ms. Sayu never treats me like this. I mean I am not jealous. I cannot describe it. I did not expect this scene when I brought Phoebe back. I can tell she loves coming? Unlike her, I love my home more. Yet, I sense Phoebe *loves* being around Ms. Sayu more than going back home. *Must be my imagination.*

Ms. Sayu teaches us her card game. We play for half an hour before I tell them I need to leave before it starts getting dark. Phoebe also lives in the same direction so I tell her, "come on Phoebe let's go home."

"Oh- oh okay," says Phoebe. We pack our belongings. The walk back home is silent with a few failed attempts at making conversation.



Before heading out, I tell my parents I will stay after school. Ma asks, "oh, is there someone we should know about?" I told her I am meeting a classmate who I promised to study with after school. She told me not to stay too late.

School lets out and I am unsure what I can do. I mean I do not need help with my reading or writing. Why exactly am I here for? Ms. Sayu looks in my direction after a couple of minutes and says, "Hey I have an idea. Sandra, how about you come over here and quiz Phoebe on spelling these words."

Replying with an 'okay' I move my desk in front of Phoebe.

"Alright Phoebe spell the word intrigue."

"Umm. I-N-T-R-I-G...E? No wait I-N-T-R-I-G-U-E?"

"Correct."

"Sandra say !correct!," Ms. Sayu tells me. I ask her why. She replies, "Sandra, are you the same student who tells me 'don't give me all the answers Ms. Sayu'? I can tell you if you want. Or your parents can tell you. Your parents are wonderful people. I am sure they would know why we should reply with enthusiasm. Would you like to ask them instead?"

"No, that's okay." *Ahem*. Clearing my throat, I try again. "That's correct. I mean that is !correct! Phoebe." Adding excitement is a little tough. I do not like how Ms. Sayu convinced me to say it with more oomph. I bet she knew mentioning my parents would make me say 'correct' with more enthusiasm. *Why should I say it excitedly to someone? Was the task not done correctly? Why add emotion?* As I think

these thoughts, I see a small smile on Phoebe's face. People are quite strange.

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I kept returning to the classroom. We did not always study. Ms. Sayu made sure we could play card games or a board game too. She brought them from home. The walks back home before we split up were filled with silence at first. In time, we began saying goodbye. At some point we started talking about the weather or what we had for lunch. As Phoebe's vocabulary increases she manages to read more books on her own. We began talking about the books more and more. I found talking to her easiest when we spoke about what we are learning.

We can talk more frequently now. Despite talking together after school. I did not find myself talking to her much during school. I never ask her about her home life either. Her home life seems like a topic I cannot touch on. I felt a rift between us there.

Weeks pass by. Before I realize, I begin speaking with Phoebe before, during, and after school. Phoebe talks with me like any other friend she has at school. With positivity and excitement. Very different from how we first met. I try to avoid talking to her as much as possible during school. Talking to her meant having to talk with other classmates as well.

What I found real funny is what Phoebe told me one day. She told me, "you are quite strange Sandra. You avoid people and never try to spend time with others. Not that I mind. But- Hmm. *Should I ask?* Nevermind."

"Hey Phoebe, why don't you ask. I am not going to judge you no matter what you say. I am not God," I tell Phoebe with a straight face.

"Well, it's always been on my mind. Why did you decide to start talking with me out of all people? There are plenty of smarter classmates and prettier ones too. So why?," asks Phoebe.

*Why? Why did I start speaking with her?* "You know, I am not too sure myself, but there is something different about you. I do not know what. I believe there is something I can learn from you, but I cannot put my finger on it. I DO like spending time with you. That's all I know for now. Is that bad?"

"Nope. I like spending time with you too," says Phoebe as she smiles at me. People are quite strange. Myself included I guess.

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What else is strange is time. It seems like only yesterday I spoke with Phoebe for the first time. In reality, a few months have gone by. Out in the fields, my Ma asks, "how is your friend? Are both doing well?"

"I would say so," says Sandra. My Ma asks about how I am getting along with my other classmates too. I reply to her saying, "so-so. About the same." She nods and we continue working. Today we are picking the corn and stacking up on corn stalks for our animals. We make sure to harvest enough corn to trade at tomorrow's plaza.

Being at the plaza is a great time. We play bingo at a nearby stall aiming to earn a few extra cents. Villagers put in their few cents into a jackpot which they gamble. I find it entertaining seeing Pa getting excited. He plays once in a while, never more than once. The house, the person providing the bingo cards and facilitating the game, takes a cent from the pool at the end. Not much. *Then again, we play one game, but multiple games are held throughout the day. That means-*

"Hey Sandra, sweetie we are heading to the next stall," yells Ma as Pa gestures to her to hand over the goods so he can carry them

instead. I hardly see anyone walk through the market like Ma and Pa. Well, they are Ma and Pa. They hold hands the whole time as we walk through the plaza. Growing up, I recognize most couples do not share intimate relationships beyond seeing their roles as husband and wife. My parents, on the other hand, hold each other in their arms limiting themselves to hand holding in public.

"Hey Sandra! Isn't that your friend right over there?," says Ma. What friend? I do not have a- Wait, it can't be. Phoebe?

Sandra's Ma is all smiles as she gets the opportunity to talk to the classmate Sandra spends so much time with. Her mouth curves upward then instantly disappears. Her and Pa stand still for a moment. Looking at each other. Pa shakes his head. The grip between their hands tightens. Whispering to each other, Sandra can barely make out the words "you know why."

Ma and Pa approach Phoebe who for some reason is rubbing her head. "Hello there. We are Sandra's parents. We heard Sandra has a great time with Phoebe over here," says Ma to Phoebe's Uncle who looks annoyed.

"I should have guessed," says Phoebe's Uncle who I later learned is called Robert. Ignoring his comment my Ma continues, "Hey is it alright if Phoebe joins us for dinner?" Rob gives a glare to Phoebe saying, "you need to ask her, but it gets pretty late out. I do not know if we feel comfortable keeping her out late at night."

My Pa interjects, "that's no problem. She can sleep over, we do not mind." Seeming more annoyed, Phoebe's Uncle replies again, "you have to ask her." He glares at her more intensely. We all look towards Phoebe. She surprisingly says, "if it is not too much trouble. I would love to come." Ma's smile returns. She says, "Great! We will see you on Octo from now on."

"Wait! That's not what we agreed upon! I cannot cover any of the costs for you to feed her. You got some nerve you damn b-" before Phoebe's Uncle finishes I see my Pa with an expression I rarely see. He steps in front of Ma as he towers over Phoebe's Uncle. *Tch.* "Do whatever the hell you want." Pa calms down a bit and says, "thank you and we would never ever ask you to pay for what we offer."

"You better not. Come Phoebe! We gotta get going," says Phoebe's Uncle as he pulls her harshly by the arm. I do not like him.

"What an ass," says Ma. Pa wraps his arm around Ma's shoulder. "Nothing we can do," replies Pa. "Come on, let's finish visiting the last couple of stalls." We follow Pa's lead. We trade our corn for chiles, onions, and herbs. We end our trip by eating a local handmade tortilla with bean paste. Not my favorite, but my parents sure love it. It's cheap too. *Can't we make this? It's not delicious. Not to me. Looking around, I see most clients buying this bean paste are much older adults.*

"Hey Ma, why do you like this bean paste tortilla?," I ask.

"I had this a lot growing up. My Ma, your Abuela, would make it. We ate this as we spent time together talking with one another trying to make each other laugh. Within my family, we spoke about anything running through our heads. You know, maybe I will ask my Ma how to make this. I never took time to learn how to make it because she always made this snack for us." Sandra looks at her Ma as she waits for her to reply to the original question. "Oh right, why do we eat this? I don't know Sandra."

"Maybe it's the memories of the past," I tell Ma. Ma replies with a shrug of the shoulders saying 'maybe'.

This year we visit my grandparents more often. Not sure why. I do not mind. Pa has always suggested they come move in with us, but my grandparents refuse. I know their reasoning, I just do not understand their reasoning.

My grandparents still grow crops on their land, but nowadays most of their food comes from the food their children pull in. Right now, we sit near their wooden cottage surrounded by tall grass. With a neighboring river close by. We spend most of the time speaking with each other. Ma braids Abuela's hair while Pa shares a beer with my Abuelo. I do get bored. What gets me through this is realizing my grandparents will not always exist. Everything comes to an end. Deep down I feel I will regret not spending time with them. Loving them makes spending time easier.

"Sandra. Your Ma tells me you made a friend at school," says Abuela. "She said something about you guys having her over on Octo night."

"Yeah, I guess we are," I reply.

"You do not sound too excited," says Abuela, sounding a little disappointed. I explain to her that having her over is another regular day.

"Hmm. Sandra, you are a smart person and you do not know why this is so exciting for us to hear."

"Come on Mama. She will-," says Ma until she sees Abuela raise her index finger towards her. Gesturing her to stop mid sentence. Not to silence her. Instead her finger respectfully indicates wanting to finish her thought. With a pause, Abuela continues, "you are bringing a friend home to dinner. I never heard you talk about anyone except our family. We do have a family, but it never hurts to have a good friend we trust. They may not have our blood, but friends we trust

are hard to come by. Very hard. There is more trust in blood, but not always. So for you to take interest in this person named Phoebe means we can trust an additional person to watch over you. If they help you grow, that is even better. Next to food, relationships are the best thing we can ask for in our life."

"How about money?," I ask Abuela. Both my parents and grandparents turn to me as if I said the worst curse words to them. They all sigh.

My Abuelo takes the stand. "Sandra, what do you value most?"

"Family of course," I reply with confidence.

"If you do not lose sight of that I can tolerate you wanting money. We used to see people wanting money as evil. Then somewhere along the way we saw it differently."

"What do you mean Abuelo?," I ask.

Excluding Abuela, we listen intently. "Those with money like taking and taking. Of course we would see money as evil. At least that is what I thought for a long time. The story I am about to tell happened decades ago. Your Abuela had fallen ill. Not only her. Villages all over our homeland got hit by an epidemic. We did not know what to do. Then as if a miracle from God, people from the South came. They brought food and potions. They treated us well. Spoke with us. Before they left I asked 'why did you help us? How could you help us? Did this not cost you an arm and a leg?' Among them one man stood up and said, 'I work hard to provide and put people to work. As you would watch over your own, I watch over my own family and friends. I have made enough in our country to have the ability to have abundance. Given abundance, why not give anything and everything I can. That's what my God tells me. God,



not a he, she, or it, tells me to work hard and never forget to give. If you never give, sure you may have money and power. Yet, despite all your riches you will never have peace of mind, love, nor respect from God. I give to you because God gave to me. Yes, I collect wealth. As much as I can. I collect it to choose how to best use it. There are many wicked men out in the world who earn it without praising God. They might live a good life, but not an eternal life. I laugh because their days are filled with misery and dread. Do I do right? I do not know. What I do know is I choose how money is circulated. I prefer that than letting others manipulate and control my life. Anyone who says money is not necessary are lying to themselves. I have met many more men who are happy with having money than men who suffer from having it."

I am not gonna lie. I do not know if I am more impressed with what Abuelo said or how he could remember what a stranger said.

"I thought about what he said for a long time. Until recently do I have an idea of what he meant. Never having had money, I do not understand how he got money. Much less how he uses money. What I do understand is that there will always exist people who will take money. He is no different. The difference in him is that he wants to use his money to help others. He could easily keep it for himself. Sandra, we raised our eyebrows because we do not understand money. Money is helpful. If it were not money your Abuela would not have received the medicine that saved her life. I believe his message is money will reflect the person we are. Those who have caring hearts will give. Those who do not will keep. I have no clue about anyone else, but I trust you Sandra. I hope you become rich and reflect our values onto the world. If you value **our family values** then you will reflect betterment, virtue, and kindness."

"So money reflects who we are and if we want to change the world we start with our family. Like it or not, our ability to access, use, and understand money leads to how our society is shaped. Is that it?," asks Sandra.

Abuelo looks my way, as if I pulled the rug from under him. *Chuckle\**. He chuckles saying, "Sandra, I am sure you can make it." Not sure of myself I ask, "Abuelo how do you know?" He shrugs his shoulders. Looking around, no one disagrees.

Abuela tells me, "I agree with your Abuelo. You will make it." I ask Abuela how can she know. How can they be certain? She shrugs her shoulders. Being dumbfounded I sit there not knowing what to think. Breaking my train of thought my Ma asks me, "so are you excited to see Phoebe tomorrow?"

"I do not know anymore. I think I am," I reply to her. Ma smiles and so does everyone else. I am still a little confused. What I am not confused about is being grateful for having this family who speaks with me. Sharing their life experiences and wisdom.

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"Bye Ms. Sayu," we both say. Phoebe and I tell Ms. Sayu we are leaving straight home today. We tell her about our plan to have dinner together with my family. I thought she would get upset. Instead, her smile grows telling us to have a great time. Of all my teachers, Ms. Sayu remains one of my favorites.

We walk together talking about what we should do later. I tell her not to sweat planning too much. My home is plenty of fun. We will eat the fruits we picked yesterday. At night, Pa will tell his stories by the fire before we go to sleep. Before all that, we will feed our animals. For some reason time flies when I am home. I forget time exists.

Opening the wooden door, we enter the kitchen. We smell smoke piling up a foot or two above our heads. Ma is making handmade tortillas and Abuela is preparing the meat. They must have gone to the plaza earlier today. Today is special because we rarely buy fresh meat. In the corner, I see Pa and Abuelo dicing up the rest of the ingredients that will go along with our meal.

"Hey Sandra," says Phoebe in a whisper. She tugs on my shirt while asking, "why are your Pa and Abuelo cutting up the ingredients? Did we take too long?"

"What do you mean?," I ask. "Well- I mean- nevermind." Phoebe fumbles on her words. Pa and Abuelo always help with preparing food when they can, nothing unusual.

"Hey Phoebe," "Welcome Phoebe," "Glad you came Phoebe," "So you are the Phoebe I keep hearing about." One after another, my family greets Phoebe. "Yes- I mean hello. Thank you for having me," says Phoebe as she gives a slight bow with her head.

"Sandra, take Phoebe next door and put away your school bags. Dinner's almost ready. Make sure to feed the animals. They keep making loud noises. You can take Phoebe with you." I tell Ma okay.

"Come Phoebe. This way." She follows me out the door. Phoebe keeps her head turned around as she takes in the scene. She bumps her head against the wall. *Ow\**. Dropping the tortilla, Ma comes over to massage her head. "Does it hurt anywhere? Do you need to lie down?," asks Ma with concern.

Taken aback, Phoebe takes a step back telling her, "No, I am okay Ma'am." Turning her head to the others in the room she sees them all staring at her. Phoebe rushes out the door and asks Sandra where to go.

"Are you okay Phoebe? What happened," I ask. She replies saying, "nothing happened; just got distracted." We put away our bags. Together we feed our pigs, lambs, sheep, and our donkey.

After feeding the animals we wash our hands in a basin. We return to the kitchen where everyone is waiting for us. Ma and Abuela serve the plates. Pa fills everyone's cup with water while Abuelo distributes them across the table.

Like always, Pa gives a prayer before we eat:

"Thank you Lord for the food on our table. Thank you for protecting my family. Thank you for giving us health and air to breathe. Please watch over us. Thank you for giving my daughter a great friend and protecting them on their way home. Thank Lord for all you do. Keep watching over us. In our brightest and darkest times. Amen"

We open our eyes then dig into the food. Everyone chats trying to rope Phoebe in. We give Phoebe some room as she is shy to speak to everyone. Slowly her posture loosens ever so slightly. We all clean up after our meal. Smiling, we see Phoebe rushing back and forth trying her best to clean. She kept telling everyone thank you for having her over and treating her to a meal.

Ma removes a large pot from the furnace. She tells Sandra to get her old clothes for Phoebe. Pa carries the pot to our makeshift bathhouse. At the end of a school week, we all take a bath. The bathhouse is split in two separated by a cement wall. Phoebe takes one room and I take the other. We split the hot water mixing it with cold water. We shower using a basin. Changing our clothes after drying ourselves with a towel. My grandparents followed by my parents take their showers afterwards. We gather around the fire inside our kitchen. Then long awaited story time begins.



I snuggle closer to Phoebe trying to cozy myself right up in front of the fire. My grandparents snuggle together in their blanket to our side. Ma wraps herself as she sits near the fire too. Pa, without a blanket, sits on a wooden stool as he prepares to tell a story.

*Ahem\**

Across all the land and sea many live and many die. People fight and feud. Love and lust. There is never rest. Among them are a few who try to improve. Not only themselves, but the world as a whole. They struggle in a futile effort and never succeed. For every time they try they die before success is achieved. For one man, or woman, cannot do it alone. Thousands and thousands of years pass with no one reaching the throne. Right when they get close the universe says no. Floods come when anyone gets close. The waves bury everything under leaving nothing, but marine life. Or fires that blacken the sky creating layers upon layers of pitch black sky. Freezing the oceans leaving all to die. Then-

"Hey Mister. Did this all happen? How did you learn all this? Was it passed down by your ancestors," asks Phoebe not knowing it is all a lie.

Pa pauses with a small chuckle under his breath. Everyone turns to Phoebe sighing and giving a small laugh of their own.

"No Phoebe this is made up. I want to give an extra special story today so I thought of a tale that is grand for tonight. I, myself, am not sure where the story comes from, it just pops into my head," says Pa.

"Oh, I see. Oh. I'm sorry. I did not mean to interrupt Mr.," says Phoebe hiding her mouth under the cover.

"No trouble at all. Feel free to jump in. You can tell a story or two if you feel up to it."

"Oh. I'm good. I like listening," says Phoebe.

"Where was I? Oh, right." Pa continues to tell his tale below.

After lifetimes of struggle, at the final steps to victory stood one last obstacle. The greatest adversity that raises ocean waves, makes the clouds scream, bringing destruction and nothing to please. There at the steps stands a person who only loses in defeat. What a futile attempt. For who can defeat that who reigns supreme. The entity sits on a stone taking the shape of a throne. What we consider an eternity the entity considers a blink. Once again there stands someone before the stone. Each time a different person, but the result is the same.

With an unending loop there stands someone at the steps who for once does not budge, fear, nor is alone. There is no one around, but one person. Yet, the being opens its vision for the first time. What is it? What makes this single individual different? Strong men with great power and status have come. Virtuous women with no will to quit have stepped close. So why? Why does this person bring love and hatred? Fear and pain to the being. Is it excitement? Or peace?

Stepping closer and closer.

There- At that moment- The person who-

*Hah\** "This is what I get for trying to come up with the story on the spot. Maybe I should have gone with another tale," says Pa with a deep sigh.

"Hey Mister, what happens next?," spoke Phoebe with a calm and excited voice I have never heard before.

"Sorry Phoebe. I am not sure. The story becomes fuzzy around there. It's like I have a vision for the tale, but I am still having trouble picturing what happens next. Like the tale is not mine to tell," says Pa.

"That is a great story honey. How about for tonight we tell another tale and revisit that one when you come up with it?," says Ma. Phoebe looks a little dejected so Pa comforts her with his words.

"Phoebe don't worry we have next week too. One of these weeks I am sure I will get it," says Pa.

"Really! I can come next week too," asks Phoebe.

"Why of course," says Ma. Pa continues a new tale. This became a tradition for all of us including Phoebe. I am glad Phoebe is having fun.

I thought these moments would last forever. How naive are the thoughts of a child who knows very little of the world.

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"Hey, did they come to your home too?,"

"It was a little scary, but they left after we paid them,"

"I heard they went to everyone's home."

People whisper around the class. Despite being curious, I decide not to speak with my classmates. I will ask Phoebe about it after school.

Walking back to our respective homes. Phoebe explains how our local Church is being replaced by the state's Church. The Church has

always existed, but they kept their distance from remote areas such as ours.

"Apparently they want everyone to attend Church regularly on Cetera. We have to bring an allowance too. Something to do with keeping good maintenance for the Church. They have no starting money so they decided to visit the homes of everyone," says Phoebe.

"How about those who cannot or do not want to pay," I ask.

"They came to my Uncle's home. He made a fuss saying he did not have to pay a damn cent. He told them he will not attend Church if it means paying. They did not like it. The Church officials beat him down telling him they will come back the following night."

"I do not like your Uncle, but that sounds excessive. Can't he and other people get together to fight back?," asks Sandra.

Phoebe shakes her head. "I have seen this before. Back home with my parents." Phoebe holds her elbow trembling slightly. I used to live close to the city so the Church has a larger presence there. People who fight back are dealt a heavy hand. It's not only local officials who come. All official members of the Church can get called to fight heretics going against orders of the Church. If the Church does not use physical means, they use social means instead. The Church ousts individuals. Attacking their reputation. They make finding work become increasingly difficult because no one wants to get associated with you due to fearing the Church's wrath. Those who go against the Church find their lives becoming more difficult. The Church, sometimes, does not need to lift a finger. There are Church believers who believe anything and everything the Church members say. People go as far as committing arson to get back at nonbelievers. It's crazy!"



"It can't be that bad," says Sandra. "It is. That's why- ... Ms. Sayu taught me a lot. From her I learned how to read the Holy text. So it does not make sense. The book says no Church is required nor intellect. A heart seeking out God is enough. If learning about God's word is so important to the Church why do they not teach more children how to read? They keep preaching to work hard on our fields and pray for a good harvest. Yet, they do not preach learning or discussing the Holy text based on our own personal interpretations. But then again, what do I know?"

"If you have felt this way, have you not told anyone about this?," asks Sandra. "I am telling you right now. I have not told anyone else. I thought about it, but I felt too much pressure. Like an ominous feeling of death. I cannot explain it. It is the same feeling I had back home. I felt like puking after-." Phoebe stops herself as her trembling worsens.

In a murmur Phoebe says, "no one would come to help me anyways. No one did."

I do not want to pry, but maybe I should as a friend? Then again. If I know about it, is there anything I can do? Should I get involved? She never wants to talk about her parents or past. Does that mean something bad happened? I am sure she would tell me if anything bad happened to her right? Racking my brain, I end up not asking what made her puke. Since my family follows the teachings of the Holy Scriptures, I am sure everything will be fine for us.

"Bye Phoebe. See you tomorrow night." We wave farewell to each other. When I arrive home my parents tell me not to invite Phoebe tomorrow night. Only tomorrow, she can come again the following week. I tell Phoebe what my parents said the following morning. I skip seeing Ms. Sayu after school. Instead, I head home. As I approach the hill leading to our home, I see my parents. Last night

they told me we are heading to the home of my grandparents to spend the night.

My grandparents cannot make the trip to our home anymore. I can tell their movements are becoming slower. Even when I hug them I can feel how frail their bodies are. Despite how frail they appear, I am amazed how they manage to push their bodies to complete work around their farm. I sense an ability to crush their bones, yet seeing them work makes the thought go away. What pushes them to draw strength in a feeble body? What they do should not be possible.

We walk along the rocky dirt path with our family mule. The only animal better than a donkey. He carries a lot of weight and is our family's greatest asset. We use him to carry our groceries and food. Without our mule we could not possibly carry the same amount of beans and corn. Our mule can carry more baggage than my Ma, Pa, and me combined. We make use of every part of an animal whether they are dead or alive. With the exception of a donkey and a mule. A donkey has a significant meaning in our religion. We do not desecrate a mule either because it is a descendant of a donkey.

We take this opportunity to bring a month's worth of food to my grandparents. The commute is around two hours by foot. We are the closest relatives who live near my grandparents so we naturally visit them the most. The siblings of my Ma help by giving funds here and there. Whatever amount they can give. My grandparents have not visited us since the first night Phoebe came over. They must have pushed themselves to visit us on that night. Thinking this, I can hear the nearby river as we get closer to their home.

In the distance, we can see their small cabin under an umbrella of trees. The scenery is beautiful only plagued by the rotten stench of the river. The stench grows as more people use the river to bathe and wash their clothes. We never drink the water, but my grandparents

do. Dunno how they can stomach drinking the water. We receive our water from our large pond which fills itself with rainfall throughout the year. We made a small reservoir of our own too. We occasionally carry water from the local river to irrigate our crops and/or provide water to our animals. Farming is a hard, but a simple life. Our main concern is having enough food all year round. The work seems to never stop.

Ma said the water in the river was cleaner when she grew up. Overall, the humble home of my grandparents is great. They receive water from a river, enjoy fertile land, and have the best tree to take refuge under during the Summer.

Ma knocks and we see my Abuela opening the door.

“Abuela we came.” I give Abuela a big strong hug.

“Hey Sandra, not that strong,” says Abuela smiling.

“Sorry.”

“You better be sorry ignoring your poor old Abuelo,” says grandpa peeking from behind my Abuela.

“I don’t remember having a poor old grandpa. I remember having a happy and nice old Abuelo.” With my arms open, we embrace each other smiling and he lets out a laugh.

“You rascal, I guess you don’t want your present,” says Abuelo.

“You old man, give the child her present,” says Abuela.

My grandpa gives my grandma this look of wow you just had to kill my fun. Then again he is picking a fight with his granddaughter. I let

out a smile and chuckle at their playful atmosphere. He hands me a sour candy.

“We brought you some peaches we grew at our home. You could say they were ripe for the picking,” says Ma.

We did the usual. Banter and intermingle talking about what we did today. Anything funny we thought of, we told everyone about it. Pa said there is no storytime today. It is rare for Pa to not tell a story given the atmosphere. He said he is tired so he cannot tell a story tonight. The night grew colder and darker as the breeze reignites the burning campfire. Yawning, my parents tell me to hit the hay (go to bed). I do as I am told. Having trouble sleeping, I stay awake for another hour or two. When sleepiness arrives, I hear murmurs from my family. Zoning out under intense drowsiness I make out a few words. *You gotta go. No. Think about...*

By the next morning I cannot remember what happened. All I remember is sliding into bed.

We wake up early and return home to tend to our own farm. Not much occurs around here. I wish there is more to do. I want something that can challenge me. I sit away thinking about how I came to life. Why am I alive? Am I the product of a biological process or is there a reason to enjoy my existence? There is so much to think about. I think these thoughts under the shade of our peach tree. I look up at the clouds. There must be something out there.

Several weeks go by and before I realize, the end of the school year has come. Students are talking about going straight into farm work. A lucky few talk about heading to the city to attend school. Our education from here on out is no longer free. All costs come out of pocket. Too expensive for most people. Some families sell off land to ensure their child goes to school. For many the risk and cost is too

high. There are students who refuse continuing their education knowing it will cost their family a large sum. Most students who study do not remain in the village. That's all I know. As for women, we understand the age for marriage is coming. My parents never force me to consider entering a relationship. They, themselves, did not enter a relationship until their late twenties.

My parents repeatedly tell me how they met whenever the chance pops up.



My grandparents, on Ma's side of the family, had five children in total. Ma is the youngest. They had Ma when Abuela was thirty four. They were not expecting another child so late in their life. They said they never regret having a daughter like her. They have no regrets for any of their children. Each one brought value of their own. They wish they could all stay together, but they also want land of their own. To grow a family through their own effort. Not me, I want to stay with my family as long as possible.

Every sibling found a partner, but Ma did not find anyone for a long time. According to Ma, her parents would worry a lot about her future. About how Ma would get by. Who would keep her company and keep her safe. Children can keep their parents safe, but you need someone to help you raise them. I always thought Ma had a beauty to her. Apparently other men thought so too. Suitors came every couple of weeks bringing food and animals. Her family accepted the food as an invitation for allowing suitors to speak with Ma. They rejected their animals though.

From our culture, I notice people court wives based on what and how much they bring to her family's home. By custom, men brought food multiple times with animals in tow. After a couple of visits, depending on the gifts, parents give their approval for their

daughters to get married. Like the animals, Ma kept rejecting every man who came before her.

Giving food is equivalent to showing you can provide. There are men who bring multiple cows and/or bulls. Bringing a cow, in itself, is a big sign for a confirmed marriage. Despite bringing cows, Ma said 'no' to every suitor. Before rejecting them, Ma spoke with each suitor multiple times to gauge who they are as a person. Then she would reject them. For example, she told one of her suitors to pretend he is married to her for a single day. By doing so, they started working together early in the morning out on the fields under the supervision of her parents. When dinner came the man said, 'let me rest, call me when the food is ready.' Ma would give them a second chance and tell them, "I worked the same job you did. Can you keep me company in the kitchen at least?"

Men being men, he replied saying 'that is not my job, that is **your job.**' Most people would say Mama was being picky, but she understands wanting not only a partner who helps her financially, but also a partner to spend time with. Her reasoning is if all she wants is a man to give her financial help then what is the point. She says, "if getting married means only listening to what my husband needs and wants with the reward being staying at home and never working. Then I choose work any day. If I cannot speak my mind to him then I will feel like a caged bird. Only there for appeal. I want the ability to open my cage. I know I will love raising my children regardless if I am inside or outside of it. I only want to have the option to leave the birdcage by my own volition and when I have children I need to defend. If my husband tells me to stay in the birdcage for protection and to raise our birdies, I am fine with that. What I am **not** fine with is him demanding I can never leave the cage because my only value is being in the cage."

Ma explains how she heard stories of people going crazy when they get locked in a small enclosure. You get paranoid thinking if someone will ever find you. That or, after a couple of days or weeks you lose track of time. Your mind wanders. With no new stimuli our brains malfunction increasing our anxiety and stress. Basically, torture.

“People can say whatever they want about keeping a woman at home. What they say can differ from what they want. We never know what another person really wants. We only perceive the actions they take. Some will mean it when they say they want to protect their family from the evils of the world. While others use the excuse of protection when their actual intention is to have complete power over their family. They assert themselves as the boss with no room for refusing any order they give. There are people who thirst for power. They will strive to attain power by any means necessary not limited to religion, politics, or economics,” says Ma.

"Ma didn't you say you stayed home to raise me. Isn't that being locked up?," asks Sandra.

"That was a choice. My choice at the time was to keep you safe. I understood the intention of your Papa. I do listen to him. I do not find it becoming of a woman to overexert her will onto her man either. If I, or any woman, constantly complains about her man's shortcomings or yells at him constantly telling him what to do then I am tricking him to get into my birdcage instead of me. Neither of us should get locked inside the birdcage. It's a tricky matter and varies from situation to situation. That's why communication and a degree of selflessness is helpful in a relationship."

"Ma, why are you telling me this? I thought you wanted to tell me how you and Papa met," says Sandra.

"Oh right. Where was I..." says Ma as Sandra sighs out loud.

"A husband may want a well deserved rest and a home cooked meal. For me, what I want is company from time to time. When I asked each suitor to keep me company I am purposely testing what values do they hold. Will they listen if I speak with them? None of them did. Maybe I did annoy them by asking them to work on a farm that is not theirs. My idea of doing so is understanding that when someone marries into a family they are not only marrying me, but marrying my family too." Ma takes a deep breath before continuing her story.

"I could predict how trapped I would become under each suitor's household. When couples officially marry it becomes difficult for women to escape an abusive relationship. There are husbands who verbally, physically, and sexually abuse their wife and/or children. There are wicked men, but there are also men like your Papa and Abuelo."

I believe Mama is done talking. Before I speak, Mama continues. "Women are no picnic either. I have seen women who are married or in a relationship. There are no problems to speak of, yet they flirt and accept advances from other men who are not their partner. They ignore their children. Children who will become parents themselves. If children are not well taken care of then the likelihood of them becoming sour, scornful, and disrespectful increases. When a child misbehaves, it's an act calling for attention. They seek attention because no one at home is giving them any. All they want is love whether they recognize it or not. They will repeat any positive or negative actions that result in receiving attention. At the same time they need discipline to show them that not everyone will tolerate their insupportable actions.



Small accidents should not require physical punishment unless it becomes repetitive. When a child is involved in a big incident parents need to ensure the safety of their child first. Only after checking on their child's health should a parent reprimand them. Regardless of the scale of the incident a parent needs to explain to their child why they are getting punished. Otherwise children are more likely to hold a grudge believing they did nothing wrong. Their punishment can range from being whipped to getting lectured. That's why a child really needs a father and mother. They both bring different values for raising children."

The whole time I sit there wondering when Mama is going to get to the point. I let Ma be Ma. She continues explaining why finding a good partner is important for our life in the long term. Explaining how she sees women in terrible situations unable to get away because the Church prohibits separation between couples. If they somehow separate the woman faces scorn from all society and their family name becomes dishonored. A question pops into my head. Naturally, I ask Mama my question.

"Hey Ma. What about people who want a partner not from the opposite gender/sex. I remember people in our Church getting riled up when they heard a boy from a neighboring village kissing another boy. The boy in question said he was forced to kiss him. Villagers went to the boy's home forcing his parents to permit them to whip their son from his sins. Sounds terrible. Is it right to beat them? Did we really need to beat it out of him? Something seems wrong about it. Is it because they will ruin the structure of a family that consists of a father and a mother?"

Papa and Mama turn to each other. As if they are telepathically telling each other *what do we tell her?* Papa takes the lead saying, "Sandra if anyone you know, including yourself, says they like the

same sex keep quiet about it. Your Mama and I do not like people who sin by getting together with the same sex. That's what I would like to say. There is close to nothing that will change our minds about it. But no matter what, I want you to understand this. No matter what you do Sandra or who you like, we will always love and protect you until the day we die."

"So Papa, is it wrong to like the same gender?," asks Sandra.

Papa says, "We follow God's teaching. God says no one who roams his territories has the right to judge anyone on it. They are not God. They do not understand who that person is. The only entity who sees them from birth to death is God. To judge them is to judge God. My personal belief is if someone does no harm then there is no reason to hate them. In my eyes, liking the same gender does no harm. I do not like it, but no harm is done. If there is something wrong with liking the same gender let God judge them not us. That means, do not go out and beat the hell out of someone for who they like. Everything is situational. Do you remember when I told you to only stand up if someone or something really matters to you? If it does not matter then stay quiet. We did not say anything against the boy's beating because we understand mob mentality. If we refuse the common held beliefs in a group then everyone will turn against us. I am not afraid of what will happen to me. What I do worry about is if anything would happen to you or your Mama. If it was one of you on the chopping board then I will stand up. For a life without either of you is one I am not sure I can handle."

"Is there any way to prevent harm if we go against common beliefs?," asks Sandra.

"Perhaps someone who holds a high position in the Church can have the authority to dismiss a case. Preventing a punishment or scaring away people voicing out their opinion. People see them as

influencers. People follow the act of an influencer putting their trust in them. If they say something is 'bad' people believe it's bad. If they say something is 'good' people believe it's good. Most people do not take a step back to think. They allow others to decide how they should feel," says Mama.

Following her Papa says, "Someone with wealth can have the capability of sheltering someone being targeted. They can keep them safe by having them take refuge at home under the protection of trained guards and dogs. Or perhaps they are loved and/or feared enough that no one dares question their authority prohibiting any harm or malice getting directed to someone they care for. It is more like people cannot refuse their orders. The worst situation is being put in a vulnerable position where refusing an order can have deadly consequences for themselves and those around them. I bet there are times when only someone of equal or greater power can challenge people in high positions of society. These are my thoughts in regards to your question Sandra."

*Hmm* I murmur mentally saving my questions and thoughts for another time. I want to contemplate these thoughts at my leisure. "So how does this all relate to meeting Papa?," asks Sandra, still waiting.

"Oh right. What I have said so far is to explain how I remained single for a long time. I stayed single for so long that my parents worried about my future. As I grew older, the number of suitors began diminishing until no suitors came around anymore."

"How come Mama? Is it because you became uglier?," says Sandra.

"Noooo. I was and am beautiful. Isn't that right honey?," says Mama.

"That is true. If anything, your Mama is more beautiful today than before," replies Papa. Sandra tries to mute out the *pop*\* sound her parents make when they give each other a quick peck on the lips. Sandra turns to the side as her parents smile at each other.

"Come on Sandra. One day you are going to find a guy you will fall for. You will want to kiss him all the time and hold his hand and ..."

"I get it Mama. I get it. You don't have to paint the picture," says Sandra as she flusters from embarrassment.

"To continue, your Abuela met your Papa before me. She is a reason I met him in the first place," says Mama.

"Really?," asks Sandra, turning to her Papa who nods his head.

"It's a little embarrassing saying it now, but at the time I lived in the trees. I had no home and nothing to my name in my early twenties. Each day was a struggle. My aim was to earn enough money to purchase property where I can grow my crops. The price for land, at the time, was not outlandish. The problem is there are very few jobs that pay enough to purchase land. Most of the pay went to covering daily essentials as food and lodging. After all the costs, I am left with little next to nothing. Instead of paying for lodging, I decided to hide in trees to sleep at night. After a couple of days, I paid to take a shower at any local bathhouse nearby. It was not fun at all. I wish I never spent time in the streets. The feeling is terrible. Everyone looks down on you keeping their distance as if they see you as a parasite. It makes you recognize people are self-absorbed in their own life. I never hated anyone though. I did not play the victim wanting someone to save me. I understood where I was heading and worked towards it. My goal was to have something I can call my own. Working and sacrificing so much for it. I wanted to have freedom. One step to freedom is owning a piece of land. I traveled

across the country looking for different jobs. From gardening, construction, field picking, and the mines. The mines paid good money, but I had the feeling my health would deteriorate if I stayed too long in that line of work.”

Sandra stays quiet. She thinks about what she should say. She did not know her Papa had a troubling past. He never spoke about his past much. She did not realize the land they live on must have gotten purchased by her Papa shortly before her Mama gave birth to her. She wants to know how he wound up in the streets. She also wants to know how he and her Mama met. She wants to thank her Papa for all he did and does, but how can she ever thank him. She understands wanting to care for her parents, but does not want to spout false promises. For these reasons she hesitates until her Papa says, “there is one thing I am happy about because of that experience. Well, two things. One, if I never lived in the streets I would have never found my second family. And two, if I never lived on the streets I would never understand and appreciate what I have today. I have the most beautiful, caring, and thoughtful wife. I also have a great daughter who I love raising and watching over. I enjoy focusing on the good, not the bad.”

After feeling a bit more at ease, Sandra asks, “So Papa, how did you and Mama meet?”

Mama replies saying, "before I let your Papa wrap up the rest of the story there is another part-"

"Another part! I feel like you are giving too many details and not getting to the point of how you two met," says Sandra covering her mouth after letting her thoughts slip out.

Mama smiles telling Sandra she used to say the same line to her own Ma. The endless details of a growing woman. "Sandra, I like talking

to you. Giving you more details makes our conversation last longer. That's not so bad is it? Besides, I like this story a lot. Meeting your Papa, having you in my life makes me happier more than anything else," says Mama.

Sulking then lifting herself upright Sandra asks her Ma, "what is the last detail you want to mention?"

Mama continues saying, "during times where we needed a bit more funds, your Abuelo would work on the farm while your Abuela worked in the market selling handmade food and drinks. Your Papa at the time did not know this, but your Abuela routinely saw him climb trees on her way home from the plaza. She found your Papa a bit strange and worried if he meant any harm. At least until she met him." Mama gazes at Papa, indicating for him to tell the rest of the story.

*Sigh.* "If I have to," says Papa. "I was working odd jobs from the moment my family disowned me. Raising enough funds for years to own land of my own. I had to cut losses somewhere. With nowhere to go. I slept in trees and took showers in the river as needed. What kept me going is taking care of my body. Every time I wanted to cry I went for a jog. Each time I fell into temptation I did push-ups. Over time I built a better body keeping my mind in check to survive the long haul of my life. I may not know as much as you will Sandra; what I do know is I cannot remain laying down for too long."

"So how did you meet Abuela first," asks Sandra.

"Before meeting your Abuela, I took on a temporary construction job near the plaza where your grandparents live. When I am unfamiliar with an area, I take refuge on the tree branches near public accommodations. During the day, I jot down the location of food stalls, bathhouses, and people I met. When I speak with people

I do not have ulterior motives. Although, not meaning to. I find out about job proposals through a few, out of many, people I speak with. I sometimes wonder what would happen if I never chose to speak with others. Not speaking means never allowing yourself to learn from others or finding out about work opportunities. Till this day, I am grateful for the meaningful conversations I have with others. Do you have any questions so far?," Papa asks Sandra. Sandra shakes her head and continues listening intently.

"Most of the time, I spoke with people to hear about their experiences because I find their life stories fascinating. Everyone has a tough life under their eyes. Some problems are not as big as others, but each problem is big to the person facing them. One person who told me about her story is your Abuela. She told me about meeting her partner in an arranged marriage. Neither of their families had much. She got nervous before getting married knowing all the problems that came along. Yet, her lover made her happy by listening to her and helping around the house. Of course he is no pushover. Despite being kind, he had rough edges around anyone who physically confronted him. That is a time men let their fists decide who is right. Your Abuelo got into a lot of fights growing up. He had to. His father passed away early, diagnosed with dehydration. With only sisters and a mother, he trained himself to prepare for the worst. Each time he fought he learned techniques from others and taught his sisters a bit about his defensive and offensive positions. Basically, he grew up a fighter. Even though he helps around the house no one spoke ill of him much. You can take my word for it, many women saw him fight and something about him radiated. *I want him*. That is what your Abuela told us. Long story short, your Abuela admits she is fortunate to have a man who is tough, but caring too."

“Wow really! That’s so cool. I never would have guessed. So Papa, how did you and Mama meet?,” says Sandra.

“Hold your horses (wait). I am getting to that part,” says Papa to Sandra. Mama giggles in the back.

“Among the topics your Abuela spoke about, she spoke about her daughter and her worries about her. I did not think much about it. I was more fascinated about hearing the stories about your Abuelo, their travels together, and your ancestors. As we spoke, I remember ordering a bean paste tortilla from your Abuela at her makeshift stall. It was the first time I ate it. As I bit into it, I began regretting ordering the tortilla instead of the sweet coco milk. She must have seen through me and glanced at her pot. With not much money, I did not want to spend it on luxuries. Either she was kind or knew about my situation. She chose to give me a free cup of coco milk that day. Not much, but I understood it is the little she can give. Despite not liking the bean paste tortilla, I came to frequent her stall to talk with her and people who came. Apparently the bean paste tortilla I dislike is a very popular local dish. Who knows why? Maybe it's because the tortilla fold is the cheapest item to buy at the plaza.”

“Or maybe for nostalgia,” says Sandra interrupting her Papa.

“Yes, maybe for nostalgia,” says Papa.

“Tell me Papa.”

“Yes, what is it?”

“Can you please tell me how you and Mama met now?,” says Sandra. After a pause, her parents chuckle.

“Yes, now we can tell you how we met.”



"Your Abuela sold food on weekdays mostly. I woke up early for work so I did not see her for weeks at a time. Time slips by; a year passes. I sense my construction job is getting to the end of its rope (time is ending). A few weeks before construction ends, I see your Ma for the first time-

"Finally!," says Sandra laying her head on the table. Her long wait came. "So what happens next?," says Sandra lifting her head.

"At the plaza I saw your Ma for the first time shouting the daily specials. Not in a big loud voice. She yelled with enough volume for people passing through to hear. I never knew your Abuela had a daughter. Well I did, but forgot. When I approach your Abuela, I avoid looking at your Mama while I order my usual meal. Something about her made me want to glance over to her. With each of her turns, I instinctively look elsewhere. Not my usual behavior. Almost done with the meal, I think of heading out. I never seen this girl before. Who is to say I will ever see her again. Right there, I decide to pull a trick my brother told me about. It went like this:

Extending my hand I tell your Mama, 'Wow, you are the most beautiful woman I have seen. My name is Owen. Your family makes great food.'

My brother told me the most important part is giving a small pause to see if the person gives you their name. If they only thank you, you should move on. If they reply and say their name it means they are willing to hear you out.

Your Mama replies saying, 'Owen you are the most handsome man-'"

"Oh stop it," says Mama, laughing it off. Papa chuckles alongside her.

“Well, your Mama said ‘thank you’ accepting my hand replying ‘my name is Kaori it’s nice to meet you.’ I asked her when is the next time she plans to come to the plaza. Apparently, she comes to the plaza on weekdays when her Mom needs help. I tell her to come tomorrow to hear one of the best stories ever. I did not know what else to give except a great story. The-”

“Wai-Wai-wait, how did you suddenly become a storyteller? And I forgot to ask, why did you get kicked out of your home?,” asks Sandra confused.

“I thought you only wanted to know about how we met? Didn’t you complain about me giving you too many details?,” asks Mama.

“I did,” says Sandra.

“Well I will tell you about that story another time. Is that okay with you Sandra?,” says Papa.

“Alright Papa,” replies Sandra.

“Continuing off. I met your Mama the next day. More accurately, I began seeing your Mama most mornings until the end of my construction job. Having made my share for the season, I find it more valuable spending time with your Mama than working. I told her about what I had been through, my goals, and about missing the last few weeks of construction work. Your Mama got furious. Not because I made no money. She got mad I let off the gas pedal towards my goal I am so adamant about. We were not together so she had no benefit from telling me that. In fact, we would lose touch when I have to move onto the next job. Later she told me she thought I was barely starting my journey. She did not realize it was years in the making. I am not the smartest or strongest, but what I

am is someone willing to put in the work. No matter how I am feeling.”

Mama points to Pa saying, “for that attitude your Papa carries. It made him bond with your Abuelo real quick. But I’ll let him get to that part though.” Ma flutters her hand to tell Papa to continue.

“I was almost there. In a year or two I can purchase a good piece of land. Except I had to leave soon. I like your Mama, but she was right. I had to make my path first before telling someone to follow me. I told your Ma we could write letters to each other. She can hear all about my stories and I can hear all about what she is learning from her Mom. I did learn how to cook better through the letters your Mama sent, but none of my dishes came out as delicious as hers. I did not get it. We followed the same recipe to the letter,” says Papa.

“Honey, you never follow a recipe to the letter. The recipe is a guidepost pointing you in a direction. You have to figure out the different tastes and textures generated from your own experimentations and failures. I kept failing which only makes my success even better and bigger. That’s why you both eat delicious meals. Having a mentor like my Mama made my progression even better than if I had to figure out all recipes from scratch,” says Ma as she touts her own horn.

“For about a whole year, I spent working odd jobs. I took a few small breaks between jobs to visit your Mama for a single day. She kept getting annoyed that I spent time with her knowing it costs money and time. Her consideration made me want to spend even more time with her. I never had that feeling before. When staying in town, I kept insisting I stay near the plaza. She kept insisting I stay with her instead. I did not like the feeling of smooching off others. I felt terrible for encroaching. They are not my family. Her parents must have seen my concern. Your Abuelo got straight to the point and

asked me, ‘are you serious about my daughter? Or are you messing around?’ Our conversation lasts for more than a few minutes. I told your Abuelo I really like his daughter. I do not know why, but I do. I do not want to lose her. I plan to provide a home for us in a year or two. After hearing my intentions, your Abuelo nods only stating he will not forgive me if I ever do any harm to his Kaori. On the first night I spent with them, I remember your grandparents chuckling at me when I made off to climb a tree a couple feet away from their home. After climbing, they chased after me laughing at my stunt. They said stop being silly and join them sleeping in the kitchen. They said there is no way they will allow a family member to sleep in the cold all alone. I slept next to your Abuelo on the far left side of the kitchen area. Your Ma and Abuela slept on the far right side of the kitchen. Of course they would not let me sleep near your Mama for obvious reasons. We are not married yet. They were open to new ideas just not the idea of a man and woman getting too cozy at night. With that, I spent more nights at the home of your grandparents when I came to visit. When your Abuela and Ma were not around. Your Abuelo would teach me about takedowns, holds, guards, grappling, and fighting stances. I find it valuable to know about fighting to some extent because you never know.”

“You managed to fit right into Mama's family real quick. That’s great,” says Sandra radiating.

