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**HUPE**

**in the**

**Story**

**Land**





**NATIONAL SHORT  
STORY WRITING  
COMPETITION**

**HUPE**  
**in the**  
**Story**  
**Land**

Dear readers,

You are about to dig deep into the magical world of stories written by the most imaginative writers among us, the children.

HUPE proudly presents the stories submitted to the National Writing Competition that was organized this year for the first time. You have sent us your stories in two categories (primary and secondary) and our executive boards have spent almost a month reading them. The winners were announced and awarded on Valentine's Day, but we've given you all the opportunity to publish your masterpieces and to be read by all teachers, members of HUPE, as well as our associates in many countries. HUPE Board congratulates not only the winners but to everyone among you who has shared an idea, sent a message or given an opinion on a particular topic. Also, we hope this is the first of the many years you'll be able to read wonderful stories written inside the HUPE family. Enjoy!

Anita Žepina, HUPE Publications Editor



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# WRITING COMPETITION



AND THE WINNERS ARE...

Primary  
school

1. The result of insecurity
2. Amani



3. Choosing the right fight



Secondary  
school

1. Cobwebs & bar corners
2. Onus
3. Beneath it all

**JOIN US ON HUPE DAY,  
FEBRUARY 20, 2021, AT  
THE AWARDS CEREMONY.**

**ZOOM MEETING  
ID: 8126637 5940  
PASSCODE: 564994**



**Please, resend us your pupils' stories. This time, names are welcome (pupil, mentor, school). All stories should be sent to [hupe.newsletter@gmail.com](mailto:hupe.newsletter@gmail.com). After that, just wait for your prizes and certificates to arrive!**



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Mentor: Ante Žderić  
OŠ Cvjetno naselje, Zagreb

*Antun Bader Bistrović*

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## **AMANI**

Mark Twain said that we should write about what we knew. Let me begin this story of liberty by telling you who I am. My name is Joseph Madiba. I was born into a poor family in a small village near the city of Ouadda in the Central African Republic. My dad ran a small tire business in Bangui and my mum took care of us back home. I remember walking for hours upon hours with my brothers and sisters just to get to school. There I met my best friend Djalle who was two years older than me. We used to play football and tag together having no worries.

But the time was to say goodbye to my school, my city and all I knew as I had to go to college in Bangui. My dad almost talked us into moving to Bangui because there we would have many more opportunities, I mean- me and my siblings. But there was no way to persuade my mother. In Bangui I attended l'*Universite de Gobongo*. I was a good student, everything was great on paper, but inside I began feeling homesick. I soon missed my old life, my mom the most.

In Bangui I lived in the center of the city with one of my classmates whose name was Phillipe. However, at first we didn't get along well, but in time we became really close friends. We would commute to school daily by motorcycle. One day on the way back home, Phillipe saw an old typewriter for sale. That was the thing we needed the most at the time. We stopped and asked the owner for the price and he answered in Bangui slang: "This one? It is only 50000." Phillipe quickly responded: "Even in America it isn't that expensive." Phillipe would give 20000. But the vendor kept insisting on the price of 50000 saying: "Look friend, it is perfect, very fast typing, cheapest in Bangui." I finally ended the negotiations by getting it myself for 35000. The deal was done and I got the typewriter. There was the smell of victory in the air. As soon as we came home, we tried to see how it works (to realize it wasn't worth the money though).

The next month a great riot struck my country. The president was assassinated by an extremist of the Kwa party. He called it revenge and soon massive protests started. My homeland was divided by various political groups, almost right after the terrorist's bomb attack on the government building. I woke up that night to guns and screams. When I looked from my bedroom window, I saw a large crowd of men in front of the government building. It turned out that the prime minister had burnt himself in front of the crowd half an hour before. The country was in a shambles and there seemed to be no hope for the future.

I still have no clue about what came over me, but I launched into a long rant about the need for fight against extremists. What is more, I started gaining instant popularity around the country being some kind of a leader of the anti-war party. The elections came after two months and in the meanwhile my college had been bombarded along with many important landmarks in other cities. There was chaos everywhere. The civil war seemed inevitable so I ran for the presidency challenged by a dozen contestants. It was basically the fight between me, Agoudougdal Kamara and the military general Francis Kondlegba. I promised to reunite the country and offer free education to all. We all know that education is window to the future. I would reward the people who contribute to the society and the environment. By 2050 our country would get all its energy from renewable sources (God knows we have a lot of sunny days).

Later that year I was sitting on my couch with Phillippe watching the news, waiting for the results of the elections. I was a bit sad when I finished second. Yet I realized that I would have probably been killed if I had won so I wasn't that disappointed. I'm only human after all. A few months passed by and the election of current President, Kamara came into question with suspicion that the elections had been rigged. Most political parties wanted ME to take charge of the country until the situation was resolved. Just like that, in a few months, I went from being an average student to being appointed the President. All of a sudden it struck me how much work I needed to do. I was not certain that I would be capable of fulfilling the promises that I had given before. I knew I would first have to mend the current situation.