“Well not exactly,” says Papa. “Remember how I said I climbed a tree. I chose to climb the tree to avoid others like your grandparents. When your grandparents told me we would all sleep on the same floor, I was taken by surprise. I mean, I have never done that. I may have slept in the trees, but I never shared my space with anyone else. In my family, everyone had a room of their own. Everyone came and went without a care for anyone else. Even my Mom secluded herself after making meals to avoid the wrath of any family member. Most

of my brothers and sisters occupied their time finding ways to please our father. Who knows why. Maybe they want him to leave his fortune to them or maybe they want some of his affection. I do not care for either. I did not care for what he did or gave because at the end of the day he beat my Mom. He beat me for any reason he found too. He found it terrible that I did not focus on my studies and spent the time away daydreaming about stories. As I grew older I began not fearing him as much. I began thinking of a way out. Before I could escape his grasp he threw me out when I rebelled against his iron fist. As for why I like storytelling, I will tell you another day. When I slept with everyone, I felt uneasy. The whole night I pretended to sleep. I was nervous about the situation at the start. Maybe it was your Abuelo teaching me how to fight. Or perhaps it was him telling me to hurry up to the kitchen. Whenever he saw me alone he kept dragging me around everywhere to help. I began feeling safe around him. For the first time in a long time I let down my guard. For once I could sleep at night. I have so much respect for your grandparents that I call them Ma and Pa sometimes. As a form of respect. Today, I see them more as my real family than my actual one. You know what gets me? The whole time before I bought any land. I had this idea that it would make me happy. Having land certainly satisfies me, but there is more to life. I found more peace not sleeping alone at night. All of our lives will have to come to an end. When my time comes I want to go out as a badass. If I can smile in the end then I know I have succeeded.”

"How come Papa?"

"That's for you to find out when your own time comes. We never know when that is. Perhaps it's today or tomorrow. Something tells me that in our last moments we recollect all our memories. The fond and forgotten ones too.”

“Alright, that’s enough of that. So after the construction job, I spent close to two years away from home. When I could finally buy land, I chose to buy land close to the home of your grandparents because what else would have made your Mama happier? I did not mind. Not knowing much about love from my own family, except from my mother and brother, your grandparents became my second family. To explain how we grew closer together through the letters we wrote will take too long. You might end up falling asleep this time. Just know I am who I am as the result of the people I met. I am not perfect, but I am better today than yesterday. For instance, it took me a long time to learn how to give your Ma and grandparents a proper hug. So when I give you advice it is because I did not learn certain life lessons until way later in life. I want to instill the lessons I learned through years to you so you can avoid years of agony. I believe helping to shape you is better than anything else I can ever give to you. What you learn and are taught lasts longer than any material gift one can receive.”

“Is that the whole story then Papa?,” asks Sandra one last time.

“Pretty much. I purchased the land we have here. Then your Ma and I spent real time together for somewhere between two to three years as we prepared for our wedding. Trust me, your grandparents became extremely worried that your Ma did not have any kids as she approached thirty. We both chose to only have one child. Of course in an agricultural society like ours having only one child is a terrible idea. But it’s what we decided to do. Not till the year of our wedding did we move in together. Customs said we should not have, but we did. I mean we are not getting any younger. Besides, most people our age are already married with multiple kids. Once married, we chose to have you. The rest of the story is the one being told by you. That’s pretty much how it went down. Now you know how I met your Ma,” finishes Papa.

“That sure is a long story. Couldn’t you have told me Mama worked selling food in the plaza and you called out to her. Enticing her with great stories until the day she fell in love with you. That would have saved all of us a lot of time. Don’t you think?,” asks Sandra.

Together they both say, “where is the fun in that?”

“I could tell you my whole life story. I was born then sixty five years later I died. Does that sound fun?,” asks Papa.

“Well not really. Sounds depressing if anything else,” replies Sandra.

“Exactly! A good story puts everything concisely together because a story ends when a writer no longer wants to not write. We only have so much time to give. Write too long of a book and everyone will avoid reading it. Write too short of a book and the most fascinating details and facts are omitted. The point of a story is to fascinate others with your tale. To entertain them. You cannot tell a great story without details otherwise the tale is not as entertaining. I thought a lot about it and came to realize that after food, shelter, and clothing. A big factor of life is keeping ourselves entertained. Whether entertainment means watching a play, seeing your children grow, or working towards a goal. For example, you must have noticed when we visit your grandparents or your Ma’s siblings we help around the farm, but not much else. Instead, we spend time together trying to make each other laugh. There is not much value doing so for some, but if it keeps you entertained then you will continue repeating your actions. Whether it’s the right move or not is not the way to see it. The best way to view your interactions is to ask yourself is this moment meaningful to you? I believe we all want great relationships, but sometimes we have a goal. That goal will keep us away from spending all our time with those we care about. Doing so is what I call sacrifice. Sacrifice is giving something up for something or someone else,” says Papa.

Coming back to reality. I cannot believe the short time that has passed. School ended abruptly for me. Now a new one will start. This fond memory I had resurfaced randomly.

Within my head, there is one last sad memory. The memory of the last moments with my grandparents. For now, I have thought enough. I want to sleep. Sleep and pretend I will wake up at home and forget all about where I am because what is the goal now? We had everything we wanted. We did not want to leave. Life was getting better. Now we need to leave and start over. We do not want that. Who wants to leave a home they love?



# Bundling Growth

Growing up, I have little to no friends. The few people I knew spoke behind my back. I do not want those people in my life. They mean nothing and are nothing. I have nothing against them and wish them the best. Even if they spoke behind my back. I remember my classmates making fun of how much I kept trying. How little I spoke. I understand what I can say to appease those around me, but why should I do that? If someone thinks I am trash let them think I am trash. Why should I pay any attention to people who look down on others? I have no time or energy to think how much better I am than everyone else. I focus on myself, no one else.

I do not classify myself under any category. Otherwise I will box myself inside a limited mindset. Telling myself what I can and cannot do. I analyze the words and thoughts of others I hear and come to my own conclusions. I consider why people said what they said. Regardless if what they said is positive or negative. I use their understanding for my growth. For instance, many students tell me not to read saying, 'what will reading ever do for you?' I do not listen to them. If so many adults tell students to read. They must be telling us to read for a reason. I listen to the wisdom of those older than me. Later on, if I learn reading is not helpful then no harm is done. Worst case, I learn something, anything.

I prevent others from influencing my thought process unless I have a certain level of respect and intrigue in their thought process. Despite not caring what others think of me. I find it funny how irrational I am.

Rationality, irrationality, and unpredictability is human nature. Rational people make smart moves with any mistakes they make being glorified in a negative light. While irrational people are overly

pessimistic or optimistic. Matters are made worse by throwing feelings into the fray. Feelings generate unpredictability within humans regardless if they have a tendency for rationality.

That said, staying true to yourself is one of the greatest challenges to face in front of adversity.

I understand I am rational most of the time. Yet, when my dad is involved I become irrational. I mean, if someone is rude to you. Talks down to you. Shows little remorse for any pain they cause you. The rational thought is to stop being with them. Stop looking for them to say 'you did good today'. I do not seek anyone's approval so why do I care so much what my father thinks. Why do I seek his approval? If he were anyone else I would not care. I believe what he says wholeheartedly. If he says I did something bad, I believe him. If he says I am embarrassing him by eating with my hands, I put my head down. Choosing not to eat another bite even when I have not eaten all day. If he tells me I am wrong or dumb. I agree without a second thought. Therefore I am dumb.

It was not always like this. My memory is vague growing up, but I know Dad used to play with me on his days off. He took care of me going along with entertaining my imaginative antics. We were and are always together. He taught me how to cook, clean, and cultivate. He's provided as much as anyone can ask. We did not have much the first couple of years growing up. Now we have more.

Life was good until Dad began slowly changing. The first moment I remember my life changing is when he broke it. I will never forget that day. On that day, I began questioning why I obey him? Why do I hold him in a high regard?

Humans are quite funny.

Perhaps my obedience stems from religion. We go to Church once a week. Church is not mandatory, we go regardless. Paying a monthly fee to help maintain the Church and any charity work they do. Mainly providing clothes and food for incoming migrants. I do value the Church's beliefs. Helping your neighbor, never harboring hatred, and forgiving sinners. We are all sinners. For these reasons, I forgive Dad immediately. For anything and everything. He does not hurt me regularly. Besides, the pain inflicted on me does not hurt anymore.

Truthfully, I never understood most topics our preacher spoke about. The topics sound foreign and cryptic. I understood nothing from the phrase 'the land of God will become holy when the meek make their claim'. Who are these 'meek' people? I did not put much thought to it. I am more fascinated by thoughts under construction in my head.

Instead of hearing the preacher, I look to the white walls. I decide to change the color of the walls to blue, then orange, then purple. I picture animals walking across the aisle. I imagine the ceiling covered in stars before feeling a pinch on my side. Dad angrily stares at me telling me to stay still, remain quiet, and look straight ahead.

I remember one significant aspect of the Church. A repetitive notion. Fear God or else. I ask my Dad why we should fear God. He said God is mercy. He can make waters rise, the earth shake, clouds roar, and the wicked sick. He can also make the rivers flow, clouds rain, cure the incurable, and make the soil new. To me, God sounds tyrannical.

Whether I am at school or Church, most of my activities bore me. If people could see what I see at will, reality becomes a bore. I wonder why the world I see is different from the world others see.

School comes easy to me. My classmates tend to get behind in class. I do not consider myself smart for being ahead. Much less do I

consider myself smarter than others. There are a bunch of topics I do not understand. I am ahead because I study outside of my classroom. Investigating the next topic ahead of time. Dad heavily influences advancing my math skills at an early age. Testing me on my multiplication table regularly. Congratulating me when I made progress. When he still cared for me to a certain extent. He forces me to learn them up to  $12 \times 12 = 144$ . He taught me a lot before he became remorseful over the years.

There is one class I do enjoy. The current class I am taking. Music class.

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Naturally, everyone knows each other by name given we were a small community. We came to this country we call home when I was less than four years old. Apparently, we came to this bountiful country before the nation started to take off. With the little fortune Dad brought, he managed to procure land of his own. Otherwise, Dad would have spent more years working before having enough to purchase his own land. By owning his own land he can retain more revenue coming in after each year's harvest. Of course, he will eat any losses coming along with owning the land. Dad is a lot of things, one of them is being a great farmer with a green thumb (the ability to grow healthy plants). He made more wealth than he lost in the long run.

We came to this nation during a time of expansion and growth. Manufacturing began growing through innovation and inventions bringing new job opportunities. Companies fortunate enough paid people more money than what they would earn by harvesting food. No one, at the time, could recognize the societal and economic norms beginning to shift. Not long ago, no one would have known about our small town. It went from a population of 97 to over 1,000.

Like, where is the money coming from? There has to exist information I do not know about.

All I know is people are getting paid more for working in manufacturing. Mass producing new inventions such as stoves and sound systems. This leads to more spending. With more money in circulation, more people have temporary access to it. Now people are buying more food, a luxury in the past. In combination with these developments, our farm town began shipping more food bringing in even more money.

In return, more townspeople bought fancy gadgets being marketed to us. Before the boom, not many people lived around us. With hardly anyone desiring to live in our remote town, Dad manages to purchase land with the little wealth we brought. Still, there is something eating deep inside me. Like, how did we get extremely lucky? Did we even deserve getting this fortunate when there are so many out there suffering? What did we really do? What did I do to *deserve* this life?

I do not remember much from the time I was two. I remember glimpses here and there. Not much, it was a long time ago. Despite the passage of time, I cannot shake off this feeling. The feeling something did not feel right at the time. What is it though? Everything makes sense so far. People earn more so they spend more to enjoy food. Most people live relatively close to the center of the city so there is no big deal getting around. There is plenty of land to go around. So why do I feel this ominous feeling?

I feel crazy for seeing a predictable future. Like what happens when too many people live congested. Won't there exist competition to live at desirable locations close to public goods. I mean if Family A lives ten feet from the library someone else will live twenty feet away. Unless someone forcibly removes Family A to take over their

land they will never live ten feet away from the library. They will meet resistance if they try removing them by force. The scary thought is thinking about this thought. I thought about the idea therefore I am sure someone else will think of it too. Eventually someone will think about how to remove a family with ease. The easy solution is for multiple families to live together. The trouble is, multiple families living together does not change the level of congestion. Besides, not everyone will want to live together due to compromising their privacy. In the end, there is no avoiding the situation of everyone wanting to live close to certain locations.

What happens when too many people want to live there? What price will they pay? I find it crazy that most people do not think about these questions. Like why? These are important concerns.

To me, if there is a high demand for a location more people will want it so how do they agree who lives there? If someone lives in a remote area with no one around then no one will take their land. How will they take away land they do not know exists? We might as well live in the wilderness if no one else lives around us. When too many people gather in an area, a civilization starts emerging alongside its benefits and cons.

In spite of my ideas, I feel I am missing the bigger picture. What though? What am I missing that I cannot see? These are thoughts I think about throughout the week, month, and at times through the years. Long story short, we are a growing community requiring more teachers to teach.

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Our education starts at the age of five. Classes are separated on the basis of age and academic level. Most classes have a ratio of one teacher to fourteen students. First through fifth grade is elementary school. Sixth to eighth grade is middle school. We finish with high

school which lasts from ninth to twelfth grade. Most students drop out after ninth grade for various reasons. The ones who stay enter agricultural studies, government, the military, and now growing businesses.

Most students prefer sitting in the back. I do too except my poor vision prevents me from seeing the board. I sit at my desk watching students shuffle near the door. The sound of the school bell goes *ring\* ring\* ring\**. As students walk out, Mrs. Alligar tells us, “remember tomorrow is the last day to return a signed permission slip to participate in music class.”

The permission slip notifies parents about their child wanting to participate in music. By signing, parents acknowledge to pay any repairs for damage done to instruments students borrow.

*Seems like a bore.* This is another class I am sure Dad will want me to get tutored in. Most students spend their time trying to understand current teaching material. I spend my time reading ahead or from books I brought from home. While everyone tries to understand what we are learning, I get ahead simply by reading ahead. What else am I supposed to do? Sit in a chair all day doing nothing? I read from our history books which everyone is given. Yet our school hardly makes students read from it. I do not understand why we have history books if we do not plan to read them. We rarely cover any material from it.

Reading from the history textbook, I read up on how slavery began and continues. Or about people coming to new lands taking them away through force from the native people. Or worse, tricking people to sign a contract knowingly knowing they do not understand what they are signing. Not due to ignorance, but misinformation of the contents of the contract. All for the purpose of refuting any future disputes brought forth by the native people. I am sure they

will state, 'well if you did not want to give up your land you should have never signed the contract' fully understanding they misled them from the start. Maybe that's why we should educate ourselves? We need to prevent others from taking advantage of us by sharing information with each other. As I contemplate my thoughts in my head, I sense there exists an underlying power struggle in any society. The scary part is some power structures seem made up.

One aspect I am grateful for is the separation of Church from State/Government. I am not sure people understand the importance of this separation. Imagine a powerful body pushing their beliefs, not of our own, onto us. Telling us what to think and believe. I find people controlling our thoughts as dangerous. The major con of this separation of religion from state is the possible decay of morals. I want to believe everyone thinks. Then again. As time passes, I am starting to think not everyone thinks. I consider myself a thinker, yet I still do not understand my own values. If I am having trouble understanding my personal values then how are people who never think faring? These notions make me believe religion is vital for most people. The biggest benefit I see with joining a religious group is taking away the stress to think about our own personal beliefs. Why not follow the teachings of people who have put a lot of thought into morals we can follow? Following the teachings of others takes away from the anxiety of trying to understand our existence. Religion can give us a peace of mind and a sense of community. The major con to religion is religious persecution between different religious groups. Another con is having the populace being led astray by someone only because they hold a position of authority.

Many of the conclusions I came up with are not found in the history books. All I do is think of how I could use any information I understand to my advantage. I would not exploit people, but I



cannot be naive enough to ignore what someone else can do with this information.

*Ca\* Clank\** I kick a rock on the dirt road as I head home. I walk alone each day to and from school. Most students live close to town; on the other hand, Dad chose to live higher up in the mountains near our town's river. We have a few neighbors, all farmers, far in between.

With not much else to do, I think on my walks. If I do not get lost in my head I will remember how lonely I feel. How bored I am. From morning to night, I am all alone in the dark and broad daylight. I wake up and see Dad go to work then prepare myself for school. I walk by myself for over an hour to and back. During breaks, I eat alone in the courtyard or walk aimlessly around the school. I study throughout the afternoon and see Dad until nightfall. He usually leaves food he prepared on the table. Some nights he does not return until the morning. Before, Dad never slept in. Sleeping in meant more stress to get the same amount of work completed in less time. Now with more workers under him, Dad allows himself more time to spend in leisure. Most workers are migrants.

Using my imagination is fun, but what does it all matter if I am the only one who can see my world? My life would be better with someone else around. The only one around is my best bud Tom. I try not to think about the day Tom is no longer around.

Before going to sleep, I keep finding myself wondering if anyone else shares my innate thoughts. I am sure most people think right?

Most nights, I recollect my thoughts and experiences for the day. Analyzing what went well and what didn't. I think about how to improve and about the awesome adventure(s) I had in the backyard. I shift my head towards Tom who is lying right next to me. I tell Tom

all about my adventures and thoughts. Some nights, I look to the ceiling thinking about where Dad is, what's the meaning of living if I am completely alone, or about the problems I could not answer in class. When I speak about my adventures or thoughts to Tom. I always ask him, "What do you think, Tom?" Tom just gives me a strange look. I chuckle imagining that one day Tom will reply with, "Bro, what are you on?"

I close my eyes letting out a sigh. Opening my eyes I tell Tom, "Tomorrow we will make a potion for super strength so nothing can get in our way."

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Growing up, most people said I play around too much. It's true I do play around. What they do not understand is that I am not always *playing*.

When Dad hosts people, I play in their vicinity to overhear what they say. Hiding in corners attuning my ears to the sound escaping their mouths. Otherwise, how else will I gain information from him that he does not want to share? For someone who tells me to learn he sure does not teach me how to. All he says is, "go do it." Do what exactly? I tend to figure out what to do on my own. Why do people do that? Not share info with each other. Do they fear their trade secrets will get taken? Why fear losing an edge over someone else? I mean, why not continue being better than them. If you help them grow then it means you have to grow even more to stay on top. What's so wrong about wanting to grow even more? Why is there so much fear for doing so? In school, I recall classmates asking me how to solve math problems. At first, I did not want to help. If they improve then the teacher will start assigning more difficult problems. Worse, they might become better than me. Then I realized that all I need to accomplish is to strive to become better.

I listen a lot too. I think about why people act the way they act. When I point out people's personality traits. I try to explain moments people contradict themselves. For example, I had a classmate boast about how great of a runner they are. Going on and on about how much work they put in. I point out the obvious. I tell him 'so after all that work. You still cannot out pace me in running.' Our peers whisper. My classmate walks away irritated for some reason.

I have pointed out faults in my Dad too. He will say, 'we follow the teachings of God.' When I ask if we follow all of his teachings? He tells me we do. I then question him why he gambles away money late at night. He tells me to close my mouth. I try pointing out how it is a sin, yet he will have none of it. He sends me to my room. I would say he felt judged when I spoke about what he says versus what he does. I have no control. He is bigger than me. He will always be bigger.

There are moments my speculations are off the mark about someone. I do not understand I am in the wrong until after I speak with them. When we talk, they explain the errors in my reasoning. I start re-evaluating my perspective. If we BOTH do not listen to each other obviously one or both of us will still retain negative emotions for being misunderstood. Regardless of how other people are, I try to learn from everyone. When I say everyone, I mean EVERYONE. We can always learn from others. Despite what Dad does, my Dad teaches me a lot.

My Dad teaches me what I should do and what I should avoid doing. Dad speaks a lot about his regrets and harsh upbringing. He uses his upbringing for a comparison or maybe justification for how he treats me. He indirectly teaches me about finances. He never speaks to me about how he makes his money. Instead, I observe and see how he does it. Sometimes I pretend to play when in reality I am listening in

on his conversations. I never understood why he did not teach me directly. All he does is force me to learn and excel in school. Wouldn't most people want to pass along their knowledge?

Strange enough, when I come to realizations I try explaining them to Dad. He tends to say, “really now?” Crop rotation is one example I kept endorsing. We started a small garden in front of our home as a testing area. Of course I am the one responsible for maintaining the garden. If I never had the idea or did not tell Dad perhaps I could avoid this extra work. Then again, do I have anything better to do? *Not really.* Knowing myself, I write notes regarding the progress of the garden. Writing helps organize my thoughts.

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Our home kitchen is decent. Most upgrades came from the ventures Dad had. He convinced people to lend him money to speed them up. Using his land as collateral, he had his lenders sign a contract to keep their mind at ease. In the face of failing to pay them back, his lenders have the right to divide his land among themselves. In the span of a few years he paid them back in full thereby voiding the contract. He almost fell into bankruptcy and could have lost everything. Most people who go into business make good money, but most of them go broke. Business is not for the faint of heart.

One venture he took was to cut up wood. Convincing people to buy his plywood. He found more success when he traveled from town to town. Especially in districts under development. The only difference between him and other sellers was he would talk to everyone. They bought his wood not as a transaction, but as a friend doing him a favor. From there he knew the most important aspect of business is your relationship to those you serve. Giving good service can guarantee your business will grow.

Through word of mouth people found themselves needing more wood. Soon he would continue with another business to grow. With enough income coming in. Dad hired another man to help him cut wood. Now he has a handful of men he pays to ship out wood. Unlike other men, Dad has resources at his hands. He finds ways to reduce the cost which helps to drive out his competition. Except as in business, like life, there will always exist competition. Soon he runs into a wall as he meets men with their own connections. His business stagnates, but he makes enough money to at least create our kitchen.

As a kid, I remember Dad working early in the morning till late at night. Working, working, working. Always. He did not sleep much. He kept working. Then one day he stopped. Giving me a notebook and a bag of money, he tells me to pay each person who comes for their wage. Each person came looking for Dad. To their surprise they saw me instead. After a few visits it became the norm that I would pay them instead.

Despite how Dad is, I have tremendous respect for him. I look up to him. Coming here with nothing, he made a name for himself in our community. Succeeding in getting people to make better roads connecting our town to the main road. It took him years to accomplish, but after setting the groundwork we finally have roads. I look up to him as a working father who does his best. He does occasionally hit me, but I am sure he's got his reasons right?

The only person he never dared hit is his grandma. May she rest in peace. I never met her, but I wish I did. Unlike his docile grandma, his mom would grab his face and drown him in a bucket of water if he misbehaved. She did not care hearing him choke on water. As a butcher, his mom made decent money, yet never bought him

anything. Not a candy nor toy. All her money went towards buying beer all the time.

*Why does this all sound familiar?*

There is a part of me wishing my grandma was still alive. I believe she is the only person that could influence Dad. I wish she were here so I can ask her to tell Dad to become kinder to me and to not get angry with me. At the very least, there would be someone I can run to. If she never left perhaps Dad would be a completely different person.

I know grandma would affect him. When he sounds as if he is about to erupt I ask him, “what would grandma think?” At worst he replies, “do not bring your grandma into this conversation.” Most of the time I never say it. I mention grandma’s name only at the most crucial times. Just like how cats have nine lives. Using her name is like having my own nine lives. By comparison to his own life, my life is not so bad. I have food. I have a good home. And I have a Dad who does not put my head in water. Half the time I do not even see him anymore. He is either at work or in the bars.

Dad tells me his fair share of other stories too. Stories like how he won big in a few Poker games he has played. His friends comment on how he is one of the best players around. Mentioning that they know better than to play against him. Dad said when he was younger he would travel to different cities, work whatever jobs he could get and he would play Poker before he left.

One thing I do not understand is the contract Dad signed regarding dividing his land in the event he failed to pay back his loan. Having read the contract, there is no clear indication of how much land he would relinquish. From the wording, it sounds like he would only release half of his land and only the cheap ones too. When I brought

this issue up to my Dad he said, “so, what? They should have read the contract. If you like this roof over your head you better keep this to yourself.”

I thought he was threatening to kick me out. Now, I think he meant something else.

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Sometimes this feels so unreal. I feel like the last twelve years went in a blink. I cannot vividly remember my childhood. I can only see glimpses. This whole time I have been retelling my past. Remembering how Dad and I made the trip further down South. Remembering my sweet memories of Dad. The joyful times I spent playing on the tree branches by the river. Remembering my good old pal Tom. My only companion. Now I stand over him. Over his grave. Why could I not go with him?

His death feels unreal. Like this should not happen. Why? Why him? Why now? Realizing the reality of my present, tears well up behind my eyes. Dad holds a hand on my shoulder not speaking a word. In a low voice he says, “it’s okay. Everything will be alright.”

At the sound of his words I drop to the ground. Burying my head into my knees. Tears fall as I remember all that he meant to me. A creak then a sob comes out from my mouth. I keep my eyes closed wishing this is all a dream. I try superimposing Tom into reality, but deep inside I know Tom is not alive any more. I cried all night outside. My Dad kept quiet. He made a fire near me to keep me warm. With no more tears, I crouch down next to the fire. At some point, I fall asleep. Waking up, I turn to the pine tree under which Tom is buried. I make a small prayer.

*Tom, I hope you are in a better place now. You are no longer with me, but I want you to stay around a little longer. I chose the thickest pine tree*

*I could find on this mountain; after measuring each and every one. Remember Tom? Remember how we would run up and down this hillside? You and I together ran from bandits, pirates, and the colossal giants. Running round and round (my eyes water picturing us running together again). Remember how you chased rabbits always wanting to bring me a meal. Never caught one, but you came close. Tom, you are one of a kind. I am glad you were and are part of my life. Tom, you have been my support, my companion, and best friend. Maybe this is wishful thinking and an awful part of me, I feel your spirit will linger a little longer while under this pine tree. Until then, I will continue coming to speak with you. To keep you company. I know you are gone, but I will find you again some day.*

Keeping my word, I visit Tom regularly. I know he is gone, but is it wrong to want to speak with someone? Someone we remember and love. When Dad leaves me alone I come here at night. Making my own fire to keep us warm. I whisper to Tom telling him *sorry, I really am sorry for keeping you here*. The guilt of keeping Tom attached to this world ate at me. Falling asleep, I cannot remember the dream. All I am told is to say thank you instead of giving an apology.

With years having gone by, I approach Tom's tree. Sitting with one knee up I speak to Tom.

“Tom, it's been a while. I have so much to tell you. *Sigh\** Guess what Tom? *Haha\** It's funny, I don't know why I still expect a reply. I am deciding if I want to stay in school or not. Dad is not feeling too well. He seems on edge, more often than not. He worries me. There is more to worry about now than before. Growing older seems to add more awareness. I love Dad, but he still loves testing my patience. Oh, Tom. Tom, you will never believe it. Dad brought “Luffy” home. Not gonna lie, I was not sure on how to process Luffy arriving.



Believe me, I am quite confused on how to approach the topic.  
Makes me rethink a lot.”

Lowering my head, I close my eyes and say, “please Tom watch over me and give me the strength to protect Luffy when my body freezes. Please help me protect those I love and forgive me for any bad thoughts I have. Thank you Tom for always listening.”

## Confessions

Had I known, I wonder if anything would have changed. Having to leave our home never came across my mind. How could I ever have known these are our last days. The last moments with my grandparents. With Phoebe.

Unfortunate events came one after another. Abuelo's age caught up to him. His legs gave out. Now we see him bedridden. Abuela washes him with wet towels on a crusty old mattress laying outside their home. Abuelo says he prefers being outside.

Despite my Abuelo being unable to walk, Abuelo says he wants to thank God for keeping him healthy this long. Perhaps God looks upon Abuelo blessing him with health or perhaps his continuous work kept him healthy. With each visit, we saw Abuelo getting weaker and weaker. We knew the inevitable outcome for Abuelo. Still, his death came as a surprise. He was bedridden only a few weeks. Less than a month. No disease got him; age got him. He kept saying 'my time is coming'. *Time for what? Time for him to stand up? No, that's not right. I am avoiding the truth of Abuelo's words. Lies are more comforting than the truth.*

On Abuelo's death day, Ma says she felt the need to visit her parents. No one greets us at the gate. There is silence around the courtyard. We find my Abuela on her knees holding onto the hand of my Abuelo.

"Mija/daughter, your Papa is not waking up. I wanted to call you, but I did not want to leave your Papa all alone. I kept pleading with God all night. Asking God, if I brought any goodness at all I ask for only one favor. One favor in exchange for everything. Please bring my Mija/daughter home. Please let her talk with her Papa one last time. Please."

Ma joins Abuela kneeling on the bedside. Pa holds tight onto my shoulders, his hands shaking. I am confused on how fast this is all happening. Part of me wants to cry, another part tells me Abuelo is going to wake up soon. I hear Ma speaking.

“Hey Papa. I want you to know. *Mmm*. Hey Papa, thank you for being my hero. Thank you for carrying me on your shoulders. I want you to know I love you. I love you and will miss you. Papa, thank you for being with me. Thank you for being with Mama. I knew you wish you could have given more to your family. Well Papa you gave us more than we deserve. Remember when the boys would pick on me. You came in yelling at the top of your lungs telling them you’ll whip them if they did anything to me. *Haha*. Even now, there is so much I want to talk with you about. Look Pa.”

Ma gestures for Sandra to come over. Sandra slowly walks to the bedside holding Abuelo's hand a final time. Ma continues, “Look Papa, Sandra is here too. I love her. Is there anything you would like to tell your Abuelo, mija?”

“Abuelo please wake up. I know you can do it. Aren’t you the one always saying anything is possible. If anyone can beat this illness, it’s you.” Sandra’s Ma gives her a slight rub on the side of her hair to console her. “Thank you Abuelo for all the candy. Thank you for treating me like another daughter. For helping me cut the veggies when Ma is not looking. Thank you Abuelo. Please wake up. This is not funny.”

Sandra’s Pa comes to the bedside staying silent for a moment. After a small silence Pa kneels and says, “Papa sorry for not giving you more grandchildren. Sorry for always bothering you.” Pa stops as Abuela puts one hand on his shoulder. Sandra scoots over to allow her Pa room to touch Abuelo’s hand. After a deep breath Pa continues, “Thank you Papa for treating me like a son. Thank you

for blessing me with the hand of your Mija. Without you, I will lose someone who brought me happiness during my life. You understand my story. Thank you for listening to me all the time. I promise you I will take care of your family or die trying. Thank you for being the person I need and never had. To me, you are my real father. My real dad. My real Papa.”

As if Abuela casted a spell, Abuela whispers to Abuelo in a hush voice. *See you did accomplish something.* We all feel the warmth draining from Abuelo's hand. Looking back, I am certain Abuelo's life went beyond its expiration date. He must have held on a little bit longer for us to say goodbye. We all close our eyes. All I hear are wails. All I hear are my wails. My tears.

Nothing felt real.

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We held a funeral. My Pa's brother came to give his condolences. His brother did not stay long out of concern of attracting attention from religious authority figures keeping an eye on him. Apparently, his brother does not have a great relationship with the Church. All of my Ma's brothers and sisters came to pay their respects. I left my family to mingle among themselves. I prefer staying alone a little longer. If I am alone, if no one gets close I will have one less person to cry over when I lose them.

My parents would not allow me to stay alone for too long. During the procession, we all share stories of Abuelo. From funny, to serious, to random stories. We all feel our hearts drowning. Being together helps mend our hearts. A few people outside our family came too. Close friends of Abuelo. Even a few adolescents came to pay their respects. Apparently, Abuelo trained a few students who have rough family homes. Rather than going home, he convinced the school to allow him to mentor a few students. He taught them

how to defend themselves and write. His students said, “your Abuelo is not a great writer, but it never kept him from trying to write.” According to them, Abuelo stopped mentoring for health reasons. He could hardly walk to the school. Abuela says a few students came to visit Abuelo frequently during his last moments.

Strange. Most people, especially boys, give me strange glances. I do not feel any sort of gaze from Abuelo’s students. I cannot describe the feeling. All I understood is out of respect for my Abuelo, no one close to him would try to do me harm. Abuelo does not have much. Nothing to give either. With hardly anything to his name, Abuelo made all these people come together. I found no one speaking ill of Abuelo either. Maybe Abuelo did have regrets on what he accomplished. Despite the small or large number of accomplishments he made. I want to say he did the best he could and that is what matters more. Not how much more he did than others, but how much he went beyond what he thought he could do.

During the experience, I remember my parents and Abuela talking. I remember overhearing ‘*I think it's about time.*’

*Time for what?*

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A few weeks pass since the death of my Abuelo. Arriving home, I put a hand on the kitchen door when I hear my parents and Abuela arguing from inside the kitchen.

“We are not doing that! We cannot leave you!” I hear Ma yell.

“If it will put your mind at peace, I will live with one of your siblings. *Eventually.* I want to live on my ranch for a little longer,” says Abuela.

“That’s the problem! What if you fall with no one around to help? What if people start harassing you? What if something bad happens?,” says Ma.

“Those are a lot of what ifs. Trust God. He will protect me. You know what is not a what if. Your opportunity to live a better life. I heard there are more opportunities in the South.”

“I understand that. Still, we do not want to leave you,” says Ma with sorrow.

Abuela turns away from Ma to Pa. “Mijo, you understand right? Anyone can tell by a quick look that my time is coming, I can feel it. Before I am gone, I want to know you all went to seek a better life. Free of prosecution. I want you to keep your promise to Abuelo; to keep your family safe. You heard what people are saying around town. Monasteries are seeking new recruits. That’s not bad in itself, but you heard the stories. There are pastors who abuse their power taking in children and women to have their way. To make matters worse, the Church does not have a good relationship with your brother. They may harm your family in the process of getting to your brother.”

*Having their way? What does Abuela mean by that?*

“It’s not just about you now. It’s about my Mija and Sandra. You know Sandra will get targeted as she grows older especially when she has no partner. The Church is becoming more shrewd. One day they might not even care if you are young or married. They only avoid married women out of fear of damaging their reputation. Even their reputation can fall to ruins by entering a relationship with a married woman. Reputation is all that hurts those higher-up quacks. Nothing else. That’s their downfall. The public will want them

outed. The easiest solution for the Church is to erase one individual rather than let everyone fall.”

Trying to hear more clearly, I tip toe towards the door. On accident, my foot stumbles on a pointy thick thorn piercing my thin sandal. *Ahhh*. I jump letting out a light scream. From outside, I stare at our wooden kitchen door as silence permeates the air. Not wanting to hide, I walk through the kitchen door. All three of them turn to me.

“Come in Sandra,” says Abuela.

Walking over, I give Abuela a hug welcoming her home. Abuela turns around pulling a wooden stool next to her indicating for me to sit. “Hey Sandra, there is something we need to talk about,” says Abuela. The atmosphere is tense. The conversation felt ominous.

“Sandra, I want you to journey with your parents to another land,” says Abuela.

“Are you asking us to visit another village?,” I ask. Deep down, I want my Abuela to lie. Pretend the whole conversation will never happen. *She could-*

“Sandra... I love you, but I need you to leave from here. I need you-,” says Abuela.

“Leave! What do you mean leave? Leave where? Why can’t we stay here?,” I ask in confusion.

*Sigh\** “Sandra, I don’t want this, but I need you to listen **very** carefully. I need you to stay strong. Okay. I need you and your parents to leave for the South. I do not know where in the South, but anywhere is safer for your family than here.” Before Sandra interjects, Abuela holds a finger towards her signaling her to hold her thought. “Your parents do not like worrying you. We, including

your Abuelo, have spoken about moving for a long time. We all understand why this needs to get done. We understand none of us want this. I mean, when you all leave we will never see each other again.” As Abuela speaks, Sandra’s eyes become watery. Those eyes pierce Abuela, despite that she knows the conversation cannot end here. Not yet.

“Not too long ago, a couple of men came asking about your Pa. Never seen any of them before. Told them we ain’t interested for any trouble. A few nights later, your Pa mentions having a feeling of being watched when he came walking home. Out of concern, your Abuelo and I made more frequent trips here.”

“Why would they ask about Pa?,” asks Sandra.

Before continuing, Abuela looks in Pa’s direction for approval. He nods. “Your Pa does not understand politics much, except for tad bits of information he picks up from his older brother. The more he understood, the less he wishes he did.”

Pa interjects saying, “the way my brother puts it is, ‘politics is like any other business; money is always involved.’ After my brother made a name for himself, he says he wishes he had not. Says the target on his back keeps getting bigger. When I ask why he does not leave it all behind he says no one else will do what is needed. Mentioning how there are very few people trying to improve policy. At least improve policy in a way that will help most people.”

Abuela takes a pause to catch her breath. She continues, “Sandra, during Abuelo’s funeral Pa’s brother brought us a few pistols telling us a couple of men attempted kidnapping him. Two of his men got killed. Out of concern, he pleaded with your Pa to accept his gift. Told us we can stay at his villa for a period of time. Pa refused feeling our family will get drawn into more trouble. Honestly, I do



not trust his brother, but I trust your Pa who vouches for him. Your Pa says his brother is like a human among lions. Anyone can kill him, but he is willing to run the circus to meet his personal goals. Putting down any lions that step too close to him.”

“Do you understand everything I said so far?,” asks Abuela. Sandra nods. “Good.”

“About a week ago, Ms. Sayu came to inform us about a recent visit from the capital’s monastery. Told us, the monastery came looking for school records of prominent students who may want to pursue a career in the Church. They never visit areas like ours for no apparent reason. That does not happen. As of this morning, your Pa says an additional person came to observe him. We fear these observers may come to spy on your Mama and you next. Lately, we are anxious when you are not home. We think ‘Did they take her? Are they following her?’ ‘Is she okay?’

“Pa’s brother, Joseph, is planning to visit. Through his connections, he knows about a smuggler making the trip down South. If we choose to go, Joseph will pay the smuggler to take us with them. He suggests we plan accordingly before he arrives. If we go, we need to start preparing now. There might not be a next time. Your Pa disagrees, but who knows when the ‘next’ time will come around. Joseph is a busy man. He is not available at all times to help us. There is no guarantee Joseph can or will protect us forever. Your Pa insists no one will come knocking on our door out of caution for Joseph. Sandra, I need you to stay strong and tough when making the journey with your parents. For me, please.”

Perhaps it was Abuela’s words or my presence. Whatever it was, it struck home. My parents wore faces as if to say they are now seeing reality. I look at my Abuela then my parents not sure what to say. I

know I should agree but I do not want to leave Abuela. I am sure Pa and Ma do not either.

“Can I count on you Sandra?,” asks Abuela.

“No..., no I do not think I can do that. I can't. We can't leave you,” says Sandra.

“Sandra, please. Mija. I need you to go,” says Abuela.

“But Abuela...” before I can argue Abuela hugs me.

“Sandra, we all got a time. I lived mine. Go live yours.”

I brush the arms around me away, “No I can't do that Abuela. We will stay together. We will figure it out. No one can take us away from each other. No one can take away the land Pa worked so hard for. They can't! How can they?! That's not allowed! Abuela why are you so worried? There is nothing to worry about.”

“Sandra, you will go. People do take from others. Killing if necessary. What do you actually know about the world?! Mija, what do you know about a mother's love? Mijo what promise did you make to Abuelo? Believe me, I want you all to stay. If what we had were enough to protect this family I would not ask you all to leave. Mija, you have family here except none of them will get close to the love you have for Sandra. I have children here. I have my farm. So, please go. I want to stay. I want to live my last years on the farm and get buried alongside Abuelo. That's all I want. Mija please. Mijo there is nothing you can do to change the situation. We have neither the influence or protection of your old family. We are at the bottom. Nothing wrong with that. What is wrong is the weakness we have towards anyone holding power over us.”

“Sandra, I do not want you to leave. I want you to stay forever. Abuelo and I thought the same. We do not want anyone we love to leave us. That's why we kept avoiding the truth. We only delayed it. Not until Abuelo's passing did it sink in. Life is short. Mine is coming to an end. Sandra, you are beautiful, smart, and curious. I wish I could have seen you grow even more, but there is nothing for you here. You are meant for more. If you really love this place you can come back and bring what you learn elsewhere to make this a better place, but I have never seen anyone come back.”

Pulling me closer, Abuela embraces me. Rubbing my back, her voice trembles. “I don't want you to leave. I want to see you smile. I want to see who you choose for a partner. I see no one coming close to deserving you so when you do choose someone I want to see what kind of man he is. Only then can I thank him for taking your hand as Abuelo took mine.”

Abuela apologizes repeatedly into my ear, not letting go. I hear her sobs then mine. My parents hug us from behind. We stood there weeping as the sun set. Without a word, we all understood. We are leaving for the South.

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Pa steps outside returning with a stack of logs. He places them next to our fireplace. Ma and Abuela do not say much. I do not say much. We sit watching Pa start a fire. None of us say a word or else it will make everything become true. It will make our trip true. It will make leaving Abuela a reality. It will make us have a deep sunken feeling inside again. Breaking the silence, Pa says, “my brother is coming in a few weeks. Before then, we need a lot to discuss. Like, who will we leave our land to? What should we take? How much can we carry? What should we do in the worst scenarios?”

I quietly walk over to a kitchen drawer fetching a pen and a notebook my Pa usually writes in. I tear a piece of paper from the notebook and hand it to Pa. Instead, Pa holds a hand out for the whole notebook. He grabs the pen held in my other hand. He jots down notes and questions he comes up with. He notes all the questions my Ma, Abuela, and I have. We spend all night and morning talking about what we need to handle before venturing out to the South. Making plans to flock to a new location brings a large headache. The more we spoke the more my stomach began hurling. I do not have food poisoning, but I feel the bowel movements of my stomach churning acid. The pain does not go away. Until the day we left I felt itchiness all over my body. The more we spoke the more I realize there is a lot to worry about.

Where will we sleep when we get there? How do we prevent anyone from robbing us? How is the journey? What if-. I don't even want to think about the thought that crossed my mind. There is a lot of uncertainty and I am not sure how to handle it. For a second, I wanted to pray everything will be alright. The uncertainty is making me feel uneasy, anxious, worried, and on edge. It makes no sense. I wasn't worried or concerned before today. I know I am capable. I am also smart. I understand we will get through the tough times or die trying. When we are dead there is nothing to worry about anymore. A win-win. Why despite my confidence, despite my optimistic view, why does it feel like it was all thrown away?

I recall students speaking about family members making the journey down South. Many have not heard from them since. Others said they came back after getting lost in the desert. No one says it out loud, but some family members may have met their demise on their journey to the South. Dying to starvation or thirst. Caravans with a proper guide are a luxury. They refuse anyone who cannot pay. Even with an expert, a lot can go wrong during a journey. Guides stop

taking people if they no longer need to take people across a wasteland. Nothing grows in the wasteland. There is no water for miles around. You must be crazy to want to cross the desert multiple times. Or desperate for cash to make the journey.

Do we have a guide? Are we gonna get lost? Are we gonna die? I never liked school but now I feel like I would rather stay in school with everyone who I do not like rather than make this trip. If I knew something like this was gonna happen I would have never complained about school.

*God please keep us here. I promise I will be good in school. I will answer questions. Please-* No wait, why am I pleading with God. Even if God exists, why am I only seeking his hand when I need help. I do not like this feeling. Asking for help from someone who always offered me help but I refused. Maybe I should have accepted.

For whatever reason, I cannot accept help from someone I treated so poorly. How can I? I will only ask for their help after I help them first. I will continue helping asking for nothing in return. Unless I really need their help, will I ask for help. I will try my best to resolve my issues on my own, but when there is nothing I can do then and only then will I ask for help. Maybe I will even ask God for help. But right now I do not deserve to ask.

For the next few weeks, I did not leave home. Ms. Sayu came to check-in. My parents informed her about our situation and she understood. My parents packed making large decisions among themselves. Pa told Abuela to divide his land among her children. She kept refusing, insisting they have no money to pay him. She understood how much he worked to acquire his plot of land. Abuela suggests for Pa to write to his brother asking if Joseph is willing and able to purchase the land at a discount. Pa said he will see what his

brother says and if he refuses then Abuela needs to agree to accept the land. Then distribute it as she sees fit or sell it if she wants to.

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Several days pass, Pa receives a letter from his brother accepting to purchase his land at a discount given the short notice. Pa says discount, but the price is fair. Pa jokes saying the escort and “gifts” makes them even. I do not contemplate what would happen if Joseph could not afford to purchase Pa’s land. We would be penniless in a new country. We would be forced to live out on the streets. Not knowing anyone and our inability to speak the language will **not** make our situation any easier. It would make it harder. Us leaving means Ma and Pa fear being targeted due to no fault of their own.

Joseph pays Pa in gold. We find clever ways to disguise small coinage within our clothes by sewing them into our garments. We threw pouches into a tortilla holder. The hard part is money is heavy and going to a new land isn’t the easiest thing to do. We worry about strangers coming over to ask what is in our bags. We foresee people out of desperation capable of crazy acts. If they heard someone has lots of money during a trip where people are concerned over when their next meal is gonna come, they will either take our coinage by any means or continue harping at us as to why we are keeping all the riches to ourselves. The sound of coins did not help ease our tension either.

Before leaving, I remember about Phoebe. *How awful am I?* During this whole ordeal, Phoebe never crossed my mind. What would become of Phoebe? She has friends, except I felt she never really did. She has not come over. She usually came with me after school. None of us would mind her coming over unannounced, but she might.

Returning from feeding the animals, I find Ma washing our morning plates. I ask Ma if I can visit school one last time to say goodbye to Phoebe. I insist on wanting to say goodbye at least once. With a similar look, Ma seems to have the thought I had earlier. She replies, she will discuss it with Pa. The discussion must have been successful since the three of us are walking to my school. With only an hour left in school, Pa and Ma wait outside the school gates with anxious expressions.

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Sandra walks past the school gates distancing herself from Pa and Ma. Owen and Kaori, stand together in silence. Initially, the plan is to have Phoebe over one last time. Before heading out, Owen and Kaori change plans. They tell Sandra to wait with Phoebe inside the school. They want to avoid entangling Phoebe into their problems.

With Sandra gone, neither Owen or Kaori felt able to speak their mind. Neither wants to burden the other. *Why am I being indecisive? I am not like this. Not with him. I will say it and trust he understands.*

“Hey Owen-”

“Kaor-”

Owen gestures for Kaori to speak first.

“Owen, what do you think about taking Phoebe with us? Crazy right? I mean that’s like kidnapping right?” *Stupid. Maybe I should not have said anything.*

“Really?! I was thinking the same thing! I mean, I was not sure if you would be okay with it,” says Owen.

“Why would I not be okay with it?”

“Thank God you said something. I was nervous about asking you this whole time. I mean I don’t want to stress you out more than you already are.”

The two smile together with a sigh of relief escaping them.

“We need to ask Phoebe first, but I do not like the idea of leaving her with that Uncle of hers,” says Kaori.

“Yeah, there is something I do not like about that guy. I mean, we can tell he is an ass, but it's more than that. He gives the same feeling as one of the pastors at the church. Every time that pastor comes near us, I do not want him near you or Sandra.”

Owen continues, “I am still worried. Taking Phoebe is like kidnapping her. Even if we took her willingly there is a lot that can go wrong. We do not know if we can survive the trip. Also, how about her parents? Won’t they miss her. Or won’t she miss them?”

Kaori gives a small snort uncharacteristic of her. “A real parent would not have left their child alone.”

“There might be circumstances preventing them from being with Phoebe. We, ourselves, could have chosen to leave Sandra behind with Abuela. Except, the whole point of the trip is for us to stay together as a family. We will ask Phoebe what she wants and go from there.”

“Okay, let's do that,” says Kaori, feeling less anxious now after speaking with Owen. She puts her head on his shoulder telling him, “Hey Owen.”

“Yes?”

“I love you.”



“I love you too.”



Walking into class, everyone turns towards me. I sense my classmates wanting to ask where I have been. I take my seat. Class ends after an hour. Soon, my classmates clamor around me asking where I have been. I told them we had distant relatives visiting. My parents believe staying home is a better choice than coming to school since we have not seen them for years. A couple classmates complain how that is unfair and how they wish they could stay home too. I give a weak smile. There is no point in telling them the truth. How would they ever know I am lying anyways? Better to lie to them than worry them.

My classmates leave one by one after hearing about the reason for my absence. No one stays after school except Phoebe and Ms. Sayu. Ms. Sayu peeks outside the classroom, closing the door after she sees no one nearby. I walk towards Ms. Sayu, apologizing for not coming to class and lying about having relatives over. She replies saying she already knows. Getting closer, she crouches giving me a big hug saying, “so you really are going. I’ll miss you.” She walks over to her desk to grab something.

“Here take this,” says Ms. Sayu. She hands me a thin book. The cover seems new and the pages have pieces of paper cut out from other textbooks. “I can only replicate the words, not the images. I cut out some pictures from a few textbooks I kept at home. Someone put star marks around certain sections. I am unsure of the reason myself. The last page contains information about space with a picture of the stars next to it. I squeezed an excerpt about adaptation as well. I am sure you will find them fascinating.”