Six months have passed so quickly. The country has become more stable with the big cities being protected. There's no sign of terrorism in them, but sadly, the rest of the country is still controlled by various terrorist groups and the military. In my recent public speech, I've called out the military and the terrorist groups saying that they are the reason why our beloved country is not prospering. My next goal is to help



the UN peacekeeping troops to restore peace and initiate prosperity. In a matter of weeks our international friends will be here and we will, hopefully, start changing my country for the better. Together. Maybe one day other African countries will follow our example. I would like to think that I have contributed to making my continent, this cradle of humankind, a better place. There is the smell of hope in the air.

(Author's note: "Amani" means "peace" in Swahili, and in Arabic it means "hope, trust, security, wish")

*Mentor: Amela Ojdanić*  
OŠ Turnić, Rijeka

*Ivan Brlas*

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## **THE RESULT OF INSECURITY**

A long, long time ago, before the dawn of the time, there was pure darkness. No sound, no smell, nothing could be felt or heard in this void until a sudden light came soaring through the empty abyss. The darkness did not like the sudden intrusion into its domain and it retaliated against the light. Both forces were caught in an endless stalemate not having enough power to overthrow the other. In the midst of their clash, a wide variation of colours emerged.

The more they clashed, the brighter and larger the colours were until finally, the first universe was created. The endless battle produced 7 universes, each being assigned a protector to guard it. The protectors, later known as The 7, could not venture into the other universes because the battle of dark and light was still producing forces that would rip anyone who would even attempt to venture across. As the time passed, the universes started developing their own things like planets, and slowly, life began blooming on each planet. There were only a few races in each universe, one of them being humans. Some of The 7 decided to share their divine knowledge with the life on the planets, the others though decided it was best not to interfere and let the races choose their own path and learn on their own. The ones that received the knowledge of the divine beings prospered much faster than those that didn't.

Each of the protectors decided to name his universe. The names mostly consisted of a letter and some numbers. In a universe that was named G-987 there was great dissatisfaction among the races. And where there is dissatisfaction, there are wars and riots. Each race blamed the other for their poor conditions. After some time, they declared war on each other thinking that more territory meant better conditions for them. Since they weren't blessed with the knowledge of their protector, they had no wits to manage the situation. They had to rely on their own bloodlust and their inner strength.

The protector, suddenly woken from the noise of the fighting, decided to reconsider his decision of not interfering. He just wanted some silence and peace, not riots and wars. Since nobody could perceive his true form, he had to craft a body for himself. He formed his soft white hair from the essence of the stars and his white horns from a dying dwarf star. Now he needed a weapon, in order to be able to strike fear into the others. He decided it would be a sword. He wanted a powerful unbreakable sword so he crafted it from a part of his spirit. That way he imbued the sword with the same divine power he possessed. He crafted his silver armour from the finest material he could find. To test his armour's endurance, he struck it with his sword. He was elated to see that the armour endured without a single scratch. He considered himself invincible now. The last touch were the wings, now he could soar through the sky and space whenever he wished. He created a mirror and opened his glowing eyes to take a glance at his creation.

Following the noise, he ended on a beautiful planet filled with rivers and vegetation. He was frustrated because the races were fighting and destroying the beautiful planet, so he hastened towards them. One race, called the elves, were careful not to destroy the vegetation because if they won the battle, the crops would be crucial for their evolution. If the battle destroyed all the crops, the war would be for naught because the land, that once had been prosperous and beautiful, would become a barren wasteland unable to help any of the races to prosper. Others being blinded with the lust for power and land did not think about the consequences of the war, stomping and crushing every plant that stood in their way. The protector descended onto the battlefield emitting colours of the galaxy. Witnessing an unknown threat landing they ceased fighting to observe what the creature would do. The protector opened his eyes revealing a strong orange glow, almost like fire. He was furious. He opened his mouth revealing a deep and strong voice:

"Why are you fighting? You have absolutely nothing to gain from this pitiful war!" the protector spoke in an angry tone. "Do you not see what your war is doing to this beautiful land? Even if one of you won the battle securing the land as your own, you would have no vegetation to help you prosper," he spoke more calmly.

No one couldn't utter a word because they were petrified. They all immediately noticed that he wasn't one of them, he had a weapon, armour and knowledge. He had all the things that were unknown to them. One of the humans however, gathered enough courage to speak to this unknown being.

“W-w-why should we l-listen to y-y-you?” the human slowly muttered. “Y-y-you land here not even telling us your name and you expect us to listen to y-you?” as he spoke, the human gained more courage and gradually stopped muttering.

My name? Hmmmm! – the protector hadn’t thought that he needed a name. He thought they would just fall in line seeing his divine form. He had to think of something quickly. He settled on Surthirius because it sounded divine to him.

“My name is Surthirius. I am one of the seven protectors of the seven universes.”

“You asked us why we fight. We fight because we are afraid. Afraid that one day another race will grow so powerful that they will get bored of their land and decide to expand on ours. Isn’t it better to exterminate the threat before it rises to power?” the human answered.