“Are you sure?,” I ask while flipping through the pages. I count thirty pages in total. I notice keywords such as *pressure*, *fluid dynamics*,

*thermodynamics*, and *photons* are repeated. As Ms. Sayu said, the last page contains a single image of the stars. There is no known way to take a picture much less of the stars. For Ms. Sayu to hand it to me is something I do not understand. Why me?

“I cannot explain the feeling myself. Except, I felt I had to make this for you once your parents explained the situation the last time I paid them a visit. No one has understood what those symbols or numbers mean. Perhaps it is false hope, but I have an instinct telling me this information is better off in your hands than in my storage cabinet,” says Ms. Sayu.

“Thank you,” I reply giving her another hug. “My pleasure Sandra. I would offer a book except your family is only taking the essentials.” *That’s right. We will have to leave my ceremony crown, the wedding dress Ma made for herself, and the cabinets Pa first built. Our belongings, our memories are being left too. We cannot take any of it.* Bringing me back, Ms. Sayu says, “Your parents must be waiting outside. I will go get them. Phoebe, make sure to give Sandra a proper farewell.” This whole time Phoebe sat in the back silent. Ms. Sayu leaves the room and I turn towards Phoebe.

“Hey Phoebe.”

“Hey Sandra.”

*I shouldn’t get up. I want to get up. Why? She is leaving either way. Why bother? Won’t you miss her? Yes. Then why not stand?*

Phoebe gets up to take a seat closer to Sandra.

“So, are you really leaving?”

“Yes, this might be the last time we see each other.”

Ms. Sayu told me she might leave. She didn't tell me why. I felt afraid to ask. Afraid I might be snooping too much. I want to know, but maybe that might cause more problems. Maybe they are trying to keep a secret. A secret that can hurt them. One like mine.

"I missed you."

"I missed you too."

*This is the last time you will see her. Why not tell her how you feel?* No. I cannot make the same mistake. Not again. She might find me disgusting. She might hate me. I do not want her to hate me.

For the past few weeks, I felt lonely without Sandra and her family. Some nights, I tried remembering her laugh, her gentle touch, or the feel of her skin. I'd stop myself. Remembering she is a close friend. Feeling ashamed, the next words come out automatically.

"Sandra, I'm sorry for being a terrible friend. I never came to visit. There is nothing I can do to help either. I'm sorry for being a lousy friend this whole time. I never taught you anything. I nev—"

"Hey Phoebe stop. Don't talk like that. There is nothing for you to feel sorry about. I came because you are my friend. The only friend I have. I always enjoy having you over at home. My parents love you too. You are not lousy. You make me want to try more. Even without parents, you decide to come after school to learn. No one else does. I bet it felt embarrassing not knowing much, yet you still came day after day. Who knows if I can do that. You are beautiful and smart. You ask questions. You continue trying. When I had no one to talk to, you talked to me. You read books just so we can have something to talk about. You are a hard worker. Why is it that you cannot see what I see?"

“Since I met you, I have loved you. From all my classmates, you are the only one I came to say goodbye to,” says Sandra as her voice cracks after feeling irritation towards Phoebe for belittling herself.

She loves me? *Tell her.* “I love you too Sandra. I like spending time with you. So... Can I...”

“Can you what?,” asks Sandra. “Can I ask for a weird favor? Can I kiss you once?,” asks Phoebe as her face reddens. “I will never see you again and I want something to remember you by. Since we love each other... maybe we can? Or maybe it is a dumb idea.”

Sandra is taken aback. *Well this is the last time I will see her. If that's what she really wants. A kiss on the head won't be the end of the world.* “Sure, if that's all you want,” replies Sandra.

“Are you sure?,” asks Phoebe. Sandra replies with a yes. Phoebe gets closer to Sandra admitting she is a little embarrassed giving her a kiss. “You won't get mad will you?” “No Phoebe, I won't,” says Sandra sighing. “Can you close your eyes?,” asks Phoebe. *Close my eyes? That's a little too much for a single kiss on the head. Isn't it? Then again, I may never see her again. Without a family, giving a single kiss might be embarrassing for people. Sigh\*.* “Sure.”

Mustering her courage, Phoebe stands in front of Sandra who closes her eyes. Phoebe tilts her head towards Sandra's lips. Cocking her head to the side, Phoebe inches closer and closer to Sandra's pink lips. Heart thumping, she feels her nerves as she brings her face closer to her. Before the final push, she closes her eyes while slightly parting her lips. She reels in Sandra by the neck before briefly hesitating. *Is this really right?*

Phoebe's hesitation lasted mere seconds before she felt soft bumps press against her lips. Opening her eyes she sees a confused Sandra

say, “Phoebe what are you doing?” Sandra's fingertips were pressed against Phoebe’s lips.

When will I ever learn? Earlier, when she said she loves she meant it in a familial way. Not romantically. How could I make that mistake? *Was it really a mistake? Yes. Really? Then why did you hesitate? Did you really not know or did you want any reason to kiss her?*

Sandra sees Phoebe staring at the ground. Darting her eyes left and right. The same look she gives whenever she feels anxious or afraid. Phoebe turns around ready to run out. Sandra grabs onto Phoebe’s wrist understanding Phoebe wants to run. “Wait Phoebe.” “Can you forget what happened? Please don’t tell anyone,” says Phoebe.

“Tell everyone what?,” asks Sandra. “We still have not said goodbye.” Sandra pulls Phoebe closer to her. Phoebe keeps a downward cast. I am not sure why, but at the moment I felt I should give Phoebe a hug.

“Hey Phoebe, you wanted a kiss right?” Sandra puts her hands on Phoebe’s cheeks turning them towards her. Sandra kisses Phoebe on the forehead before smiling saying, “I will miss you.” She gives another kiss to Phoebe on her cheek before stepping back.

Phoebe is stunned muttering, “about before.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about. Nothing happened.” Phoebe’s eyes tear. She rushes to Sandra giving her a hug. She feels her back being patted as she hugs Sandra. A moment later, they hear footsteps approaching. The door opens unveiling Sandra and Phoebe hugging to Kaori, Owen, and Ms. Sayu.

Kaori walks up to Phoebe. Kneeling to give her a hug. “Phoebe we missed you. Are you alright? I’m sorry we could not have you over.

We wish we could have. Except, why must the world have wicked people?,” Kaori turns her head to Ms. Sayu. Ms. Sayu says, “I have an errand to run. I will be back in a bit.” Ma must have spoken with Ms. Sayu beforehand. Signaling a message to Ms. Sayu with her eyes. Ma waits until the door closes behind Ms. Sayu.

Pa walks over to Phoebe saying, “Hey Phoebe what do you think about coming with us? Coming with us to a new land. The road is not easy. Who knows what can happen. Like Kaori said, we missed you. We want to take you with us. It’s a big decision.”

“Would my family be okay with this? Can I really leave?,” asks Phoebe.

Kaori replies, “well, we need to keep this between us. Your Uncle might say no if we ask. We would take you the day we leave. You would come with us packing the bare minimum. We may never return back here. We both felt, Pa and I, that we do not want to leave you behind, but we can only take you if you want us to take you.” “What do you say Phoebe? Want to come with us?,” asks Pa.

*Yes, I want to go. Will they really take me?* Before screaming yes Phoebe recalls her past.

‘Get the fuck away from me!’

‘There goes the whore.’

‘How could you raise a child like that?’

*Whoosh\** ‘Why’d you gotta do something as dumb as trying to kiss a girl.’ *Whoosh\** ‘we will see if we can beat the devil out of you. No child of mine will sin.’

Phoebe felt shivers run down her back as she remembers the stares of others from her old home. Remembering the beatings her father gave her. She held onto his words, ‘You bring nothing, but hatred to

everyone. Who would ever love you?’ It’s true. I do bring hatred everywhere I go. Close friends rejected me and called me a whore. Boys told me to not get near them. Neighbors spoke behind my parents back. After being fed up with me, my parents sent me to my Uncle. My Uncle and his family hate me too. I do not want to bring Sandra or her parents problems. *I do not want to become a burden to them. I do not want my Uncle to prevent them from leaving if I go. If her parents knew I tried kissing their daughter would they still bring me? I am a sinner. What right do I have to say yes? I do not deserve their kindness.* “I am not sure I can go. My family might miss me.” *If I tell them the truth they might take me.*

“Are you sure?,” asks Owen. “We can take you. We want to take you, but if you want to stay for your parents we understand,” adds Kaori.

“Yes I am sure,” replies Phoebe.

“You are not lying to us are you Phoebe?,” asks Kaori. “No I am not. I want to stay” *to not give you trouble.* “My parents might miss me too” *miss giving me a beating.* Owen and Kaori give troubled expressions. They decide to respect Phoebe’s wishes. “Phoebe, if you change your mind, come to our home at any time. We will figure out the rest from there,” says Kaori. Ms. Sayu returns to the classroom, we all give a farewell hug. After Sandra and her parents leave, Ms. Sayu tells Phoebe she will walk her home despite knowing her own home is in the opposite direction.

Phoebe never came to see us off on our last day.

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We had our luggage packed in suitcases brought by Joseph. Apparently, a suitcase is another luxury. According to the navigator, people only brought what they could fit inside their backpacks.

The journey will take five days by carriage. The carriage carries water containers and our luggage. There is an expectation that the horses will die at the end of the trip given the lack of water we can carry. The carriage is there to mainly carry our clothes and our money. We carry our own food and water on our backs. Not until most of the water is gone will we ride inside the carriage. With no home, it would be ideal to arrive with this carriage intact. Worst comes to worst, we will abandon the carriage midway.

At times, I wonder how difficult the journey is for people who cannot afford to take a carriage. Owning a carriage can take several years to acquire. Crossing the desert by foot is more usual. I do not like thinking about it, but what would happen if for whatever reason people are not allowed to take carriages even if they have the funds. Like if there existed a man made border.

We have a last feast with Ma's family filling ourselves up in preparation for the long journey. On the day of departure, Ma's family sees us off along with Joseph saying goodbye to Pa. I still feel nervous. All the bad omens and thoughts crawl in. Pa wraps his arm around my shoulder telling me, "everything will be fine. Trust me." I calm down when he reassures me.

The night I wish I could forget is the night our navigator tried touching me. He made me remember how powerless I am. I told Abuela no one can take me on. Yet, it only took one person to pin me to the ground. I squirm helplessly as his hands slither up my thigh. He whispers to me not to move or shout. Or else, my family will be stuck in the middle of the desert. He tells me about hurting Pa and not minding having a taste of Ma either. I think about not resisting until he says, "see you do want it. I'll make you feel real good." I get revolted, disgusted, and repulsed by his words and touch. I do not



want his hands on me. His hand loosens the button on my pants. I cry and cry. Then I hear a *Bang*\*

The man falls over. I sit up, my eyes are covered quickly. I hear Pa's voice saying, "it's alright honey." He guides me over towards Ma's voice who is screaming what that noise was. The rest of the night is a blur.

The trip took seven days to complete. We traveled mainly at night. Pa said he noticed the general direction by the stars. Pa said we can use the sun as a beacon except he did not want to risk misguiding us. He trusts in the stars more than he trusts the positioning of the sun.

After seven days, we approached a small town.

## Formative Years

For a long time, I thought I would always be alone. I kept seeing classmates make plans after school. They spoke about where to hangout, what they would do, and who they will see. I never stayed past the final bell. What would there be for me to do? With who? I never found any real connections with anyone at school.

Most people bore me. Teachers included. I felt they kept repeating the same lessons. Everything came naturally. Anything I had trouble with, I'd take more time to think about during my walks to and from school. Occasionally, a teacher would post a challenging question. When the answer does not come readily, I question my fundamental understanding of the world. I'd question if what I knew is sufficient. Investigating any and all topics having any remote correlation to the question at hand. Take yesterday as an example, a teacher mentioned getting buried in the snow when not wearing snowshoes. It made no sense to me. Why do we need snowshoes? Would snowshoes not leave a bigger hole in the snow? I thought about it for a while, unable to come up with an answer.

Several months pass, bringing me closer to the end of sixth grade. Tomorrow, we will decide our courses for seventh grade. As for today, I am at the plaza with my focus entirely on the aroma. I can smell the raw pork hung over the stalls and sizzling beef on the stovetops. Alongside the food stalls are local vendors selling their baskets, bread, produce, and knick knacks. Even this popular plaza we traveled hours to arrive at is one of the last few still in business in this country. At least, that is what Dad tells me. Mentioning how society is changing. As long as I do nothing to annoy my Dad, he treats me well. Buying any grub I like and boy can I eat.

Before leaving, we visit a bookstore. Normally, I pay little attention to books except for any that catch my eye. One book in particular caught my attention. The cover has hand drawn stars. Dad bought the book for me of course. I read the book cover to cover that same week. The book contains information about volume and surface area. Immediately, I get a recollection of my experiment with plastic buckets. Another section spoke about pressure. Explaining how a large surface area can distribute weight across its surface resulting in less pressure. A smaller surface area means more weight and force is focused at a single point creating a piercing effect explaining how knives are able to cut through food. Someone must have made the connection and invented the blade sharpener to keep the edge of the blade thin. Or perhaps they invented the knife itself. Only later do I make a connection between snowshoes and pressure during one of my walks.

When I come across these revelations I remind myself to not get too full of myself. Always reminding myself there are people who know more than me. People who see the world differently. People who are unafraid to carry on with their experiment. In comparison, who am I to think I am smart? No matter how boring a class is, I keep my mouth shut because there must be a reason why these lessons feel repetitive. Not that I justify it, but there must be a reason.

The end of the school year came as always. The courses I choose never matter to me. I learn everything I believe is useful on my own. On a whim or a careless thought, I chose music. Music is the only course I know nothing about. I never sought music. Music is what it was, sound. Before this year, music was never offered. Parents see no use for music other than killing time. They see no reason to spend money the school does not have on instruments and a music teacher. Playing is guaranteed to offer nothing in return. Unless you are the best of the best of course. Even then, you will struggle and can easily

be put out of the industry. Thinking this sends shivers down my spine. This year, a generous donor bought instruments for our local church to play during days of rejoicing the Lord's grace.

Reaching out to the church, the school asked if students can borrow instruments to practice with. The church agreed to allow students to borrow instruments under the condition that they come play at the church every other week. I never understood the donor, my Dad. He shows generosity as easily as he shows aggression. Why donate instruments now? Unlike when I was younger, we do not attend church regularly. Why purchase instruments we will rarely listen to? Perhaps he ran into extra money. Or perhaps- *Stop*. There is no use thinking about another person's thoughts. Either ask them directly or leave it be.

On the first day of school, I do not remember much. I recall being assigned an instrument, doing self-introductions, and having music students thank me as I pass by. As always, the first day of school felt like a waste. *Great, here comes another eventful school year*. Most of the time I did what I wanted. My teachers understood I am grade levels above everyone else. I am sure this year will be the same. I will again spend time with people I rather not be around. I wonder why I dislike spending time with them?

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The first mistake I made is not realizing music class takes place after school. *Damn. How could I have not known? I should have known. Now, I have to stay in school even longer*. I was wondering why I had an additional class on my schedule? If I knew music class is after school I would not have joined. Students gather outside the music room waiting for our instructor to arrive. His name was...ah- I forgot. On que, I see him wiggling his way through the students trying to get to the door. He is a tall man with a lean figure and not

much body fat. In a clear voice he loudly says, “Everyone take a step back... okay, take another step back. Now, line up against the wall.” Students start shoving as everyone finds their place. I go towards the end of the line. Class will not start till all students are in class anyways. No point in shoving to get ahead. I feel a glance, but pay little attention to it. As we walk into the classroom, Mr. Teacher welcomes each student by name. At the end of the line is me. The line continues moving until I am at the front.

“Hello, good afternoon Ross,” says Mr. Teacher. I reply with, “yes, good afternoon.” Before I can pass, Mr. Teacher holds an arm in front of the door. “Good afternoon Mr. who?” *What do I do? Should I feign ignorance, walk straight through? No, too disrespectful. I give everyone my respect till they lose it. I barely met Mr. Teacher. He has done nothing to lose my respect.* “Uh- I do not know your name. Can you tell me your name?” *Remember his name, remember his name.* Better tell him the truth than get caught in a web of lies. Lies can unravel and this conversation is not important enough to spend energy on maintaining a lie. Now, let’s face the consequences and move on.

“My name is Mr. Smith. (*pause*) I am going to ask you an honest question. Will you pay more attention today than yesterday? If you do not want to be here there is no obligation for you to stay.” His words irk me for some reason. My head ran two scenarios, as if time froze.

The first scenario shows me asking to stay. Going against my word, I decide to still not pay attention in class. This scenario ends with getting kicked out of music class. The words of Mr. Smith made me not want to pay attention. I found the first scenario stupid. If I am going to decide to not learn anything, what is the point of staying in music class? Why lie? In the second scenario, his words still annoy

me. Except, my inner thoughts change. *I will show him. I will learn my instrument and become better than him. I am exceptional. I have failed so I know achievement is built on failure. Without failure no experience is ever gained.* At the end of the scene, I envision sitting on a piano bench playing. Scenario two is the better outcome, yet I choose an alternative. Another reality.

“Good afternoon Mr. Smith.” I have nothing to prove to him. Nor does he deserve disrespect. The way I dislike his words, he may dislike me for forgetting his name. I only have to memorize seven names. Mr. Smith probably needs to memorize over a hundred names each year as a teacher. I will listen and learn, but is there a reason to become exceptional? Removing his arm, he welcomes me to his class. As I walk by he tells me, “be careful with those thoughts. They can help you or stunt you.”

I do not understand the intention behind his words. Entering the class, Mr. Smith starts situating students to their assigned seat. Initial lessons are about instrument maintenance, finger placement, tuning, and reading scales. Being myself, I read ahead memorizing my music sheets. Except memorization of the notes is not as easy as I thought. At times, I need to wait until music class to ask Mr. Smith specific questions. Questions such as *what is a beat, what is a two beat note, why are there numbers on the scales, why does my music sheet look different from everyone else's, what does this curved line mean, what does this semicolon mean?* I understood some lessons. Other lessons I would shake my head up and down as Mr. Smith spoke. Then he would ask, “Do you understand now?” With a straight face I reply, “not at all.” Only to hear him say, “then why are you shaking your head in agreement?”

Unlike other students, I have the privilege of playing the piano given I have one at home. My dad bought one a year ago claiming wanting

to learn. The piano now collects dust in a spare room at home. Makes you wonder why he bought a piano in the first place. I asked Dad if I could play the piano. Dad looks at me unsure how to respond. In the end all he said is “do what you want.” I practice the piano a few minutes a week. I will learn it quickly anyways. I always do. No need to rush.

Having a piano at home reminds me of how far we have come. *Where did we even start? Oh, now I remember.*

∞ ∞ ∞

Around the age of three, Dad bought a large sawmill. I have to give Dad credit. He is smart, creative, and forward thinking. The cost of the sawmill is around \$3,000. Dad stated we will not pay a single cent. Claiming the machine will pay for itself over time. I did not know much at the time. What I did know is that \$3,000 was all we had. If it were me, I would have never done the deal. We did not even have a roof over our heads. Not until we built our shed. We slept with blankets under the night sky. On rainy days we went into town to take shelter from the rain. The pastor allowed us to stay on rainy nights. Never with much luck the following event seems too convenient.

We woke up before the sun rose. Wearing our best outfits we set off. Dad wore a faded collar brown dress shirt, a belt, black sandals with long socks, and decent dress pants. I wore the same outfit minus the collar shirt since we have no money to buy one. Instead, I adorn my cleanest black shirt. Tucking the shirt into my pants. The journey to the large city takes several hours by foot. Sleepy faced, Dad kneels telling me to get on his back. He carries me most of the way while I sleep soundly.

We finally arrive at the buzz saw store. Dad proudly walks past the double doors straight to the register. Walking in, I notice a man

giving us a glance. I am unsure what to make of it. The store clerk at the register walks us over to the sawmills, each looking identical. The clerk explains they are the first model of its kind. Dad gives each machine a thorough inspection, selecting one after asking a multitude of questions. At the register Dad asks, "how much does the total come out to?" The clerk responds with, "\$2,999 sir." Dad's face lights up as he puts down his cash on the register. "Thank you sir, now will you be needing help loading the machine onto your truck bed?" Dad's beam dimmers. His smile fades. "What do you mean?," he asks.

"I mean, how will you be transporting the sawmill to your home today? We can deliver the machine if you would like."

"And how much will that cost?," asks Dad concerned.

"About five hundred dollars sir."

"Five hundred dollars, are you out of your mind!" Dad momentarily shocks the clerk with his screams. He calms himself down before speaking again. "Is there anything you can do? Please. I have nothing left." The clerk says there is nothing he can do.

"Is there a problem here?," says the man who stared at us when we walked through the door.

"No, well yes," replies Dad. "I want to purchase a sawmill except I have no means to take it home. I have no funds left."

"You can always return another time when you do."

"We do not have that option. I can save more money, but I will easily waste more too. My son needs new shoes, better food, and a roof over his head. The money I have now will disappear and I am not sure how long it will take for me to make it again. By the time I do,



someone else will jump on the opportunity I see. If somehow the price of the machine can get lowered then I can pay the transportation fee too.”

“There is no way we can lower the price. Creating this machine took several years, close to a decade. Not many people can buy it. Which means we make most of the money from the few saws we sell. For a pear or an apple, I could give you a discount. Except this is no apple or pear.”

As I listen to them, I interject. “Then how about putting our land on the line?” Both Dad and the man turn to me. “We can sign a contract stating we will pay you a monthly fee. If we fail to make a payment you can take our land.”

The man chuckles at my suggestion. “You are telling me you want to put your land as collateral?”

I cannot speak for us so I look towards Dad. The man does too. Dad stands there looking towards the ground as he weighs his options. Then he speaks, “that is not a fair trade. How about this instead? If we succeed in paying you in full within a year you give me ten of your sawmills for free.”

“And why would I ever do that?”

“Well, why would I risk losing valuable land? At least this way we both have something to lose. If only one side has something to gain, negotiations are one sided. If you do not like that then what about this instead. For a year, I will pay you monthly installments. If I fail to pay you for a single month then you can keep my three thousand dollars and you have the right to repossess your sawmill. By doing so, you will make three grand on top of any money I send you monthly. Plus, you will have a spare sawmill to sell.”

The man thinks about the proposal. Then he says, “I have to think about it. Is that alright with both of you?”

Without much choice, we nod in agreement. Then he tells us, “I am about to have lunch. Would you both care to join me? It’s on me.”

Dad agrees. Walking through the market, I try staying out of their conversation. I only speak when the man occasionally asks me questions. He asks questions such as:

“How does a hammer nail in a nail?”

“Is it possible to have half of a man?”

“Can you describe the color blue to me?”

I understood none of his questions or why he asked. All of my responses ended up being more questions. The responses I gave are:

A nail is sharp which allows it to cut through wood. All a hammer does is force the nail further inside the wood. I do notice some nails do not go straight in if they are hit at an angle. I wonder why.

What do you mean by half of a man? Are you referring to men who lose their limbs? Does losing your limb make you less of a man? I don’t think so.

Describing the color blue is tricky. The sky is blue, but is it really blue? At night it turns dark. Then at sunset the sky is orange, no yellow, no it is more like an orange yellow. Now that I think about it, what color is the sky? Isn’t it based on the light in the sky? What is light anyways?

I feel like a fool, yet I continue thinking about possible answers. The man also asks questions to Dad. Questions such as:

“Where is your family from?”

“How did you decide you wanted to purchase a sawmill?”

“What village do you both come from?”

Dad replies by saying, “we came from the North. There is not much up there. No real opportunities.”

“What do you mean by no opportunities?,” asks the man.

“Maybe there are, but everyone lacks knowledge. As a kid, I told myself if I had the chance to come South I will. It is only here that you see innovation. Take your sawmill for instance. Nowhere else in the world will you find it. Only here. All I want is to become part of the group of people who help lead the way.”

“What pushes you to think that?”

“When I was a kid, I remember an older man who came to the village. He carried a box with a conch shell on top. Out of curiosity, everyone took a closer look. To our surprise, we suddenly heard someone’s voice. We told the man to release them. People began calling him a witch, a cultist, or even a worshiper of the devil. Would you blame us? No one believed him when he said no one is inside. He said he bought the device from a country down South. He also spoke about kitchen countertops lighting on fire with no wood. And about truck beds carrying heavy logs with no horses or bulls. How can such things exist? Now I understand that through innovation and service do people find purpose and a way to buy their land. In the North, farming is the only way we can find our next meal.”

I do not completely agree with what Dad said, but I let him continue.

“Everyone said he is out of his mind for telling blatant lies. Everyone except me. I also thought his tales sound like fantasy, but I wanted to

see it for myself. I asked the man if he knew how to make the devices at which he shook his head. The man had no clue. If I had the knowledge to create I would have done it up there.”

“You can always create even now. But now tell me about your family. Where is your wife and the rest of your family?”

“I only have a mom and two younger sisters. Both of my sisters moved out as soon as they got married into another family. As for my mom, leaving her was not hard. We had no real connection or attachment.”

“Nothing at all? She is still your mom.”

“She brought me into this world. For that reason alone, I cannot hate her. Despite what she did to me.”

“What did she do to you exactly?,” asks the man again.

“When we went to the market we would take our sheep to sell. To get there, we had to traverse across multiple rocky mountains. I was only three or four years old at the time, but that didn’t stop her. She made me walk in front of her. As a kid I could not keep up. When I walked too slow she would pick up a rock then throw it at my back. She always threw rocks. There was not a day she did not. That is how my life was for all of my childhood. It did not help that she would yell, ‘you piece of shit, hurry the fuck up you good for nothing. Just like your father you are a piece of shit asshole. You can’t even make a dime so here I am needing to feed you. Grow up and be a man.’ Not until I grew older did I throw a rock back at her. If she dared to hit me I would hit her back. That is no life. It is better that I left her behind. For both of us.”

“I also got bullied and when I told her about it she would whip me. Telling me to stop causing trouble. I learned never to go to her. To never talk about **any** problems I have. I always saw her drinking too, but I don’t want to talk about that. Not about how she would always find money for her liquor, but never to buy me a shoe. She bought them for herself and my sisters, but never for me. For those reasons, I told myself to never deprive my children of what they need in life. That is why I am here trying to give Ross a better life than what I had. I want him to have shoes to wear and good food to eat.”

“I understand. Now how about your wife?”

At his question, Dad stays silent and looks at me. He replies saying, “I can tell you about that some other time.” Dad never understood how much I do remember. Not until the beatings started did my memory begin getting foggy. Still, no one understands how much I know and see around me.

“You know when you both came into the shop I was curious to know who both of you are. To me, you both seemed like two people trying to look impressive, yet failing. Why did you decide to come dressed up?,” asks the man.

“I wanted to feel good in the clothes I wore on the day I bought the sawmill. That is what I wanted. Now I am not sure if I will go home with it anymore.”

“And here I thought you wanted *different* treatment,” says the man. “What do you mean *different* treatment,” asks Dad.

The man continues explaining, “there are people who dress well while considering how others will perceive them. For example, if someone came into a shop dressed in tattered clothes smelling like mildew. Many shop owners will run them out despite them doing no

harm. On the other hand, if someone dresses formally, wears perfume, and walks in with jewelry. People will treat those customers better. The treatment is based on your appearance not your real status. This is what I mean by different treatment. There are those who dress well to feel good about themselves while others dress to feel superior. I thought it was funny seeing you two wearing sandals despite your formal wear. Then again, people can perceive that as part of your character. People who are trying their best with what they have. That I can respect. I only wanted to know what type of people you both are.”

“Let’s go back to the shop. I think I will have an answer by the time we get there. By the way, my name is Chris Diamond. It’s a pleasure to meet you both. What are your names?,” asks Mr. Diamond.

“This here is Ross and I am Shane Han.”

We return to the shop following Mr. Diamond back to the counter.

“Clark, ring these two up and get Ricardo from the back. Mr. Shane you won’t mind helping us load the sawmill onto our delivery truck will you?,” asks Mr. Diamond. “No sir, but what about the fee?,” asks Dad.

“I will personally cover the cost, but there will not be a next time. Is that alright?,” asks Mr. Diamond. Dad nods. “Good, I expect great things from you. The both of you.” He emphasizes the word ‘both’ for some reason. With help, we take our new sawmill home storing the machine next to a stack of logs Dad prepared beforehand. Dad makes use of it right away. Building a wooden shelter for us. Of course there are mistakes, but over time Dad learns how to make it better.

Over the years, Dad visits Mr. Diamond when he is in town. Apparently, Mr. Diamond is a busy man overseeing the construction

of factories and production lines across the country.

Recently, Dad told me Mr. Diamond said he was in the shop to oversee the layout of his stores and to collect data. Emphasizing visibility matters and so does the importance of regular customer service evaluations. From the data he collects, he makes informed business decisions. He is a busy man indeed. For those reasons, Dad rarely sees him.

As for us, the machine we paid for has paid for itself. We earn revenue from the lumber we make from cutting trees. Or from areas we are told to clear to make way for housing development. The first couple of years I help Dad with the numbers. Then one day Dad snatches the notebook I use from my hand. He tells me, “Ross you don’t have to worry about this. Go run along. Go play with Tom. This is grown up work.” “Okay Dad,” I reply. Maybe I should have never told him there are better materials to make a home than out of lumber.

Months following the purchase of our sawmill, I ask him what would happen if no one wanted or needed to use this machine anymore for X reason. Or what would happen if someone tried replicating his business? Wouldn’t that cause him a loss of money? Is it a bad idea to put all our money in one project?

Seemingly annoyed he replies, “Ross get going. I know what I am doing. You don’t have to tell me.” He is right there is no reason for me to tell him what to do. He must see an image I do not. Not too long after, Dad would be gone for stretches of time saying he is working at a neighboring town to help with construction. He worked construction for a period. Using our home to test his knowledge of how to build a home from bottom to top. Our home took a long time to construct. Dad started with our respective rooms. Making my room first then his. He kept knocking everything down when

realizing he can make our home even better and more comfortable now.

For years, I thought Dad was working construction. In reality, he only worked construction for only about two or three years. At some point he decided to open his own construction company. The thought never occurred to me. The startup cost is enormous for us. There is no way we can create a construction company. Apparently, Mr. Diamond gave Dad a letter of introduction to a man living a town over. Telling Dad he received his initial startup costs from him. The man he calls Mr. Stein. He warns Dad to remain vigilant and to thoroughly read any contracts he signs. Mr. Diamond recommends Dad to speak with one of his associates who is exceptional at rhetoric. A fancy term for someone great at reading, writing, and speaking. Mr. Diamond admits never wanting to conduct business with Mr. Stein. Distancing himself once he paid off his debt to him. Dad questions whether Mr. Stein would accept the letter given their constrained relationship. To which Mr. Diamond replies, “if there is money to get made he will not care about anything else.”

Before meeting Mr. Stein, I remember walking home with Dad after having knocked on dozens of doors to speak about services we offer. During the walk, Dad mentions seeing more people around the city. Mentioning Mr. Diamond telling him, “if you heard you can make money working at one of my factories. Of course you come running. Everyone needs money. The difference is I laid the groundwork so you do not have to. What else is there to do besides work? I mean really what is there? Sure you can enjoy entertainment, but if you have the opportunity to enjoy it all the time, won't you get tired.”

Mr. Diamond is a knowledgeable person. Throughout my life, I saw him a handful of times. The few times I did see him, he kept encouraging me to question everything he said. On one occasion,



Dad left me with Mr. Diamond when he went to speak with his associate. With not much else to do I ask, “Mr. Diamond, how did you get to where you are now? Do you have a similar life story like my Dad? I never understood why you helped us the first time we met.”

“Well, I helped you both because I could. My life story is not remotely close to your Dad’s. Then again, no one’s life story will be exactly the same. As for me, I come from a fairly well off family. I am thankful for that. They kept encouraging me to read and learn. Most kids my age loathe learning, but I love it. I love learning. Maybe that’s why I got to where I am. How about you? Do you like learning?”

“Not really. I only do it since there is not much else to do. I pick up books to pass the time. Then again, I do enjoy reading some books. That reminds me, I wanted to ask this question for a while, but are your parents inventors too Mr. Diamond?”

“No they are not. My Dad is a former governor of the state. As for my mom, she ran her own wedding planning services. She limited herself to weddings because my Dad did not want her to work. For my Dad sees no reason for her to. He made enough for both of them. Mom took care of us till we grew older. She never disliked taking care of us; on the contrary, she told us she loved raising us more than working as a wedding consultant. By raising your children properly, there is less responsibility as a parent the older they grow. At some point, they might start taking care of you. With nothing else except boredom, Mom convinces my Dad to allow her to open a wedding business. It was never in Mom’s character to sit around and wait. Dad admits her character is what made him fall in love with her in the first place.”

Mr. Diamond brings a cup of orange juice for me before continuing. “I did not suffer like my ancestors before me. My family has lived in these lands for generations meaning they have land to their name. Now, people purchase land through deeds. Over the years the prices of these deeds are slowly rising. The only real fear I have is if they dramatically increase. You see-”

“Why is it worrisome if prices increase dramatically,” I ask.

“I can tell you, but I am sure you will figure out why on your own. Besides, even if I did tell you there is not much you can do. At least, not right this moment. To make the necessary changes you need to realize what has to change yourself while not trying to affect society as a whole. For instance, if I gave you a gold coin and said you can buy a home with this single coin you’d yell ‘That’s fantastic!’ Then on the following day I declare gold coins are worthless and convince everyone to agree. All of a sudden all the gold coins we use in trading become meaningless. People lose jobs and land. Then war sparks out over the resources of the land. Fighting over what the next currency is. I am an inventor and love inventing. I have no reason to want to pursue changing the financial system. I am a selfish man because unselfish men die sooner. To borrow a quote, ‘the brightest candles burn the fastest.’ I want to continue inventing. I will let some other self-sacrificing person fix the system. Besides, I am not well-informed enough to figure out a solution. I cannot solve every problem, only the ones that matter to me.”

“How come we do not just use the brightest candle to light up the unlit candles around it?,” I ask. He smiles almost chuckling. I am not sure why he is smiling. I did not say anything funny. At least I don’t think I did. “How old are you again?,” he asks. “I am nine years old, sir.”

I ask Mr. Diamond the next question on my mind. “And if no one ever tries to fix, I mean improve, the system what happens?,” I ask. “Go read history books and you tell me,” he replies. “Also, how do you deal with your ideas, thoughts? Hmm I guess what I am really asking is how do you deal with living in the world? How do you deal with the stress of living?”

“Like I was saying, my grandparents said during their time there was a lot of land to go around. As long as no one claimed a piece of land you were free to claim the land for yourself. The only cost is to help out the community when asked. Helping to clear roads, form dams, clean the chapel, and join community meetings. Now there is less land and less people wanting to live far from the city. To answer your question, when I was younger my grandparents always told stories about them growing up. As the man I am, I listened. They spoke about the wars they lived through. The atrocious conditions their own grandparents had to endure to put food on the table. Stories of people laying in the streets starving to death during wartime. Seeing their intestines rot in real time. There were no proper hospitals. Mothers dying by giving birth was common. Many women sold themselves to make money to feed their children. There was a terrible plague running throughout the country killing thousands preventing people from interacting and selling. The issue is people had to sell to live. The streets smelling like turd gives you the picture of how the times were back then. There were no sanitation regulations. Someone had to come forth to fix these issues and someone did. It’s not like I love hearing about all these terrible events, but they help me cope with my own anxiety. The anxiety of spending thousands of dollars, risking all the money I have, and the stress of failure. In comparison, my troubles are not serious. Real stress is feeding and providing for a family. That is a real problem people face in any generation. I am not perfect. I had trouble doing what I wanted. Some days I do a little and other days nothing at all.

It took a couple years to come to terms with who I am. At some point, little work turned into consistent work. My consistent work turned to hard work. At least from the point of view of those around me.”

“How did all this lead you to inventing a sawmill?,” I ask.

“At first I had no real assets or funds. My first goal was figuring out how to earn money. For weeks I tried thinking of ways to make money. I felt the follicles of my hair harden over the stress. While stressing over my dilemma, my Mom told me to bring a bucket of berries she bought from my aunt. My aunt was not home when I arrived. I waited outside her wooden cabin. Looking at her cabin home, I wondered if it is possible to close the gaps between the logs to better protect it from insects and animals. What materials would I need to construct a better home? Lumber can help, but the majority of cut lumber is not smooth. After returning home with the berries, Mom thanks me. I then retrieve a knife trying to smooth out wood we had at home. The first problem I ran into is the knife kept getting dull. I had to think of how to keep the blade sharp. None of the wood I cut came out straight either. As I worked, I thought the process is too slow. How do I make it faster? Cutting wood by hand takes too long. Using my knowledge I recall an inventor I admire. An inventor who found a special rock that when lit creates a light source. The light source must work because it is emitting something. What is being emitted? I can go on and on about all the problems that arose. To cut it short, I needed a machine that could cut wood rapidly and smoothly. A machine requiring an alternative power source since manpower was not cutting it. Also, a blade that kept its edge. After several years, I succeeded at creating the world’s first sawmill. From the invention I did not only create the sawmill. I also found a way to sell my power source to emerging companies trying to invent movable truck beds and alternatives to the farm plowing. From

there, more money came into my pocket. I could have stopped there and lived a decent life with all the money I made from my first invention, but I felt too much joy from the process of inventing. Despite all the stress it brings. It's funny. Throughout the whole process I forgot all about wanting to make money.”

In the distance, I spot Dad. “I think I see your Dad, Ross. I'll tell you about almost quitting after a blade flew right across the side of my face. Missing my head by mere inches. For now, I will tell you this. I sent your Dad to see a man called Mr. Stein to do business with. Make sure to be careful around Mr. Stein alright Ross.”

“Yes sir,” I reply. I really do enjoy speaking with Mr. Diamond despite seeing him less and less each year till the day I never saw him again. He did finish his story. Telling me, he made a wall to protect himself during the experimental phases of making his sawmill. Mentioning finding no customers at the start. No one could afford his prices. So he had to not only figure out how to make a sawmill, but also the finances and logistics behind selling his product. He started with wealthier people who like the idea of living in better homes. From there, he tried figuring out how to reduce the price so more people can make use of his services. Admitting he did not love the process at first, but he found his profession more enjoyable over the years. Being grateful he can make inventions for a living. Saying, the money certainly did not not hurt either.



Mr. Stein's estate is quite large. He has fencing all around his home. His dogs bark as we go inside. As we go in, one of the three dogs jumps the fence and charges at me. My first instinct is not to run. Even a full grown adult cannot outrun a large dog. My initial thought is to stick my arm inside the dog's gaping open mouth. I already picture myself using my nails to gorge out its neck from the

inside out. My body and mind numbs itself to the pain the dog will inflict as it tries to tear my arm apart. My intention is to mangle the dog who is trying to mangle me. So if I die, I will at least permanently scar the dog if not end its life. That never happens. Before he reaches me, a security guard yells a word I do not recognize. The dog stops midway and goes to the guard. The guard apologizes then leads us to Mr. Stein's chamber.

We enter seeing a man in his fifties or sixties with gray hairs sticking out from his scalp. He looks formal, yet I can tell I do not like him. If anyone sees him they would say he looks youthful for his age. I thought he would look diabolical. On the contrary, most will say he looks dignified. Despite Mr. Diamond's words, I do not judge anyone until I see them face to face myself. On the surface, Mr. Stein is a wealthy man with connections and status. He might conduct shrewd business, but I can tell he would not harm me. Financially maybe. I cannot put my finger on the unease I feel around him.

"Good afternoon Mr. Han. What can I do you for? Have you come to accept my proposal?," asks Mr. Stein.

"I came with a counteroffer," says Dad as he approaches Mr. Stein with a written contract. "You can take a look. Most stipulations remain the same with some alterations in the wording of the contract. To protect me and you of course."

"Yes, to protect *our* interest right?," says Mr. Stein. After reading over the contract for a couple of minutes he continues, "I cannot agree to all these changes. You must understand. You are asking for a lot of money. There is a lot of risk involved on my part. It's only fair I ask for equal compensation or I might have to reconsider."

"Under normal circumstances I'd agree with you. After running the numbers again, I found there are greater losses for me if I fail and

greater gains for you if I succeed. Under normal circumstances there are merits to what you say. Except, we both know the conditions the market is heading. Do you believe you will find someone else willing to accept the risks? Someone who will put in the work? Are you sure you want to walk away from guaranteed money?”

“If I walk away. What then?,” Mr. Stein asks.

“I will wish you the best. In the same manner my work led me to you, I will speak with many others. Out of those people, do you believe not a single one of them will accept the conditions I am presenting to you today?”

From his chair, Mr. Stein looks Dad directly in his eyes. Stretching his hand, Mr. Stein reaches for a pen at his desk. He looks down as he signs his name. He gestures to a guard sitting in the corner to come over to sign. “Will he be your witness?,” Mr. Stein asks, pointing towards me. I nod before Dad answers. I walk over to the desk signing the document like Dad taught me. Dad signs the document too, giving a copy to Mr. Stein. Dad and Mr. Stein smile, shaking hands before his guards see us out.

I came to Mr. Stein’s home multiple times as a kid getting dragged along by Dad. They kept me inside the room when they spoke business regarding the state of Dad’s company. As they spoke, I pretend to aimlessly roam the room. Looking around at his bookshelf, his trophies, and the artwork pieces adorning the room. In reality, I keep my ears perked up to their conversation. I notice people let their guard down when I pretend to have no clue of my surroundings. Years later, I came to realize the danger and/or benefits of pretending. I would pretend not to care about the actions of my classmates for a long time when I really do care about them. At some point I actually do stop caring about their thoughts. The benefit of not caring is that their perception of me does not influence

me. The downside is I have more difficulty creating connections with them.

This thought reminds me of the last conversation I had with Mr. Diamond. I forgot the context, but remember him saying, “a lie can become the truth if told and lived enough times. Although, there is a part of us deep down that will never change. For me, it's the excitement of being an inventor. Another belief I have is that no matter who it is I truly believe people want to help others. Those who do not might have felt betrayal from not being helped. I think the better train of thought is asking ‘how do I help others?’ Ross, I won't be around forever. So I will tell you this while I still can. Having seen you plenty of times, I can tell you have a strong heart. I notice you putting items back on the shelf, giving your food to another child staring at the food cart, and how you offer a helping hand picking up litter from the ground.”

The last words I tell Mr. Diamond are, “that does not matter. None of those acts are special. There is nothing special about me. You are special. Dad is special. Not me. I did those acts because I was bored and not hungry.”

“Those acts **do** matter. You'll see,” says Mr. Diamond.

Coming to my senses, I see Dad and Mr. Stein end their conversation through the reflection of a trophy. Dad keeps me in the room when he speaks business. Other times, Dad tells me to wait outside. I sit around till curiosity gets the better of me. Walking over to a bodyguard, I ask, “Hey Mr., what are those sounds you make when speaking with the dogs?” The guard explains he gives them commands in a foreign language. The commands they mainly use are ‘come,’ ‘stay,’ ‘sit,’ and ‘chase.’ The pronunciation is tricky, but he helps me to pronounce them properly. The dogs must have heard us seeing as they are waiting outside the door. The guard named Alex



tells me the biggest one, the one who charged at me, is named Rex. Along with Rex, there are two other guard dogs. They are siblings named Stella and Hulk respectively.

“It’s nice to meet you Mr. Alex,” I tell him. “The pleasure is all mine.” When I pay the guards a visit I always bring fruits from our farm. Before we had money and after we had money, Dad always insists we give food to others. Asking Dad for permission to give food to the guards at Mr. Stein’s estate is not an issue.

Initially, the dogs bark at me. After a few visits, Stella and Hulk warm up to me accepting food from my hand. Rex is the only one wary of my presence. I mainly bring flavored biscuits and pieces of jerky to feed them. I ignore Rex when he approaches me growling. I never did harbor any hate for Rex, nor do I shy away from the thought of putting his head into the ground if he dares to bite. The day finally came when Rex came towards me without growling. I extend my hand slowly towards his nose allowing him to sniff my hand. Reaching into my pocket, I pull out a piece of beef jerky tossing it at the ground beside him. I never cared about befriending Rex nor feeding him with my hand. I have no reason to have Rex submit. I gave him meat as thanks for not growling nothing more nothing less. If I have food to offer why not offer it? I spot Rex trying to hide his wagging tail. I’d like to say we have a truce. After that, everything he has done is in the past. I now feed Rex no differently than I feed Stella and Hulk.

I recall the guards telling me the dogs must like me. Insisting they never stop barking at people. Mentioning that the dogs do not bark at them because they discipline them to listen. One guard jokes around asking who would have more influence over them. Someone who puts them into submission with violence and terror or someone who asserts their dominance, but treats them with respect and love. I

tell them I do neither so it's my loss. If they like me it's only because I feed them.

During my visits, I keep my interactions with Mr. Stein to a minimum. I never ask the guards any questions about him either. I try avoiding getting them into trouble from a slip of the tongue. From our visits I can tell Mr. Stein and Dad take me for a fool. As if I would not notice the aromatic perfume coming off their clothes or how their ties would have new lengths. If I confront them they are sure to deny my allegations.

For a long time I made the excuse that they smell perfumes while I am not in the room. Having admiration or love can make anyone blind, myself included. Not until that bond is broken do we see what is front of us. Or at least question those we hold in high regard.

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With more money coming in, we have more wealth to spread around. Recently, Dad made more purchases of land. Hiring more hands to help us cultivate. We are lucky to have connections to large vendors in the city. We sell our produce on the cheap avoiding the trouble of selling our product at the market ourselves. With the money we generate, we put the funds into purchasing more equipment such as truck beds. These early years made me wish life could stay like this. Days when Dad rarely yells or hurts me.

Through his connections, Dad learns about migratory patterns of the populace. He goes for large construction projects in the cities. With an absence of equipment and knowledge, Dad acquires large contracts for city projects. His staff is satisfied with getting decent wages and regular work. With more people coming to the cities, Dad finds opportunities to offer home construction too. What started as a small operation grew over the years. I remember Dad working extensive hours from morning to night. He still works many hours,

but has more rest time. This is the result of no longer having to supervise his hires. He put good people in place to take care of that.

Dad used to take me everywhere until I began school. As I grew older, he only took me to business meetings. Now he takes me nowhere. Only coming home exhausted. With more free time, I notice Dad making a few more visits to the bar and gambling rings. I keep my mouth shut about his habits. The last time I questioned him he gave me a thrashing as I cried 'I'm sorry.'

Before meeting Mr. Stein and before he began drinking he used to punish me only if I had done something wrong. Now it feels like he hurts me when I do anything to annoy him. I learn to tiptoe around him and not share anything going on with me. Instead, I tell Tom about all my problems and good memories of the day. At least that's how it was until he was gone. Now I have no one except an empty house.

To avoid my loneliness, I think of proverbs I heard and made up. One proverb I have been thinking about as of late is about wolves and lambs. If people like Mr. Stein are wolves, how can a lamb ever win? No matter what a lamb would like to become, the lamb will remain a lamb. They will never have sharp teeth or eat meat. I do not like that idea, perhaps because I feel like a lamb. Not being able to stand up to anyone. Unable to speak what is on my mind out of fear. Why does a lamb not fool a wolf instead? To do so, the lamb must become clever to not only fool the wolf, but itself too. Clever enough to keep other wolves away from the flock. How can that be done? Well, that's when we have to start thinking 'how can we fool a wolf'? Whatever answers we come up with we must act on. To test how clever we are at fooling wolves. To beat a wolf we need to become stronger than the biggest baddest wolf around. Whether that is beating them with our cleverness, our strength, or our

numbers. Wolves are vicious, clever and strong. Which means we must become more vicious, more clever, and stronger. While never forgetting we are lambs who became wolves to help other lambs not to become another wolf ourselves. Then again, is a wolf really that bad? They are loyal and have families too.

My thoughts are my only companion. When they too want to leave, I fall asleep to avoid the loneliness of a thoughtless world.

## Music Class

For a long time, I believed everyone can do what I can. I thought everyone can think spatially. That everyone continually questions how everything around them works and operates. Believing everyone observes the river's water levels or the number of times people wear the same clothes. I thought every child woke up early to pick up from where they left off.

I felt irritation towards classmates who could not grasp concepts. Thinking 'Why is this so hard for you? It's basic. It's easy. Why do you have trouble with basic math? Basic word problems? Why?' I do not understand. I never said my thoughts out loud to avoid offending others. More importantly, what right do I have to criticize their shortcomings? If I, myself, cannot pinpoint reason(s) for their struggles, what makes me expect they will. How am I any better? Rather than think of others as a burden, why not help them? I came to realize helping others is much more difficult. There are gaps between people's understanding. Certain gaps are easier to fill. While other gaps can only get filled if an individual wants to fill them. Filling a hole is not fun and is long, extensive work. As a result, most people never fill them. They decide to keep their gaps of understanding. The ditches will make for a bumpy road.

I recall rare occasions when classmates would ask for help regarding homework assignments. I try relating my knowledge onto them only to come up short. My words made no sense to them or me. I understand how information is processed in my head, but to relay my thought process is difficult. I could not find the words to explain my thinking pattern. When I did find the words, classmates gave me looks of confusion as if my words could not register inside their head. How would they? What is inside my head is inside mine only. What's in their head is only in theirs. How could we ever share each

other's thoughts? I never put thought into resolving this issue. Why would I? What do I care what other people are thinking and the idea of someone else knowing what I am thinking scares me. That's how it was for me before joining music. Not until meeting and speaking with people did I realize my shortcomings. Learning to accept people have natural weaknesses and strengths.

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After a couple of music lessons, I found myself alienated. I kept away from classmates. They kept saying:

'You're so lucky to have a Dad like that'

'Must be nice to have anything you want'

'Your Dad must really love you to buy all these instruments so his son can play along with others'

I should not get bothered by these comments, but they kept irritating me for some unknown reason. I believe most students told me such comments with no ill intent.

Looking around the room, I observe students talking amongst each other. Thinking, I ask myself who seems to know the most about music so far? Who is valuable to learn from? Who should I stay away from? As I think, something flat hits the top of my head. Mr. Smith had gently hit my head with his clipboard telling me to not overthink. By reflex, I rub my head. Not that it hurt. He proceeds to the front of the room tapping his clipboard on the desk.

"I'd like everyone's attention please... At the end of the term we will host a concert for your parents to showcase your skills and what you learned. Most of you are still getting familiar with your instruments and notes. I do not want any of you to worry. As long as you practice there is nothing to fear. I have never seen, I meant heard, anyone fail to play the music piece. The only way for someone to fail is if

they never practice at home at least once. With that said, we will continue on with our music lesson for today.”

Mr. Smith goes on to talk about notes and plucking. Most of what he says is straightforward. Simple enough that I decide not to practice at home. Dad won't show up anyways. Not anymore. It's been years since Dad took time out of his day for me. He is never present now. During my first and second grade years he celebrated my accomplishments no matter how small. Now we celebrate nothing.

Gradually, I saw Dad less in my life. Yet, deep down I kept telling myself *Dad is doing his best for me, for us. He must be tired from all the work he does. It must have been a bad day for him.* As we gain money, he told me we can eat at any restaurant of my choosing. He apologizes for not being there for my third grade end of year celebration. Dad tells me to view our meal as an apology. *See he does care. Does he really?* I hear that voice again. The one I keep silent. The one which shows me the worst images of reality. Telling me if I accept I can make the world bend. *Stop.*

*Everything is fine. I have food and shelter. What else do I need?* When fourth grade comes along, Dad leaves a note apologizing for not being able to attend. Mentioning there is excess work at his company. Leaving money on the counter, he tells me to use the money to eat at any restaurant. *There is always next year.* I tell myself. I enjoy my special days because Dad is extra kind on those days. Never yelling. When my fifth grade year ends Dad again leaves an apology note with money. *Who cares about dumb celebrations anyways? Like they matter. As long as he is here at the end of the day. That's all that matters.*

Dad used to love hearing my great news or hearing about anything new I learn. Now he gets grumpy asking 'is what you are going to tell that important?' or 'what do you want?!' Now I keep it to myself

waiting to tell Mr. Diamond instead. Now I never see him either. *At least there is always Tom around.*

With Tom no longer around I do not know who to talk to anymore. *It's so lonely. Stop.* I prevent myself from feeling sad. Especially today which marks the end of sixth grade. I hear the door open and see Dad walk through the door. *See he did remember.* I tell myself.

“Hey Ross you're still up?,” Dad asks. “I am,” I reply.

“You should go to bed. You got school tomorrow.”

“Today was the last day. I'll start seventh grade next year. Isn't that why you came early today? To celebrate together,” I ask.

“Was that today? I'm so-. I mean, congrats Ross. I'm heading to bed. Make sure to turn off the lights before you sleep.” Dad yawns as he takes off his shoes from the couch. He looks up momentarily meeting my eyes. After a brief second, I break eye contact and look down. Getting up from his seat, he heads to his room. Before disappearing past the hallway he says, “I'll give you some money in the morning as a reward for staying at the top of your class. And Ross don't expect an apology from me since there is nothing for me to apologize for. You're my son. Why should a father apologize to his son? Well, good night Ross.”

“Goodnight Dad.” My heart hurts. *Why, though? Who cares? You've always been alone. Nothing changed. Stop.* There's that voice again. I keep it at a whisper forgetting it exists. Except, at certain moments the voice gets louder. At school, it shows me how to get girls by telling them false promises. Other times it tempts me to start a fight. Not shying away from how gruesome I can become. **How will you ever know how strong you truly are?** *That's not me. Those girls do not deserve to get lied to and none of the boys have done me any harm.*



*Besides, that's too easy. Too easy to lie and use violence.* The voice disappears, but there is no real voice to begin with. It's only me.

I ignore the images it shows me. Telling myself they're not my current reality. The voice forces me to think about who I am. Who we are. Questioning why we exist? A positive byproduct is seeing wonderful possibilities too. It's quite an odd phenomenon really. I am sure no one will ever believe me.

The first moment I saw positive images of myself is when I would exercise, learn, and pray all in the same day. Not to please others, but for myself. It must have taken a long time because unless Dad forces me to run alongside him, I would not run. He doesn't force me to run anymore. I stay indoors nowadays. Passing the time with my thoughts. When I do acts for myself, a blurry image appears in the back of my head. I'm not sure what to make of it. It's hazy, but I can feel the presence of someone. I feel someone grabbing onto me, but who? When I get tired of the work, the image fades.

I do not trust the images. They are too grand for me. Showing me meeting people. Helping them at the capacity I can. Grinding nonstop as I try to help more people. How could I ever work nonstop? I can't even work now. How can I become the person I envision? The one with confidence and an unbendable will. I treat these images as rubbish. *Like that will ever happen.* Not when I am me. Thinking the worst of people as easily as I breathe.

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“Listen up. We have all been in class for a few weeks now. By now I have learned the names of all my students including the ones in this afterschool class. The instructions are simple, we will form a circle around the classroom. Starting with myself, we will move counterclockwise. The goal is to provide the name of all your

classmates. When we finish we will share our thoughts on this exercise. Sharing my personal views for last. Is that understood?”

<<Yes, Mr. Smith>> replies the whole class in unison.

We went one by one. Classmates easily name their friends as they learn new names during the course of the activity. Thankfully, I was not first. Otherwise, I'd only be able to name two or three classmates. I try memorizing everyone's name as best as I can during the exercise. Out of a class of nineteen, I manage to remember nine names.

“Would anyone like to take a guess as to why we are doing this activity?,” asks Mr. Smith. Hands go up. Responses are as follows:

‘It'd be awkward to not know each other's name.’

“To kill time.’

‘To show how hard teachers have it.’

‘Making friends is easier if you know each other's name.’

“Those are all valid responses. My personal view is hitting on what you all said. We will have to learn how to play together for a whole year. It makes no sense to not know each other's name at least. We can play together without learning each other's name, but it's not the same. By knowing someone's name a connection forms whether you like it or not. If more of you make a connection, music changes . How music sounds depends on the group. Let me paint you a picture to drive home the point. Let's say a stranger asks for help carrying a bucket of water. In exchange, you will get nothing. How many of you would help carry the bucket?”

A few hands go up. Most students raising their hand ask questions. The loudest students speak as their hand is raised. Mr. Smith does not reprimand them. He allows them to speak only pausing the

conversation when people start interrupting each other by talking over one another. Students ask:

‘How old is the person we are helping?’

‘How far are we carrying the bucket? If it’s not too far, why not?’

‘Are we getting paid for it Mr. Smith?’

‘Shouldn’t we help because it’s the nice thing to do. That’s what my parents tell me.’

Someone clearly was not listening. Regardless, Mr. Smith replies.

“Those are great questions. Before answering, let me change the question. Instead of a stranger. Let’s say your Mom, Dad, or grandparent asks for help carrying the bucket. By a show of hands, who would help them?”

Everyone in class raises their hand. Mr. Smith continues, “why help them?” One by one, Mr. Smith calls on a student to hear their response. Their responses are:

‘They’re my Dad’

‘They’re my Mom’

‘They feed me each day’

‘I don’t want to get yelled at’

‘They’d chase my ass down if I don’t listen’

‘They will force me to help’

‘They’d guilt trip me, telling me what they do for me each day’

“Great responses everyone. Yes, Ross do you have a response too,” asks Mr. Smith when I raise my hand. I ask, “What if you don’t have a parent or family? Or anyone you can say you love.” I’m not sure why I asked that question, but it’s what came to mind. I’m sure most of my classmates are thinking in terms of their parents, but what about those who don’t have parents. Those who have no one.

“Isn’t that more of a reason to create a bond with someone. Everyone wants a bond. People will accept a bond even from someone that will hurt them. We should, of course, prioritize supportive bonds more than hurtful ones. It’s also unavoidable to never get hurt when we create a bond with someone.”

I raise my hand again. “What did you mean when you said ‘people accept bonds from those who hurt them’ and why should we help anyone in the first place?”

All eyes turn to me as if I am asking absurd questions. Mr. Smith replies, “To answer your first question, I will leave you all with something to think about. There is a well documented illness researchers call Stockholm Syndrome. Most information found on the illness comes from after reports of kidnappings. Those kidnapped may start believing they “deserve” the mistreatment of their captors. Sympathizing with their abusers and making justification for any physical or emotional abuse they suffer. If you ask me, the reason it appears is because there is no one present for either party. Those being abused do not know affection. Those abusing others likely have been abused as a child. The only way to break the cycle is to become someone who can learn to care for others. I’m not telling you all to love everyone unconditionally, but you should find someone who you care about and they care about you. Life is complicated and despite me telling you all this. Facts do not always resemble reality. There are multiple layers to understanding who we are as humans. That’s why scientists say we suffer from our thoughts. To answer your second question, there is no reason for you to help anyone. Some will say it’s the right thing to do. Yet, there is no “real” right course of action. Others will say karma exists. So if we do good then good things will happen. If we do bad then bad things happen. The trouble with that is people question if they help to get something in return or if they help for

the sake of helping. I do not know if karma exists. What I do know is if you are able to help, why not help. If you can't, that's fine, but if you can why not. Why not let me be the one to help? I like that person across the room. Why not ask them if they would like to spend time together? Oh, I got rejected. Why not try again? Why should we help anyone? Why shouldn't we help someone, especially if we can help? I don't have all the answers, but I believe helping others is beneficial. When I help others it helps me recognize I am not alone in this world. I cannot help everyone, but I can try to help a few. So, why not?"

"There are a lot more arguments and counterarguments that can be made regarding carrying a water bucket as Ross demonstrated. If you like thinking about those topics feel free to talk amongst yourselves, but I will stop here with the philosophy. Otherwise, we can spend hours talking about it. We'll try sticking to learning how to play an instrument. There is only so much thinking we can do before we recognize we have to take action? Thank you all for participating. We will try this circle activity again next week."

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The circle activity went on for a few more sessions. Having learned each other's name, we return to our cliques.

I overhear students wanting to visit the ice cream parlor after music class. Sitting down, I look towards the group and accidentally make eye contact with one student. I avert my eyes immediately. He calls out, "Ross, we're going to the ice cream parlor. Would you like to come with us?" Students beside him look towards each other hesitating to extend the invitation themselves. Recognizing the anxiousness of the group, I decline Kareem's invitation. Over time, Kareem keeps bothering me to join them with their after school activities. Eventually, he stops inviting me, but continues greeting

me at school when we bump into each other. *I want him to bother me again. Wait, no I don't.* I felt troubled when he kept insisting I join his group. Why is it now that he stopped inviting me that I find his invitation more alluring. Regardless, Kareem is one of the few decent guys at school.

At music class, Mr. Smith pulls me to the side. He hands me a violin. I ask why he is giving me a violin. He says, “a piano has a steep learning curve. Like everything, you can learn it with practice. Except, I can clearly tell you do not practice at home. You can still practice the piano on your own, but if you desire to play at the parent night showcase then you need to learn how to play the violin instead. There is not enough time for you to learn how to play the piano properly. And it is not fair for those who are practicing for you to drown out their music with your malpractice melody.”

“I can learn. I promise I will start practicing today Mr. Smith.”

“Don't make promises you will not keep. Promises are sacred. Break one and you will break them all,” Mr. Smith emphasizes. His statement about me annoys me. Telling me what I will or will not do. He continues, “If you were someone who can practice regularly then we would not be having this discussion. Once you start practicing consistently, demonstrating you are capable of playing the piano then I will allow you to play the piano again. You plan to learn the piano regardless of what I say, right? Fair warning, delaying your practice results in adding more work onto yourself than if you would have practiced from the start.”

“How is missing one day of practice adding extra work? It's only one day,” I ask in confusion.

“Aren't you the smart one Ross? You tell me. Plus, you have this all wrong. You did not miss one day of practice. You missed multiple

days of practice. The time is gone now.”

At times, Mr. Smith spoke in riddles. As if he read my thoughts he said, “You must think I speak in riddles. I do no such thing. You are only too young to understand what I am saying. You will, hopefully, understand my words one day. If that time comes, remember that knowing and understanding something are not the same. We all start somewhere. I, myself, did not always practice consistently when I was young.”

“How did you start practicing consistently?,” I ask. I genuinely want to know the secret to staying consistent.

“Even if I told you, it will not make a difference. What works for me will not work for you. You need to find a strong reason for wanting to stay consistent no matter how you feel. Whatever reason you find that keeps you on track is the one you should remind yourself of each day. My reason, my why, is because I gave a promise to my Mom to become a musician. Yet, I wasted my days away until my mother was no longer around. I was unable to play a wonderful song for her at her funeral. Not wanting to have that feeling of regret again. I began earnestly learning about music. Would people with a cruel mother or no mother understand my reason? If this does not move someone to act then my reason is not a strong enough reason for them. In which case they need to find their own reason.”

With a pause, we notice students are no longer playing their instruments. Many of them must have been tuning in on our conversation. As all eyes are on us. I could not tell what their facial expressions communicated. Their expressions are not disturbed, annoyed, or bothered. Their expressions are similar to when we spoke about the bucket situation. Intrigued. If I had to put a name to it, I would say their faces say they enjoy talking about these topics to a certain extent. I wonder why.

“There is nothing to see here. If everyone is done warming up, we will take it from the top,” says Mr. Smith as he walks to the front of the class.

I practice the violin not consistently, but more frequently. I also decide at the very least to say good morning/afternoon to whoever sits next to me during class. By no means am I friendly with anyone in particular. Although, I am starting to understand I do not have to ignore everyone completely. When Kareem greets me I feel a moment of not being alone. I am sure others would feel better if I said hello to them instead of ignoring them. After several weeks of preparation, the parent night showcase came. I saw parents and their children dressed to impress. Among the audience, I saw no one I knew. As we gave our performance, I try my best not to overshadow the tune of the music piece. Doing my best with the small time frame I had to learn how to play the violin. My skills with the violin are not the best, but it is passable. After the show, my classmates walk towards their parents who have balloons in their hands. As for me, I pack up my equipment as I stare behind me towards the families gathered today. I take an early exit walking fast to get ahead of the crowd. Walking home as fast as I can. At home, I find Dad taking a nap on the sofa. *Must have been another hard day's work.* For a long time it is true that his days are hard. *Still it be hmm-* I fetch a spare blanket covering Dad with it turning off the lights as I head to my room.

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Seventh grade might be the most enjoyable time I had at school. Sure I don't have many friends to speak of. Nor a special someone. Yet, this year is more enjoyable. Music helped. Why is music different? If I ask myself, is music special to me? The answer is not really, but I do enjoy my time here despite still not being the best piano player. Although, I am getting better with more practice.



Initially, I thought I was not half bad. Maybe even a natural. Through more practice and an unexpected encounter, I learn I have no aptitude for music. In fact, my playing is atrocious. No wonder Mr. Smith could tell I did not practice. *Did other students notice too? Wouldn't they say something?* I would. Then again, would I really?

Being in music for months now, I still have not found a reason to play. Music does not matter to me, but it sure does matter to other students. There are classmates who practice early each morning and past class time. Mr. Smith allows students who wish to stay a little longer inside his class. *How can they play for so long?* The more I saw them trying their best, the more I felt adverse emotions. It's not that I felt afraid of being ostracized for not playing well. The emotion is completely different. I felt I cannot allow my poor performance to affect those who do care about music. Music may not matter to me, but it does to them. I could always leave the class, but that seems too easy. If I choose the easy path when would I ever stop. With no reason to play for myself, I decide to practice the piano more often for my classmates until I find my own reason. *Why did they have to become better?* Now I feel bad if I do not try.

I ask classmates why they play so much. They say it helps them forget. *Forget what exactly.* One particular classmate answered my question without having to ask her. I hardly spoke to her, but I vividly remember the one time I did. She would always wear the same red sweater with white striped sleeves throughout the year. Wearing it inside out at times. I did not want to make presumptions, but I remember doing the same with my shirts when I had no home nor spare clothes. She rejects a lot of guys who approach her remaining unpresumptuous. I'd overhear guys talk about how pretty she is. I'd agree she certainly is, but that gave me no inclination to speak with her. In fact, I rather avoid her since I know nothing about

her. Speaking with her, only because she is pretty, does not sit right with me.

What makes me remember her is not her sweater, her face, or the gossip girls spoke behind her back. I remember her for three main reasons. The first is that she noticed my presence.

I met many students who speak behind my back. Fooling anyone who thought I never notice. Sometimes I'd walk right behind them as they gossip. It's very hard to ignore what is literally happening in front of you. When I spoke a single word, classmates would jump not realizing I was standing right next to them. The day I spoke with her, I was walking behind her making my way to music. Suddenly she stops to turn around. Her gaze is on me and asks, "Ross, can you help me with something after class?" Right away, I said sure. "Great! Thanks a lot! You're the best." Her response is not exactly what I was expecting to hear. Her energy and recognition of my presence is the first reason I remember her. The second reason is in regards to what she needed help with. She said she is having trouble with her math homework. I offer my homework for her to copy. Instead, she pushes my homework to the side saying, "Don't show me your homework. Show me how you solved the problem. I want you to explain to me how you did it." I gave her what I believe is a poor explanation, but after a couple minutes she said she understood the problem now. She raises her hand high. When I stare at her hand dubiously, she grabs my hand making it clap hers. Shouting, "we did it!" There is something different about her and I cannot put my finger on it. She is the first girl I spoke with who I am unable to see any ill will.

I try not to fantasize about any girls, but my biology tries anyways. I keep fighting it. For her, she is the first girl I never wanted to fantasize about, never could fantasize about, and never did fantasize

about. I was content with speaking to her only that one time. Unlike most guys, I do not want to bother her even if she was nice to me. I could tell we will not become friends due to our polar opposite personalities, but deep down I wish she does find someone who cherishes her.

Before leaving the classroom she tells me, “you aren’t really good at the piano are you Ross?” With a stoic face, I shake my head. She tells me if I can teach her the basics. After telling her the basics, she did something curious. She began humming with her voice tapping a key after each hum. Changing her hum after locating a key she likes. After finding the piano keys she likes, she closes her eyes and stays silent. I stand awkwardly near her. What came next left me in awe. Starting with a small chime, she rearranges the notes in real time. Her jingle is catchy. Not until I hear her playing do I realize there are levels to playing an instrument. I really did enjoy her short jingle, but it also made my heart feel a tinge of sorrow. Right away, I tell her she should play the piano instead of me. She grievously declines. Telling me she has no piano at home, does not want attention, and does not plan to become a musician. Thinking back, maybe it would have been nice if I chose to speak with her. For someone who never assumes, I sure do make assumptions about others without ever speaking with them. *Then again, if I don’t speak with anyone then I will not feel the pain of losing them.* I never spoke with her again. Not like this only as a friend.

Over time, I start randomly joining conversations. Adding a random statement then returning to my original state of being quiet. Not because I do not want to speak. I just do not know how to express what I am thinking. What is appropriate and inappropriate to say? More importantly, topics people spoke about have no value so why join in on those conversations? At least in music class people are

trying to learn more. Students in other classes aren't always trying to learn. No wonder we keep going through the same lessons.

As the school year comes to a close, people still speak behind my back. By the same coin, there are more classmates saying hello when they spot me. Versus a year ago, I look forward to school a tad bit more. Beats being at home alone with nothing to do. Seventh grade ends with no real friends or Dad coming to my end of the year concert. At least, I have a few associates who say hello.

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With eighth grade underway, Dad comes home more often. After asking him why he's not at work, he explains how his employees do not need him as much. Now he sits around. He sat there until the day he told me, "Ross, I am going out for a drink."

Dad hardly goes out for drinks. Soon a drink turns into a weekly ritual. The more he drinks, the more he develops an aggressive tone. Coming home late only to yell at me screaming, "Ross! Where are you dammit!" When I come running with my heart beating he responds with, "Good. You're alert. You can go back to bed now." One night I dare to ask why he does not learn the piano instead of drinking. His eyes radiate with anger as he screeches, "what the hell did you say?" I look down and with a hush voice say, "Nothing. Sorry Dad."

When did Dad change? Going through my memories, I remember Dad's behavior changing little by little as he spent more time with Mr. Stein. The last time he took me with Mr. Stein I remember smelling perfume on him. As I observe him with my eyes Dad asks, "what is it Ross?" I replied "nothing." Walking away from the two of them.

Dad used to celebrate my accomplishments. Now he displays irritation when I teach him something new. Why? Not only that, he used to take me to work. At his work with Dad being busy, he could not pay too much attention to me. To pass the time, I talk to his workers. They must have thought I am a nuisance bothering them as they work. Asking questions such as ‘why’d you do that,’ ‘have you tried this,’ ‘oh wow I would never have thought about it like that,’ ‘what struggles do you face daily,’ and ‘how could we help you more.’ In the end, I could not help. Many solutions involve creating nonexistent inventions or paying workers more money to manage their necessities. Those improvements are out of my control.

What is curious about all this is that workers would come towards us asking me questions instead of Dad. Saying they want my perspective on issues. Whether they are issues with personal matters or work related problems. Sometimes Dad would get in the way saying he can help them instead. Rather than take Dad’s offer, many workers would back off or apologize for wasting our time as they head back to work. For some reason I can tell Dad does not like their behavior. I look towards Dad who decides to walk off. I try calling out to him, but he does not turn around. Before he’d ask “what is it Ross?” Now he goes straight into his office, closing the door behind him. I notice he enjoys feeling important at work. He gleams when people approach him for help. I must have taken it away from him. That must be why Dad leaves me alone at home now.

The more I think about it, I wonder what’s next for Dad. He earns enough to live a good life. With our needs met, what drives Dad now? For a long time, necessity drove him. What about now? Randomly, I recall a man reading the Holy scripture out loud at Church. The passage he read said ‘an idle mind is the devil’s workshop.’ This made no sense when I first heard it. Thinking about it now, perhaps it applies to Dad. Maybe losing focus on what he

wants is jeopardizing his values as he spends his time idle. Pushing him to partake in drinking, gambling, and possibly prostitution. Then again, what do I know? Who knows what an 'idle mind' really refers to. *Stop. You know what it means. Stop fooling yourself.* Again, I hear the voice of my good inner wolf.

It's strange. Dad's treatment towards me deteriorates, but he still takes care of me. Ensuring I have untorn clothes, access to information, and a home stocked with fresh food. Not hesitating to buy me something I really ask for. I have abundance around me, yet there is a part of me missing the days we spent together under the rain. I must be odd.

I never told Dad I remember pieces of my infancy. Crying out as bright lights hit my eyes, I sense someone carrying me over to someone's arms. As my eyes adjust to the lighting, I see a gray ceiling and a towering face. The person holding me must be my Mom. Seeing her dark long brunette hair, I stop crying. Everyone crowding around displays a look of surprise as I swiftly calm down. Regrettably, Mom's face is a blur. My first year of life is like a forgotten dream. Remembering portions of it then when I wake up the dream is quickly forgotten. Not until I am able to walk do I recall my experiences more vividly. Mom's warmth at least told me she does not hate me. Making me wonder why we left her behind. Even if I ask Dad about Mom I am sure he will fabricate a story of why we left her behind.

Last night, Dad was in the worst shape I have seen him. Against my fear of the dark, I walk towards the living when I hear rummaging, thuds, and breaking plates. I feel relief when I see the silhouette of Dad. I hear him murmuring "who the FUCK does she think she is? I pay for what she has. Fuck that. Fuck her." When I try to walk away, my shoulder hits the wall behind me making a small thud sound.

Turning my head around, Dad makes eye contact. We stood there without a word. I decide to turn around and head to my room. The next morning, Dad cooks breakfast avoiding speaking about last night. Heading to school, I see our broken plates in the garbage.

Weeks pass by. Sitting at the piano, a strange thought crosses my mind. *I hope Dad doesn't come home today.* I shake my head at such an arrogant thought. How can I think of such a thought. Everything I have is because of him. *But wouldn't it be more peaceful without him? Wouldn't that be nicer?* Stop. Before pressing the first key, Dad walks through the door smelling of booze. Throwing himself face down on the sofa. I ignore him and continue my piano practice. After hitting a few notes Dad asks if I can stop with the racket. I obey and stop playing conceding because he rarely comes home drunk this early. This infrequent interruption began happening more frequently. Dad goes from asking to demanding I stop practicing.

All my life I never went against Dad's words, but I had enough of his interruptions. I decide that even if he comes home drunk and asks me to stop practicing the piano, I will continue playing. On que, Dad walks through the front door going head first into the sofa minutes after I arrive home. Hearing me play, Dad tells me to stop. When I don't, Dad asks again. Why should I stop? I wasn't the one who told him to hit the bars all day. He does not understand practicing matters. Why would he? He never shows up to hear our class play.

It's always been like this. He never listens. Never taking time to sit down with me to hear what I have to say. Why bother pleasing him? He won't be satisfied no matter what I do. Yet, why is there a part of me that still cares about him and hoping he will one day say, "you did good. I'm proud of you."

Standing up, Dad marches past the hallway slamming the front door wide open. I hear Dad rummaging in the backyard shed. Soon, I hear

stomps approaching. Dad returns with a shovel in hand. For a split second I am unafraid. When Dad lifts the shovel up high, my eyes go wide open as I cower covering my head with both hands. *Bang\** I hear the sounds of distorted keys. Opening my eyes, I see Dad wrecking the piano with the shovel stabbing its sides. Grabbing me by the shirt, he lifts me off my chair bringing me in close before shoving me to the side. He proceeds destroying the chair I sat on. He walks out again to rummage the shed, returning with a sledgehammer. Swinging the hammer, he pummels the piano into broken pieces. With each swing he said, “I bought this damn piano! *CLANG\** Not you. *CLANG\** I provide for you. Give you a roof over your head and food to eat. *CLANG\** I won’t stand for this disrespect. *CLANG\**... Stay right there! You better not move.”

Dad leaves the sledgehammer on the ground as he heads for his room. I hear him opening a drawer. I bet he is looking for his belt. When he returns he finds me sitting where he tossed me. Immediately, he arches his arm to swing his leather belt against my side. *Whoosh\** Looking directly into my eyes he asks, “are you going to do this again?...” I do not answer. *Whoosh\** “I SAID are YOU going to try me again?” I shake my head furiously. Not feeling satisfied, Dad smacks me three more times before leaving me sobbing on the floor. When I hear him close the door to his room, I stop my crocodile tears. At some point, I became numb to the pain. I notice Dad beats me until I cry. To get it over with, I pretend to shed tears. In reality, the pain stopped long ago. When I accepted that no one is coming to save me. Not Mom, not anyone. How could I forget this simple fact? Why did I try to learn the piano? For my classmates who won’t help me? I do not blame or hate them. They cannot help me even if they want to. By the same coin, *I don’t have to do anything for them.* Why bother? Dad wins again. My hand rolls into a fist cracking a knuckle.



Before, I thought I deserved to get punished. Now, I question why I get punished. Is what I did truly bad? Church always taught us to never disrespect our mother or father. Therefore, I never put into question why Mom is not around or why Dad partakes in questionable behavior. All in all, I do not hate either of them. I do dislike Dad's behavior. I only wish he liked me more. *Why do you need him to like you in the first place?*

Church advocates us to not question our parents or God. But should that always be the case? Parents should guide their children who do not know better, but do they understand they might not always be right? Even if they are wrong, we should not disrespect them. Instead, we can learn from them. From their mistakes. There is no need to love our parents, but we cannot hate them either. Otherwise the same hate we give to our parents we will give onto our children. Instead of giving our children love, we will raise them with the same hatred our parents gave us growing up.

Dad ingrained in me that when I grow older I will never hit my child for no apparent reason. I refuse to drink any alcohol if there is any instance I harm someone physically or emotionally. On this day, I promise to myself to never break these rules. No matter the pain I will bear it all. *Then stay away from others. You're not strong enough to sustain the painful sorrow of everyone? You are no saint, no God. You are but a man.* In the back of my head I could hear another soft, but strong voice telling me, "become stronger, you can endure more than what you believe you can." I must be going crazy.

I do believe certain circumstances call for instilling fear or physical punishment to children, but it should only occur conservatively. Meaning, not at all if possible. It's a complicated matter that should be thought about. If my child sexually assaults another or curses at their loving mother that requires correction. How do you teach it

and how do you avoid physical punishment when possible? If we give excessive punishment to children they will become numb to the pain leaving it ineffective. Child rearing/development sure is complicated and can vary depending on the child's environmental factors. All I know is if I punish my child I will allow them to explain themselves first to clear any misunderstanding. If they are at fault I will punish them ensuring I explain why I hurt them. Of course I do not want to hurt them if possible.

How else will they ever know why they got punished if we do not explain ourselves? My child dropping their drink does not constitute a strong reason to lay a hand on them. I will have them clean their mess so they learn how to clean after themselves. Besides, I do not like Dad hitting me hard on the head when I drop a drink accidentally. If I don't like it, I am sure my children will not like it either.

Now I question if being taken care of justifies maltreatment. With unanswered questions, I decide to read the Holy text cover to cover. The words of pastors seem like gibberish. Like hearing a song without understanding a single word being said. As I read more, the more clarity I gain. Recognizing pastors enjoy repeating the same passages over and over. Teaching only lessons they feel are important and never going over questionable ones. For instance, the pastor never spoke about the passage describing daughters having sex with their father in a cave. Which by the way is wrong and condemned in later chapters. However, most of its content is helpful towards learning how to live a better and more fulfilling life. Given we take the time to understand its messages. Most adults do not. They ignore the most basic tenets. Rather, adults like children do as they are told. Not questioning what pastors tell them. Why is that?

Why do we only cover passages making us fear God? Then make a complete turn around. Telling ourselves God is all loving and all knowing. The more I try to understand God, the more questions I have rather than answers. Wondering if we are even meant to understand God. Maybe we aren't. I question why God makes us suffer. If he is all powerful, why not give us eternal bliss. Deep down I want to reject God's ideals. I am tired of hearing how we should remain humble and not greedy. That we need to learn how to forgive our neighbor. Accepting that all the tragedies coming our way is part of God's plan. How can any of us know what is to come?

Despite my thoughts, I am the biggest hypocrite of my own words. I pray to God each night. Thanking God for allowing me to eat and having a roof over my head. I ask God during my prayers to forgive my father for his sins and to allow him into his kingdom. I pray for Kareem's good fortune and for the girl who played the piano. I pray for all those who greet me each day. I repent for all the evil thoughts that cross my mind. Most of all, I ask for him to give me strength.

I do not know what God is, but I believe there is a life force bigger than ourselves. Logically speaking, I should be dead. We should have died in the desert, died of thirst, died of poverty and malnourishment. How is it that years later we are here living a better life? When we were about to faint from dehydration, we found water jugs hidden in the bushes. When we had no money, God brought us Mr. Diamond and Mr. Stein. When we had no food nor roof, his church gave refuge when we first came to this nation. His nation. I am not arrogant enough, not powerful enough to believe I am responsible for all these events to occur. How is that anything if not God's work?

I believe people, humanity, pervert the word of God. Adults for years told me we will burn in infernos if we go against God's words. After

reading the Holy text thoroughly, there is no mention of infernos. There are diabolical existences who make us suffer and fall into temptation, but there is no mention of the horrific torture chambers we were told about as children. Why would traditional Churches advertise false horrors?

Implicitly, the darkest horror is soulless people. People who have no belief in God. No belief in anything, really. They do not care about anyone except themselves. Never thinking of anyone besides themselves. For when it all ends they will find an unending solitary solitude for eternity. At least if you allow someone, if you allow God, into your heart then you will find company when our time comes. For God loves everyone the wicked and the good as long as they try to love God too. I'm sure telling God a good tale of your life is a small price to pay for God's love.

All that matters is trying to understand the sacred text no matter our educational level.

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The next morning Dad and I eat breakfast together. Breaking the silence Dad says, "Ross I'll get you another piano, but don't play it when I tell you not to."

"There is no need. I won't be playing at home anymore." Standing up from my chair, I head to the sink with my plates trying not to look back. I notice Dad wants to say something, but hesitates. I almost forgot how he is when he isn't drinking. The contrast between his two selves is something becoming of an eyesore. Punishing me one day then treating me well the next.

When Dad is about to say something, I interject. "Dad, I have to go now or I'll be late for school. Thanks for breakfast. I cleaned my plates. I'll see you later."

I stay after school for the next couple of days to practice the piano until I decide to quit music. *I'm not getting any better. Why bother continuing? Besides, Dad might threaten to take away our instruments as recourse for my bad behavior. My classmates and Mr. Smith do not deserve to pay for what I did.*

*“Isn't that all an excuse to avoid failing? To avoid letting your classmates down. Ross, don't lie to yourself. Do not use your Dad as an excuse to give up.”*

Is my inner voice telling the truth? Am I really afraid of not living up to everyone's expectations? Am I trying to avoid getting close to anyone? That can't be. I am leaving because there is no piano at home. There is no time to practice. I cannot stay after school every day taking up Mr. Smith's time. Isn't that inconsiderate? *“Tell yourself any lie you want. In the end, you're just giving up.”* At the end of the school week, I ask Mr. Smith if I can talk with him privately after school. He agrees.

When class ends, Mr. Smith and I talk outside his classroom. I explain I no longer have interest in music and will not attend class anymore. Telling him I cleared it with the school and my Dad. I thank Mr. Smith for all that he has taught me. Before he lets me go, he asks why.

I find it difficult to answer. I could lie telling him music is the dumbest activity around, but I cannot. I find lying about what I like and dislike difficult. Instead I tell him, “Mr. Smith I am not good at piano. I never improve. I also don't like staying past after school too long (*Which is true. I do not like staying after school when music class is over.*). Music isn't important to me. I do not see myself playing when school is done this year. I'd rather get a head start on my academics for next year. Please, Mr. Smith let me leave. I do not want to stay any longer (*Which is true. I do not want to cause trouble.*)”

Mr. Smith stands there taking a deep breath before replying. “If that’s what you want Ross. I’ll respect your choice. I really thought you would stay till the end of the year given your playing is getting better. I can tell you are practicing. You must have found your reason. Which makes it a shame that you are leaving us now after you put in so much work. I guess that’s how life goes sometimes. I’ll be seeing you around Ross.”

*Did I really do a good job? Have I improved? How can he tell I practice?* “Mr. Smith, how do you know I’ve been practicing more?” Mr. Smith, who began heading back to class, turns around replying, “Ross, we all know. We hear it in your playing.” There is a small pause before Mr. Smith tells me, “you are welcome back at any time.”

“Hey Mr. Smith, I do have a question. Back on the first day of school you said to watch my thoughts. Saying they might make me or break me. What did you mean by that?”

“Oh you remember that. Why did I say that? Oh now I remember. Yes. On that day you were waiting for everyone to line up before lining up yourself. At that moment, I sensed you might have similar thoughts I did at your age. Always thinking why bother trying, why become exceptional when no one is going to notice, and why stand out only to bring trouble. Your choice is not a bad one, but you need to understand letting others get ahead while you take your time might make you lose something precious one day. When you realize what you want, it might be too late to get back. Then again, I thought I’d never learn how to play an instrument let alone multiple instruments. Neither did I believe I had time to become a teacher, yet here we are. Maybe it’s never too late, but starting early lets us enjoy ourselves earlier in life.”

“Why did you end up becoming a teacher?,” I ask.

“Being honest with you Ross, sometimes I ask myself the same question. Wondering why I put up with so many annoying students going through hormonal changes. Students who think the world revolves around them. Believing they figured it out. Whatever it is. When I start wondering why, I recall past students. Their curiosity and eagerness to learn made teaching bearable. Having felt alone for a long time, I find saying hello to each student rewarding. Regardless if they are troublemakers or not. I found most troublemakers have a neglectful or rough family life. I tried teaching those students how to play music. The ones that allowed me. Some came around. Not everyone, but enough. Now I teach students after school to help them find peace through music. Like I did.”

“I see now.” With nothing else to say, I decide it's time to leave. I tell Mr. Smith, “Thank you for everything. I really did enjoy your class and thank you for being my teacher. I don't understand everything you said, but I will continue thinking about it for a while.”

“No, thank you Ross. It was a pleasure teaching you. You kept helping your classmates with their questions. Asking for help, yourself, when you got stuck. I do hope there comes a day you see what everyone else sees in you. Thank you and get home safe.”

“I will.” I turn to head home when Mr. Smith calls out. “Hey Ross. One last thing. Remember, how you do one thing is how you do everything.” With that said, Mr. Smith heads back inside.

That's the last time I spoke with Mr. Smith.

## Meeting one Another

Entering high school, I neither want to attend class or go home. Being alone is lonesome. Being at home is tense. Dad yells and makes jokes of punching me. Routinely, pulling his arm back and throwing a fist into my face. Squinting, I cover my face with my hands. He'd laugh as he stops his fist before it hits my face. My throat dries. With each of his laughs, I feel my heart give a light pulse. *How is that funny? It's not funny.*

Initially, a couple of students from music continued speaking with me even after I left. Part of me felt gratitude, relief, or was it happiness when they spoke with me. Except with Dad's changing behavior, I kept pushing people away. Feeling uncomfortable with the possibility of others seeing him or having Dad interact with them. I found staying silent drove people off. With time, I found myself alone again as it should be. Why should I deserve anyone?

I never allow anyone to get close anymore. Otherwise they might recognize my personal thoughts. The idea that someone might steal my ideas or can recognize my plotting scares me. I believe plotting is necessary with troublemakers around. Unfortunately, no one picks on me, but regardless I think about what I should do if it were to happen. Considering how can I create fractures within their group or how can I isolate its members? Thankfully, I never had to act on my thoughts for revenge.

Ironically, I get along with the students labeled "troublemakers." I never try joining them nor follow their lead. I only get along with them because they leave me alone. They try to joke around saying how school is so dumb. With a straight face I tell them, "then why come to school." Even if I do not love school, I am already here so might as well learn something. What else is there to do? Some



students would skip class which I found dumb. Those students would find themselves with nothing to do. There are rare exceptions of students leaving school not because they want to, but have to. Leaving to help their family on the farm or taking an early exit from school to start working at the factories out of necessity or need for money. Nothing wrong with that. I'd do the same, but Dad prohibits me. For someone who seems to never care about what I do, he still finds a way to know how I am doing in school. Sometimes I do not understand Dad.

Students being bothered by troublemakers try to pass them onto me. Hovering near my space as if to say, 'here is a lousier kid than me. Pick on him instead.' Instead of bothering me they would nod their head towards me. In response, I'd lift my hand giving them a half wave. Then they'd leave. *If they didn't leave, what would you have done?* Easy, I'd fight. If they are going to pick on me regardless of what I do I rather fight. Why prolong the inevitable? If I die, I die. *If I am going to die, I'll at least take their eyeball. If I take one I'll go for another. If I'm still not dead I'll try crippling them for messing with me.* What do I have to lose? Once I'm dead there is nothing to worry about anymore. No more Dad, no more school, no more anything. I'll find peace.

I'd rather not go to such extremes, but we never know what can drive us to the brink. Sometimes I did wish for someone to pick on me. That way I can know how strong or weak I am and recalibrate. I cannot fight Dad because I fear a part of me would break. If I am unafraid of harming someone who has given me everything and brought me into this world then why would I hesitate harming anyone else? *I do not want to harm anyone.* Still, my mind imagines physically fighting against Dad if he dares punch me. Because of that, I tell myself I do not deserve anyone's love. *How can I think of hurting Dad? What's wrong with me?* I made a vow to myself. To only

restrain Dad if he ever gets violent with me or anyone else. For that, I need to become stronger. *And what if he does something that cannot be undone?* I try not to contemplate this thought.

I could always pick on someone at school. Forcing them to fight me. Except at that point, I'd be a bully which would leave a sour taste. Besides, why harm someone for no reason? They did not wrong me. I just need to wait for someone to throw a punch at me. No one does. The troublemakers who I thought would bother me, keep saying hello to me instead. Some even ask for help with their school work.

Seeing them work so hard, I tell them I'll bring food to celebrate after our tests. I do not care for money, but it sure does feel good being able to use it for others. Those not trying to study listen in and ask, "you'll bring us some too, right?" With a straight face I tell them, "no and do not try taking any." They stand up and I ask myself, *is this it? Is this my moment?* My heart pulsates. Looking unpleased, they walk away. A student sitting diagonal from me comments, "they must be scared of how quiet you are. There is always something off about quiet people." *Quiet? What does being quiet have to do with anything?*

With Dad's permission, I bought the meals. Dad does not hesitate forking over the money when I tell him my intention. He is big on giving food to others remembering how he would drool over food as a kid. Going without a meal at times when his Mom did not feel like cooking for him. Unlike his mother, Dad always ensures I have a good breakfast and lunch before he starts indulging in drinking. That part of him never changed making it more difficult for me to dislike him. These aspects of Dad are ones I adopt. Dad does not teach me much directly, but I learn from him. I learn what to do, what not to do, and what to avoid doing.

Before eighth grade ended, I kept having the same dream each morning. The dream did not feel like a dream. It felt more like a premonition of what is to come. Call it an intrinsic feeling or call me crazy, but I could sense someone new coming into my life. I'd wake up each morning only to forget what I dreamt. Only remembering being unable to defend someone. *Who was it?* Whoever it was, I kept failing to defend them. *Why?*

Without knowing why, all I knew is I am unprepared as I am now. Strength is what I need. *No, you need mental strength.* How do I gain that? *Do you enjoy exercising?* No. *Then that's what you gotta do.* Why-? *Stop, do not question it, just do it.* I am not a fan of exercise since it's painful and sweaty. I want to avoid what is uncomfortable and run away. Yet, I understand if I continue running away I will find myself unable to defend someone I care about when it really matters. Futile as it might be, if doing push-ups, running, carrying weights, and punching the air increases my chance of protecting someone, even by one percent, why not do it? Getting stronger is quite painful so *how can I get my body to act beyond any pain threshold it experiences?* *How?* Without figuring how my mind works or who I am trying to defend in my dreams, I recall the girl with horns I saw at the market. If I'd been stronger and braver, I could have stood in the way between her and the person trying to harm her because she is a slave. Instead, I remember feeling awful for cowering in fear to protect myself. The same sensation I felt that day is the same emotion I experience within my dream. As I want to throw in the towel, to give up, I am reminded of the girl I failed to defend.

With repetitive failures of staying consistent with work, I decide on the bare minimum of what I need to expect of myself each day. Deciding that I will do ten push ups each morning. On days I feel like not keeping my word, I hear a little voice. *So you're going to allow someone to pick on her? She never mattered did she? Or will you*

*get up and do what you said you are going to do, so it does not happen again?* I get up.

With time, ten push ups turns into twenty, then fifty, a hundred, then a hundred fifty, after two hundred push ups I stop counting. Stopping until my arms give and my chest slams into the ground. Not until I reach several months of consistency, do I stop dreaming. Now, I wake up with adrenaline before any nightmare takes form. Although, I never once changed the amount of push ups I do each day. Not once. It was only ten.

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Coming into high school, I notice more students with light pale skin speaking a distinct language. Given most local residents have light brown skin and dark gray hair, students with pale skin stand out. It is likely they are from the North.

Today, in particular, I notice one of those Northern girls. I never seen her before. Like me, she roams around school buildings and occasionally looks up towards the sky. Mimicking her, I'd look up too. Seeing nothing except for clouds. Days pass and I still see her alone. Sometimes she'd pick up a broken twig to poke the dirt. Other times I'd see her reading from the same book she carries around school. When people got close, she'd walk away or stay mute. It took me several days to realize she does not understand the common language spoken in this country? Feeling stupid, I ask myself why it took me so long to recognize.

On top of her language deficiency, I cannot imagine the troubles she carries. Especially when boys try approaching her. I'd think a girl like her would make friends by now. With weeks having gone by, she still sits alone. *Maybe you should try talking to her?* I shouldn't bother her? She must have enough to deal with. I mean we did when Dad and I first came to this country. *Wouldn't that be more of a-* I cut my

thinking there, telling myself the only reason I am considering talking to her is because of how beautiful she is. Which she is, but her beauty is not what is attracting my eyes. I cannot put a finger on what is making me pay attention to her.

Trust me, I dislike approaching people and asking questions. Yet, staying in doubt bothers me more. With no other choice, I approach a group of pale skinned students and ask what language they speak. At first they look at me strangely so I ask again. This time, a girl comes forward telling me the name of her language. I thank her. Extending my hand, I introduce myself as Ross. She follows suit, shaking my hand and telling me her name is Fiza.

I try looking for resources at the market covering their Northern language. Not wishing to bother Fiza, I end up bothering her again when realizing learning a language only using a book is difficult. She makes time to help me, so I make sure to take as many notes as possible. Asking her about common words she uses and help with translating sentences. I compare the differences in sentence structures of our respective languages. A boy named Orson is quite helpful too. Alongside Fiza, he helps me learn the proper pronunciation of words. Which I am thankful for. His help reduces the number of times I bother Fiza. While all this is going on I ask myself, *why am I doing all this again? Why am I pushing extra work onto myself that will never pay off?* I hear the voice again telling me, “you can’t forget Ross there is no wasted effort. Everything you learn can have value. Remember when you tried experimenting with remolding plastic? Did it not help you better understand the book covering volume and surface area? All you need to accomplish is associating your knowledge to practical uses. Besides, do you have anything better to do?” *No, I don’t. ~~I guess~~ I will learn this language. When I do, I can finally ask her why she keeps looking up at the clouds. Not because I want to talk to her. Not at all.*

Randomly, I reflect on my tendency to stay outside of all group circles. Which helps me pick up on the fact there are social groups within our school. Among other factors, groups are divided between shared interests, hobbies, humor, and social identity. For instance, there are few select parents, besides Dad, who have succeeded at making money based on the needs of the populace. Those affluent families also do business together; therefore, their respective children have more chance encounters with each other. Likewise, students with pale skin stick together. Those with a dark skin separate themselves based on academic achievement, extracurricular activity, and social standings. There are anomalies such as Orson who, with his tan skin, joins the Northerners regularly. All the same, he seems welcomed within their circle. He must have close connections to many of them given he walks home with them towards the outskirts of town. Coincidentally, I did see him once glancing at Fiza's silhouette as they walked. All I could think is *good luck Orson, I'm rooting for you.*

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If I have no reason to interact with someone, I do not interact. For that reason, I walk around school to kill time until lunch finishes. In spite of not caring what others think, I still do not want to appear alone. Walking helps keep prying eyes away from me. I can tell there are kind classmates who contemplate approaching me to invite me into their group. Not for any external reward, but for the sake of providing company. I am sure there are students who see me alone who question why anyone would choose to stay alone. Except for me. When I find no one around, I find peace.

I stop seeing her for a while when I find a hidden area with shade. Laying down on the comfy concrete, I close my eyes to hear the whistling of the wind. Soon forgetting about whoever was on my mind. Strange enough, my mind does not allow me to forget. Falling

asleep under the shade, I dream of a life where I never approach her. Realizing she never needed my help. I see her make good friends and no longer see her roam the school. Before seeing any more, I wake up.

8 8 8

I hate this country. We met no one, but scum. When Papa went to purchase land the man almost sold us a trashy plot. The dirt is dry with no nearby waterway and the asking price is too high. With little choice, we rent a lodge near the outskirts of town. We are needlessly on alert when thinking of the possibility of others robbing us when eyebrows get raised when we ask around about where we can buy a good home. As incoming foreigners, we should have no funds to purchase a home. So it's no surprise people are raising their eyebrows.

Without knowing who to trust, we turn to the Church. I never like going to the Church. *Why do we need to rely on others for help? Why is there nothing I can do?* Since the day that man tried coming onto me. I keep feeling this hatred inside. My hands turn to fists whenever a man, besides Papa, approaches. *Why do I need to rely on him? Why?* Luckily, Papa and Mama do not push me to interact with others. They allow me to stay a recluse.

The pastor at the Church helps us negotiate a better contract for a home closer to the school and center of town. I can tell the pastor is at least better than our old one back home. He never asks where we got our money nor digs his nose into our business. All he asks is for us to stop by the Church from time to time. My parents thank him as he leaves. I want to thank him too, but the words do not leave my mouth. With the pastor's help, we move into our new home.

My initial impression is I hate this home. There is little room and the backyard is small. Definitely not enough for farming. How the

heck are we meant to live? The plot is not dry, but there is only enough space for a small garden. I want to complain, but I know better. We could have come with nothing, living in the streets instead. I am grateful for the home, but not satisfied. I start attending school briefly until my anxiety and panic attacks take hold. Understanding, my parents allow me to miss several weeks of school. I curl into a ball and hide under the covers wishing this was all a dream. *I miss you Abuelo, Abuela. Sniffle\* How are we going to eat? Is it going to stay like this forever? Why is this all happening? Why is there nothing I can do?*

The next morning Pa tells me, “Sandra tomorrow Ma taking you to school. Try your best, I know it’s hard.”

“What about you Pa? Aren’t you going with us?,” I ask sulking.

“I heard there is farm work available close to the outside of town. The factories denied me for not speaking the Native tongue. As for your Ma, we agreed she will stay home temporarily to receive you when you get home. When we get more accustomed to our new life we will figure out what we can do moving forward. For now, please bear with it Sandra. I’m sorry it’s like this honey,” says Papa. I do as I am told and head to school with Mama.

At school, I slowly overcome my anxiety. Staying longer without needing to leave early. At this school there are many more students, teachers, and courses. It’s all so confusing. I understand squat. No one can help me either. Most people do not speak my language and those who do I stay mute around. *What’s the point?* Not comprehending much, I keep getting failing marks on all test subjects. Losing hope, I remain isolated at the back of the classroom.

Whether in this country or any other, boys remain the same. They keep glancing at me as if I do not notice. Trying to get close to me,



even daring to touch my hair or hand. As if that flatters me. I notice the glares of other girls too, watching me with hostile eyes. What I find weird is, some girls enjoy boys lightly touching their arms or paying attention to them as they pretend not to care. I am not pretending, I genuinely feel repulsion when they try flirting with me when they know nothing about me.

During lunch break, I roam the school trying to avoid classmates from coming close. Doing everything in my ability to isolate myself. I hate this country. I hate my classmates. I hate those who took everything away from us. We did not ask for this. We did not ask to come to this country. I wish I could have brought Phoebe. I never knew how significant Phoebe's presence was. She made school bearable. Looking towards the sky, I wonder if Abuelo is watching over me from above. I wish I could be like a bird and fly away. Other times, I look at the clouds to forget about life.

As I walk around school, two boys follow me. I try avoiding them by taking turns, but they stay persistent. My heart starts racing and I feel a panic attack incoming. I hear them whistling at me. From the panic, I wander to a less populated area of school. My knees wobble and my breathing gets heavy. My vision blurs and I hold an arm against a wall. *I hate this. Why can't I move? MOVE Dammit!* The boys get closer. One of them touches my shoulder and I shout, "Stop! Don't touch me!"

Through my blurry vision, I see one of the boys take a step back. The other comes towards me saying, "don't be like that. We're here to help. Everybody's been saying how you play hard to get. Only to get down with random guys around school. That's why you keep walking around." I start fuming wondering who'd spread such lies. Asking myself why someone would do such a horrible thing. When he gets closer my hands roll into fists and I hear them crackle. I touch my nails to check their sharpness. This might cause discomfort

for my parents, but I'd rather die before letting another man touch me again.

As if from thin air, a stranger pops up asking, "What's going on here?" From their voice, I can tell the stranger is another boy.

*Where'd he come from?* I didn't hear his footsteps at all. The boy who was about to touch me jumps back. After their initial shock, the boys from earlier lift their chins looking like they want to intimidate the stranger. Regaining my composure, I lift my head towards them. Doing so, I can almost swear seeing the stranger subtly moving one leg back the closer the two boys got. I cannot explain the sensation, but for a moment the air around him seemed to change. Before closing the gap, the two boys back up. Forfeiting a confrontation.

"Nothing's the matter," says the taller boy who tried to touch me. For whatever reason, they both avoid looking the stranger in the eye.

"Is that so? To me, it seems she is having a hard time breathing. If you don't mind, can you both give her room to breathe?," says the stranger. I cannot understand what they are saying, but whatever he did say made the boys from earlier start leaving. Before they get too far, the stranger tells them, "thank you."

*Thank you?* I do not understand most words, but I do understand those words. My parents made sure of that. Why the hell is he thanking them? What for? I hold my hands in fists again. The stranger looks at me. Closing his eyes, he gives me a light bow. *Why are you bowing and what does that even mean?* Turning around, he walks away.

*Where is he going?* Nothing is behind that corner except for the school's fencing. Instead of walking back to the main courtyard, I end up looking around the corner where the strange boy went. There, I see him sleeping on the concrete floor under a small patch

of shade. The only word I find to describe him is weird. Then again, it does look peaceful to stay away from others. Sleeping to forget about the world even if only momentarily.

The next day, I wonder if I can go to his spot if he's not there. During lunch, I do not see him there. *That must mean I can use this spot today, right?* I can't find a comfortable position to lay down. *How does he do it?* I take off my sweater sitting my bottom on top of it. As I press my back against a wall, I try daydreaming of my life back home, my real home. *Will I ever get to see it again?*

For consecutive days, I return to the same spot without spotting the boy. Not being bothered by anyone, I find peace. The only bump in the road now is seeing the boy showing up again. A few days go by with no success. *Maybe I should give up on that spot.* In my heart, I hope he's not there today. Looking around the corner, I see no one. *Yes!* Before I can take the spot, a voice from behind startles me. "Can I help you?"

*Gahhaaa\** I jump at hearing someone behind. Turning around, I see the strange boy. "Where'd you come from," I ask stunned. *Wait, he must not understand what I am saying.*

"I was umm... right behind the aaa... whole time," he says. I think he wants to say he was behind me the whole time. "Oh, okay." When I turn to walk away he says, "you take the spot today you want." He walks away fast, soon disappearing from view. With him gone, I decide to take his spot. *Should I have not taken it?*

For a few days, I do not see him again. When I finally do spot him he only tells me, "you can take the spot today you want." Disappearing before I can say a word. I do not follow him. Why would I and why should I? Contrary to my thoughts, I feel remorse

for not speaking a word to him? *Now that I think about it, did I ever thank him for helping me the other day?*

I spot him between classes. At that moment, I decide to approach him. I want to thank him for helping me before. I stop when I see him talking to the boys who bothered me the other day. I am bothered by it. Why is he talking to them? Did they set the whole scene to make me feel like I owe him? I try hearing in on their conversation despite not understanding a single word of what they are saying. All I see is him handing food over to the both of them.

“Clark, Esteban I happen to have extra food if you’d both like some. I have a green apple for both of you. I like them a lot myself.”

“Why are you giving us this?,” asks Clark. The taller one.

“What do you mean? I heard your stomachs growling. I’m not hungry myself so rather than throw away food I prefer giving it to someone. Unless you both don’t want it. If that’s the case, I’ll find someone else, but please take it for me.”

“What about what happened the other day?,” asks Esteban.

“What do you mean? Nothing happened. If something did it would be a completely different story. Anyways, here are the apples for both of you. Take them. If you do not eat them during break, eat them on your way back home. Esteban, I know your parents are farmworkers. I am picking at straws, but they might get home late. It won’t hurt to eat a snack while you wait for them to get home. By the way, don’t expect this from me all the time. As for you Clark, I have seen our dads drinking together at the pub. I don’t know about your family, but if your Dad is anything like mine. He might punish you by not giving you breakfast (*he’s never done it to me, but you never know. I have enough reason to believe his dad hurts him and at times*

*refuses to relinquish any food to him*). I heard your stomachs growling during the passing period so please take it.” Both of them accept an apple. As Ross is about to leave, Clark felt an inclination to ask what was on his mind. “That day, if we took it too far. What would you have done?”

“I would have made you both bleed.” *If I failed, I’d wait till you are alone. If anyone is willing to hurt others, they cannot complain when someone tries to hurt them. When I see people touching those who do not want to get touched it revolts me.* Briefly, they see a void in Ross’ eyes.

*Hahaha\** “That’s what I’d like to say, but who knows,” says Ross smiling.

*What are they saying?* I do not understand a word. Why are they talking for so long? Why’d I even think of thanking him? Before leaving, I see him give a small smile. Which angers me. Returning home, I ask Pa if we can go to the market to find a book covering this nation’s language. He says, “that’s a great idea.” I learn on my own and teach Papa after he gets off from work. Slowly, we both start learning this nation’s language. Soon Mama joins in on the fun. Pa asks me what made me decide to buy a book. I ask what he meant.

8 8 8

“Hey, that's him.”

“Really?”

“What do you see in him?”

“He’s got money right, maybe I should talk to him instead.”

“Shh! He'll hear us.”

“He has money?” “You didn’t know? I thought that’s why you wanted to talk with him.” “No.” “Then why, Lizbeth?”

“I don’t see it.”

Girls sure talk a lot. Understanding the local language more, I eavesdrop on conversations. I notice girls, unlike boys, share a network of information about people through gossip. Judging people based on their appearance and perceived potential. Always dreaming of a charming prince who will come to protect and spoil them. In reality, most men are crude. Men who are willing to work are overlooked for not having status. I am sure those hard working men will treat them better. It's simple really. If a man is chasing after you, won't they cater to your needs rather than their own? In contrast, men who can pick from the litter have no obligation to NOT toss you to the side.

Girls in my class seem to have a false perception of themselves. Believing they are 'the baddest bitch.' I do not understand the phrase completely, but that's what I have heard girls say while wearing a smirk on their face. Exceptional men will see through them and avoid them altogether. If not, they will only have fun with them to pass the time. I have seen the cycle. The most handsome young men go out with the "prettiest" faces. Breaking up when they are caught cheating with another girl. Why? It's simple. Girls want to get with them believing they are the one for him. Believing they will change him and that there is no way he would choose to leave her because she is 'the baddest bitch around.' *Who would say that about themselves, anyways? I am no dog.*

The likelihood of meeting an exceptional man with morals is small, making me consider if I am better off trying to make it on my own. A father, today, can support a family on their own. I fear the day when both parents HAVE TO work to support a family. I sense there will be a shift in societal values as more women try to become independent and fathers start having to compete with a wider pool of candidates reducing the number of possible spouses they can have. Both Ma and Pa help each other out, but we know Pa does most of

the heavy lifting. At least, there is no large entity who takes our money away. The only money we give is to our local Church who uses it to maintain its building and feed anyone in need. They do not buy flowers, except on special occasions. The pastor says God did not save us to get glorified. God saves his people for them to live a better life. We can buy the prettiest picture frame, but the picture is what has value, not the frame. Excess funds get evenly distributed back to people who attend Church. Usually around the annual Holy day. Pa, Ma, and I all agree we enjoy going to this Church a lot more than our old one. As a bonus, the pastor does not give a negative vibe like our old pastor.

Snapping back to reality, I see the girls who are chatting staring in the same direction. Following their gaze, I see that boy again. He's not the most handsome guy. So why are girls stealing glances at him? *Does he really not notice?* For whatever reason, I start paying attention to him more. On this occasion, a daring girl approaches him as she tries pressing her chest against his arm. Telling him how great it would be to go shopping together. In response, the boy shakes his arm away saying, "I'm good." I give a chuckle. It's not what I expected. I turn away to look at my book pretending I read a funny line. That day, when returning home. Ma and Pa ask what's got me in a good mood. I ask them 'what do they mean'?

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From the day we first met, we sometimes make eye contact. Sometimes I'd look and she wouldn't, but other times she would too. Except, I immediately look away when she turns. *Stop it. Are you trying to talk to her? Why? Is it because she's pretty? Do not get full of yourself.* To forget about her, I decide to bring books from home. With my secret spot taken, I read at different locations around school. Soon, I forget about her.

While in class, I can hear all the girls gossip. They might as well be sitting next to me. It took me time to realize not everyone has adept ears. I'd even play a game, closing my eyes as I try to distinguish the footsteps of each student and teacher. Testing how far of a distance I can hear. That said, it's no surprise I can hear the negative remarks of the guys in my class. They rarely speak behind each other's back, but when they get rejected by a girl they like. For some reason, they start bashing me saying, "what's so great about him. If my dad were rich I'd bet they would have said yes." *Would they really?* They'd spend your money then leave you once it's gone. I'd rather not deal with that. Besides, I am not the one who made all that money. What right do I have to spend it? I am not better than anyone. Even if I were to make my own fortune.

In a class of thirty, I don't pay much attention to the girls except for Lizbeth. She has a similar vibe as the girl I met who can play the piano. Attractive wise she is not the prettiest. She isn't the worst either. Out of all the girls, she is the one I wouldn't mind spending time with if I had to choose someone. Most wouldn't consider her the prettiest, but I thought she is. Having seen her struggle in class, I decide to work on easy to follow note guides at home. Slipping her the notes before class. Telling her, "this might help you." I return to my seat before hearing what she has to say. Days later, Lizbeth approaches me saying thanks. Our conversation always ends there. Momentarily, I felt she'd hesitate when walking away sensing she wants to tell me something. I do not think much of it. If she had to say something, she would have said it.

After a couple of weeks of helping her each day, she no longer needs my help. Having caught up to her coursework, there is no reason for us to interact. There is no reason to reach out to her. She is now independent. *Go talk to her. Why do you need a reason to speak with her?* Why would she want to talk? I am not funny, charming, nor do I



look the best. *Stop it, why do you do this to yourself? Why do you deny yourself? You did this when you actually did like the girl playing the piano. Lying to yourself saying you didn't, but you did. Telling yourself you are not a good match for her. How do you know? What makes you think you are so powerful to know how another person is going to act towards you. You never know what can happen until it happens. Perhaps it does not work out? Sure. But what **if** it does? What **if** you can have whatever you want. Imagine **if** you did decide to speak with the piano girl. **If** she were by her side. I mean, she had everything you like. Positivity, can do attitude, learner, unpromiscuous, and most importantly she noticed you.* I think to myself, why is it that I deny myself? Why do I not allow anyone, especially girls, to get close?

I ponder that question for a long time. I use my thoughts as an excuse to avoid approaching Lizbeth. While I am lost in thought, Lizbeth has grown. Originally being smaller in height with some excess fat. She is now taller with a slimmer waist and bigger bust. I could not help but stare. More guys approach her as her appearance changes. Of course they would. She was beautiful to begin with. I overhear her friends telling her, 'wow you look stunning, if he doesn't notice you now. He is an idiot.' By coincidence, I feel multiple eyes on me when they say it. Instead of lifting my head from my desk, I keep it down to prevent eye contact with them.

I do nothing as days pass. Having dealt with Clark and Esteban yesterday. I decide to listen to my inner voice and approach Lizbeth. Only to stop when I see her talking to another classmate. Looking closer, I realize the classmate is Kareem. I sit back down and decide I will try approaching her again tomorrow. But the next day I see her with him again. Before I know it, they start talking regularly. When Kareem finally notices me, he waves hello whenever he comes into the classroom.

While walking to school in the morning, I notice a few guys following behind Lizbeth. This is not the first time it's happened. Usually I walk near her to scare away anyone up to no good. Only striking a conversation with her when guys try touching her waist. I thought today would be the same. Except, instead of me, Kareem walks right up next to her. Chatting together until they get to the school's gates. Since then, I stop trying to approach Lizbeth. Unlike me, Kareem does not hesitate standing next to her. Walking side by side even if no one is around. Only once do I see Kareem trying to touch her waist before she nudges his arm away. Since then, he never tries touching her.

I feel guilty for looking at Lizbeth a certain way. How can I look at both her and the foreign girl? I feel like scum for wanting to like two girls. If I had one of them, or anyone, I wouldn't look at anyone else. My eyes would only be for the person I like. Why must my body react this way around girls? Do girls experience the same issue?

Today, I feel Lizbeth's gaze for the last time. The final bell rings. She has no reason to approach me, but she does. She tells me, "Hey Ross, Kareem is inviting me to his family outing."

I sat there not understanding how to reply. Does she want me to question her? Should I ask why she is telling me this? *You know why.* If I speak against it then would I have to take responsibility and invite her to my home? But then she would have to meet-

"That's great Lizbeth. Kareem is a great guy. You two look good together. I hope you enjoy it. You know, you were always a beautiful person. You still are, I hope Kareem understands that and does not take you for granted." *I know I'd cherish you.*

She turns away from me before I can see her expression. Heading towards the exit, she pauses at the door and turns. "Hey Ross I do

not know much about you and I am not claiming I do, but I have observed you enough to tell you this. It doesn't always pay to be the 'nice guy.' You think you aren't, but you are. Be careful, one day you might lose someone if you stay like that. You deserve someone too. You only need to claim what you want. Stop denying yourself for others. You never know what another person may think of you if you don't ask. Take a chance."

With that, she leaves. That's what I believe made me like her. We did not speak much, but when we did. I felt she could see through me. Better than myself. The following day, I can tell the family outing went well. Seeing that Lizbeth now allows Kareem to hold her by the waist.

Being absent minded, I head to my spot. Laying under the shade, I think about what Lizbeth said. She must have said it for a reason. Before I get too far with my thoughts, I hear a voice. "Hey there, I have been meaning to ask. What is your name?" Looking up, I readjust my eyes to see her.

"My name is Ross. How about yours?," I respond automatically.

"I'm Sandra. Do you mind if we speak in your language? That might be easier for you. Also, I need the practice."

"How'd you learn to speak it? You speak it pretty well." ~~I feel like a fool~~ I'm glad I learned her language in case we could not communicate like this. I never considered she'd learn our language on her own. Is this what Lizbeth meant? We can never know what those around us might end up doing.

"At first I tried learning it from a book, but a book can only do so much. I'd come to this spot to practice on my own for several weeks. I still could not speak properly, but with time I started to understand

what others were saying. Wanting a change of pace, I went to the library. By coincidence, I met two girls. We did not say much at first. Of course, given I kept running into them, I naturally waved at them. They'd wave back. Soon, we struck up a conversation talking about books we are currently reading or read. Noticing I struggled communicating, they spent time helping me improve my pronunciations. You know what I learned. I learned not all the words are spelt the way they sound. Language is quite tricky.”

“It is. Like if we say ‘that is dad’s house’ in a different language we might need to change it to ‘that is the house of my dad.’ otherwise it will not make sense.”

“Yeah. I totally get what you mean. The translations are not always word for word. If I say ‘how are you today’ the direct translation is ‘how you today’ which apparently does not make sense. It’s amazing how children pick up on language so easily, but have trouble when they grow older.”

“Right? Without having someone guide you. Learning anything takes a lot longer,” says Ross.

“I’d agree,” responds Sandra.

*Now that I think of it. Isn’t this a great time to ask her why she stares at the clouds.* I hesitate before speaking. Thinking she might find me weird for noticing her staring at the sky. An inner voice prevents me from overthinking, telling me to *take a chance*. Uncharacteristically, I stop thinking and ask her, “Sandra, sometimes I notice you stare at the sky. What are you looking at exactly when there are no clouds?”

“Oh that. Nothing really. I’d only wonder if Abuelo is watching over me from up there.”

Not knowing if I touched on a sensitive topic, I stay quiet. She does too.

“Hey umm-”

“Hey”

“You can go first,” says Sandra. Having interrupted each other, Sandra allows me to speak first. “What made you decide to come over to speak with me? Not that mind having a beautiful girl like yourself coming over. Beats being here by myself.”

“Well, I was not planning on coming. Especially since I no longer come to this spot. But when I told my friends about being curious to know your name and after telling how we first met. They insisted I go up to you and ask for your name. From their expressions, I could tell they knew your name already. One of them said she took music with you too. For whatever reason, they refuse to give me your name. Walking out of class, I saw you heading over here by chance so I followed you here.”

“By the way, do you talk to all girls like that? Calling them beautiful,” asks Sandra innocently.

“No, only the ones who I think are. Most women are attractive, but I wouldn’t say they are beautiful. I need to like something about them, that is not their looks, to call them beautiful. I do see other guys call girls beautiful, but not mean it. I could do the same, but what if they start liking me?”

I get what he means. There have been multiple guys who called me beautiful. Rather than feel complimented, I feel bothered. If he is calling me beautiful, does he mean to tell me he likes me?

“Thinking someone is beautiful does not mean I like them. Not always. I respect them enough to prevent myself from thinking about being with them. Before I realize it, they get taken. Which clearly means I am not the only one who sees their value. What about you, Sandra? What is it that you value?”

“Hmm... Give me a minute.” *What do I value?* “Do you mean what I value in a person or in general?”

“Both, I guess.”

“I value my family. What else...?” Sandra sits to think. Before long, the lunch bell rings. Standing up, Sandra says, “I’ll have to think about it more. I’ll get back to you.”

“I’ll be waiting here when you do,” says Ross.

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We never set a time we’d meet. Each day I’d come to lay down under the shade of the tree. Wondering if she is coming today. Maybe she no longer has interest in talking with me. Do not start again. *You are smart, honest, and a good judge of character. If she were the type of person to never show up. You would have never liked her. Trust yourself. Trust your instinct.* She is coming. If she does not, I can approach her myself. Let’s give her time. If I do not see her this week. I will try talking to her on Sanctus when we return to school.

While waiting, I run through course material I am learning. Trying to recall each word the teacher said. Running through their practice examples inside my head. When any material gets exceedingly tricky, I pull out a paper and pen to map out my thinking process. I find doing this makes understanding large problems a lot easier. There is only so much our brains can handle at a time. Before I

know it. The week comes to an end. On the last day, Octo, I see her again. I wave to her, feeling an awkward smile on my face.

“Thank you for waiting. It took a lot longer to come to an answer. I asked my parents what they thought about your question. They kept smiling when I told them a boy from school asked me this. Thinking about it together, we came up with the idea of listing all the values we each appreciate as affection, ambition, caring, communication, compassion, courage, discipline, faith, family, gratitude, knowledge, optimism, respect, strength, trust, and wealth. Pa said to reduce the list to three values. That way, I can learn what values I truly value. Deciding is pretty hard. But I came up with my three top values. They are Family, Knowledge, and Wealth.”

“Why did you choose wealth?”

“Back home, my family feared Ma or I would get abducted by strange men or worse. Worrying they might make Pa disappear too. With wealth, I could have paid guards to protect my family instead of being forced to move to this country. With it, I can buy Pa his farm and build a nice room for Ma. Instead we had an asshole who tried taking advantage of Pa’s lack of literacy, almost coaxing us to sign off on a deed way too overpriced. If only I had wealth could I ensure we are never put in a vulnerable position again,” says Sandra. With her last sentence her eyes get void.

For a moment, Sandra’s beauty disappeared. I felt something off. *You don’t dislike it do you?* This type I do. I felt a dark emotion I held inside resonating with her temporarily. Except, hers is different from my own. Her dark emotion felt like a different strand from the same beast. In response I tell her, “that does not sound like Wealth, it sounds like Power.”

“Maybe. Thinking about it now, I understand why my parents did it.” says Sandra with a shrug as light returns to her eyes. She continues. “Though, no matter what. I will value Family over Knowledge and Power. What value is there to have knowledge and power if there is no family in my life?”

“Not everyone needs a family. We can have great friends too. Not fake friends, but REAL friends. Ones who push us to succeed and try to succeed themselves. The difference between family and friends is that our family is less likely to abuse us mentally or sexually. It’s unlikely, but it does happen. At that point, a friend is better than a demented family member. That’s why it is important to have good parents we can trust and believe. For if the day comes, a child can feel protected and secured enough by their family to tell them an adult touched them inappropriately. On the other hand, if a child feels alone, unloved, or always judged. They will never tell a soul. I am not going to say my Dad loves me excruciatingly, but I know if someone did me harm his eyes will turn red. I had a bully in elementary school. He never hit me, but did call me names. Dad happened to pick me up to celebrate my graduation, but when he saw my bully making fun of me. Without hesitating, he grabbed the boy turning him around then slapped him across his face. Telling him to never speak to his son or any of his classmates that way. The boy’s father got mad yelling ‘what the hell do you think you’re doing?’ My Dad responded by telling him, ‘educate your child before I educate you.’ The whole ceremony turned into a fiasco as their fists flew. Walking back home, Dad said ‘if anyone tries to pick on you. You can fight them. If you come home bruised or I’m told you started the fight. I won’t say a word or blame you. If you need it too, I can help you fight their parents.’ I never took it to that extent, but I told myself if anyone tries throwing a swing at me, I will throw one back. Unfortunately, no one has. In the end, for better or worse, we are stuck with the families we are born into. Despite what I said, most of



us will not find friends who will treat us better than our own family. Unless we come from a terrible one.”

“You know, your way of thinking is quite different. A bit dark if I’m being honest. But you make good points. Makes me glad to have parents like Ma and Pa. Except, now I’m wondering what you value. Can you tell me?”

Before answering, Ross asks if she can pull out the piece of paper she put away inside her pocket. Seeing the list of values she had written down, Ross rewrites them onto his own piece of paper. Adding some values of his own. Then he slowly starts crossing out words until only three words remain on his list. The words are Companionship, Knowledge, and Gratitude. “I value people who listen to what I have to say. Whether they are my family, God, a good friend, or a loving animal. And, right now, I do value speaking with you. I am also grateful for everything I do have and I thank God for it. Even if I were to lose everything today, I will always thank God. If life is going bad, I will thank God for life. If life is going good, I will thank God for everything going well. I know life can always be worse. There is no point in focusing on what is wrong with our life. There will always be something wrong. I rather focus on what is going well and how I can make life better. As for why I value knowledge, if there is not anything new to learn each day I’d be pretty bored down here with nothing to do. Sometimes I do get lonely, but when I get to speak with someone it makes life better. So, thank you for speaking with me. I know you don’t have to. You are choosing to and I am choosing to enjoy it.”

The bell rings, ending our conversation. Taking a few steps, Sandra heads to class. Before leaving, she turns around to say, “You know Ross. You are kind of weird. Has anyone told you that? What did you mean ‘down here’? Do you mean down here on Terra. I didn’t say

anything because I wasn't sure if I heard you right. I did enjoy our conversation too. Maybe we can talk again next week."

"Next week? Sure, I'd be glad to talk again."

"How about on Octo?"

"Octo? Yeah, that sounds great."

"Okay great. I'll see you next week."

With that our series of conversations continued.

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One the following Octoday, Sandra sees Ross lying under the shade. Hearing her footsteps, Ross remains laying down with his eyes closed until she sits next to him. Sitting upright, he scooches over to the side to avoid sitting too close to her. "Hey Sandra. Thanks for coming back."

"No problem. The last time we spoke, we did not finish our conversation. I told you about what I value, but not what I value in a person. I never thought about it before. What is it that I look for in a person? To help, I thought about what I like about Ma and Pa? What made me get along with Kiara, Rebecca, Ms. Sayu, and an old friend back home. Then I realized, they all share a desire to learn and look out for each other. Pa has Ma. Rebecca has Kiara. Phoebe has Ms. Sayu. That said, I appreciate those who try improving themselves and are capable of thinking about someone other than themselves. Out of curiosity, I began wondering if others share the similar values. I did only ask the girls since I feel wary around guys. They must have misheard me. Changing the question from 'what do you like in a person' to 'what do you look for in a partner.' Instead of denying them, I rolled with it. Hearing their responses gave me an

opportunity to understand who they are. Getting a better idea of who'd I get along with and who I want to avoid.”

“To me, you do not seem like someone who'd do that. Interacting with others, I mean. Isn't that why I kept seeing you under this tree. How did you decide to suddenly interact with people?”

“It's true. I prefer not interacting with others, but I cannot stay like that forever. Pa told me, now that I am older I need to learn how to deal with people. Even those I do not like. Saying, he notices those who accomplish more at work are people who take time to interact with others. Either to build a relationship to receive opportunities not offered to others or asking questions on how to approach their work. The more genuine someone is about their intentions, the more people open up. If someone truly wants to improve you can tell. For those who are all talk, why waste words on them. Does this answer your question?”

“Yes it does. Now, you were saying something about what girls value.”

“Right, where was I? I remember now, I was gathering the thoughts of girls. Which took a while. That's why I did not come to see you until today. The consensus I came to is that girls look for three main traits. If any guy has them, they have a good chance of going out with someone. Going from least important to most important, girls want to see someone who is compassionate, intelligent, and has wealth. As the girls spoke, they seem to have no interest in nice men, but kind men. Men who are kind to their parents and compassionate enough to help others. As for intelligence, girls want a man who is smart enough to make wise decisions for themselves. Instead of having an indecisive man, who is not confident about the decisions he makes. If he feels insecure, we will feel insecure and we do not

want that. No one else said it, but I for one also want someone with emotional intelligence.”

“I’m sure finding someone who can make you laugh is good too,” adds Ross.

“Yeah, I would say so. Life is better if we can laugh.”

“I’d say it differently. Life is better when we laugh. Laughing makes life enjoyable. As do the words we think and say. Okay, so how about the third trait?”

“The third trait is finding a resourceful man. To a lot of girls that meant something different. To some it meant finding a man with money or land. To others, a resourceful man is someone who can bring home the bacon by knowing how to farm and procure food consistently. One girl said she is fine with a man not having land if he can build a home instead. We did not understand her until she explained herself. She said, ‘well building a home is not easy. A lot of effort and learning through trial and error is required. Wouldn’t a man capable of building a home be showcasing their competency to learn and work hard to provide shelter for their family. Not everyone knows how to build a home either. Unless many others learn the same skillset, are his skills not valuable?’ Jumping on the bandwagon, a minority of girls said it is okay if they do not own anything right now. If they can carry themselves in a manner indicating they will have more resources in the future. Then they will bet on them.”

“How about you? Does a man having money matter to you?,” asks Ross.

“I prefer not having to rely on a man. If I can bring money myself, that is what I want,” responds Sandra. Ross wants to continue

speaking with Sandra except the bell interrupts them. Standing up together, they head to their classrooms waving goodbye to each other. Neither of them mentioned whether they'd like to talk again. Regardless, Ross waits by the tree hoping he might see her again. When Octo rolls around, he sees her waiting under the tree.

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“You know, I am quite weird myself. Despite loathing men, here I am talking to you. Why did I decide to come to talk with you? I don't mean anything bad by that. I do enjoy our conversations,” says Sandra in an apologetic tone. Sitting with Ross I can tell something is off after I said those words. He looks somber, but it is sadder than that.

“I do not mind the reason you come to see me. All I know is I am glad that you do.” *Huh?* For a moment, my heart felt a tinge of happiness and sadness hearing him say that. The same happiness I feel when getting home and the same sadness I felt when leaving Abuela. A part of me said he might really have no one to talk to. Reminding me of when I first met Phoebe. Any hesitation I felt for coming to see him a third time disappeared with that thought. *I really do enjoy talking with him.* Sitting hunched over, he seems quite small. He looked a lot bigger the first time we met. Standing tall and firm with his shoulder back. His atmosphere felt different too. Scary, but also protective. “Hey Ross, try sitting upright.” “Why?” “I think you'd look better.”

“Is that so,” says Ross as he sits up and lifts his head. “Feels a little tiring.”

“You look better now though. Your back still needs to get a bit straighter,” says Sandra who puts her palm on Ross' lower spine as she pulls his shoulders back. “That's better.”

“Does this make a difference?”, asks Ross.

“Well, let's see,” says Sandra standing up. “Stand up. Now turn to the side. Okay, now face towards me. Hmm. Yeah, it totally makes a difference. Trust me.”

Later during the day, Ross sees his Dad. Looking from behind his desk, he pursed his lips when Ross walks by. He looks down again at the work he brought home. Not knowing why he felt dissatisfaction when seeing his son pass by.

With several weeks passing, we continue talking. Unlike me, Sandra is becoming more open at school. Meeting more friends as they gravitate towards her. Making me wonder if I have any right to talk with her. She explains to me how girls here, unlike her hometown, enjoy talking about school and future plans. Saying, back home doing farm work is a given. In this new country, there are more options of what we can do after finishing school. Telling me how a lot of girls want to become mothers. Wondering herself, why girls aspire to become one. Mentioning her goal is to manage a large farm or pursue a career that can bring her wealth.

She continues by stating some girls want to continue their education if money does not get in the way. From personal experience, the only roles I have seen women play are being a teacher, taking on administrative duties, or being a secretary. In contrast, men take more labor intensive jobs which earn them more money. An example of hard working men are the construction workers working under Dad. He pays them well and damn are they strong. There are times I am not sure how to feel when thinking about the toll their bodies are taking. Making me wonder if there is any way I can help them. Can I create something that helps them carry sandbags, concrete, and boulders across their worksite with ease? Are there treatments for their pain when they overwork themselves? In the end, I am

recognizing money is needed to follow through with any idea. Resourcefulness only helps to reduce the amount of money required to solve a problem. In any case, both are needed.

The funny part is money is actually not needed. We only need to convince people of working by reassuring them we will provide food and shelter for their family. Naturally, people do not trust others. Most have the experience of not keeping their word/promises to themselves. Believing everyone operates the same, they run with the following narrative. 'If I cannot keep promises that I make to myself, how can others keep promises they make to me'? For that reason, people work for money despite its illusion. No matter what happens, people will gravitate back to a money system. For me, I am naive and idealistic to believe there is a better way to live benefitting both the rich and poor. What we want to avoid is equal return. When people get an equal return for any extra effort and work they accomplish, this will harbor laziness and downgrade quality. It is the opportunity to gain more money that drives people to take risks and put more thought into the actions they take. Only a few will do it for fun.

I believe the system our country is heading towards has great possibilities, but runs the risk of imploding if needs are not met. Innately, I believe prices will even out. Unless there is an organization who creates a monopoly; therefore, gaining complete control over pricing. My main concern is if someone orchestrates to buy massive plots of land. Dividing it only to sell the land at a higher price. They will gain lots of money, but the ability to own a home becomes less feasible. Not that it will happen. Who on Terra can have enough funds to purchase so much land to accomplish such a feat. *No, someone will figure it out. You thought it, meaning someone will think about it too. To counteract them, you need the support of the people, money, and exceptional foresight derived from your wisdom. And the grace of God to keep you alive.*

Sounds dangerous. Still, I want to create a better living environment for those with and without money. We all deserve a better life. All I ask is for no one to get in the way. With or without me, when the time comes, history will repeat itself. When the 'have nots' become exceedingly high. They will overthrow any existing system and form of government having nothing else to lose and all to gain. For that reason, do not get in my way of preventing me from helping people get their needs met.

An important aspect after meeting people's needs of having water, food, shelter, and clothing is to allocate free time for workers to spend in leisure as a reward for working so hard. In an ideal form, people will come together to achieve necessary goals. Goals such as creating better roads, innovating machinery, improving agricultural practices, and providing people in the community with good food. The dilemma is who will be in charge? Perhaps the first generations will find success. But who is to say every generation will stay the same? At some juncture, a person with unsavory thoughts will think about increasing their personal benefits while decreasing their work obligations. What will prevent them from wanting to hire assistants who catch their eye rather than who is competent? If they do not like people disagreeing with them, why would they want them around questioning their authority? With no one watching, who is to say they will not spend their days taking advantage of those who have no choice, but to listen. Fearing backlash for refusing orders. We can try to prevent tyranny and abuse of power, but it will happen in spite of the safelocks we implement. Then the system meant to liberate people will now enslave them. In other words, humans are moronic beings who will find a way to fuck it all up.

The most important aspect of any system is tailoring it for problems we face today. Accomplished through pursuing the solution ourselves. If we are not leading the way, there is no lead to follow.



Actions as simple as passing a law preventing people from owning an excess amount of land is the purpose of controlling our laws, anything else is a regime. All we need is enough money and/or knowledge to learn the process of getting the job done. *And what is the process to change the law?* If we can answer this question, we are on the path to changing it.

If we keep failing by following procedure, we need to bend the rules. Recognizing there are consequences to breaking them. Part of the trial is navigating these consequences.

If we keep failing by following procedure, we need to bend the rules. Recognizing there are consequences to breaking them. Part of the trial is navigating these consequences.

In simpler terms, imagine we are before a judge. We plead to them, ‘can I have bread?’ The judge says, ‘why should I give you bread?’ For the trial, the goal is to convince the judge to hand over the bread. Another route is positioning ourselves to have external power and force the judge to rule in our favor. Either way, the goal is to **get the bread**. Does it matter what means we choose?

Moments like these make me wish I had a magical wand capable of influencing people to get them into what I believe they can help with. Whispering in their ear, telling them ways they can do it. Whether they listen or not is up to them. Controlling them is not the goal. To make a comparison, commanding a child to read carries a different feel versus seeing a child read for themselves. *Besides, what fun is there in having complete control?* With my mind and vision drifting, I sense I am forgetting something important. Having gotten deep in thought, I can hear a voice murmur. Will you-

“Ross, Hey Ross, Ross are you listening?”

Snapping out of my train I thought, I lost focus on what Sandra said.

“What were you thinking about?,” asks Sandra.

“I was thinking about how rules never change,” he responds.

“What rules?”

“Well, there are only two. Follow the rules and do not get caught breaking them. They apply here and outside of school.” I continue explaining to Sandra my prior thoughts. As I spoke, I consider if I might be boring her. Except her nodding and attention towards me told me to keep going. We end until the bell signals us to return to class. I never liked walking with anyone. At first, I tried walking separately from Sandra, but she kept insisting we walk together. Saying, we are heading in the same direction. Initially, I feared drawing attention. On the contrary, no one paid attention. Instead, their eyes face forward or towards the ground.

Thinking about it more later. I think people are occupied by their own problems and concerns, they have no time to pay anyone else attention. Anyone paying too much attention to someone else must have a lot of time on their hands. With no problems of their own. That or they are deliberately ignoring their personal problems. We all have problems we can solve. If a problem lingers, we must take immediate action because no one else will.

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Dad has been busy for weeks now. Arriving home too tired to drink. *Maybe it's all over.* Falling asleep, I wake up to loud *thuds\** at the door. Feeling groggy, I make out someone's voice. *Ross. Ross!*

“Ross! Hey Ross, come out here!”

It must have been the middle of the night when I heard banging against the door. Dad must have forgotten his keys again. I came running outside to open the door. The first words out of my mouth when seeing him are “Yes Dad?”

“I’m back (hic).” I stay silent. “Well? You got anything else to say?,” asks Dad.

“Welcome back Dad, I’m going back to sleep.”

“What the hell is that? Come here and sit down with me,” says Dad swaying onto the couch. “Do you know who pays for all this? Do you know who you have to thank for all you got? Me. That’s whooo. While you sleep all day I’m out there working. What are you doing? Nothing, absolutely nothing. As thanks, all I get is a goodnight.”

Moments like these make me stop hoping for uncomfortable events to stop happening. The more I wish for them to stop, the more they occur. Deep down I knew the only way to stop Dad is by confronting him. Still a child, I worried about being thrown out in the streets. *You will make it. There are ways to survive. You will figure it out.* My inner voice kept calming me, telling me everything will work itself out, but how could it know? I never lived on my own. How can it tell me I can do something I never done?

“You weren't working, you were drinking,” I replied without realizing I said it out loud.

“What the fuck did you say?,” says Dad, grabbing me by the shirt. He pulls me close enough that I can smell the alcohol in his breath. “You better not say that again!” Having stayed silent, I stare into his eyes which infuriates him more. He yells, “What did I say, Ross!”

“Yes Dad, I won't be disrespectful to you again.”

Letting go of my shirt, he says, “that’s better.”

“Thank you Dad for working hard. I do not know what I was thinking. Is there anything I can help you with before going to bed?” Dad only replies with, “no, go to bed. You got school tomorrow.” With no further words, I tell Dad good night. Walking back to my room, I can hear myself. *You are almost there. A little longer. High school is almost over. Soon, you can leave home to work.*

At school, I forget about Dad. I rarely see him anyways so forgetting about him is not too hard. When I do see him, he acts like he did last night. He gets especially mad on Sanctus. Luckily, he is usually not home on that day. Instead, he returns the following morning on Odiosis to shower before heading back to work. Leaving breakfast on the kitchen counter for me. Not telling me good morning or goodnight. There are days I prefer it like that.

Being in school for months now, nothing about my home life changed. I am still alone. Finding companionship only with fellow classmate(s) who need help. Most days I think about abstract ideas that cross my mind. Not imagining ideas can end. Not to say ideas stop, but we get to a point where thinking is more detrimental than helpful. We could, for instance, spend days thinking about someone’s reaction to what we have to say. Or instead, we can stop overthinking and approach the person. They might be friendlier than we imagined or crueler than we thought. We will not know until we act on our decision to approach them. No matter how much we think, we will not know how events can unfold until we act. No matter how many iterations we conduct inside our heads. None of it matters if we do not talk to the person.

For comparison, let us say a person stumbles across a bear cave. They could wait outside while debating with themselves if they should enter the cave or run away? Madmen march forward without

question to find out who is tougher. The bear or I. Jokes aside, worrying bears no fruit, but stress. Why not go inside the cave if the stress is killing us? If there is no bear, the worry goes away. If we do find a bear that is great too. Dying is painful, but when everything goes dark the pain goes away. At least then, we won't worry about getting mauled by a bear the next day. Only today.

I, on the other hand, would have left as soon as I saw the cave. While retreating, I would prepare for any possible attack. Tying a knife to an open hand. Making a spear for another. I am not staying around to wonder whether there is a bear or not. Unless I have a reason to not back down, I am running. Now, *what would make me unable to run?*

I thought about this question for days. With no luck, I evaluate myself. What makes me do what I do? I began exercising out of fear of not being able to defend someone important to me. When I teach others, why do I teach them? I like talking to them, to anyone. With nothing else to do, why not help? When I gave apples to those two problematic students bothering Sandra. Why did I give them apples? They remind me of myself. Why add more hatred to their lives? There is no point.

With all these thoughts. I am recognizing thinking is good, but can also get in the way. Taking my life as an example. Without Sandra approaching me, I would have never spoken with her. Given, I never came up with a reason to. I even forgot about her at one point. All of this makes Sandra more interesting to me. From observing her, I can tell Sandra moves for herself. This past month is a great example. The school announced they are looking for students to join the student council. No one ever joins the council nor do people hold any expectations for them. Only students who want to waste their time join. Immediately following the announcement, Sandra asks me

what fundraisers we can host. Unlike me, Sandra chose to join the student council saying what better time is there to learn than the present. She always did have her eyes fixated on earning money. Instead of seeing the council as a waste of time, she sees the council as an opportunity to experiment with how money moves between people. Before meeting up, I saw her asking students what their families ate and spent money on. When we met, she apologizes for seeing me on a day we usually do not meet. Telling me she was gathering data from students to predict what sells for profit. She then asks me, “Ross, how would you raise money?”

“I’m not sure. There is one idea- no wait it's dumb.”

“What’s the idea? Can you tell me? Please?,” asks Sandra, jumping at me. Seeing her excitement made me unable to refuse telling her.

“People take Temcus off, right? Given it is also winter, we could sell warm refreshments and sweets. The tricky part is convincing, namely parents, to come buy them at school. Parents are the ones holding the wallets after all. We can promote a movie night, but it is likely only a few students will come. With a small turnout, profits will be low. Since you are now part of the student council, convince the school to impose a mandatory movie night fee. For each student, a parent must pay four dollars for a ticket regardless if the student attends movie night or not. If a parent comes with their child on movie night then the ticket price will get sliced to one dollar. So if a father comes with his son that will come out to two dollars. If the son comes alone, the parents must pay four dollars. We will create a system to reimburse parents at the door. The goal is not to sell tickets, but to bring parents into the school to buy refreshments for themselves and their children. If a family of four or more come. That is a bonus. We need to send out letters explaining the mandatory fee to parents. Adding an acknowledgement section to avoid disputes on

the day of the event. We also need to write down the costs of each operation, calculate the number of attendees, and - What is it Sandra?" Before continuing, I see Sandra chuckle. *Did I say something funny?*

"Are you sure this a dumb idea? Sounds pretty good to me. And hey we gotta try it to see if it works, right?"

Instinctively, I thought Sandra was going to laugh at my idea. Seeing that Dad always does. Instead, Sandra listened to what I had to say and smiled. Seeing her smile made me feel better. Still, how long must we know someone to understand their thought process. I could tell Sandra is fascinated by the idea of crunching numbers, marketing the event, and seeing how far she can take this. For me, my initial thought was how can I bring families together while covering costs to host a good event. The profits were secondary to me.

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Change is something we rarely notice. By the time we do, we ask how did I get here? In the past, I'd be cold in the mornings and at night. Having done regular exercise on a daily basis for months now. I no longer feel hot or cold. When it's cold, I say it is pretty warm today. If it gets chilly, I ignore the stares and jog around school. On hot days, I tell the sun to bring it on. Telling others it is pretty fresh out here today. I truly believed what I said. Even when people complained to me about the heat. All I said to them is, 'what heat?'

What drove me to exercise is the repetitive dream where I am unable to defend someone I care about. The dream is now going away. Making me ask myself, what pushes me now? There is no longer a reason for me to get fit, but my inner voice does not accept such thoughts. Telling me, *'you might not need it, but those around you will.'* With no dream, I try picturing a situation that forces me to

demand I get stronger. The only mental image I come up with is seeing Sandra in front of a bear. I am not naive to believe we stand a chance against it. The chance of escaping is razor thin. Which might as well be nonexistent. Despite that, if exercising each day increases my chances of saving her by one percent then why not suck it up and do one more push up. I do not want to regret being unprepared if the day comes where I have to fight a bear. Without her, what other reason do I have for looking forward to each day? I'd rather risk my life for her than be without her.

Is this why people say women can make or break a man? That does not sound correct. I think the proper saying is, 'behind every great man there is a great woman.' Before meeting Sandra, I never thought about my posture or hair. Not until she told me, "I think a haircut will make you look a lot better. If you can afford it, why not get it?"

After asking Dad for money to get a haircut, he does not refuse. In fact, he said nothing at all. Which in his words means he approves. He even forks over extra cash. Telling me to buy new clothes too. Who knew changing my appearance and posture would increase the attention I receive. Guys would recruit me for sporting events which I did not refuse and more girls would approach me to make small talk.

I used to think looks do not matter, but perhaps they do to a certain extent. I take the week to think about what else I thought did not matter. Initially, I thought money does not matter, but if I set out to accomplish something. I need lots of it. Not for the sake of money itself, but for the idea behind it. Money allows me to move people who do not want to get moved. Those who earn it get to decide what society pursues. Whether it benefits people or not is up to them. I will say it is much harder to help others versus only ourselves. There



are also times where helping others makes a situation worse. Humans are humans after all.

Imagine we told others we can create a heaven here on Terra. Saying we only need to abide by certain rules in the rulebook. Rules such as being kind to our neighbors, trying to become better each day, avoid temptations, and never cheat on each other. The issue is everyone needs to follow them. When a few people break the rules, the rulebook gets thrown out the window. Those still abiding by them start losing. Making it more beneficial to help yourself than others. Those who still want to help, ask yourself *are you trying your best each day?* If you cannot help yourself, how do you expect to help others? Over ninety-nine percent of people will say no they are not trying their best. Those who say yes, nine-nine percent of them are liars. Our time is finite; we can only directly shape a select few. Forcing ourselves to put trust in others to fill roles we cannot.

Understanding numbers, I believe after thousands, millions, billions, trillions of iterations of our life, we will find ourselves in a lifetime where nearly everyone makes better choices for themselves and strives for greatness. In that brief pocket of time, we will achieve heaven on Terra. When that happens, what can we call it if not a miracle of the universe? Miracle or not, to reach that goal we need to become our best selves. Trusting others will follow suit. For we are the reason a better world does not exist.

Zooming out of our personal lives we need to look at the world around us. At its foundation, Terra is unruly. And because it is unruly, we can rule it. Individuals who figure out the art of ruling become administrators of the system. People who do not govern the system will simply find a role to fill within the system. Any role, including being an administrator, is always open to anyone who can position themselves. As for the roles no one knows exist, those are

open too but you have to find them. To illustrate, many years ago no one thought metal boats would float. Today, ports are filled with them. Not until people contributed towards creating metallic boats could we have known about the possibility of a maritime economy.

Life is a paradox. To succeed, you need to fail. Taking actions, means choosing inaction elsewhere. For me, the most ruthless paradox is what God gives. God gives us curses as blessings and blessings as curses. Yet, blessings and curses do not exist. We get to choose if a blessing stays a blessing and a curse a curse. I choose to see my blessings with gratitude while learning from my curses.

Sometimes I ask myself how I came up with these ideas? Moreso now. Sandra says my ideas are interesting and she likes hearing them. At first I thought she was trying to flatter me, but she keeps saying it. She must be saying it for a reason. Thinking about her words more, a strange thought crosses my mind. Do people comb through their day to remember the good moments? Moments like my teachers telling me to have a great day. Cherishing Orson's and Fiza's company as we try understanding our assignments. Or how Sandra waves to me each day. Do people pray on both good and bad days? Suddenly, I have more ideas to think about now.

For the next couple of days, I made a conscious effort to recognize when I contemplate ideas. Waking up, I jog before school. On the jog, I think about unresolved ideas running through my head. When I return home from the jog, I hop into the shower thinking about my preparation for the school day. During school, I think about what else I can learn while classmates try catching up. Should I bring a book, do homework, or teach others who are having a hard time understanding the material? When lunch arrives, I think about the meal I made. Should I have added more salt, did adding pepper make the sandwich taste better or worse, and how long did it take me to

prepare this sandwich? With the school day ending and no one around, I think about fictional stories I read. What made certain books better than others?

Arriving at the doorsteps of my home, I enter to see Dad home knocked out on the sofa with paperwork cluttering the living room table. Retrieving his blanket from his room, I lift his legs onto the sofa. Covering him up before heading to my room.

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Huddled in a group, we see Kiara's former bully passing by. Menda, the bully, is ostracized after spreading lies about her. A girl from our group says, "I SURE hope Menda stops showing up at school. Imagine sleeping with one dude only to sleep with another. Then lying about someone else doing it. Pathetic."

Without a word, Menda scurries away. Menda harbored jealousy towards Kiara for her modest looks and predisposed kindness. Her natural traits made her catch the eye of the boy Menda has been crushing on for the past year. With nowhere else to go, Kiara came up to Rebecca and me. She told us Menda spread lies about her sleeping with any boys who paid her. Stating her prim and proper routine is an act. Unlike me, Kiara cares about the lies others spread about her. There are days now Kiara does not show up to school. Paying Kiara a visit, I see her covered up in her blanket turned away from the door. While speaking with her, she stays motionless in bed. *I guess my words do not matter to her right now.* I find that funny. Hateful words matter to her more than my words of encouragement.

Still, I do not like my friend being tormented. I remember Pa said getting a job done depends on our relationship with others. For the next couple of days, I think about how I can use my relationship with others for my personal benefit of helping Kiara. The solution hits me. The following day during lunch, I approach Clark. I tell

Clark if anyone asks if he slept with Menda for him to reply with, ‘it almost happened until Sandra walked in.’ Immediately Clark replies with, “why the hell would I do that?”

“Clark, if you refuse. I will tell everyone you tried to violate me as I was having a panic attack. I am sure I am not the only one who can come out and say you have a violent history. You are a boy who gets scorned by the girls and gets into fights with boys who rub you the wrong way. Tell me, if the teachers put us in a room who would they believe? You or me? Oh, by the way. If you try anything with me, I will tell Ross.”

“Ross? What about him? You think he will do anything about it? Why would he?,” asks Clark.

“I am not sure what Ross would and would not do. What I do know is I am one of the few people he talks to. We enjoy each other’s company. If you understand, accept the idea that if I ask Ross for help, he is likely to help me. You have a choice, get in trouble for sexually assaulting me or tell a lie of almost sleeping with Menda. Side with me and I will never use this against you again. Nor will you face any severe punishment.”

“You will never use it against me again?,” asks Clark, not convinced.

“Of course not,” I reply.

“If I refuse. Won’t I get in trouble with Menda and her parents?,” asks Clark, reluctant to accept my terms.

“Don’t worry, at worst you will get a suspension for a few days. Since Menda seduced you, nothing she says will hold. With no evidence, it is our word against hers. I promise you, no other party will agree with what she says. When it all comes down to it, no one will care

who she “tried” doing it with. People will forget about you. Not her though. They will remember her as a skank. If she discloses the full story, she will need to admit to bullying Kiara. Not only will she get seen as whore, but also a liar and a bully.”

“Okay I get your point, I will do as you say,” says Clark. *The fool.* Only a fool forgets to get any agreement in writing. Of course I will keep my word, but I will never accept someone else’s. They can easily lie to me as I lie to them.

I made sure rumors about Menda spread around like wildfire. Acting nervous and restless, I get classmates to ask how I am doing. I pretend nothing is the matter. Letting the tension build for two days. The only ones asking how I am doing are mainly the girls who I approached a few weeks ago; when asking around about what values do they look for in a person. I pretend I have no one else, but them to confide a secret with. I tell them how I almost walked into Menda and Clark doing it behind the school building. Telling them, Menda told me to keep quiet or else. “I- I’m not sure what to do? She told me she’d spread lies about me. Like she did with Kiara. Kiara, a close friend, is getting bullied by Menda too for catching the eye of another man she likes. And- *and* Sorry, I’m not sure what to do. Will she come after me? Will my friends believe the rumors too? Do you? We were having such a great conversation the other week. I wouldn’t want that to get ruined. I- I just don’t know what to do.”

“Sandra, relax. Tell us what happened.”

I tell them the whole story. Soon, the news spreads across school. More boys try talking to Menda while girls stay away from her. The school board catches wind telling students to avoid spreading further rumors. The situation escalates as Menda brings her parents who claim her innocence. Kiara is brought in to tell her story of Menda’s bullying which goes beyond spreading malicious rumors. They call

me in, instead of diving into the details. I start crying saying all I want is Kiara back and for Menda to stop pushing me against the wall. I tell Menda's parents to look her in the eyes and ask if she ever spread false rumors.

The case ends when Menda agrees to apologize to me and Kiara. Neither of us pursue the matter past Menda's two week suspension. There is only one instance when Kiara faced me and asked, "Sandra did you- Uh, nevermind. Thank you Sandra." Since the incident, Menda no longer confronts anyone. Especially not me.

Part of me feels excitement from what I pulled off. I cannot tell anyone, yet I have to tell someone. Someone needs to know about my ingenious plan. Today is Octo, right? I can just tell Ross about it when I see him. Hearing the lunch bell ring, I break into a brisk walk to the door.

Walking through the courtyard, I spot Ross. He is unexpectedly walking with Northerners. I spot Esteban and Clark, they hand over a packet to Ross. In exchange, Ross gives them grapes before they walk off. Unlike before, I can now understand what they are saying. Ross thanks Clark and Esteban for their hard work. When they leave, Ross tells the girl standing next him he needs to go somewhere. Before Ross leaves, another Northerner asks Ross if he can help them review after school. Ross says it will be his pleasure to help. He keeps saying he has no one, but who are they then? Why does he not talk to them more often? How about the girls too? Why does he ignore the looks they give him?

Seeing him walk away, I snap out of it. I walk towards our regular meet up point. Instead of telling him about my accomplishment. I ask him, "Ross, why do you talk to me? Nothing I say is extraordinary."

He thinks about my question before lifting his eyes towards me.  
“Well if it came to your looks, I would have spoken with you much earlier. I mean, you are one of the most beautiful girls I have met. Except, that is not enough for me to approach someone. Otherwise, I’d approach too many girls. Most girls are pretty to me after all. But looks disappear when we grow old. With good fortune, all we have left is a companion to speak with. Not her looks.”

“Then why me? Why do you talk with me?”

“I’m not sure. All I know is that it is easy talking with you. I worry more about you not showing up anymore. Why would you? I have nothing interesting to say. Yet, you keep coming to see me. With that in mind, I talk with you knowing one day you will have enough of me.”

“Ross, what you say is always interesting to me. If it was not, I’d tell you stop ranting. If I did not like you, I would have stopped showing up a long time ago. Get it out of your head. You are interesting and have value. At some point, you gotta see it for yourself.”

I see the gears moving in Ross’ mind. He is questioning if he has value. His thoughts are written all over his face. “Hey Ross, say it with me. I have value.”

“I have value.”

“I cannot hear you.”

“I have value.”

“Again.” “I have value.” “Again.” “I have value.” “Again.” ... “I have value!”

“Great. Don’t let me hear you say anything else.”

“There is one thing I want to tell you,” says Ross to me.

“What is it?,” I ask.

“Another reason I like you is because you are so bright to me. You move to the beat of your own drum. You say what is on your mind. You pursue any goal you set out for yourself.”

“Don’t you do the same?”

“No, I don’t. Not for myself. Each time I act, I act for others. Not myself. The idea of going against oneself. Pursuing a goal for our own happiness is foreign to me. I wonder why?”

“Maybe you help others because what you really want is someone to help you. Then again, I never see you needing help with anything. Maybe what you are really looking for is someone to count on you for the purpose of having someone to talk to.”

*I knew it. Getting someone to know you is dangerous. I do not want her to see the ugly me.*

I decide not to pursue the issue further, sensing Ross is clamming up. Instead, I tell him how I feel. “Ross if I am bright. You are blinding. I hope one day you see it yourself.”

With that, we cut our conversation short.

8 8 8

I decide against telling Ross of the plan I carried out against Menda. After hearing Ross tell me how bright I am, I am reluctant from shattering his image of me. Instead, I reflect on the actions I took. Like Pa said, there is value among relationships. If I chose to never speak with other girls, the whole plan against Menda would have failed. If I never chose to speak with Ross, would Clark feel inclined



to help with the plan? Probably not. The plan required working with Clark, a man I do not like. Working with him I come to realize I am fine crossing those who I do not care for. Except, I have no desire of betraying people who do matter to me. If Ross or Kiara asked me what really happened I'd tell them. If Menda or any other girl asked, I could care less. Regardless if someone is with or against me, I will use them.

*Why did you do this? Was it for Kiara? Or yourself?* I tell myself I did it for Kiara, but was it really for her? All I knew is I had enough. *Enough of what exactly?* Enough of revisiting the past. Remembering the lack of control my family had for being illiterate. Alongside our initial fears of not knowing if this is the night we will get robbed. I felt powerless. The same powerlessness I felt on the night a grown man tried pinning me to the ground while my parents slept. Not until I heard a loud BANG\* did I feel relief instead of fear. I did not bury this memory out of trauma. I buried it out of fear from feeling satisfaction seeing the bullet pierce the man's skull. There were nights the man tried entering my dreams. The only way I thought of stopping the nightmares was to dream of slashing the man's face over and over and over until there is only mush. I felt no happiness or torment. I felt nothing except hatred.

The memory resurfaced a few days after encountering Ross. His aura felt familiar somehow. *Why?* Then I suddenly remembered that atrocious night. The night the cage that should have been kept locked opened up, releasing a beast. Unlike mine, Ross' beast felt different. There was no animosity, no hatred, no love, there was nothing. Having spoken with him for a long time now, I never detect malice. Nor alternative motives. Nothing except for a boy who feels alone. Making me wonder if he ever opened his cage.

Getting the outcome I desired with Menda, I felt in control for once. I have come to realize the mask(s) we choose to wear determines what we get. Speaking kinder to others helps us earn their cooperation. Crying gets people to feel bad for us. Stacking evidence in our favor forces people to not question our legitimacy. I think to myself, why not continue wearing masks? It gets me what I want after all.

Instead of returning to who I was, I chose to continue opening up to others. By speaking with people I gain their trust and knowledge? Once I gain their trust, I make it a mission not to break it. Why would I? Only if someone tries harming me or someone I care about do I become vengeful. When the opportunity to join the student council came up I took it to force myself to grow. Choosing the discomfort of others rather than staying inside my shell. There are times I feel inner conflict. Like two sides vying for control. At first, I could not handle it. Then with consistent practice, I soon questioned who the real me is.

Having worn a mask for so long. I no longer know if I am wearing one or not. What I do know is that I enjoy talking with people now. I can also recognize moments when I try deceiving them. The only ones I try never to deceive are my parents, Kiara, Rebecca, and Ross. I understand why I try staying truthful to my parents, Kiara, and Rebecca. But why Ross? He is not anyone I would say is extremely close to me so why do I feel guilt at the idea of lying to him?

He keeps telling me interesting ideas; therefore, I continue talking with him. When he tells me anything witty, I tell my parents about it. I spoke more about him than I realized. Why else would my parents keep asking when they can meet him? I always brush off the question. Or ask why they want to meet him that badly. They would smile and say, 'we'd like to know the man who keeps talking to our

only daughter so much. To see if he is a good man or not. That's all Mija.'

I seriously never considered introducing him, but if it gives them a peace of mind then why not? With fall vacation almost here, there are only two months left before our three month break from school. Soon, I will have no reason to see Ross. I made up my mind. I will invite him to my home.

At lunch, I go to our meet up spot. Arriving there, I see him lying under the shade as usual. When the time came to ask him if he would like to visit my home, I froze. I have never frozen before. Why now? After greeting him, there is silence. I look down as I try to find my words. *Think, how did I invite Phoebe? Oh Phoebe... I wonder how she is doing now?*

"Ross, I have a question for you."

"What is your question Sandra?," asks Ross.

"There was a situation back home. A close friend asked for my opinion on whether she did the right thing. You see, her closest friend named Dehya called her after school. Behind the school's building she tried kissing her. The issue is that they are both girls and their feelings were not mutual. What should she have done? And isn't it a sin to like the same sex?"

Ross thinks about it for a moment before saying, "well none of us are God. What right do we have to judge others? None. We are no better. Each of us sins. In the end, God will judge if what we did was right or wrong. Unless she killed someone, I do not see the problem. Perhaps she should have asked if she could kiss her first, but it could have been that she had reason to believe the feeling was mutual."

“How? Why would she think it was mutual?,” I ask.

“I am not sure Sandra. I was not there,” replies Ross.

“My friend did not talk it out with her, was that the wrong choice? Was it a mistake? She really does like her. She was just surprised. By you know, the kiss.”

“If by wrong choice you mean kissing the same sex then according to the scripture that is a mistake.” Ross sees Sandra dejected and continues, “but if it were me. I would have kept them as a friend. Making a real friend is hard. I rather keep them than toss them. I will respect their choices as long as they respect my religion. Respect is sometimes given through silence. If your “friend” gets the opportunity to make up she should take it.” With nothing else to say, they sat there until Sandra chose to speak again.

“Hey Ross?”

“Yes, Sandra?”

“Would you like to visit my parents? They keep asking me to invite you over.”

“When would I come over?”

“Maybe on Octo after school. Ma will cook a meal. We can get Pa to tell us a story too. You don’t have to, but my parents might ask if you want to spend the night that’s how they are. Make sure to ask your own Pa if spending the night is alright.”

“I would love to come. Let me ask my Dad first.”

We sit together a little longer under the shade making small jokes and looking at the clouds. I start off strong when I try telling Ross a

story based on the clouds I see. As the story progresses, I find it harder to continue. I keep asking myself why did the character I create continue to lie? How did they get from point A to point B? What had to happen for them to change?

I think to myself if I am taking too long telling this story. I look at Ross who stays attentive. He tells me to take my time. Throwing suggestions for what route the story can take. There is no value in speaking about a false story with no meaning. Nonetheless there is something about that time I miss with him.

8 8 8

Ma got elated hearing the news about Ross coming to pay a visit. Pa grumbled asking if I am sure he is the one. ‘The one’? I told Pa to stop getting funny ideas. Pa grumbles as he fetches wood, but I can tell he is looking forward to meeting Ross. He even gives himself permission to come home early today. Pa’s usual schedule calls for watering his fields before work. Then eating with Ma, taking the lunch bag she made for him to work. Wrapping up with eating a large meal when we all get home.

Pa keeps saying that with so many people going into factories there are less people wanting to work out in the fields. As an incentive, the local Church convinced our council to sell farmland at a lower cost to help people who want to pursue farming. Pa finds that crazy. Not only do crops sell for more here, they get sold more too. Pa is convinced this will not last forever. Other people will see the opportunity too. When they do, food supply will go up (increase) which will lower prices again. To drive it home Pa says, “remember Sandra, everything comes to an end. When we thought we could do something, we no longer can. So don’t think so much. Go out there and get to work. If we cannot show up when it does not matter what

makes us think we will when it does? Try not to waste an opportunity because we never know if we will have another.”

When Pa finishes stacking wood next to our fireplace there is a knock at the door. Must be Ross. Earlier this week, Ross said his Dad gave him permission to visit. He said his Dad only asked, “do you trust this so-called Sandra?” When Ross said yes, his Dad only said, “I won’t be here that night either.” Those words stung me.

“Come in, come in,” I hear Ma say.

“Thank you for having me.”

Pa dashes to the door as he hears Ma inviting Ross in. At the door, Pa stands up straight looking like he wants to defend the place. Putting out his hand Pa says, “You must be Ross.”

Taking his hand Ross says, “It’s a pleasure to meet you. Sandra always says great things about you two. I honestly did not want to come, but I would find it too disrespectful not to. You two matter to Sandra so being disrespectful to you is like being disrespectful to her. I cannot do that to her.”

Hearing that, I give Ross a light tap on the head. Telling myself, *what are you thinking?*

“You are very much like one of my coworkers. They speak what is on their mind. I will get right to it then. Do you like my Mija or not?”

“I do,” says Ross with a straight face.

Does he understand what he said yes to?

“But as a friend. Nothing more.”

“Why is that?,” asks Pa. “Is she not good enough?”

Ross looks down as if he never thought about it before. “I am not sure. She is *really* pretty. We do get along. I never get bored talking with her. But she does not see me that way so I rather not think about it.”

“What if she said she likes you more than a friend?,” asks Ma.

“That’d make me happy, but I’d ask her why?”

His words rile me up. Like I want to slap him. I thought I told him to stop talking like that. He looks at me for a split second.

“I made a mistake. I do value myself so if Sandra ends up needing someone, I will be there for her.”

Pa stares into Ross for a few more seconds. Then Pa calls him to follow him outside. I can hear their whole conversation. “Do you think you can help me with the chicken? Defeathering it and all.” “I definitely can.” “Great, would you mind also helping me with some gardening too while Sandra and Kaori cook the chicken?”

As I hear them, Ma calls me over to help with cutting the veggies. Ma taps me on the arm with her elbow saying, “he seems nice. Quite the character. Pa is probably out there trying to convince him to marry you?”

“Stop it Ma. We are not like that.”

“That’s what Pa and I thought too, but we continued talking regularly. That’s all you need. A partner willing to work alongside you through the good and the bad. It wouldn’t be the worst idea for us to see you with someone. Right now, you have Pa and I, but we won’t be here forever. Being alone is terrifying. You may not think much about it now, but you will one day. So, don’t get too grumpy with Pa. As parents, we cannot help but worry. Can you pass me the carrots beside you?”

After defeathering the chicken using boiling water, we crouch down to pick up tomatoes from the garden.

“Hey, umm.”

“You can call me Owen. Pa if you marry Sandra. You won’t see another girl like her again.”

“Yes, right. Mr. Owen, do you sell these veggies at the market too? I have not seen tomatoes like these. They look different.”

“Ah, those. Those are from my home country. They did not grow like that before. Maybe the temperature here is better or the soil is richer. Wait, look up there.”

Turning my head. I see nothing.

“See that right there. That’s a cumulus humilis.”

“Cumulus humilis?”

“Yes! They bring good weather and are fun to look at. Ha, I remember staring at them with Kaori as we held hands under a tree. At least, we still have that. See there, that looks like **an elephant** and the cloud next to it looks like a **giant baby**. Did you know that the giant baby brought his toy elephant to life? When filled with life, the elephant kept looking down from above the clouds. Wondering why other animals looking like it are down here and not up there. The elephant thought, how does the green floor feel? How about the brown dust? The elephant’s curiosity got the better of him. He followed his heart and tried leaving the heavens. Having seen him, the giant baby followed the elephant telling him to stay with him for all he will find below is misery. He catches the elephant before he leaps. He tells the curious elephant to watch



over this land with him for a century. Only if he waits with him for a century does the giant baby promise not to stop him if he still chooses to leap down. So, there they are. Together, watching our world for decades now.”

“Really?”

“Did you like it? Fun right? Hearing a story makes you forget about your troubles. Just do not get lost in them for too long. Or you will lose sight of what is in front of you. How about we go check on the soup,” says Mr. Owen as he wraps an arm around my shoulder right as Sandra’s Ma calls us over.

8

With the chicken soup about done, Ma calls Pa and Ross inside. Sitting at the table, Pa gives a small speech thanking God for the food and for bringing Ross here today. Typically, we only close our eyes and thank God individually for what he has given us. I, personally, only say *thank you* inside my head before opening my eyes again. Most of the time, I have no idea who I am thanking. I guess I am thanking whatever force brought us here together today.

Without skipping a beat, Ross asks Pa a question before any of us start eating. “Mr. Owen, earlier outside you named a cloud column humus”

“Cumulus humilis,” says Pa correcting Ross.

“Yes, right. Where did that name come from? Do other clouds have different names? And how can you tell them apart?”

Pa does not hesitate to reply right away. During the whole lunch, we listen to Pa and Ross go back and forth. For each answer Pa gave, Ross had more questions. I interject here and there answering questions I know the answer to. When I do, Ma smiles. I

ask her why she is smiling so much. All she says is, “oh, no reason.” Ross then asks the same question I asked long ago. He asked, “Mr. Owen, how do you know so much about clouds? I never read or heard much about them till today.”

“Well, where do I start? When I was young I loved making up stories to tell others. The issue was no one, except for an older brother and my Ma, would listen. Everyone else kept insisting they were too busy to listen to me. Funny enough, with both my parents passing away the schedules of my siblings opened up right away to debate who has the rights to our father’s property and businesses. But that is a different topic. With the help of my Ma, who comes from a line of storytellers, my storytelling got better. Her family also had a peculiar tradition. When their children turn twelve, they start training them to pass down oral stories of historical events. That’s how it should have been except my older siblings complained to my father about the pointlessness of having to learn about tall tale stories. Stories about people venturing into the bottom of the seas, communicating across lands, and men who could soar through the sky. I never got to hear them in full except for one she told me and my older brother before passing away. She called the tale Skybird. Covering the exploits of the Wright brothers who defied all reasoning. For why should a man have the ability of a bird. If you ask me, if God did not want us to see the beauty of the world from above then God would not have given us the wisdom to learn. Whether something is good or evil depends on the person. I am not going to get into philosophy right now because my chicken is getting cold.”

Ross gives a look of surprise followed by looking at his own plate that is still full. Soon, they both start chowing down before continuing their conversation.

When we finish with lunch, Ross takes our plates and starts washing them. “You don’t have to clean them. Leave it to us.”

“Mrs. ah-”

“Kaori.”

“Mrs. Kaori, I want to clean them. Otherwise, I will feel bad for eating without bringing anything. I’d like to do this. Please.”

“You don’t have to feel that way. We wanted you to come. Now go sit over there,” says Ma gently scooting Ross to the side. In response, Ross wipes down the counters instead. By effect, Pa and I start cleaning around our home too. When we finish, we sit down outside to eat sliced melon.

“That reminds me. We did not finish our conversation. Where did I leave off? Oh, right. The story of the Skybird influenced me a lot. From the story we learned about the terminology for clouds helping us to better predict the weather. Unfortunately, Skybird is one of the last stories I heard from my Ma. She ended up passing away when giving birth to my sister. There were complications and they both died that day. My father was never nice, but he did try to give us a better life. Except when my Ma passed away, he became even crueler. He would yell at us for no reason when returning from work, drinking in his free time, and refusing to eat most of the time. A year later, he passed away having given up. At his funeral I kept wondering did the rest of us not matter? I did not see him much in the end because the year prior he kicked me out. At the proceeding, he named Joseph as the successor to his companies. As for his land, it got distributed equally among my siblings. For me, he left nothing. When I turned fourteen and before he kicked me out, I decided I had enough of my household. There was nothing tying me down. I wanted to meet new people, see new sights, and meet someone who would talk to me. When I did move, my lifestyle changed drastically. Except for farming there was nothing to do. I thought I made a terrible mistake. What gave me comfort is that people walking by would actually talk to me. When

I told them a story they would listen. What else was there to do? Using the funds I gained through work, I would travel moving through towns looking for more work. I wanted to prove I could make it on my own. I found out that as towns got bigger, the less people interact. Eventually, I fell in love with a free spirit. Her smile brought me happiness even on my worst days. Maybe there was a better path, but if all my suffering in loneliness meant meeting Kaori again. I'd do it without thinking of it."

With his story done, Pa gives Ma a big smooch. Ross and I look away as they kiss. Ma gives her side of the story too. We continue talking and soon we find ourselves talking about the most random topics. None of us notice when the sun goes down. Before leaving, Ma and Pa give Ross a hug. He stood stiff like he never had a hug before. I shook his hand instead of hugging him which only made my parents give me a dirty look. *Oh, fine.* I give Ross a hug before seeing him off.

Soon after that visit. We start seeing Ross more regularly. Meeting him on a weekly basis by the time school is almost out. He never said it, but I could tell with each visit he kept brightening up. It made me happy. Maybe Pa and Ma are getting to me, but I am starting to think maybe I do like Ross after all.

# Luffy

That Fall, I visited Sandra's home weekly. I felt remorse for never bringing anything. I never asked Dad for much besides a few books. Not until now. Walking into his studio, I see him hunched over his work desk. "Hey Dad. Is there any chance I can work at your company to earn money?"

"What for?"

"I feel bad for never bringing anything to Sandra's family when I visit. And I do not want to ask you for money either. I'd like to earn it, if it is alright with you."

He thought about it. Then said, "show up tomorrow. I will have you work with the construction workers."

I was surprised by the words of Dad. There was no resistance, no questioning, nothing. I walk out the room questioning if I heard him right. Dad only permits me to work three days a week. Saying he does not want to take work away from others. But his words did not match his eyes.

For the days I did not work construction, I worked alongside Mr. Owen cultivating his fields. What else is there to do? Besides, I enjoy listening to his stories. Sandra and Mrs. Kaori are there too. We'd all joke around. I began feeling less alone with others around. I thought it would last and it did for a couple of months.

8 8 8

Ross says a lot of interesting things. But there is something about the way he brightens up as he speaks that makes me happy. When that happens what can I do, but listen. Telling him to go on.

Lately, there is an aspect I do not like about him. Since meeting my family, he is starting to open up to others. Which makes me feel conflicted. On one hand, I am glad he is growing. On the other hand, I wish he hadn't because others are starting to notice him too. Especially the girls.

Since the start of the year, we have been hanging out more publicly. Making it inevitable that he met my closest friends. When Ross got to speak with Kiara, her smile beamed. Apparently, Ross had been dropping off notes at her home when the whole bullying incident occurred. Getting into arguments with classmates who spoke trash to her. When I introduced him to Rebecca and Kiara, his first words were, “wow you are both so beautiful. I wonder what lucky guys will get you two.” Rebecca smiled too, but hers was different. Before they could talk more, I put myself between them. I mean, I met him first. That's what I do not like about him. Why does he have to compliment other girls besides me? *Wait huh. Isn't it fine that he talks with other girls? He is single.*

∞ ∞ ∞

This year Sandra and I share the same literature class. During class, our teacher makes us form small groups to brainstorm the main events from the story we read. I already had an idea of what they were, but I was not sure if they were correct. No one spoke initially. Right before I was going to speak up another classmate named John said, “Alright everyone, we need some ideas. Anyone got anything? Pass the marker, I'll write our ideas down.”

Classmates started sharing their ideas. The issue was they kept repeating the same main idea using different words each time. Right or wrong, I chose to stay quiet to allow others to speak first before voicing my own thoughts. Plus, John sounded confident in what he

was doing. Except I started doubting his ability when I saw nothing written on our poster with half of the class period having gone by.

“Hey everyone. I do not want to be rude, but let's write some of these ideas down on the poster.”

John looks a little surprised. He responds by saying that sounds like a great idea. Everyone nods in agreement. Seeing how awful John writes, I suggest to John if he would not mind letting Lizbeth write instead. I advocate her great penmanship. Hearing me, my classmates agreed to have Lizbeth write on the poster. With the poster almost finished, everyone says, “Wow, you write so pretty Lizbeth.”

I take over the group discussion by asking questions. My goal is to help direct our thought process. Helping my classmates identify the difference between details and the big picture. Otherwise, we will remain at an impasse.

Before today, I thought John was a charismatic and smart leader. And earlier this year, when Sandra asked to join my group for the class project John interrupted. He said she would be better off in his group. Telling her how fun it will be to work together. She looked at me for some reason. I did not object because at the time I thought she was better off in his group than mine. I kept telling myself John is a better man than me.

I kept assuming he, like others, knew best. Jogging home, an epiphany crossed my head. I do not think everyone thinks about the importance of exercise. Exercise helps us maintain our health and strengthens the chance of protecting ourselves or someone we care about. I must be crazy, but is there also a chance others do not think either? Do people not reflect at the end of their day? Envisioning what they will do tomorrow before falling asleep. I feel silly for

putting people on pedestals believing they do no wrong nor make mistakes. Have I been naive?

Today, I recognize I think differently than others. But I still believe I can learn lessons from anyone. When I say anyone I mean **anyone**. I keep myself humble by reminding myself that no matter how smart I believe I am there is always someone who will know more about a given topic than me. Since the day Sandra told me to value myself more. I kept telling myself *I have value. I have a good head. No matter what happens I will figure it out. Nothing can oppose me when I put my trust in God. For everything crumbles before God. If I lose trust, which I do, I have a list of accomplishments I can look back at. I have sold house to house. I have survived in solitude for years. People come to me for solutions not problems. I have helped a multitude of classmates with assignments. I have gained the trust of fellow coworkers. If there was nothing on the list, I can always add to it by doing anything.*

I have come to accept that I should have confidence in myself when I speak. People do listen and for a good reason. I know what I am saying and why I am saying it. Not only that, I also notice a lot of people are reluctant to act. I was too until Dad forced me to knock on doors trying to sell our services to them. I still get nervous sometimes, but I get through it. Now, I only freeze up when it comes to Dad. I do not fear confronting others, but I back down when Dad is involved. I do not know why.

Overall, I learned that if we think too long we may as well admit we will not act. Act too quick and we will have acted without thought.

The following time John tried convincing Sandra to join his group. I grabbed his wrist recognizing his intent to physically pull her towards his group. I did not want him to touch her. I told him in a clear voice that Sandra will not be joining him. Grabbing her hand, I slowly walk her to my group. I let her go not realizing I may have



made her uncomfortable. She always has a look of disgust when boys try touching her, but when I turn there is a faint smile.

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Life began feeling more comfortable. I spoke with more people at school, spent more time with Sandra's family, and felt more confident about myself. Then like a bag of ice falling on my head everything collapsed.

Late into the afternoon, Dad came home bloodied. I could see the blood dripping from his arm and head. Enough blood that his clothes got soaked and stained.

"Dad what happened!" I said running to Dad's side helping him by having him lean on me. He stood there motionless while I began treating his wounds.

"I think we should go see a doctor, Dad. This is a lot of blood."

He sat there and stared at me with motionless eyes. Then he said, "no." He stood up despite his injuries making his way through the kitchen cabinet. He began shuffling through our utensils. I could see him slide something in his sock. Then he said, "I'll be right back."

"Dad, please don't go!"

"Let go Ross, I said I'm going!"

"No, don't go. If you go I will be all alone." Despite all Dad has done, I did not want him to go. I had the premonition if he walked out the door I'd never see him again. I held on tight, pressing my face into him. I don't remember how long I cried. I do remember still sobbing as I got carried to bed. The following morning, I saw Dad stay home from work for once. That is when it all started. Since

that night, Dad's behavior became more extreme or maybe that's how he has always been, but I chose not to notice.

The beatings he would give decreased, but he began insulting me more frequently. How is it that I feel more hurt by his words than by the whips of his belt? Then the day came. I could see Dad walking across the field carrying something in his arms. It came out of nowhere. He brought home a new companion for me.

“Ross, look here. I brought you a brand new dog.”

In his arms, he was carrying a new pup. I was not happy nor sad about it. I just had so many questions. Where did he come from? What is his name? Why'd you bring a new dog here? Where is his mom?

“This here is Luffy. While you are not at school, you'll be in charge of him from today onwards. I am going back to work tomorrow. Make sure to show him around. He's your responsibility while I am not around. Are you fine with that? Think you can handle it?”

“Umm, yes Dad I can.”

I take Luffy from the arms of Dad and carry him into my room. Seeing him shivering, I wrap him with my blankets. Luffy kept quiet the first few days then began barking nonstop regardless if it was night or day. I could support it, but Dad could not. With a look of irritation, Dad would march into my room to say, “Ross I thought you said you could handle Luffy. If he does not calm down, I will throw him outside.”

Dad was never a fan of loud noises. Except since the incident his hearing became more acute. The night Dad had enough of Luffy's whimpering he marched into my room and yanked him from my

arms. Dad threatened me to let go of Luffy unless I wanted to get beat. Like he promised, he left Luffy outside on the cold dirt. My heart kept hurting hearing Luffy whimpering outside my room. But what can I do? Maybe Luffy, like me, was wondering where his Mom could be. Where was she while he cried all alone in the dirt? After Luffy spent consecutive days outside, I made my choice. The following night when Dad tried yanking Luffy from my arms, I told him to allow me to take Luffy out instead. Wrapping Luffy with two blankets, I sat outside in the cold with him. At least then he will not be alone. I sat there hugging Luffy to keep warm. All Dad did was look at me in contempt telling me why the hell am I sitting outside in the cold for a damn dog. I felt that dark feeling again. Then I realized it was only me telling him to *go die*.

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I miss Abuela. I miss my old home, but I am also glad I got to meet new people. Life is getting better, but why is it that when life seems to go up, it can bring you down to your knees in an instant?

Spending time with Ross is always great, but then everything changed for some reason. He suddenly stopped showing up at my home. Keeping to himself at school. Secluding himself under his favorite tree again. I no longer see him on Octo or more like he is avoiding me on that day. Why? Did I do something wrong? When I did see him, I never pestered him. I could see something was going on. It was made clear by seeing the heavy bags under his restless eyes. When asking him if he is alright, he keeps quiet which ticks me off. Feeling bothered, I chose not to speak with him for some time. Why can he not tell me what is going on? Ma and Pa kept asking me about him. Telling me to tell him he has to come because they have not thanked him for buying us new plates.

I had enough. At lunch break, I marched right next to him as he laid on the ground. I told him, “What is your big deal!? Are you too good to talk to me now? My parents want to thank you for the plates so you better come with me after school.”

Ross laid there quietly before saying, “I can’t go.”

“Why not?”

Again silence. “If- if I stood there and saw you. If I saw you get hurt by someone and ran away. What right do I have to stand next to you?”

“Ross I have no idea what you are talking about, but you are coming with me today.”

“Bu-”

“Stop. You are coming with me and that is final.”

Ross finally sat up unable to protest. “Alright, I’ll go. But I need to head home first.”

“Sure, I’ll go with you.”

“No! I mean, you don’t have to. I can go by myself.”

His response is a little weird, but I do not linger on it. Instead, I tell him, “fine, you can go alone, but I need you to do something for me.”

“What?”

I sat down patting the space next to me. “Sit here then turn around. Good. Now slowly lay on your back.” Lightly grabbing his head, I place it onto my lap. “Now sleep.”

“Bu-”

“Stop saying but. It does not suit you. Now sleep. Or do you want me to go to your home after school?”

Without being able to argue, Ross loosens up and lays on my lap. I never thought about it before, but he has rough hair. A bit prickly at its ends. I twirl my fingers between his hair feeling a sense of pleasure from doing so. Either he thought nothing of it or was tired because he fell asleep almost immediately. When the bell rang, Ross did not wake up. We end up skipping literature class together. While he slept I continued playing with his hair thinking he looks a little funny with his sleepy face, but he looks at peace.

After school I went home to wait on Ross. I told Ma about him coming over. All she said is she will make something extra special for tonight's dinner. I waited for him outside on the porch while doing homework. He took a lot longer to arrive, but from a distance I could see him carrying something in his arms. Not being able to wait any longer, I walk towards him. Up close now, I got a little shock. Ross had been carrying a newborn puppy.

“He cannot walk much. Do you think your parents will mind that I brought him?”

“I don't think they will. Can I carry him by chance?”

As Ross is about to hand over the puppy to me, he starts whimpering not wanting to leave Ross' arms. Reaching his little paws towards him. I end up handing him back to Ross. Only getting to pet his little head. Once inside, Ma screams to ask who the little puppy is. Ross tells us his name is Luffy. On cue, Pa walks through the door. When he sees Luffy he asks, “And who is this? A puppy! Look Kaori, a puppy!” My parents never bought a pup, but from their expression I

could tell they definitely want one. They surround Luffy trying to get him to play. Seeing Luffy look anxious, they back off.

At the table, my parents ask Ross why he had not come over recently. He explains he had been going home early to take care of Luffy. They ask about Luffy's parents to which Ross replies he has no idea. He says his Dad brought him home one day and told him to take care of him. "Once he gets more accustomed he can get left alone more. Before leaving for work Dad leaves him in a kennel, but I do not like it. The thought of him being all alone for hours does not sit right with me. That is why I run back home after school. His loud barking does keep me up at night. I think he barks because he sleeps during the day. I would too. Sleeping makes you forget about the world."

"How about this? Bring Luffy over here in the mornings and I will take care of him. How does that sound? Is that okay with you Owen?," says Ma enthusiastically.

"That is definitely okay with me. Besides, we love puppies. We love seeing them grow and play around. You can bring him whenever."

"No, I cannot do that. You guys are busy and I do not want to bother you. I will take care of it," says Ross.

"Hey Ross, if we could not do something we would not offer," says Pa.

"That's right. I'd like to have Luffy around too. It gets lonely at home while I wait for Pa and Sandra to return home. I tend to our garden, but it does not take all day. Taking care of Luffy will only make me have to serve an extra bowl of food. We can live with that. Luffy will keep me company and I will give him company too," says Ma.

“I’m still not sure.”

“That is what we said and that is final,” says Ma smiling as she tries reaching for Luffy to carry him. Since then, Ross brings Luffy over in the mornings on Sanctus, Odiosis, Cibus, Medio, Octo, and Dies. If he visits us on Cetera or Temcus, he brings Luffy along. Ross tries giving us money for the food we spend on them. Both of my parents refuse his money. Without being able to offer anything, Ross gradually purchases power tools and an assortment of fabrics. I had no idea why until I saw him working with Pa in our shed. Inside, I saw contraptions. All they told me was that one day they will make something that will allow us to fly through the sky. *They’re crazy.*

There were no issues anymore. Ross began brightening up again, but I could tell something was still off. There was a part of him that changed. I tried not looking, but there was something there. It made me shiver, but at the same time I felt safe. I chose to believe it was all in my imagination.

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I was reluctant to let Sandra’s family take care of Luffy. I tried offering them money for helping, but they refused. No one had refused to accept money from me before. With not much else, I thought about how else I can show them my appreciation. Then a crazy thought crossed my mind. Can I help develop a method to allow us to glide through the sky? Flying through the sky is not my aspiration, but picturing Sandra, Mr. Owen, and Mrs. Kaori smiling seeing a view no else has. That brought me motivation. Besides, would it not be jaw dropping to fly through the sky? It should not be possible, but what if we succeed? There was excitement behind that thought.

At home, Dad asked me about where Sandra’s family lived. I tried avoiding the questions, but Dad insisted on bringing a gift over to

them. With reluctance, I gave Dad directions to get to their place. In response, Dad said he will visit them tomorrow. Walking to school, I had a bad premonition. Sandra and I will be at school. Mr. Owen will not be home till at least the afternoon. I worried because Dad has been acting more strange. Dad used to have more self-control. Nowadays, he seems off. He likes drinking, but Dad never drank before work. Now he does. When I try asking him if he should really be drinking before work he gets mad. He throws anything near him at me. At some point, I stop asking. I no longer expect him to give me any explanation for his actions. Instead, I anticipate coming home to see him being passed out on the sofa with a beer can tipped over on the ground. When did this scene become normal for me?

Dad was fine on the days he did not drink. He would only complain about hearing a ringing in his ear. Telling me that drinking helps make the ringing go down. It was not an issue at first. Over time though, the more he drank the more he became dependent on it. His mental state got worse too. He became easily frustrated and the words he said made no sense. For these reasons it is no wonder why I am anxious about Dad visiting Mrs. Kaori. Instead of being at the school gate, I am at the doorstep of Sandra's home. I knock on the door, but no one answers. I decide to come in from the back. Before walking inside, I can see Dad talking with Mrs. Kaori through the window.

I see that Mrs. Kaori is turning on the stove to heat up a pot. I also see Dad trying to stand closer to her as they speak. With subtleness, she steps to the side creating space between them. I can hear Dad trying to joke around. Out of kindness, Mrs. Kaori gives a dry laugh. It is all fun and games until Dad closes the distance and forcibly grabs Mrs. Kaori by the waist. She tries pushing Dad away telling him she does not like it. Telling him to let her go. Mrs. Kaori starts



squirming trying to break free. My breathing gets heavier as my hands roll into fists.

In an instant, I heard Mrs. Kaori's voice go from anger to a whimper when failing to overpower Dad. Telling him, "Stop! Please Stop. I don't want this! Let go!" Hearing her words made something snap inside of me. I never had a mother, but I knew if I did I would want someone like Mrs. Kaori. If I made a mistake, sure she would get mad, but she would never fail to explain why she did. She only got mad when I kept refusing her goodbye hugs. I still freeze up like a rock no matter who gives me a hug, but I know she means well. I always fear Dad, but hearing Kaori's voice pleading for help made the fear go away.

Opening the backdoor, I walk inside. From an outsider's view, looking at how calm I enter the room you would think I saw nothing. My calmness surprises me too. Dad immediately lets go of Mrs. Kaori who, unbeknownst to him, held a large pan behind one hand. Dad turns his head to see who came inside. Spotting me, Mrs. Kaori lets go of the pan and walks over to give me a quick hug. She asks, "Ross, what are you doing here? You should be at school." As she gives me a hug, my hands roll up and crack. *How dare Dad touch her? He better not touch her. I won't let him. Not again.*

Turning towards Dad I tell him, "Dad. I think we should go home."

"I think I want to stay a little longer. You go on ahead."

"**No.** Dad **I think** we should go home."

"And who the fuck do you think you are to-"

"**Dad, I said** we should go home!"

All the fear I had for my father disappeared. It got replaced by the fear of picturing Dad harming Mrs. Kaori. My mind also showed me what would happen if I do not take my Dad home right now. Dad says goodbye to Mrs. Kaori as do I. We walk outside in silence. I am quite perplexed. Dad never listens to me. Making me wonder why he chose to listen this time around. Not having walked far I tell Dad, "I need to go back to tell Mrs. Kaori something. Right after, I will head to school. Oh, also Dad. Don't try that again. I mean it."

Dad has a face like he wants to say something, but ends up keeping it to himself. Before heading off I tell Dad, "Everything I have is because of you. I want to thank you for that Dad. At the same time, I do not want you to hold that over me. If the day comes where you want to kick me out sure I will be scared, but I will figure it out. Do you know why?... It's because I am more afraid of you harming someone I care about than being tossed into the streets. That said, don't come to their home again." *If you do, you'll be dead to me.*

Dad never gave a response. Without turning back, I head towards Sandra's home. The expression Dad gave is one I have never seen. Still, I chose not to look behind. All I tell Mrs. Kaori is for her to inform me if my dad ever tries anything funny with her again. Telling her what he did today is not okay.

I never heard the details of the aftermath, but the following day Sandra told me about her parents getting into an argument. She has no idea why. Coming home from school, she saw her Pa fuming at the ears. Meanwhile, her Ma was trying to stop him from going somewhere. They managed to calm him down together. Their argument ends with Pa telling her not to stop him the next time any man tries touching her. What Sandra could not understand is why her Ma said, "if it happens to Sandra, I will never stop you. The reason I do not want you to go is for Ross nothing else." For this

reason, Sandra asks if I have any idea what her parents were arguing about. I tell her I wish I knew more. Which is true, I wish I knew more about what they spoke about before Sandra arrived home.

That same day, Sandra and I walk home together. At the dinner table, Pa touches my shoulder to thank me for being here yesterday morning. He asks what made me come. I tell Papa about my dad asking for directions to visit them to leave a present. I also told him about having an anxious feeling. Someone or something told me to come here yesterday morning or else I will regret it. Pa does not push the issue any further. He looks over towards the kitchen where both Ma and Sandra are helping to clean our plates.

Since the incident, the dynamic between Dad and I changed. I used to fear Dad much more. Never questioning his actions. When he got angry at me, I always thought I was in the wrong. Now I realize he makes mistakes too. For instance, his workers began worrying about their jobs. Noticing there was no new work coming down the pipeline. They kept approaching me to check on the status of the company. *How would I know?* I ask them why they are asking me instead of my Dad. From their responses I could tell most of them fear getting fired. The few brave souls who did try confronting him either got axed or were told to stop asking silly questions. In response, I told my coworkers none of their questions are silly. They are helpful if anything else. Seeing their anxiousness, I told the workers I will figure something out. Even if it is a lie, it made them feel better. *Damn, now I have to go figure something out.*

With workers stressed, I took the liberty to use my weekends for training the most proactive employees. I taught them the art of selling door to door. Dad, like most people, fears teaching others. If we teach others we are teaching our competitors. For me, if I teach someone it only means I have to become that much better. Why

worry about others? I plan to win regardless. We also never know what can come from giving a helping hand. I never contemplate the idea of, 'how can this person help me in the future'? There is no reason to. For God blesses me each day with health. I am a firm believer that the greatest gift we can receive in life is good health. Both mentally and physically.

This reminds me of a church goer. He went by the strange name of Janko. Who knows if the story was his own or someone else's, but his words stuck with me. He said if you were God and you had to choose between hanging out with two people. Which of the following two would you spend time with? Would you pick person A who complains about the world? Asking why we are put here to suffer, telling us that all their suffering is our fault not theirs, and only shares their deranged thoughts of harming people. Or do you want to spend time with person B, someone who thanks you for being with them and loves you. Who never blames you for self-made problems. Instead, they stick with you even through tough times. I would pick person B. Are you that person? If you aren't, you can always become one. God will help along the way. For God watches over anyone who tries loving back. God cannot move you, but God can certainly support you. And because God knows our thoughts, memories, and intentions God will know who is genuine and who is not.

What keeps me tied to God is questioning God's grace. Even if we commit sins or have diabolical thoughts, if God sees we are trying to change our ways God will not abandon us. How can God give mercy to any of us? I believe none of us deserve living. We are a plague where deceit, deception, and lies arise. There is no love. When I have these thoughts God speaks with me. God says if we did not exist there would be no melodious and harmonic music? No tales of great adventures. No sights of people who dare surpass themselves. Nor

would there be anyone to talk to or watch over? God does not necessarily speak these words to me as a person would. Instead, God makes me feel them by showing me images, but since no one else is me. No one will ever know what I experience. Unless they accept God into their heart. Even then, God can only show us our own painting no one else's. Having questioned God enough times, I am coming to accept the fact that I should not question his authority. When I follow God's words good things happen. When I don't it sucks.

Unbeknown to Dad, I still attend Church. Despite trying to stay away, former classmates would encourage me to attend at least special ceremonies held by the church. I would be lying if I do not admit I sometimes only went to see a girl in a striped red sweater. I do not love her anymore, but I do admire her. I do not know why. All I know is that her music is something special. Having attended Church, I notice a repetitive theme taught to children. They are told to revere their parents without question. Forbidding them from committing any acts of violence against them. I believed it and still do. If Dad was not Dad my attitude towards him would be completely different. Thinking about it now, I would never hit Dad. I would only restrain him if he meant to harm someone. For that, you need more strength than what is required to harm someone. Which is much harder. To get there you have to out train them, out discipline them, and hold yourself accountable to the standards you set for yourself.

The job of a parent should be guiding their children who do not know better. They should also understand they might not always be right? They are human after all. Even if our parents are wrong, we should respect them. We should learn from their mistakes and ensure we do not commit the same ones when we have children of our own. What irks me is when a parent does not hold themselves to the standards they hold for their children. I remember Dad always

telling me to read as a child, but I never saw him reading. If I did, I would have become more hesitant to argue. I kept reading because many adults told me to read. They must be telling me for a reason. Similar to how my coworkers told me repeatedly to never touch a screw just drilled in. By accident I touched one and burnt my finger. Lesson learned.

Right now, God is telling me to help my coworkers. I only had one fear for doing so. A selfish fear. Still, it is more valuable to have those around me become more knowledgeable. I began formulating a plan for teaching. Which led me down a rabbit hole. I knew how to sell, but to train someone to do it was foreign to me. Like anything else, selling is a learned skill. To learn how to sell we need to get out of our comfort zone, improve our communication, adjust prior perceptions, and most importantly learn how to convince others we are offering them a product of value. We need to know the logistics of our product to know what we can and cannot offer. We have to consider geography, the demographics, and our audience. Most importantly, as a seller we need to have a drive to persevere in the face of rejection. Perseverance is something I cannot teach. A person needs to want it. What makes some people keep going while others quit? What characteristics do great salesmen have? While I teach, how can I ensure people retain the information? Can I really teach how to sell? I caught myself midthought. Rather than thinking so much, I decide I should employ what I do know and go from there.

Through the process of teaching, I came to realize how great and terrible I am at selling. It came as a surprise when fellow workers told me about techniques they used to close a deal. Techniques I never heard about such as the importance of time, confidence, and a positive attitude. Unlike me, workers who have extensive years in construction are able to break down the process and the time required for construction. For many clients, having a knowledgeable

seller gave them more confidence to say yes. Not everyone succeeded. Some workers who found no success chose to return to their post. Those who remained bounced their ideas off of each other. Together, we would brainstorm alternative income streams for times when work slows down. Other times, we spoke about what was happening in our lives. Sharing moments like the graduation of their kids or seeing them getting married off.

In the past, Dad made the majority of our sales. Now with more workers selling, we made more deals across multiple counties. In parallel, we began a training program for workers to learn how to repair a truck bed. Mr. Diamond made his truck bed invention robust, but they are not indestructible. They need maintenance. If anything needs maintenance someone will get paid for doing it. Ideally maintenance should be kept to a minimum to approach self-sufficiency. Except humans are dumb and greedy. People will inevitably want to profit. Others will see no value. As an example. Let's say we create a machine that can do all the cherry picking forever. We could tell farmers they no longer have to work, but will still get paid. People will complain to farmers asking what right do they have for getting paid for doing nothing. People are more open to the idea of getting paid for looking busy than adding value to everyone's life. At the same time, people who own this machine may want to cut costs by cutting the pay of farmers. With self-sufficiency, none of us have to work. Yet, achieving self-sufficiency, like anything else, is impeded by getting in our own way. The smart move is to move forward with creating a cherry picking machine. While still paying farmers. Except unlike before, farmers will now get paid to study and research how to make other sectors of our civilization more efficient. Why would they do that? Well, give someone enough freedom and they will go insane when they have no problem to fix. Having no work is great at the start, but if everyone else is working around us we will feel alone, insecure, and bored. Too much work

and we will question what it is all for. Resulting in depression. We need to create connections for mental stability. And purpose is what gets us moving. I will say there are individuals who can endure solitude for longer periods of time, but even they will yearn for someone. When we do not yearn for anything we will want to die.

Nevertheless, the biggest issue is that once our needs are met we have a natural inclination of having less motivation to work as hard. For many of us, our main purpose is to secure food, water, housing, and clothing for ourselves and our families. We rarely think of what happens afterwards. Once our needs are met, what is left is purpose. Without purpose, we are a boat without a sail. We'd float with no sense of direction nor ability to change our course.

That said, it made no sense for me to hoard money our workers made. In the past, Dad kept all the money. Which is obvious. He owns the company and made the majority of our sales. Except, this time Dad was not around. The workers are the ones who made the sales, not him. Therefore, they deserve a cut. Without them we would not have made any deals. All that is left for me to do is to approach Dad to tell him what will happen. Not what should happen or can happen, but what will happen. I told my coworkers about my plan. Those with multiple deals got super excited about the idea of finally being able to put money down from their own home. Something that was close to impossible to accomplish from the countries they migrated from.

Arriving home with Luffy, I see Dad passed out on the couch. Giving me relief, otherwise I have to listen to him talk about his failed relationships and the mistreatment he went through as a child. By no stretch do I believe he treats me like a father should, but at the same time I recognize I have not suffered anywhere close to how much he did. I never got touched by an adult either. No boy dared to



bully me, unfortunately. And my mother never threw rocks at my head nor drowned me in water when I misbehaved. Dad at least taught me there is always someone in the world who suffers more than us.

I walk into my room exhausted from all the work I have done these past few weeks. Falling onto my bed, I spot Luffy running around the room as he plays with toys I bought him. Without being able to hold out, my eyelids shut tight.

*Babble Bobble yaff yaff\* Bobble Babble yaff\* Babble Babble yaff yaff\**  
My heavy eyes half open, I hear Luffy whimpering. *Yaff yaff\** My body freezes up. *Yaff yaff\** It is like I am in that dream again. *Yaff yaff\** The dream where I fail to protect someone. *Bobble Babble yaff\**  
I dig my nails into my hand to wake myself up. I run outside. My breathing gets heavy. Standing in front of me is Dad holding Luffy by his hind legs. He laughs as he tells Luffy to shut up. Dad had been drenching Luffy's face and body with cold water.

“There you are Ross. Look at this,” says Dad as he laughs and sprays more water into Luffy's face. Luffy gasps for air. I march towards Luffy, grabbing onto his back and head to pry him away from Dad. My father does not like it, he responds by dousing cold water across my body. I cannot stand this. You can do this to me, but not Luffy. Never Luffy. Not anymore. Anger swells inside me. That dark voice rose up again. *End it. Stop it. It's easy.* For the first time, I was tempted. Then I shut the voice out. There would be no end.

“Get out of the way Ross! Hand Luffy over. Don't look at me like that! HAND HIM OVER!”

“No.”

“Is that how you are going to play it? Wait right here.”

Dad storms into our home and I knew exactly what for. A belt. He marches back with crazy eyes telling me, “Are you going to hand him over or not?”

“No.”

With each no. A part of me died inside. *Whoosh\** No sound comes out from me. *Whoosh\* Whip\** Instead of looking away, I stare into my father’s eyes. There was no emotion. No anger, there was nothing. Da- My father continued hitting me till red marks showed.

He stood there making fists. With a circular motion, he starts wrapping his belt around his right hand placing his buckle at the knuckles. *This is it. This is where it ends.* Pulling his arm back, he stares into my eyes with a serious look. I gradually came to accept that if he is willing to hurt me, he will not hesitate to hurt Luffy. *I won’t have it. Stop, don’t think about it. Throw it. I want you to throw it.* Dad please don’t do it. *Come on, one hit. That’s all I need. That’s all I ever needed.*

I felt relief, in a moment all the respect I held for my father will disappear. If possible, I want nothing to do with him afterwards. I wait patiently anticipating cold metal to graze my skin. After this, I do not want my father in my life. I do not want him at my birthdays, my wedding, not even my funeral. I want no part of him. *Do it. End this.*

He grabs me by the shirt and reels me in close. Holding his fist above his head, my father stares straight into my eyes. I stare right back, not wavering nor looking away. My father lets me go. He walks off throwing his belt to the side. I look at his back and remember I have to tell him something.

“Dad!” Hearing my voice, my father stops without turning to face me.

“Dad, at work we made a sales team. Those who managed to land contract deals, I plan to give them cash bonuses. I wanted to let you know.”

He stood in silence before saying, “Do what you want.” He leaves home that night not returning for days.

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Before yesterday, I spent my nights calming down Luffy. Sleeping very few hours each night to prevent my father from taking him from me. I cannot explain it but my father would look scary each time he came to my room. He wanted to find out why Luffy was barking so much. I thought I could handle it. I tried the best I could, but maybe it wasn't enough. When will I be enough? I never knew the answers to these questions. Instead, I kept hoping things would start becoming better.

Even before yesterday's incident, I stopped thinking Dad and I will make it through together. We got each other. It's just me and him. At some point I stopped believing that. These days I tell myself Luffy and I will make it through together. Grabbing Luffy, we head out to find flowers. We take the flowers we gather to a familiar place. Tom's burial site. Following Dad's suggestion, I buried Tom under a tree. I much rather speak with a tree Tom is nurturing than an empty tombstone. Over the years, this tree has become family. Through the tree I call Maple, I speak with Tom. I tell him about the best and worst moments since he has been gone. I tell him about Luffy joining the family and the joy he brings when I watch him play around. I tell him about the nights I hug him fearing he might not be there the next morning. Tom also knows about the first day I met Sandra, the first time I felt awkward receiving hugs from her family,

and he knows about my nightmare finally coming true. Except unlike in my dream, I was prepared. For countless times when I visit Maple, I apologize for not being able to defend Tom out of fear. In the face of that, I apologize for asking the same request each time I visit. Before leaving I always ask, 'Tom, can you watch over me a little longer'? I stand there in silence knowing there will never be a reply. Breaking the empty silence, I hear Luffy barking signaling it is time to go.

I lift Luffy onto my shoulder to carry him back home. With Luffy being so young, his hind legs cannot handle the long distance walk here. You know, I thought about it before. What would my life be without Luffy, without Sandra, without anyone caring enough about me to say hello? Without anyone, staying asleep forever sounds like bliss. My problems would go away, no one would yell at me anymore, and- *And you would not have met Sandra. Nor would you have met Fiza and Orson. Without you, who would have defended Luffy? With you, many classmates and coworkers found success. Trust me when I tell you that they all appreciate you. You are the only one who does not see it.* The voice I hear is not my own. I ask why God keeps watching over me. Someone who dares defy his Dad and dares to imagine the worst.

I shake my head at the silliness of my thoughts. I am blessed. Even when alone, someone spoke to me. Whether they were a teacher, classmate, or kind stranger passing by. I am lonely and if I think I am then the odds are that many others feel lonely and isolated too. If while I am alive I can make one person feel less alone then I will have accomplished something. To make it clear, I never thought about wanting to die. Dying sounds like quitting. There is no point in trying to look forward to death anyways. When we die a moment passes in an instant. Everything restarts. The cards we held in Life change. The probability of being dealt a better hand is slim to none.

There is a greater chance we are dealt a worse hand. Knowing this, the best life we can live is the one we are living right now. It is up to us on how we play our cards. Some cards, like starvation, may turn out to become more valuable than wealth. As ironic as it sounds. Given to someone else, starvation can become a death flag. When looking out into the world people will either see problems or a playground. By finding solutions in the playground, we acquire new cards we can play in this game of Life. Overall, we win in life by making our thoughts into a reality and living by standards. There is no greater game nor greater challenge.

In time, Tom's tree like everyone else will get cut down. We can only nurture the tree in the hopes that its sacrifice helps build something great. Whether it is a boat, a home, or something no one has thought of yet. Till then, I will continue talking with Maple while I can. For she will outlive me. At least then she will have stories to remember me by.

Returning home, my father is not there. Several days pass until he returns. When he does, he brings a crew to build a smaller housing unit on our residence. Since the incident, my father no longer barges into my room at night. He still gets frustrated at Luffy, but he no longer puts a hand on him. He tried, but I kept getting in between. Each time I see my father, I notice he is having trouble breathing. I tell him he should go see a doctor. He keeps refusing saying, 'I don't need no damn doctor.' Instead of listening to him, I should have called a doctor from the start. My father could no longer refute my insistence to have a doctor check him out when he lost his ability to keep his balance. After doing an examination and asking various questions regarding his health history, the doctor told us awful news. He said my father is experiencing the after effects of cerebral/brain damage which can cause alterations to behavior, motor skills, and comprehension.

I did not understand a word he said. I ask about what steps we can take to cure my father. In response, the doctor shrugs his shoulders saying there is nothing we can do. Is there really nothing? The doctor continues, he says there is strong evidence supporting the theory that the organ found in our skull is responsible for coordinating our bodies. He gives us evidence to back his claims. Showing us data of patients who experienced skull fractures, concussions, and in one rare case a man whose behavior dramatically changed after a rod pierced through his skull.

The area of the brain that suffers damage indicates what changes we may see. Damage to the sides of our brain creates auditory issues which can include our ability to understand language. Injury to the front of our brain hampers self-control and judgment. A concussion to the back of the head can affect our motor control and balance. In rare cases, patients can experience trouble breathing. Our doctor adds to our worries when he tells us about a patient who gradually lost their memories. Dying on the day they forgot how to breathe. He said it so seriously, making me not question him.

“What can we do?,” I ask.

“Pray. Hope nothing unfortunate happens. On the off chance your dad’s condition worsens, I’d get your priorities straightened. Will he be passing down his home? Who gets to keep his belongings? Where does he want his burial? These are topics to talk about while he is in a good state of mind. I know there are issues, but trust me. His condition can get worse. The progress into investigating the brain is being conducted, but practical findings will not come to fruition for years. If at all. Not until a group of medical professionals lead the way will we see progress. The patient I spoke about earlier. The one who lost the ability to breathe is my Mom. When she passed away I kept asking myself is there really nothing I can do? Why can no

doctor identify the source of her problem? I began reading medical manuals out of concern. What if this happens again to another family member? With these thoughts, I could not sleep. I remained fixated on studies I read. What commonalities did patients share? Did they have the same doctor? Where did they get injured? With so many questions, I made a rule. I only permit myself to ask three questions. It is alright to have more, but I try to keep it to three. I try answering these three questions before asking new ones. Otherwise, my mind will ask too many questions. What is the point of asking ourselves so many questions if we are not planning to answer any of them? As questions turn into more questions I ask myself which ones are the most important for me to answer right now. The way I decide which questions to answer depends on its priority and/or impact. Sometimes impact matters more than priority and other times priority matters more than impact.”

Under different circumstances, I would love speaking with this doctor more. Normally, I would have a list of ten questions to ask him right away. Today is not the day for that. When the doctor leaves, he tells my father he should stay at home if possible. My father refuses telling him he has a business to run. With nothing else to say, we bid him farewell.

We sat there in the living room processing what the doctor told us. I try asking my father about his plans if worse comes worse. He replies by saying, “that doctor is out of his mind. This is why I wanted no damn doctor. Instead of making us feel better, they make us feel worse. Then they ask for their collection fee. Think about it, we paid a doctor to tell us about things we already know. ‘You’re sick?’ No shit that’s why I am calling you over to fix me. Don’t pay that doctor any attention. I’ll be fine.”

Dad's health declines over the months till he becomes bedridden. I start coming to school late on some days. In the mornings, I wake up earlier than before to jog. Afterwards, I prepare breakfast for my father and I. Packing a lunch for myself and leaving another portion for my father. I take Luffy to work in the mornings to help organize our workers for the workweek. Thank God we have trained salesmen now. Otherwise, I have no idea how I would handle school, administration, and sales at the same time. There is not enough time in the day to take care of each task myself. *Did my inner voice know it would turn out like this?* Who knows. I don't have time to think about pointless thoughts with no answers.

Each morning my father is mute. He never said thanks for a meal nor threw insults at me as he used to. He'd only stare out the window from his room. However, this morning Luffy follows me around. My father looks at Luffy before averting his eyes. Luffy wags his tail as he tries jumping on top of my father's bed. I lift Luffy up onto the bed. Once on top, he inches closer to Dad then sticks out his paw. With a look of caution, Dad shakes his paw. Having had his fill, Luffy tries jumping off. I grab him and place him back onto the ground. He runs outside. Turning back towards my father, I see him looking outside the window again.

Each day I come home, I'd ask my father if he would like to eat anything or if there is anything he wants to tell me. The conversation ends with him staying mute or throwing an unwarranted insult at me to leave him alone. We only had small conversations when it was time to bathe. Being immobile made many seamless tasks significantly more difficult. One such task is bathing. When I wash Dad's back, Dad would ask how school is going. I respond with 'it's going well'. I reply with short answers to most of his questions. Might have been my imagination, but Dad looks a bit dejected with each answer. As a kid, I would do anything



for Dad's attention. Now I don't know what to feel. Unlike Dad, I feel like I can tell Pa anything. Which is strange because he is not family. I'd thought about it for a long time. I came to realize the only difference is that Pa listens to what I have to say. Nothing more.

His final days came as a surprise. Everything happened so quick. I thought he would have more time. I never thought kindness could hurt so much. If I knew, I would have wished for cruelty till the end. *How can I be so disgusting?* Despite the pain, I am glad he found some peace at the end.

During his final week, he regained his strength. He spoke to me as he had in the past. I wonder what has changed. Where is he finding this strength? There was nothing of significance that I knew of that could create such change. We ate together each morning and he would pester me about when I would come back from school and work. When I return home, Dad would want all the details of how work and school went. He went on to say how proud he is seeing me take over the company while still managing my studies. Proud? He never said this before, why now? Then a serious conversation began.

“How is it going between you and that girl named Sandra?”

“It's going well Dad, but we do not like each other like that. Besides, what would she see in a guy like me?”

“Ross I don't know much, but trust me when I tell you this. You deserve love. Look around you. You have taken care of Luffy. You try to give to others. Whether in school or at work, I never found anyone who met you say ‘that Ross kid is bad news’. The only ones who hate you are people who have never met you. Most of them probably only hate themselves. Haters never become better than you. Being stuck in bed and all alone these past few months made me think a lot. It made me realize I am not the father I should have been

to you. I'm sorry for that. Not until I stopped drinking did I regain clarity. Which made me ask myself, 'where was I all these years?'"

"Dad, stop. You don't have to."

"I want to. There are parts you may not like hearing from me, but I want you to listen. (*clears throat*). Before leaving my hometown, I met your mother. She was one of the prettiest girls in town. I courted her and she said yes. I thought we had a great love between us. We got married and had you. During this time, your Mom worked cleaning the governor's home. She spent some nights there too. When I asked if it is appropriate for her to spend the night at another man's home she said there is nothing to worry about. Saying, she was only taking care of his young daughter who had no one, but her to see as a mother. She stayed on nights there was no one home to take care of her. I had my grievances, but I let it slide until you were born. When I held you for the first time, I knew you were something different. So different, I believed your Mom lied to me. Such a child must be the governor's, not mine. Your Mom and I stayed together for another year as I bottled my thoughts inside. Bottling everything did not help. I began yelling more. Demanding for your Mom to tell me where she went and with whom. I would trash the kitchen on nights she spent at the governor's home. When she tried explaining herself, I would never listen. I began to berate her, calling her a whore, a good for nothing, and a waste of space. One night when I came home drunk she asked where I had been. Instead of telling her, I yanked her by the hair and told her why the hell does she need to know. I was so angry at the time, but that was no way to treat her. Today, I realize people who cheat will cheat. If you catch them cheating you should let them go because they will do it again. I wanted to believe her, but I am also not a fool. When a woman says 'he's a friend or nothing is going on' she means there is something going on. She just has not acted on it or thought about it.

Let's take you as an example. You are a man Ross and you said the same phrase a moment ago. Don't lie to yourself. You do know what is going on, you just do not want to accept it. Whatever is holding you back, I hope you overcome it because **you do deserve love**. Much like your Mom, you believe what you say. I think I am also to blame for why she chose not to come home with you some days."

Dad takes a big exhale before moving onto his next regret.

"When I spoke with Mrs. Keita (Kaori), I gave into my impulses. She reminded me so much of your Mom. I should have never forcibly touched her. I became what I hated most. Beyond you and her family, your Mom did not care for much else. As long as we had a roof over our head she was content. Learn from me Ross, when you find a partner don't turn your jealousy into hatred towards her. Alright?"

"I'll do that. And what happened with Mom after?," I ask. Dad stays silent for a moment then with hesitation in his voice he continues.

"The next morning, she packed her bags. I tried stopping her, but she screamed at me when I blocked the entrance to her room. Yelling to let her leave in peace. She must have felt frantic because she held a knife in one hand and you in the other. I knew she did not have it in her to stab me. So I grabbed her by the wrist and wrestled you out of her arms. I remember her screaming, 'you're not taking my son anywhere!'"

"Then what happened?," I asked, looking at him for an answer. He avoids locking eyes with me. In a somber voice he said, "she lunged at me. Began pulling my hair and digging her nails into my face. She said, 'just give my baby!' Her nails hurt like a bitch, from being bullied for years I threw a punch out by reflex. Having gotten her off

me, I saw her lying on the ground shocked. Touching her face to confirm what just happened. Then she said it.

‘I was wrong about you. No matter how much I pray. You never change. You were such a sweet man when I met you. I should have listened to my parents. Dad especially. (Squinting her eyes). You know it does not make sense to me. You say he is not your son, but now that it is convenient for you, you act like you loved him all along. What hurt you so much? You loved me more when we weren't together. Ever since getting married, you kept distancing yourself. Why? If not for my belief in the scripture and Ross, **yes I would have left you** for the governor. I only stayed at his place for his ill daughter who had no mother. In the face of having a million reasons to leave, I have not. Not until this moment that you hit me for wanting **my** son. Not yours because “apparently” he is not your son. He is only mine. But I won't have it. I am not going to let you raise my boy to have hatred for everyone around him, like you do’

‘Where are you going?!,’ that’s what I asked her when she turned her back to head out the door.

‘I’ll be back. Don’t worry,’ she said.

That’s the last time I spoke with her.”

“She never returned? Dad, I asked if Mom never returned?”

My father gives no response.

“From the direction I saw her going, she went to fetch her brothers. Which gave me a few hours to pack our things. I took you from there then headed here. To get here, it took over a few years. I carried you throughout the trip. Each day was scary. What are we going to eat? Where are we going to sleep? I did not want to go on. Then I saw

you. You were all I had during that dark time. I tried giving you everything I could. I kept telling myself I am nothing like my mother. I will give my son a better life. Unlike how I grew, I wanted you to have clean clothes and good food.”

“Why take me? Why not leave me with Mom?”

“When I took you I lied to myself. Told myself, there is no way I’m gonna make my son believe I abandoned him. The truth is being alone is frightening. In the past, when feeling alone I’d hit the bars to have an excuse to talk with people. When I drink I know I am not the friendliest, but people kept talking to me so I continued going. Looking back now, it is obvious why people spoke with me. I kept buying them drinks. I thought they were my friends, yet not one of them has shown up to see me. They know about my condition and where I live. I really did believe they would eventually show up. For days, I would look out the window anticipating someone, anyone, to visit. With nothing to do and no one around I fell into depression. (watering eyes). Being alone is lonely”

“We can stop here Dad. You don’t have to tell me more because I do not hate you if that is what you are thinking. Not for Mom, not for anything.”

“No, I have to continue. I might not have the chance to tell you later.” Dad snuffles, clearing his throat and drying his eyes.

“There are two things I hate about myself. I hate how I treated you and Luffy. When I fell into depression, the only moment it disappeared for a brief moment was when you returned from school and work. You’d come home and greet me to tell me you are back. I felt safe and calm hearing your voice. I haven’t treated you well, yet you came here each day to see me. You cook for me and help with any needs I have. I then ask myself do I deserve this? How? Why? I

think back on how we used to live. The moments I thought were the worst might have been the best. We did not have much, but we had each other. It took a while for me to make the connection as to what made my depression go away. Not until I heard someone scraping at my door did I understand. Crawling towards the door handle, I heard a familiar voice. I heard Mrs. Keita's voice. I open the door gently. Behind the door was actually Luffy! Seeing me, he starts licking my face and jumping all over my head. Looking behind him is Mrs. Keita who approaches with caution. She explains that Luffy would not stop barking as he scraped against her front door. When she let him out, Luffy made his way here with her help. She tried carrying him back, but Luffy was not having it. With reluctance, she brought him here. Since that time, Mrs. Keita has been bringing Luffy over in the mornings to keep me company. She, herself, keeps her distance. Only speaking with me when handing me a boxed meal before they both head back home. I ask her what her husband thinks about her visiting. She said, 'Owen is a bit angry, but he understands. He accepts the situation by telling himself if you are Ross' father you must not be the worst parent. More importantly, he trusts me. I tell him about everything big or small. When I do he listens.' Each time they both left, I felt empty again. That's when I made the connection. Instead of looking forward to seeing my friends. I wait by the window, waiting for you and Luffy to come home. To make the moment last longer, I ask about how your day went. Perhaps this is all retribution for leaving you alone for so many years."

"You don't have to forgive me, but I am sorry for how I treated you all these years. Earlier you asked me why I took you. I took you because if your Mom left me I had no one left. My father abandoned me. My mother was an orphan herself. I had no connections to any family members. The small group of friends I had all moved to different towns. What was left for me there? Nothing. I was selfish. That is why I worked so hard to give you a better life than the one I

took away. I have no regrets about working long hours or spending time away from you. Even if I stayed home, what good is that to you? I could not give you fatherly love. How could I? I knew nothing about what it meant to be a father. I gave up on being something I am not. I told myself I will at least give my son a small inheritance. Like it or not, money is essential. With the inheritance, my hope is that when you form your own family you have the luxury to spend more time with them rather than worry about where the next meal will come from. That is a luxury I wanted to give you. The only thing I would change from the past is spending more time with you rather than at the bars.”

I stay silent trying to process everything. Even if I say everything is okay, I am still not okay. Should I despise Dad or should I forgive him? Do I even have a right to judge him? I am not God.

“I need time to think about all this. I think I will head to bed for now if that is alright with you.”

After a pause Dad replies with, “sure. Take all the time you need.”

With that, our conversation ends. I spent that night unable to sleep. I recollect foggy memories of our journey going South. Remembering Dad collapsing on the desert floor as I fed water to his mouth from the last drops of my bottle. Along the road there had been skeleton remains. I thought we would soon become like them. Dead people. Getting pillaged for our shoes and clothes while vultures ate our corpses. I felt nothing at the time. Not thirsty, hungry, nor tired. My life had been short.

I barely knew the man lying unconscious beside me. Who is he? He has been there as long as I can remember. Hidden under everything I held disdain for him. Why? I only had peace when remembering a warm embrace, but from whom? Laying on my back looking towards

the sky, I feel droplets forming. I stood immediately to fetch a large leaf a vendor gave me. With it, I use its large surface to gather water into our bottles. Minutes later, my companion wakes up sticking his tongue out. With fresh water, we survive the night. A day later we made it to the new country. When we arrive I accept that the man beside me is the only one who has taken care of me. Rather than hold disdain towards him, I decide to love him instead. Promising myself to forget about whatever made me dislike him. What I did question is why did it rain that day? There were no signs of possible rain. With no answers, I turn to God.

I continue thinking about the past. From being embraced by Mom to the day Dad almost hit me. Can people change? Why do I help Dad despite all he did? Why is harboring envy and hatred difficult for me? My questions never end. I did not know what to feel. I do resent not staying with Mom. I could yell at Dad, but how can I do that when his time is running out? I do not hate him, I only wish things were better. Why'd he take so long to realize his mistakes? Knowing tomorrow is a long workday, I shut off my thoughts and go to sleep. I will handle it in the morning. When I wake up I decide to leave the past in the past. It does me no good.

The days go by, life continues as normal. The only difference is that I spend more time with Dad at night. We do not talk about anything special. During one conversation, he tells me about having gone to see the Keitas. He asked Mrs. Kaori if she could tell her husband to wait at home until Sandra left for school. At their home, Dad got knees to apologize to Mr. Owen for touching his wife. Telling him he can punch him if he wants. Mr. Owen remains silent then tells him to get up and leave. Threatening him to never enter their home if he is not there. Before Mr. Owen walks away, Dad hands him a paper telling them to accept it as insurance. Insisting they keep it no matter how they feel towards him. He tells them to accept it. If not



for themselves then for Sandra. After telling me the story, Dad hands me a packet of documents. An hour passes before I decide to head to bed. On my way out, Dad calls after me.

“Ross, let me cook our meals this week.”

I agree. For his final week of life, I have no idea where he found the strength to walk. If you had not known he was sick, you would think he never was. I spent his final night at his bedside. He lost all strength to stand or move. Barely being capable of uttering more than a few words. My instinct told me if I had anything to say to Dad this is the night to say it. I thought about it. I thought about letting my grievances against him out. Seeing him feeble in bed made those thoughts go away. I am against sending him off with heartache and anguish. He has suffered long enough in his life. Why suffer till the end?

“Hey Dad, do you remember my first week of school?” He shakes his head slightly. “There was a boy who made fun of my clothes and you came marching to the school. You scared both the teacher and my classmates. Telling everyone to leave me alone or else. I got super nervous and embarrassed seeing you come into my class. Now I can appreciate it. No one bothered me after that incident.” Dad smiles, shaking his head at what he had done.

“I also remember eating at our first restaurant. We ate the cheapest meal on the menu. The fries were soggy and the meat was extra dry. Worst meal I ever had. But when I think about it now, that meal may have been one of the best meals I ever had.”

“Me too,” says Dad with difficulty.

“You know, I still remember her hugging me. I cannot remember her face or voice, but I remember Mom hugging me as a baby.” Dad’s

eyes shift down. “But I also remember resting my head on your arm when we slept on dirt or the street pavement as we made our way here. I remember you always gave me your only jacket on cold nights. I miss the days we played together when I was young. I will never forget those moments.” Dad looks at me again.

I thank Dad for all he has done. For me and for Luffy who is sleeping at the foot of Dad’s bed. I go on telling Dad of my future plans for the company, my intentions of seeing more of the world, and the funny antics Luffy gets himself into. I continue talking, trying to prolong our conversation. I then tell Dad what I wanted to tell him all along.

“Dad, we all make mistakes. Maybe you were not the best, but I cannot find myself to hate you. If I did I wouldn’t be in this room with you right now. How can I hate you? There is more to love than to hate. I appreciate you cooking this week. The meals you made were all delicious. I wish I could have more.”

Taking his hand I tell him, “I love you Dad.”

He holds onto my hand as tears want to come out of his eyes. He says, “thank you. Be happy my boy.”

Looking out the window, I see the sun start to rise. Losing strength, I fall asleep. I wake up hours later to the sound of Luffy barking. Dad still held my hand in his, but I felt no warmth. Luffy kept yelping. As for me, I carry Dad out for one last time. Out of the home he built. Past his garden, past the trees, and into the hole I dug. Like Dad wished, I bury him under the dirt a few feet from Tom. His desire is to have no tombstone nor coffin. He wanted to return to the ground to nourish Terra and see how the world unfolds until he is reborn. Who knows if we are reborn, but I do as he wishes one last time. I sat at his grave for hours. I waited there until I could cry, but no

tears came out. As night falls, I make my way back home with Luffy who tried digging Dad out of the dirt. Luffy could not understand Dad is no longer with us.

Not long after, I held a funeral for Dad. Not many people came. Mr. Stein stopped by before the proceedings to say, "Death comes for us all. Don't sweat it too much." The Keitas came to the funeral to give Dad a prayer. They told me if I needed anything to let them know. They told me we could spend the nights at their place if we find our home too lonely. Sandra gives me a big hug. Hugging me as she cries in my arms. I came close to crying when she held me, but I held it in. I could not cry, not right now. I have a business to run and a large workload to handle. That is the lie I told myself. City council members came to give their condolences. Telling everyone how hard of a worker my Dad was. They told stories of how Dad never took 'no' for an answer. When they asked Dad why he worked so hard he always said it is because he has a son. He kept saying, "you'll see. My son will outperform me. I can already see it. So I will do what I can for him for now." Before leaving, the council members tell me to head into town to discuss business and future plans with them when time allows it. Workers from Dad's company gave speeches too.

"I remember when I first started. I was one of the first hires. I thought Mr. Han was a mean old man. Which he was many times, but when it came to his son his demeanor changed. He'd boast of how his son was top of his class. Telling everyone about the smart ideas his son shared with him. We could all tell he was proud of him."

"Mr. Han may not have been the nicest person, but he did care. When my husband got injured on the job we lost our source of income. For a time, Mr. Han continued paying him. After two weeks, he told my husband if he wants to continue getting paid he needs to

learn how to manage his books. With a harsh voice he would tell my husband, 'where is that brain of yours because it's certainly not in that skull of yours!' Mr. Han was harsh, but he came through with his promises. Working with the city council, he began developing a program to help fund a treasury used to compensate people who get work related injuries. His business partner was not too happy knowing it would cost businesses more money, but Mr. Han proceeded anyway. We smelt booze off of him the next day, but he said he made amends with his partner."

"I have nothing nice to say about Mr. Han. I'd like to spit on his grave if I'm being honest. He cost me my job and was an ass to people around him. He did eventually come around to giving us our jobs back. And no matter how much I hate him, I do respect him for giving people like me the opportunity to earn an honest living. To pay him back, I am here to tell you of the only fond memory I have of him. You see, Mr. Han loves talking about his life story on repeat. The one story that stuck with me is about his trip to this country. He told me he prayed each morning and night for God to protect him and his son on their journey. Over time, his prayers changed from 'protect us' to 'protect my son.' He pleaded to God saying, 'Get my son to where he needs to go safely. Give him the wisdom he needs. Give him warmth so his heart does not turn cold as mine. Guide him when he is lost.' This is the only time I recall when he spoke about someone other than himself. Mr. Han did not know this, but I lost faith in him when he began coming to work drunk. He also does not know that his son gave us our jobs back before he came to apologize with his head down. Before his son came, I thought the company was done for. Many others did too. I cannot find many words of appreciation to say about Mr. Han, but what I can say is thank Mr. Han for raising a competent and non-narcissistic son. May God have mercy on all our souls when our own time comes."

I would have found the man's speech more strange if he did not thank Dad for anything. Why attend the funeral of a man you hate? By attending, you are remembering them so why would you give them that satisfaction. Unexpectedly, out of all the speeches I gravitated towards his speech the most.

The last person to stand up to give a speech is a man I have never seen before. "Shane, or Mr. Han, as you all call him. He is a strange man. Buying round after round of beer. Giving it out for free to anyone who spoke with him. To be frank, we weren't close, but something told me I should be here today to tell a story. As we drank, Shane told me about his son. He said he would purposely frighten his little boy to show him how scary the world can be. Yet, his son never dares to defy him and he cannot understand it. I asked why he feels the need to frighten him. He replied by saying he wants to make sure he is tough. If he is not tough people will take advantage of him. He needs to learn how to become fearless and to not let anyone step over him. He went on to explain that during a class ceremony a snotty kid made fun of his son. Instead of fighting the kid, his son ignored him. 'How could he let that slide?', is what he said. Shane had to scare the kid himself. I forgot about that conversation until the last time I saw Shane. He was at the bar, but not drinking nor buying anyone drinks. Saying he had no money because he refuses to get paid for work he did not do. With no one around, I decided to listen to him on a whim. He told me he might have been wrong all those years ago. He said, 'people need to become tough. Especially men, but did I really have to become his enemy? Waiting for the day he'd fight back against me. Why'd I do that? He is my son is he not? Why did I feel a need to berate him and hurt him? I could have taught him how to fight, how to stand up for himself, and how to become a man without the need of being his bully. Instead, I taught him nothing. Did you know Fred, when he was younger he had the habit of coming into my room to teach me

something new. When he did I kept feeling jealousy. How can he know so much? Instead of supporting him, I would get angry. Smacking his head a few times. I told myself how can someone be smart if they are not smart enough to fight back when someone hits them. How can he not get angry with me? I was angry at his age. Why could he not be? If he does not fight against me, how will I know he will fight against someone who harms him? Then I realized it the other day by looking into his eyes. He was never afraid. He was only holding himself back. I should have felt glad he stared me down. Instead I felt I made a mistake.' Those are the last words he said before limping out the bar with his cane. For all the years he bought me a drink, I believe I owed him this much. To attend his funeral and share a story about his life. Shane, may you find peace."

After a few hours, the funeral comes to an end. Everyone bids me farewell. Luffy and I stay near Dad's grave a little longer until nightfall. When Luffy falls asleep, I carry him back home.

## End of Adolescence

The day of the funeral, we waited for Pa to finish getting ready in the restroom. Looking out the window, I see large men with sledgehammers walking into our backyard. Among them is an old man whose wrinkles are starting to show. Using his sharp pointy fingers, he directs the men to different sections of our home. Seeing them, Ma heads to the restroom to retrieve Pa. Loud *clangs\**, *clacks\**, and *bangs\** are heard as they start breaking apart our fences, shed, and garden. I hear Ma's footsteps. Turning around, I see her holding a revolver in one hand. Handing another to Pa who hides it behind his back.

Stepping outside, Pa yells, "What do you think y'all are doing?! Stop that! That ain't yours!"

Hearing his voice, the men stop. The man with growing wrinkles turns towards Pa telling him, "They're just getting a head start on the construction for my new home here. I cannot have these worthless things on it. You understand, right?"

"New home?! What are you talking about?! You cannot have a home here. This is my family's home. Not yours."

"I think you are the one who is mistaken. An old friend reminded me of a piece of land I used to own. He passed away recently. He told me there is a good for nothing family living there. Seeing that I am one of his closest friends. I am here to take back his land. Originally, you had an agreement with the Church to purchase this land. Yes? The issue is my friend and I are long term donors to that Church and our local government. When I told them about my issue they came to see this as a misunderstanding. They mistakenly gave you this land at a high discount. Of course the pastor got furious, but there is nothing he can do to remedy the situation. He had no choice, but to submit.

Otherwise... Well, let's not go there. The point is, they had no right to sell it. Nor did they sell it for the right price. In accordance with the law, I will pay your family for what it is worth today. Which is half of what you paid. In exchange, I will overlook your illegal purchase. Unless you want to risk jail time, I suggest you cooperate. Come now, don't give that look. I'm being nice here. I am **choosing** not to throw your family in jail even though I should. I tell you what, pay me double of what you initially paid and I will proceed with the paperwork to make this a *lawful* transaction of property.”

Pa clenched his fists. He asks, “What if we refuse?”

“Then you better start looking for somewhere else to live.”

The old man turns to tell his men to continue with the demolition.

“I think I know who your old friend is. I have a copy of a letter he gave me. Stipulating me as the rightful owner. He told me to keep copies in case someone came around trying to harass me over my land. Guess he knew something. Wait right here.” Pa hurries inside to retrieve a letter then he hands it over to the old man.

The geezer's forehead creases at his eyebrows as he reads the document from his hand. With a disgruntled look, he calls his men over. Before leaving, he spots me and gives a smirk as if he had not given up. Seeing him grin disturbed me. Having left, Pa walks back inside with an annoyed face. He goes directly to Ma and hugs her tight. Telling her, “okay, I feel better now. Are you two ready to go?”

Seeing Pa calm and composed made any anxiety I would have felt go away. How could that old man dare walk over us? I want to erupt, but I calm myself because today is not about me. It's about Ross and Luffy. I know how hard it is losing someone. But Ross' situation is much different from ours. With his Dad gone, who is left to keep



him company? I have Pa and Ma, but who does he have? Thinking about that made a lump grow in my throat. The idea that a parent will leave their child behind is frightening especially when their child is still young. As a parent you do not know if they will manage to survive on their own. The pain does not come from leaving them. The pain comes from imagining them struggling with no help at all because the world we live in is cruel. Granted, a parent must love their child for this to happen.

On the way to Ross' home, Pa grins. He tells us the old man was whispering under his breath. Saying, 'damn that bastard.' Any banter we had disappears when we arrive and see Ross. Ma tells him he is welcome to come to our home whenever he wants to visit or spend the night. Pa hugs him for a long time and tells him to continue standing strong. Telling him it is okay to fall to the ground, but cautioning him not to stay down for too long. We sit down waiting for the eulogies to begin. Upon hearing each story, I start reframing the way I see Ross. I can tell his father cared for him, but did he ever show him care? Ross never showed any inclination of being mistreated or abused. Most people would become bullies if they were. Where does he keep his anger and resentment? Do I actually know anything about him? I didn't even know his Dad was ill. Why Ross? Why won't you tell me these things?

Times like these, I remember Abuelo. I remember how we used to play games while Abuela chased us. I wonder if Abuela is still around? I get emotional knowing I will never see her again. How is it back home? I wonder how Ms. Sayu and Phoebe are doing right now. I think about it, if we never left we would have never met Ross. Would he have been lonelier without us? Given the opportunity, would I exchange never meeting him for the chance to return home? *A most definite yes.* Despite knowing it meant leaving him behind, I would do it. *I must be the worst person.*

Before leaving, we say goodbye to Ross. The following day, I woke up not believing I hugged him and cried in his arms when it was my turn to greet him. Why did I cry? Was it for his father, for him, or for myself knowing I will never return home?

These days, I do not see Ross much. He only comes over occasionally to share a meal with my family or work alongside Pa. He said he's been busier trying to create a new business centered around farming tools. Says farming is one of the most important jobs in the world. His plan is to help increase cultivation through research and new machinery. To give us an idea he says, 'Imagine a world where we do not need a bull to plow our fields. Plowing is a labor intensive job for both the farmer and the bull. Instead, we can have a machine complete the job with time to spare. He sounds crazy, but I believe him. Nowadays, he spends most of his time in the office. If he is not in the office, he's out studying, if he's not studying he's working out in the fields. Seeing him work, I thought he was a hard worker, but I may have been wrong again. Weeks go by and before we know it the school year is almost over. I get hit by deja vu seeing him sitting under the tree. I saw him in the morning and knew he'd be here. Obviously, I approach him.

"No work today?," I ask. He turns to look up at me.

"Unfortunately no. I'm here just sitting. Everyone told me to take a day off." He says it with a sad look in his eyes. I take a seat next to him. We sat there with not much to say at first.

"How has it been since your Dad left? How are you and Luffy holding up?"

"Luffy plays around a lot at work. Sometimes I have to keep him in a room at our job site to prevent anyone from accidentally stepping on him. My soon to be former secretary takes good care of him when he

stays with her in his designated room. I think Luffy is past my Dad's death. I don't think he completely understands where Dad went and why he does not return home. Luffy only understands that Dad refuses to come out of the ground. He would bark the first couple of nights, but not anymore. He's stopped visiting his grave too. He's young so I am sure he will forget about him soon."

"How are you holding up?," I ask.

"I'm doing good. We're making progress on the machine. We've completed the designs. Now we need to learn how to actually make it work. Which is the hard part."

I sense he's keeping something from me. I place my hand over his and ask him again, "how do you really feel?"

He pulls his hand away and turns away from me. "I'm feeling fine. Besides, why does it matter how I feel? Work needs to get done. Like I said, the machine we are working on-"

"Stop. Please stop it Ross! It's getting on my nerves. If you feel great, I'm glad. But to me, you don't look fine at all. Each time I spoke with you, even if you looked down you'd spark right up when telling me about your day. Now you avert the topic whenever someone asks you how you feel. Do you really hate me that much?"

"What does it matter telling you how I feel?"

*What does it matter telling you?*

A fuse blew inside me. I want to slap him real hard for being an idiot. I had enough.

"You dummy. See if I CARE. You moron." I stand up to leave. When I turn away from him, he reaches for my hand. He says, "I'm sorry. Please don't go. I'm sorry for being a dummy."

I sit back down again and ask, “then can you tell me how you feel?”

“I don't know.”

“Do you miss your Dad?”

“...” Ross stays silent.

“Well, I don't miss him either.” He looks up wondering if he heard me right.

“He was not my Pa after all. Ross, do you remember the day when I told you about having to leave my home up North?” He nods. “I do not miss everyone from there. I do not miss my classmates, except for one friend. I especially do not miss that friend's Uncle or our old priest. I do not miss any of the boys who gave me dirty looks or the girls who spoke behind my back. Who cares about them? If you miss your Dad that's normal. But if you don't. I'd still like you. So tell me, do you miss him at all?”

“I don't know. I didn't cry at his funeral. I wanted to, but I couldn't. Does that make me a bad person?”

“If you think you are a bad person I must be worse. At the funeral, I thought about it. Would I give up knowing you if it meant returning home? The answer is a most definite yes. That's why I am the worst. Here I am asking you to tell me how you feel, yet I would not hesitate to abandon you. Thinking about whether or not you miss him makes you a better person than me. I would not have given it a second thought.”

“Would you really leave me behind to go back home?”

“Yes I would.”

“You're right. You are the worst,” says Ross, giving an unexpected smile. He stretches out letting out a loud groan. We sit there for a moment taking in the tranquility without saying a word.

“But if it wasn't for returning back home. I would not trade you for anything else. Neither you or Luffy. Cause I like you a lot.”

“What do you like exactly?”

“I like how you listen to me. How your eyes brighten up when you speak about what you care about. How, despite your looks, you are willing to go to war for those you care about. You try to see the best in people. I also like how you sleep funny. Most of all, I like how you are with my family. Both of my parents love you. Where else will I find someone like that?”

Ross laughs. We continue talking about what we thought of each other when we first met. Asking about how we noticed one another. Did it ever occur to us that we might become friends? Together, we give a definite yes when we ask if we are glad we met each other.

When the bell rings I head for class and Ross heads to work. Before departing I tell Ross, “You know, there is one thing you could do to make me put you over wanting to return back home.”

“Oh, and what's that?”

“If you were to tell me...”

“Tell you what?”

“Oh nothing, I think you gotta figure that out on your own. I wonder what it could be. It's simple really. Don't stay a dummy forever or you'll lose me. Anyways, come to dinner tonight. It would put my parents at ease seeing you in better spirits.”

We said goodbye and ate dinner together as a family later that night.

8 8 8

When everything is going well, I feel like the universe conspires to give us a problem. I told Ross about this once. He responded by saying, ‘is that not a good thing?’ How exactly is that good? He said, ‘well, having a problem is not always fun, but it keeps us occupied. Problems help move us forward. If I see a problem in a negative view it will not solve the problem. It will only make my perception of reality that much worse. I think the goal in life is to solve problems we encounter with the intention that one day we will have the choice to choose our problem(s). Take my Dad and I as an example. The relationship we had was not the best, but we tried to mend it towards the end. My problem was that I did not like how Dad treated others, but I feared him too much to speak up. Now that he is gone, that problem disappeared too. Instead, I now have to figure out how to make payroll each month as well as figuring out how to move forward with developing new machinery. I much prefer solving the latter. Problems will always exist so why stress over trying to escape them? We should face them instead or die trying.’

I ask him what happens when we do not face our problems? What if our problems are so big or unsolvable that there is nothing we can do to solve them even if we try our hardest? He says, ‘You can always do something. Maybe some people do have problems that are too great or unsolvable. Still, is there really nothing you can do? Perhaps you really can’t solve the problem, but you can make progress towards it. You should pursue a solution while maintaining faith, not hope but faith, that your struggles will help contribute towards someone else’s future if not your own. Because in life there are some problems we cannot avoid. As I said, to face the problems you want to face; you have to face the problems you rather not face. I accept the fact that there are people who are dealt the worst cards in life.

Despite their best efforts, they will not achieve the best possible outcome. But this does not mean they should give up. When they give up they will turn a bad situation into a miserable one. As long as they keep going they can make any bad situation into a better one. Not the best one, but definitely a better one than if they gave up.'

Ross says this so easily, but as we go through it his words mean nothing. It's on us. For weeks, my family is left alone. I almost forgot about the whole incident with the old senile man. With only two weeks left of school, we receive correspondence through the mail. The letter contains a court date for a hearing. A man called Stein wants to take my family to court to dispute the ownership of our land. My parents go to court while I attend school. Returning home, they tell me Mr. Stein is the old man who came to our home several weeks ago. I start getting anxious. Seeing that, Pa comforts me telling me everything will be alright. I ask how a judge can even consider this dumb lawsuit. Apparently, when the papers were signed between Mr. Stein and Ross' Dad there was a stipulation in their contract detailing where his land ownership started and ended. Any remaining land would still be left under the control of Mr. Stein. For any doubt of ownership boundaries, Mr. Stein has the right to determine whose land it belongs to as detailed in their written agreement. In other words, our home which is on the outer boundary of Mr. Han's property actually belongs to Mr. Stein. Which means the real estate agent sold us land he was not supposed to. Most land transfers are put into a public record to help avoid these types of issues.

The question on my mind is why did Mr. Stein not do this from the start? Something felt suspicious. I suggest to my parents that we should ask Ross for help. He might know something. I am sure he would be glad to help too. They look at each other with nervous looks. They tell me about Mr. Stein confronting them indirectly by

talking out loud after the hearing. He said, 'Poor Ross, he lost his Dad and now he might lose his funding for the R&D (research and development). If I lose here I won't have any funds left to help him. Of course, if he never shows up maybe I can scrape a few dollars to continue helping him.' I am sure of it. He is hiding something. Why else would he not want Ross involved?

Then it occurred to me, didn't Mr. Han leave a note to my parents confirming their rightful ownership of the land. Can we not use it? Ma explains to me that Mr. Stein's lawyers acquired doctor notes beforehand as evidence to prove Mr. Han was not in a good mental state when he wrote that letter. Even with the letter it does not help our case. The contract they signed has more power over the case than the letter does. To make the situation worse, we need to pay a lawyer of our own to help us with court proceedings otherwise we may risk losing the case. Our lawyer informs us that Mr. Stein's strategy may include dragging out the case. By dragging out the case, even if we are in the right, he will win. People with excess resources deploy this strategy with the hope that the counterparty gives in due to financial constraints. It is a scare tactic. By doing so, they can have the court rule in their favor. If they are the only ones allowed to talk in the courtroom they can control the narrative. It is unlikely they will speak any truth that will bring them harm. I wouldn't either. If I could, I'd do the same.

I find what he did diabolical. I hate him for it. He is trying to fuck my family over. I'd like to bury him six feet under if I could. I would take everything from him to show him how it feels to have everything taken from you. Everything was taken from me before. I do not want it to happen again. Not this time.

In the morning, I walk to school following a line of students heading the same direction. From a short distance, a man approaches me.



Feeling unsafe, I get into a defensive position thinking whether I should run back home or scream. Before I do, the stranger places a letter on the ground. Looking closer, I recognize him. He is one of the men who came to destroy my home. He says, "Mr. Stein wants me to hand you this. He said not to tell your parents about it." He looks disgusted when he says it. As if he knew something. He walks away and the few classmates who stop to look at us continue walking too. I retrieve the letter from the ground which reads as follows:

*Dear Miss,*

*I find it unfortunate to see your parents in a dilemma. The whole situation is a mess. One that I rather not deal with. Your parents do not see reason. I am writing this letter to formally invite you over for a meal. It would be on Octo. Head to school like normal, but instead of heading to school head to the address listed below. I promise if you come I will sign a new contract you can take to court to end this lawsuit in your favor. I am confident you will come. As a good gesture I added a necklace of high value inside the envelope for you. You can keep it if you wish. To ensure you do not think this is a trap I am adding this to the letter.*

*Sandra Shane has full ownership of this engraved gold necklace. It was not stolen, lent, nor does it ever have to get returned.*

*See it as a gift from me to you. If you are interested I have but one request. Come join me for a meal. By the time you leave, you will have left with full ownership of your parent's land and much more. Do not keep me waiting.*

*Yours truly,*

*Jeff S. Stein*

Looking inside the envelope I find the gold necklace and leave it inside. I knew nothing good would come out of meeting him. If I were to guess, his plan is to sweet talk me. Seeing that my family does not have much, he must believe he can tempt me with jewels. With a promise of giving me anything I want. In exchange, he wants my silence. I recoil with revulsion at his intent with me. I picture myself digging my nails into his throat knowing that he is trying to touch me inappropriately. I want to see him scream in pain. The man makes me sick.

In the afternoon, I brought the note to my parents. Ma is in shock. Pa gets angry and marches out the door. Ma chases after him telling him, "Owen come back here! Owen, stop! I don't want you to get arrested. The letter is not enough to incriminate him. You know it yourself, this letter won't change a thing. If he shows up at our doorstep again then by all means go for it. I won't stop you, but don't go right now. It is stupid. His guards will stop you before you get to him. With you behind bars, who will defend us? Come back I said!" Ma chases after him. I think he should have done it. Does thinking like that make me a bad person? *So what if it does? I am tired of being protected. I am tired of people walking over us.*

The same thoughts swirling in my head are the same ones I had when I first met Ross. Ross should have pounded the faces of those two boys. He should have left fear in their eyes as they **bled**. He's smart. He could figure out how to get away with it. If any issues did arise, he has resources to keep himself out of prison. Why have money if you cannot at least do that? I saw he had it in him so why does he not do it? I would.

Everyone tells me I am beautiful, but I am quite ugly on the inside. I laugh because Ross is the only one who told me, 'You know Sandra. I sometimes get nervous around you. You are so damn pretty. I always

ask myself if I am fit to speak with you. On top of that, you have a great mind. Which worries me because there are times you frighten me. You never scare me. You only put me on alert. If it meant saving you from becoming a monster, I prefer becoming one myself so you don't have to. Promise me you won't.' *You idiot, you only have to say the magic words. Then follow them with 'everything is going to be alright. I got you. I won't let anyone harm you.'* Say it as you wrap me in your arms at night.

Octo arrives, I end up not going to his home as he instructed. Nothing happens. With the final week of school here, I walk outside to see Ross with Luffy beside him.

“What are you doing here Ross?,” I ask.

“Am I not welcome anymore?” *Arph\**

“No, you are. It is just that it has been a while since you came in the morning.”

“Sandra? Who's at the door?.” I hear Ma's voice from the kitchen.

“It's Ross Ma!,” I tell her.

“Ross?!”

“Ross?”

Pa who had been in the living room hears me too. He stayed home today to attend the court hearing later this afternoon. They both come to the door to greet him.

“Mr. Owen and Mrs. Kaori good morning, can I drop off Luffy by chance?”

“Sure you can, but under one condition. Stop calling us Mr. and Mrs. Call us Ma and Pa instead.”

“She’s right. We know we are not your real parents, but we are not strangers either. I used to call Kaori’s Dad Pa too. It is a form of endearment. Or do you not want to? Maybe he does not like us hun.”

“No, no I like you guys. So... Okay then. Pa... and Ma, can I drop off Luffy today?”

“Sure you can, oh wait,” says Ma. My parents look at each other recalling today is court day. “What is it?,” asks Ross. “Oh nothing you have to worry about. It’s just that- Umm.”

“You can tell me.”

“We don’t want to drag into our problems,” says Ma.

“Don’t worry. Any problems you have are mine too. You are allowing me to call you Ma and Pa. It is only fair that I hear about your worries too.”

They both hesitate to tell Ross about our situation. Pa looks over to me with concern. They both do. Unlike before, they seem on the fence between telling Ross and not telling him. Ross speaks and says, “Pa, you can tell me anything. It is my job as a man now to help you out. I am not a boy anymore.” Any doubt Pa had gets removed when he stares into Ross’ clear eyes. Pa and Ma look at each other before nodding.

Pa goes on to explain the situation to Ross. He tells him about Mr. Stein, our home, and the letter he sent me. Ross asks about the appearance of the guard who gave the letter. I told him the guard looked disgusted when handing me it. He had a short stature, but

bulky build. He looked ex-military with short hair on top. He asks no more questions. I think he knew something like this could happen.

With nothing more to ask he says, “I see, that is a problem. Thank you for letting me know about the situation. For now, continue going to court. I will take care of the situation. Don’t worry about the land. On the off chance they take it from you, you are welcome to stay with me. But that won’t happen. If he could take the land from you, he would have already done it. Can I leave Luffy here? I’ll pick him up before the hearing. I prefer taking care of this situation today so I will be heading to his home right now. I will let you know what happens.”

With that, he heads in the opposite direction of school. Seeing him go, I chase after him. “Wait, I’m going with you!”

“Sandra! Come back here!,” yells Ma from behind.

“Stay here Sandra. Don’t cause Ross more trouble,” says Pa.

“No! This involves me as much as it does you.”

“Sandra stay home,” Pa says again. “I can go with him instead if you are worried.”

Worried? Who is worried? I want to see what he does. I want to see if Mr. Stein stays unruffled or shakes in his boots. Why do I have to stand on the sidelines? Waiting for a man to save us. If I do not go now will I ever stand to face someone who threatens me. I might not be the one fighting today, but I will be one day. So what if I am using Ross? If using Ross gets me what I want, why does it matter?

Ross looks at me then my parents then back at me. Then he says, “Don’t worry Pa. You too Ma. I’ll take care of her. I promise. I’ll take full responsibility if anything happens.”

“If that’s the case we’re coming too,” says Ma.

“I think that will bring problems of its own. In the unlikely case I cannot resolve the situation. I need every advantage to beat him in court. He might use you visiting him as evidence against us in court. I don’t know how exactly, but I am sure his lawyers will find a way. I can take Sandra because we can use this letter he gave as an excuse as to why she came with me. Please trust me for now.”

With Ma’s face still filled with worry, Pa wraps an arm around her to comfort her. They look at each other exchanging a few inaudible words. A moment later she says, “Alright you can go, but you better take care of her Ross. I mean it!” With nothing else to say, we head to Mr. Stein’s home.

8 8 8

I hate the grin he always gave me when I came over. His grin is the same perverted one other grown men gave me when I walk through the plaza alone. When walking in public I always wore my favorite striped sweater to cover up. It was given by my grandpa. The only person who loved me. He taught me how to sing to any rhyme or beat. That’s all I have to remember him by. With many mouths to feed, Mom took me to the home of an old man with a lavish home. She said the man who lives here is promising to provide for our family. He fell in love with my singing and now wants to meet. I got scared and told Mom I did not want to come, but she kept pushing for it.

At the door, we are greeted by two guards. They escort us to a chamber along with three dogs. Opening the door, the man behind a desk says he only wishes to speak with the young girl. He tells my Mom she can wait in the kitchen. Telling her that his personal chefs will cook her a meal while she waits. I see a bed in the corner. I hold onto Mom’s sleeve and ask her if we can leave together. She shakes

my hand off and tells me not to be rude. I comply. The old man says, “come sit here with me.” He walks over to a small table next to his desk. When I sit, waiters walk through the double door bringing in entrees for us.

I want to run away, but where would I go? How would I escape? There are multiple guards stationed outside. Even if I am successful at escaping, Mom would bring me back here anyways. I don't even think I can overpower the man sitting in front of me. How much power does he have to afford so many guards and personal attendants? Upon entering. Seeing the glass chandelier overhead and marble tile made me know this is not the home of any ordinary man. He slides an envelope towards me saying, “this is for you.”

Inside it are two diamond earrings. Most girls can only dream of receiving such a gift. I know Mom would do anything asked of her to receive gifts like this. I slide the envelope back to him and decline his gift. He looks disgruntled and says, ‘I will hold onto it for you. I am sure you will change your mind.’ He then requests I start eating before the food gets cold. I do not trust the food nor the drink in front of me. My gut told me not to accept his invitation to eat. He looks irritated when I tell him I am not hungry.

I want to tell both my parents about this uncomfortable feeling from being here today. I want to insist that they never bring me here again. Knowing them, they will tell me that won't happen because this man is paying a good sum of money to have us here. Ever since he began paying our family, Dad stopped working saying there is plenty of money to go around now. Mom tells me to see this as an opportunity to help our family. What I do not understand is why I do not see a dime of what this man pays us. Rather than protect me, my parents nag me to put up with it. They even instruct me to do whatever he says. I sometimes wonder if they really are my parents.

I continue glancing over to the bed. Noticing my stare he says, “I work late nights. Sometimes I like having a bed in here. Saves me trouble.”

“Why did you invite me here?,” I ask.

“If you eat I’ll tell you.”

“Tell me first.”

“Can’t I invite a young girl and share a meal with her? After all, I am paying for that girl. Does that not give me a right to her? If you did not want to come you should have not accepted the offer.”

*I didn’t.* My parents did. “You know little girl I can pull back my support. I don’t have to support your family. Careful now, I know how your Dad gets when he is angry.”

I know how he gets too. When there is not enough money he goes out to drink or looks dazed when coming home. As if he were on something. When he gets angry he pulls me and my siblings by the hair. My older brother had enough and ran away from home. Now it is only me and my two younger siblings. Knowing Dad, if I come home to tell him I am the cause for losing our money he is sure to beat bruises into me. Worse, he might go after one of my younger siblings. With no other choice, I eat the food. The old man says, “That’s better. I knew you would do it. The food is good ain’t it? Whatever you want I will get it for you. Just say the word. In exchange, whatever happens in this room stays between us.”

Nothing happens so I continue eating. I then ask him, “how did you manage to earn all this?”

He responds with, “I made wise investments that paid off. Do you recognize the Diamond family name?”



“I do. Isn’t that the family with the genius child. The one shaking up the world with his inventions.”

“Yes, that’s the one. He, among many others, is someone I supported financially to follow their dream. And what do I get from that good for nothing man? After all the help I gave him over the years, he repays me by removing me from the board. That conniving bastard bought me out. The only peace of mind I have is knowing he paid a high price for it. I tried bankrupting him, but it failed. I invited you here today because most people only come to see me for money, a favor, or a good time.”

“This whole time I forgot to introduce myself. I am Jeff, but most people call me Mr. Stein. Now I have a few questions of my own. Do you like having a good time or feeling good? Are there any boys you like? Have you tried anything with them? You know, like taking it from behind or straddling them?”

I find his questions inappropriate, but I keep quiet. As I am about to finish my meal, I start feeling dizzy as the room sways side to side. I feel an arm on my back as someone carries me to bed. I wish I had stayed unconscious. When I start waking up I feel wrinkles pressing against my chest. No one will understand what it means to get violated. You can beat someone, but psychological bruises never heal because they can never be undone. We can try to move past it, but it will always be there in the back of our mind. Similar to how we can experience war seeing our loved ones die all around us without ever experiencing a single wound ourselves. Just because I did not get physically harmed in a war does not mean I do not suffer from it. For the rest of my life, I will suffer from the memories of seeing close friends being torn apart as cannons smash their skulls and swords pierce their chest. You might not feel anything seeing this scene, but you will if you see someone you care about dying before your eyes.

Like your mother, father, brother, sister, or long time friend. Don't lie to me and tell me you would feel nothing. When you feel nothing it means the damage done to you is so large that you decompartmentalize your suffering. That's how I felt at that moment. For years I kept it to myself. For each visit, I lay there limp as he had his way. Why was I doing this all for?

I thought I would never find love. Except one boy kept bringing me flowers each day. I told him to stop, but he would not. When I told him my plans to go to the plaza tomorrow he asked me if he could join me. I ask if his parents would be okay with that. He says he has no parents. He got put in a shelter when his Dad and Mom beat him after strapping him to a chair. I ask why he keeps following me. He said he saw me crying one day and since then he could force himself to leave me alone. He saw it, he saw how I would cut up my wrists when I thought about how disgusting I am. He said if he speaks with me it won't give me time to cut myself. I don't know what he said to me that made me cry, but the tears would not stop. As I cried, I wondered why he did not try holding onto me. Years later he said he did not know what to do when he saw me cry. Neither of us did. Neither of us knew what love was until we spent years together. I am grateful for how patient he was because it took me a long time to learn intimacy. All he said was he is fine with holding hands. He does not need anything else. In exchange, he only wishes to hear me sing gleeful tunes to him. Now I sing them for him and our two children.

I waste no energy to think of what became of my parents or Mr. Stein. On the last day I spent with Mr. Stein I asked him for a large amount of money. Telling him I hate my parents and wish to live with him. He became hesitant to give me the money, but I told him I wish to send my parents far away. I hate them, but still love them. I told him I do not want to inform them of my plan otherwise they

will pressure me to continue with how things are. I told Mr. Stein if he loves me he should trust me this once. I lied. I packed our bags and headed North with my lover and two siblings.

I am fortunate to have met a boy named Ross years ago. He had learned how to speak the Northern language. In exchange for over a year's worth of private lessons, I taught him how to play the piano better and how to improve his voice. My lover came to learn from him too with no push back. It is quite strange, apart from my lover, he is the only one I felt no need to stay cautious around. Neither did my lover feel animosity from him. Instead of insisting he only speak with me, he insisted my lover be present whenever possible. Saying it does not feel right otherwise. We never told him about our plans of immigrating so as not to risk getting caught when we ran away. We did not want to take any chances. I wish we could have said goodbye to him. I hope nothing, but the best for him.

The only negative outcome is Mr. Stein demanded I leave my red striped sweater with him as insurance for returning back. Grandpa managed to protect me one last time.

8 8 8

Walking towards Mr. Stein's residence, Ross carries a folder in one hand and tells me the game plan. "The plan is simple, we walk in and ask for an audience with him. In good faith, I will ask if he will willingly sign over the deed to your family. If he does great. If he refuses we simply leave."

"That's it?! You're not going to do anything else? You know what he did right?," I ask, confused. *How can he let him walk over us? If it were me...*

"There is nothing else to say. I could tell him my next steps, but why give him an advantage by running my mouth. Both he and Dad

agreed to sign a private deal. Mr. Stein received part ownership of Dad's company in exchange Dad removed the ambiguous language found in their original contract earning him complete ownership over more land which belonged to Mr. Stein. They played each other. Mr. Stein expected no one would ever find out about the new contract. While my Dad expected Mr. Stein would try something shady."

"Wouldn't he become hesitant to sign such a contract? I don't know how much your company is worth, but it must not be worth more than land, right?"

"It's not, but the price of the land today is not the price it was worth before. Not until more people came to live here did the prices start soaring. The date at which the contract was signed was early on in their partnership. From my recollection, the contract was signed on a day they were indulging their urges to consume alcohol and other pleasures. You should never make monetary decisions while under the influence. You are more susceptible to say yes when you are. He must have thought I would never find out."

"How come? Wouldn't it be obvious that his son knows about the contract?"

"Well actually I did not know about the contract itself until the last few weeks before my Dad passed. He gave me a run down of important documents and possessions he was leaving with me. From there, he made sure his lawyers knew who to communicate with from now on regarding his estate. They told me not to tell anyone about this topic. Except under the circumstance that someone comes to me for help regarding their land ownership. It was a gamble, but they wanted Mr. Stein to believe I knew nothing. Like Dad intended. Because Dad added a stipulation to the contract saying that if Mr. Stein were to be found guilty of committing any fraud to earn his

land back then he must relinquish his ownership from Dad's company. Fraud such as trying to harass a family to sign over their deed. Mr. Stein really did rely on me not knowing anything."

"Now I understand, but did you have to keep it a secret from us? I was worried sick."

"I wanted to tell you, but to fool him I have to fool those around me. Makes it more believable. Besides, I trust your family. Shouldn't a true family rely on each other? Helping each other when they can. Covering each other's weaknesses. You have all helped me for a long time. Now it is my turn to help you. I notice a lot of people have trouble asking for help. Makes them feel weak, but sometimes people do need help. None of us are superhuman to persevere on our own. Maybe one person will not help you, but if you do not ask for help you will never know. The world is not so cruel that everyone will say no. You know."

"Still, what reason did Mr. Stein really have? To believe your Dad never told you anything?"

"Simple, Dad would gripe about my shortcomings only to Mr. Stein. For years he told him I am a good for nothing son. Knowing very little about business. Melting plastic like a dimwit and always following the crowd. He told him I have no backbone. Dad never said kind words to me in front of him. It did not take much to convince him from there. Dad never went against him either so he must have thought he never would."

"So no one else came to you first?"

"Nope. Your family must have been his first target. He must have not gone after other families once he saw my Dad's note. If he were to knock on too many doors he knew I would start investigating his

actions. Thereby, leading me to uncover the contract he tried to keep hidden.”

“Wait, then what is the point of us going to his home? Don’t you have enough evidence to go against him in court and WIN?”

“I never liked him. He creeps me out and I never sensed he cared about anyone other than himself. Never seen him with family nor friends. Business partners sure, but no one else. Like it or not, he did help my Dad grow his business. For that, I want to give him the benefit of the doubt. If he signs the paperwork I am carrying it will end with him no longer having ownership in my company and losing the ability to harass your family. If he does not sign he will pay additional heavy fines for committing fraud and face possible jail time. I prefer having less enemies than more. But if he wants to make me an enemy then I have no problem with that either.”

We continue talking until we approach two tall double gates. The home is quite large with metal fencing all around. Upon our arrival, three large dogs ran at us. Ross speaks a strange language to them. Whatever he said made the dogs stop and sit. He grabs hold of my hand and gets each dog to sniff it through the fence. He greets a guard walking up to us telling him we wish to see Mr. Stein regarding urgent business. He lets us through. Ross has me walk in front of him as he keeps an eye on the dogs. At the front door, we are greeted by another guard. Looking closer, these are all the same men who came to destroy my home. I want to yell at them, but with Ross here I decide against it. As to not cause him more trouble. I trust him to handle the situation which gives me peace of mind.

The second guard looks more anxious about letting us in. He says, “I cannot let you in, Ross. Mr. Stein is planning to head out soon. I suggest you leave before he comes downstairs. Otherwise you will get us both in trouble. Go home.”

“I refuse to. Either let us in or I will tell Mr. Stein which of his guards prevented us from entering. If you are scared of losing your job I can always offer you one. But if you don’t listen to me now, what use do I have for you? Or do you like working for Mr. Stein that much?”

The guard hesitates long enough for us to walk past him. He follows behind us. When we get to the foot of the staircase leading upstairs we are greeted by a bulky guard. As he walks down the staircase he yells at us. “You’re not allowed up here Ross! Our boss is planning to head out soon. I cannot have you walking in here like you own the place! We let you come and go as you please for years, but not today. The boss has urgent matters of his own to attend to. Go back home and he will see you tomorrow.”

“Gustus, of all the guards you are the only one who's never liked me. For a long time, I thought I offended you somehow, but I don’t think that ever happened. I ran through all our interactions and found nothing. Then it came to me. Behind closed doors, you have your fun in this little house don’t you? I’m not stupid. I know what goes on around here. I just **choose** to keep my mouth shut. But I will be damned if you get in my way. So **step aside.**”

“I refuse.”

“Alright then. Guess that’s that,” says Ross as he takes a step closer towards Gustus who stands at the foot of the staircase now. “I had no problem with you, but if you really want a fight then I’ll be happy to give you one.”

They face each other at an arm’s length apart. The silence gets broken by a geezer who yells from the top of the staircase. “What’s with all the commotion?! Is the truck ready?”

“The truck is waiting outside sir, but you have a visitor,” says the guard standing by.

“Ross, what are you doing here?!,” asks Mr. Stein. When he asks, he spots me and we lock eyes for a brief second. As if seeing me explained the whole situation. “Come inside you two. I can have my chefs prepare us a meal. I will be leaving here soon so we cannot talk for too long.”

“There is no need for a meal. We won’t be here for long. Can we talk in private?,” asks Ross.

“Of course come right on up.”

Gustus steps to the side letting us through. Ross gestures for me to walk in front of him again. The dogs follow us growling at Gustus as we pass him. He tries kicking one of them to shut them up, but seeing Ross’ corner eye he decides against it. We walk until we arrive outside a large chamber. The dogs are told to stay outside. Inside the room are statues and art pieces scattered around the room. The walls are adorned with bookshelves. In the middle, there is a cluttered desk and a small dining table alongside it. And out of place is a small white bed. The sheets are a mess. Turning my head, I see Ross walk towards a chair next to it. On top of the chair is a red striped sweater. He grabs onto the sweater examining its cuffs. Then he glances over to the bed. For a brief moment I felt a brooding sensation from him. I wonder if it was my imagination. As if he saw something he wished he hadn’t. He places the sweater back onto the chair.

Sitting at his desk now, Mr. Stein tells Ross it is rude to touch other people’s stuff without permission. Ross takes a deep breath then proceeds to say, “my apologies. The sweater seemed familiar. To tell you the truth, I am here to get you to sign a contract. (*Don’t do it*).



There must have been a misunderstanding. (*Kill*). You seem to have taken something that is not yours.”

“Let me guess. You want me to sign some damn papers. You can leave the documents here and I’ll have my lawyers look over them later. If that’s all you came to say, you can leave now. I have somewhere to go.” Instead of leaving, Ross walks over to Mr. Stein and places a hand on his shoulder. Dropping the contract onto the table. He says, “we’re friends right Mr. Stein? So can you tell me about it, right? How was it?”

“How was **what**? I don’t like that attitude of yours and get your hand off me young man.” Ross stands there in silence with a murderous look in his eyes. A moment passes before Mr. Stein looks away and says, “Okay, you got me. So what if I tried taking my land back. It was only business so **don’t** give me that look. Out of the friendship I had with your Dad I’ll overlook that stare of yours, but only for today. If you were in shoes you would have done the same. I know your Dad would have. He was no saint either. So tell me, where do you want me to sign?”

“I am not talking about the contract. I am asking if you know how many times she cried? Did you ever think about where her cuts came from? Did you even care? I don't even know why I am asking. Of course you **didn’t**. I kept wondering who could possibly dare to harm her. She is one of the loveliest people I’ve met. I don’t know much about her, but I know enough to tell what kind of person she is. You cannot imagine the things I thought of, the things I would do to anyone who touched her. I love my father, but even for him. If he dared touch her, dared to touch Luffy, or crossed the line with anyone I cared about. I don’t give a damn. Lucky for me, I don’t have to hold back against you.”

BAAM!

In a quick motion, Ross grabs Mr. Stein by the back of his head. With force, he slams it into the desk. He lurches in pain as drops of blood run from his nose.

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I try to see the best in people, but I sometimes know more than I let on. I can tell when people lie. I can tell when people keep secrets. I can dissect what people are going through by the bits of information they give me. If I was not such a coward in the past I would have spoken to her more. I knew someone was violating her, but I kept quiet. I tried telling adults about the issue, but none of them did anything. They said they reported it to the authorities, but when I asked how the investigation was going they told me it was above their pay grade. In other words, whoever is involved is high on the totem pole. If I made a careless mistake they might make me disappear.

In conjunction with a recurring dream. I run, do push-ups, and push myself. These are all activities that I hate doing. But if I don't do them I will regret it when it is time to fight. When I want to call it quits I remind myself that failing means failing to help someone when it matters. Perhaps doing all this is futile in the face of great power, but if it increases my chances of surviving and succeeding by one percent then it is worth pursuing each day. Not for myself, but for others.

Knowing all this, I hold God and his disciples in high regard. For they forgive all sinners. Unlike them, there is a twisted part inside of me. As easily as I can see the brightest futures, I can just as easily see the worst outcomes. I can visualize people rejoicing with each other. I can also envision how to take advantage of each one of them. With clarity, I can see the proper steps to turn them against each other. The worst part is I do not feel a thing for bringing chaos into this

world. But that seems too lonely. I always shut that voice off, but seeing her sweater made me want to give into that demented part of me. The one that does not squirm when seeing dead people at my feet.

*Don't do it. Sandra is here. So? Kill him. There is a revolver under his desk. Get closer. There is no going back. Make him feel the same pain you saw in her eyes. Was Dad part of it? Each time I smelled perfume off of him did he dare touch a child? But he's not your father. Even if he was, would that stop you? How many times did you see her cry in pain? How many times did you wish you knew who it was so you could beat the life out of them? You wanted to be with her didn't you? But seeing her happy with someone else made you happy too. Just like you, she felt alone. Even if it wasn't you, you prefer her to stay with someone she loves and loves her back. They don't need to know. Neither of them do. Make this man disappear so he can never harm them or anyone else. But you are not God to take his life. For that, I ask for forgiveness for I will sin.*

BAAM!

“AAARGHHHH AH FUCK! FUCK! THE FUCK IS YOUR PROB-”

BAAM! Right hook. BAAM! BAAM! BAAM! Consecutive punches are thrown into his face one after another. My knuckles get covered in blood as they crack. Gustus, who was waiting outside, rushes in with the dogs. From his hand motion, I can tell he plans to pull out a gun. *Do it. I want you to. The moment your bullet misses, I'll plaster your face with gunpowder.*

“**STOP! PUT IT DOWN!**,” I command with a demonic screech. *Shoot it. Come on. I SAID SHOOT IT!* Like this old man. I want any reason to put him down. Gustus does not deserve to live either. If not for God's strong belief in me, I would have shot them through the

head already. They only have God to thank for me not killing them already. Despite my hatred for them, I am still holding back. God wants me to forgive them, but I am not God. They need to pay.

BANG\*

Mr. Stein tried pulling a gun from behind his back while I was distracted. *That's all I needed.* Before his shot is fired, I lift his arm holding the gun into the air. The bullet hit the ceiling instead. I dig my nails into his wrist as he wails in pain and lets go of the gun. I kick it to the side. I pull him off his chair and constrict his arm like a cobra. With my foot on his face, I snap his arm like a twig. I hear his muscles tear as I break his elbow in half. "FUCK! STOPAAAAAA-" His screams sound like a lullaby. SNAP\*

He cries like a newborn child. From his movements I can tell he no longer has control over his right arm. I hear more commotion coming from outside the room as other guards start entering in. They hesitate to approach. One of them yells, "Ross, what do you think you are-!"

**"I DIDN'T TELL YOU TO SPEAK."** There is silence again. As he cries on the floor, I get on top of him. BAAM!... BAAM!... BAAM! My fists do not stop. With a few more hits, I know he is bound to die. Again and again my knuckles scrape against what is left of his skull. One more hit and that will be it. *Don't do it.* I don't care what happens. I lift my fist high. Before it lands a body presses against it. With the strength I have, I know I can still land a good hit despite someone holding me back. Except hearing her cry made all the anger in my arm dissipate. Her voice brought me back. *sobbing\** "Stop. Please stop, this isn't you! I don't care what happens to him, but I care about you! To me, there is hatred in your eyes, but there's sadness too. Let's go home. For me, please take me home. I don't want to see you suffering like this."

Turning, I see Sandra with worried eyes. The guards behind her are flabbergasted at what they saw moments ago. I turn to Mr. Stein. Seeing his bloody face, I ask myself what did I do? I have no regrets smashing him in, but there is no coming back from the thought I had while doing it. As I stand up, Sandra wraps her arm around mine. We step together towards the exit. Before we reach the door, I ask Sandra to let me go for a second. Tracing back, I kneel down and grab Mr. Stein by the throat and whisper a few words into his ear. Then returning to Sandra, we lock arms. The guards step to the side. Without looking at him I say, "Gustus don't worry. I'll be back to talk with you. The both of you." When we exit the door I call out to the three dogs. I tell everyone that I will be taking them home. As we leave, I hear them hurrying to help Mr. Stein.

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Instead of attending school, I wrap up loose ends during the final week. The guards, minus Gustus, got fired. As promised, I gave them new jobs. Most of the time they work on tasks I need to get done. Varying from guard work, manufacturing work, to gathering intel. They keep tabs on Mr. Stein too.

Mr. Stein does not leave his house much anymore. Like my father, he stares out the window and looks over at his garden. Most people would recommend I never enter his home again. Questioning why I visit him, but I have an innate feeling telling me that he won't try killing me. No one can. Not while God wants me alive. There is something left for me to accomplish. That's what the voice inside of me said. It did not tell me what, it only told me to continue living until the time came.

For the next year, I plan to mentor someone to take my place. I need to see more of the world. I need to venture. *I need to get away.* I already have a coworker in mind. He goes by Remy, he came to this

country inspired by the great inventor Mr. Diamond. Through talking, he told me about his journey which is more arduous than my own. Using family connections he found his way to this town. Taking on any type of work he could. What I notice about him is that he is always the first to arrive at any job. He is one of the few who volunteered at the opportunity to sell door to door. Not realizing he would earn extra money selling. He did it because he thought if he did not he would lose his current job. In addition, as I began moving forward with plans to develop better farming equipment; he chose to dedicate his time to help me with the designs. In exchange, I helped him learn about electrical work and mathematics. Having tutored people in the past made teaching him that much easier. I had no money at the time, but Remy continued helping me out. I made my lawyers draft a written agreement stipulating that if we reach a certain financial milestone for this venture in farming equipment I will allot him a percentage of ownership within the company. Remy told me he trusts me and needs no contract, but I told him to not be a fool. No matter how kind someone is, a contract is necessary because there are more liars than honest people in the world. I told him to leave a paper trail whenever possible. My last words to him are, "Remember Remy. Progression is never ending. Each solution leads to problems and problems lead to solutions."

The days following the incident with Mr. Stein, I debate how to proceed forward. Stein said he will not press charges, but wants us to not report him or Gustus to the authorities. I am reluctant, but Sandra convinces me to agree. The compromise I give to Gustus is telling him he has to attend Church regularly. I warn him if he tries anything funny while attending he will go straight to jail. Looking at Stein I can tell he has only a few years left to live so I do not force him to attend Church. If he wants to change at this age it needs to come from him. Since the day he got beat, he began aging faster. Leaving his work to the side, he spends his days listening to records.

I did catch him drinking once. Learning from the past, I emptied all the liquor bottles found in his home. Initially, I took over Stein's responsibilities of allocating, collecting, and re-evaluating assets. With time, Sandra spoke with Stein more to learn how to conduct business. With her help my workload lessened, but I told Sandra about my concerns with her spending time with him. In response, she asked me one question, "Will you take responsibility over me then? Will you be there at my side at night and when I wake up? Will you stay with me or are you going to leave?"

"I can't. I need to go. There are greater men for you. I can't stay with you."

"Why are you like that? If it's work and you gotta leave I understand that, but I think it is something deeper. Why can't you let anyone love you?"

Our relationship became more distant since the day I left, but even if it is estranged she will always be someone special to me. But I knew this was not the time. Not yet. Over the years, we exchange letters from time to time. I send letters mostly when I get lonely. She sends them when she wants to tell me something annoying about her newest relationship. I still visit her family, but sometimes I see her with another man. She no longer lives with her family seeing that she can live on her own now. I can no longer picture being alongside her. I feel sad at times, but it is my fault for not grabbing her hand when I could.

That said, spending so much time with Stein made him open up to her. She learned he also got abused as a child. As a child he earned money by any means necessary. His own mother would take him to homes of rich men with peculiar tastes. They paid him to eat their food. He hated it. He hated the power they held over him. He hated his mother for not caring about him. He hated his father for

abandoning him. Stein spoke about seeing his mother waste her money away putting syringes into her veins as she remained motionless in her room. Since that day he swore he would take vengeance against anyone who dared threaten or cross him. He said he lost himself and not until he got beaten up did he realize he became the same monster he came to despise. He said he is better off dead. He has no one. In his dying years, no one visits him anymore. His associates now only speak with Sandra to deal with business. Having no children nor friends. He sits alone all day. The only time he somewhat enjoys now is answering Sandra's questions or hearing about what Gustus is learning in Church. My men tell me Gustus still visits brothels, but his frequency has been reducing. Now he spends most of his time with only one maid working at Stein's residence. I cannot forgive those two, but I cannot forgive myself either. For picturing the face of my father while punching Stein repeatedly. Maybe that is why I want to forgive them because I actually want to find a reason to forgive myself. Humans sure are strange.

The last question I ask Sandra before departing is, "how can you feel safe with Stein and Gustus?"

"Easy, I have a revolver on me at all times. At least if I die, they will die with me. Can you imagine a future where people are prohibited from having one? Sure, they are not safe, but that's only if everyone is ignorant about them. They can hurt people, but they can also protect someone. At least by carrying one I get to choose to protect myself versus trusting a few powerful men to dictate how they are used. For all we know, they will oppress us through our fear of being killed. Without them, we have no chance to stand up for ourselves."

I think about her words for years. Guns are not good, but what is the alternative? We should at least teach our children about gun safety



so they can protect themselves; more importantly, so they do not kill themselves or someone else by accident. We teach kids how to cut an apple with a knife. Why can't we teach them about guns given they are becoming a reality of our world? Not that I like the idea itself.

I remember all of the greatest moments in my life. As well as the worst parts too. Overall, life is great. One of my greatest memories in life is the final day of high school.

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Having to deal with Stein made my final week at school disappear. Knowing I am not attending school next year made my coworkers insist I attend my final week of school to say goodbye to my friends and teachers. The faculty understood there was nothing left to teach me. I learned everything I needed to learn a long time ago. With all that time going by no one told me happy birthday. Not a single time. Everyone is so engrossed with finishing the school year that no one bothers to remember that my birthday is always on the last week of school.

At the start of each year I tell people when my birthday is. Never mentioning it again for the rest of the year. Each year I waited for someone to say, "Happy birthday Ross!" Each year I get disappointed when everyone forgets. This year too. Not even the Shanes remembered. I thought at least they would. Only my Dad would remember to leave me a happy birthday card. He was the only one who did. Unlike before, Dad is not around anymore. Happy birthdays are meaningless to me so why am I fussing over anyone remembering me?

This is how it should be. *Love? Love who, you? You do not deserve love. Who would love-*. I need to give love to others before I can ask for it. I have not received it because I have done nothing to deserve

it. *Stop, please stop-*. I hear a familiar voice. It is not my voice nor God's, whose voice is it?

As I think, I arrive at the doorstep of the Shane's, but no one is home. I look around. There is no one inside. Where are they? Did I make a mistake? Did Mr. Stein get back at me? Where are they and where is Luffy? Panic takes over. I rush home for my belongings. How could I be naive? Why did I listen to the voice? He better not have touched them. Dark emotions cloud my judgment. When I arrive home I hear the dogs barking. I stay cautious. Opening the front door I look at both sides before entering. Entering, I see someone moving in the living room. Pulling out my revolver, I maneuver slowly towards it. Turning the corner, I point my gun at a body that pops out. BANG\* I hear screams. "SURPRISE!! AAAAAA." Ma, Pa, and Sandra scream surprise before ducking for cover. Recognizing Pa's face I redirect my shot. My heart pops out beating fast from the shock. Feeling relief from not having shot anyone. I put the safety back on the gun. I collapse onto the sofa next to me.

"JESUS, you had me scared. I thought we were gonna die," says Ma. *Hahaha*\* "Damn, that was scary. We should probably not sneak into his home to scare him."

"God damn it Ross! Why you pull a gun out for?!", says Sandra. Luffy barks at me for having scared him too. Looking around, I see decorations around the room. *What's going on?*

"We wanted to surprise you at our home, but our stove is not working. If we told you anything it might have ruined the surprise. Next time, we will," says Ma. Walking up to me Sandra says, "Happy Birthday Ross." She motions for me to stand then proceeds to give me a long hug. *Huh?* But I haven't-. Sandra takes a step back. Next, I feel a rough hand rubbing the top of my head. "Here you go."

“What is this?,” I ask Pa.

“Open it.” When I open it I see a hand drawn picture. It was a picture of us getting ice cream together. Pa paid a vendor to draw a quick doodle of us on a day we went into town together. I thought he threw it away. Apparently, he went back to ask for the picture to get redrawn better. He got it framed too. “Love you man. Come here. Happy Birthday Ross,” says Pa as he pulls me in. *Don't do it.*

“I uh-. Thank you.” Did he wait a whole year to give me this? Getting ice cream wasn't special was it? My throat dries while my face feels like spasming. What kind of face must I be making right now? This isn't right? I do not deserve this. I did not cry at Dad's funeral. I did not cry as I got beat. I did not cry when I forgot about Mom. I did not cry when I spent years all alone in the dark. I did not cry because I do not need anyone. Why start now? They are not my family. Pa is not my Dad and Ma is not my Mom. Why are they doing this? Do they want something? Did I do something?

“I made a cake for you. It's almost done,” says Ma. She steps closer to give me a hug too. When she does I take a step back. She looks confused for a second. She reaches over again, but I try to push her back. “It's fine you don't owe me anything. Don't force yourselves.”

“We're not forcing ourselves. We wanted to do this for you.” says Ma while she tries hugging me again. I squirm around in her arms to get her to let go.

“No, this isn't right. Please let go.” *Huh? Don't cry.* My eyes water. I try holding my tears back, but my lips quiver. They quivered when Sandra gave me a hug, when Pa patted my head, and now as Ma tries giving me a hug. When I try to gently push her off, Ma grabs my arms and pulls me in. I try resisting again, but my arms lose their strength. She pats my back and puts my head on her shoulder. She

whispers in my ears, “Let it out. It’s alright Sweetie no one is going to hurt you. No one is going to judge you. You can cry if you want. And I-”

Her voice cracks. I lift my head to look behind her. I see Pa’s lips quiver and Sandra’s eyes water. I don’t believe they will ever understand my pain, but maybe I won’t ever understand their love for me. You know, it was scary not seeing them at home. As I ran home I worried, I thought. Am I ever going to see them again? Are they gone? Will I be alone again? Coming home, will there be anyone to say hello to me? If there is no one then... No, no, no, handle the situation then cry. Those were my thoughts. Seeing them alive and well made me sink. I thought I lost them. Remembering that, I hug Ma tight. My tears soak her shoulder. Luffy whimpers as he jumps on the side of my leg. I cry for a long time before passing out from exhaustion. Until this point, I never took a break. I did not want to think about Dad passing away nor about who would take care of Luffy if something were to happen to me. I wanted no one to care about me. If they do, my life becomes painful when I have to see them go. But when I came home to see no one I begged God *please protect them. Don’t take them away. I’m sorry for not wanting them. I’ll do anything you ask. I want to see them again.* Then I cried, I cried so bad. Although, I never wanted them to see me cry. When Ma said it is okay to cry something burst. I held onto her tight. Holding her, her warmth reminds me of my real Mom. She would hold me in her arms as I cried. Singing me a lullaby until I fell asleep.

Waking up from my nap, I feel someone playing with my hair. Opening my eyes, I see Sandra. My head rests on her lap. She tells me Ma and Pa are outside giving food to the dogs. We do not speak about what happened, but when she smiles I smile. “You know Ross. I know more about you than you think. So if you ever want to cry again I’ll be here. No matter what. You got it?”

“I do.”

“Do you really? Say it to me then.”

“If I ever feel down I will come to you. And if you are ever in trouble or need someone I'll be there for you too.”

“You better be. You are quite a hassle sometimes. Stop making us worry.”

We continue talking and laughing until Pa and Ma return. We all spend more time talking till the cake is ready. Ma calls everyone over to the kitchen. In concert, they sing me a song before I blow out the candles. Out of all my birthdays, I rank this one as one of my favorites. Till it was time to leave, I spent each minute with my family. For once, I felt happy. They might be gone one day, but rather than think about that. I want to think about how I can spend time with them now.

In life, I have little to no regrets. I live life by the motto, “if I do not regret doing something now, why regret it in the future?” I do not regret the choices I made because it led me to meet great people, but there is one choice I would change. I do not think about it much since it does me no good. The day I woke up on her lap and sat up I should have told her truth. “I love you.” That way I could have loved her longer. I wish I realized it sooner, but even I am a fool.

## Afterword

(Not Gonna Lie) I was planning on rewriting my author note. I went against the idea recognizing it meant forgetting about the day I first put pen to paper.

I agree, the world can become too much. Especially during a time of technological change and globalization. I found the best steps towards alleviating negative thoughts is to keep busy and exercise. Being exhausted gives us little room to think about troubles at home. Depending on your goals or situation this can be good or bad. Everything is subjective to our interpretation. Not to alleviate, but to cure our negative thoughts we need to forgive ourselves, think of someone other than ourselves, and aim for something (most people call this finding purpose). Life is not perfect and following these recommendations is not enough for everyone. Mental health is a complex topic which varies from person to person. I could spend hours typing up my knowledge of the mental psyche. Mentioning the fact that our mood takes waveforms. Describing the difference between having a bad day, depression, and major depression. I could also explain the impact labeling can have on ourselves and others. Biologically speaking, we are not created to stay happy. This is why people reiterate to forget our feelings while pursuing a goal in mind. I can go on, but this is not the introduction to a human biology book.

That said, the final book of this series will cover the idea of life and death. How creation comes to fruition and the importance of valuing ourselves, our lives, and those around us. It is already set in stone that I will only write seven books for this series. I am not trying to extend the run. I have written so I can see if what God has shown me comes true for the alternative is much worse. Not for me, but for all of us. Not until God made me fear God, did I truly pursue writing. Enough of that though.

Book II will contain a new cast. The story will take place years prior to Book I. For any young readers, I highly recommend getting parental approval to read Books II and III. Don't be getting me in trouble with your parents. I plan to come up with a solution to prevent children from accidentally reading Books II & III when they are complete. I encourage parents to observe what their children consume. They become what they see, think, and read.

For those interested, Book II will focus on only one character and his rise to Warlord status. For those wanting to see carnage, you will see it in the next book. You may also see a change in my writing style to compliment the newest character.

With that, I want to thank everyone for reading. Thank you for your support. If you want any updates or want to see what I have to say please follow me on X @LaLexHM.

## Phoebe's Epilogue

*I don't want to stay here any longer.* Since Sandra left life got worse. I would look forward to seeing her family. Now who is left? The real reason she left me is because I did something so stupid as trying to kiss her. *Stupid Phoebe. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.* Each night, I cry myself to sleep. *One more year and I can leave.* I wish that year came sooner.

At the start of senior year, my aunt took my cousins to see her brother who fell sick. My Uncle stayed behind saying, "why do I have to see him? He never visited me when I got sick. You go by yourself." He marched out afterwards. Later that night, he came home drunk. While I slept he slid into my bed. I did not notice him until my bed creaked. I said nothing, until his hands held my chest and he pressed his body against me. I could smell the foul odor of liquor coming from his mouth as he tried kissing my neck. I try removing his hands from my chest and pushing his face away. Before I can yell he covers my mouth. I try biting his hand off, but he punches me. I cry in pain. I cry more when he slams it into me. He seems to enjoy my misery. Unable to overpower him I lay there like a fish. I try to forget about where I am. I think back to better times. When my aunt and cousins return to see my black eye my Uncle tells them I acted up. They stare at me while I remain quiet with my head down. Even if I told them what happened nothing would change. He might try touching me again if I do. I do not want that.

I was wrong. Throughout the year, he continues to molest me when no one is around. It sickens me. After a year, I gather the courage to tell Ms. Sayu. She is in shock. The authorities arrest my uncle, but there are no charges. My cousins and aunt refuse to testify against him and I have no physical marks to claim physical abuse. After reporting him he is released. All that did was force me to tell a court



room filled with strangers about the traumatic sexual experiences my Uncle did to me. Ms. Sayu took me in after I got kicked out of my Uncle's home. Nothing came easy to Ms. Sayu. She continued getting death threats and demands for resignation after my Uncle outed me. Mrs. Sayu did so much for me. I cannot do this to her. I cannot be a burden. Having fallen asleep, I slip a note next to Ms. Sayu's bed. I also placed the same note on top of her papers, her shoes, and inside her favorite purse to make sure she got it.

*Dear Mrs. Sayu,*

*Thank you for all you have done. You have done more than I can ask for. This may not be what you want, but it is what I want. I am leaving you and I do not want you to follow me. I don't really see the point of living, but I'd like to see her again. To tell Sandra I'm sorry for trying to kiss her. Maybe everyone is right. I am not God's child. I don't see how I could be, but I did not wish to be born like this. I tried loving men, but each one repulsed me. They cause me nothing, but pain.*

*Ms. Sayu, you mean more to me than you realize. I have no touchy feelings regarding my real mother, but by talking to you these past few years it made me wish you were my real mother. The nights I could not sleep. I would sneak over and beg you if I could sleep outside your home. Even though it could cost you your job you let me sleep with you instead. As I cried, you held me tight in your arms, never asking why I am crying. I wouldn't have told you. I still wanted to look like a good child under your eyes. I did not want to drag you in.*

*You once told me you are not the best teacher, but I think you are. You told me there are many times you had to overlook a child having problems at home knowing there is nothing you can do to help them. No matter how much you love your students you cannot support them all. For that, it made you hate yourself. Maybe you were like that for others, but not for me. I love you Ms. Sayu and I always will. If I can come*

*back one day to see you I will. If I don't come back, pray to God for me.  
I will pray to you too.*

*I need to go. I don't know where, but I know I need to go South. That's  
where Sandra will be. I hope you won't be too mad that I took some  
clothes. I'm sorry for all the trouble I caused. I hope you do better without  
me. I will always love you. And thank you for teaching me. Thank you  
for allowing me to write this letter.*

*Forever your child,*

*Phoebe*

With that, I marched South not coming knowing what is to come,  
but if I die I die.