Surthirius was surprised at this well thought answer. For a second he thought he wasn’t speaking to a human but another being blessed with knowledge.

“A wise answer. But a threat doesn’t necessarily need to be dealt with in a violent way. Can you not try to make a peaceful agreement with the opposing race? That way you don’t destroy the land you wish to conquer.” Surthirius responded.

“But how can we be sure that they will respect the agreement? They could break it at any point!” shouted a warrior of the elven race.

“Fair enough, but making an agreement will buy you enough time to prepare, will it not?” Surthirius responded.

“Fine. Seeing that none of the races are satisfied with sharing this planet I have a proposition. How about I separate each race and give you all a respected planet?”

The races all nodded thus signalling that they agree to Surthirius’s proposition.

Surthirius slowly raised his sword that suddenly ignited in blue and purplish flames. The cloudy skies cleared forming a circle of light around the protector. Multiple circles were formed, one for each race, surrounding them. Each of the races were slowly teleported one by one onto a different planet. Surthirius then looked around to observe the planet realising that the planet was much more beautiful than his lonely dimension. And he could finally rest and meditate in peace. He walked into the open field, sat down and closed his eyes. He started his meditation hoping not to be woken by new riots and wars among the races.

“No, no, no, no. This is all wrong.” said a mysterious voice.

The mysterious voice belonged to a little boy on his computer. He was writing a story for a competition.

“This is all wrong. The story is boring, and nobody will like it. I can’t show this to the teacher, it would be embarrassing.” said the boy.

He decided to ask his friends and his mom for their opinion. All of them said the same thing: the story was great. But the boy wasn’t convinced. He thought the story was a failure. He wasted so much time on inventing the characters and the plot and he didn’t want to waste more time on writing another one. He opened his Word document to read through his story again. “All this time... wasted, on a failure of a story.” he sadly uttered.

Letting his insecurity to overwhelm him again, he slowly moved his mouse cursor to the folder with his story, right clicking it and choosing the delete button, thus erasing the story he created.

Suddenly, the protector felt an itch above his right eye, but he just continued his meditation.

*Mentor: Lidija Orešković*  
OŠ Pavleka Miškine, Zagreb

*Jana Bulj Husar*

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## **THE 4 ELEMENTS**

Hi! My name is Katara, Katara Nilar. I come from a small village Massastriaki. It is located in the middle of the jungle. I'm 15 years old. I live in a small wooden house with my mother Tenira. She is a hardworking woman and I have a lot of respect for her. My father died when I was very young. He went on an expedition in the jungle and never came back. The only thing that he left me was a silver ring. It has a strange spiral on it. I've always wondered if it had a meaning, but I've never found an answer to my question. Maybe it is a clue to the reason of his expedition. No one in the village knows.

There is a big problem in our village. There are only 18 villagers left, because one day around 50 of them went to the jungle and never returned. There are only 4 kids. Those kids are my friends. Their names are Lira, Apolo and Axton.

The chief is afraid we might go extinct. One day I was walking through the village when Arilani, the chief's wife, called me to come quickly. She told me that the chief had died. I wasn't surprised because he was 115 years old! I was sad, though. She also told me that he had left me a very important letter. I read it and it said:

„Katara,if you are reading this I am already dead. Your father was a smart man. When he lived here, we were battling the same problem like right now, trying not to go extinct.He thought he found a way to save us all. He told me all about a lime green sedimentary rock of miracle. He told me that a very evil man named Grindelwort hid it in his scary castle in the west part of the jungle. He has gone to find it, but he never returned. You are the bravest villager, you take after your father. You are the one that has to find it, now or never.

PS: Your ring will help you find your way. I wish you luck, Chief.,

I was really shocked. Me? A 15 year old girl? I knew that there was no time to waste. I knew that I had to work smart and hard. I had to make a plan, so I went to my favourite place, the Modriahiani waterfalls. I always felt a strange connection with water. I noticed something strange. The same spiral that was on my ring was drawn on a rock on the ground. I was confused, and excited. Shortly after I found another one. I noticed that they were forming a trail, a path. I knew I had to follow it, but not alone. I ran to my friends and told them all about it. We knew our parents wouldn't let us go, so we decided to leave them notes and sneak out at dawn. I wrote my mum a note:

„Dear mum, if you are reading this, Lira, Apolo, Axton and I already left. I have to finish what my dad started. If I don't come back, don't go looking for me.

Love, Katara,,

The next day, at dawn, Lira, Apolo, Axton and I went to the Modriahiani waterfalls. I showed them the rocks with the spirals and my ring. We knew we had to follow them. We knew the jungle very well, but we have never been in this part of it. We saw a big tree. It had the spiral on it. I was pretty sure that my dad drew it, as if he had known that I would be here one day. We put up a tent under the tree. I asked Lira if she thought that my dad drew the spirals, after all, he is the one that gave me the ring when I was a baby. Lira said: „I think Grindelwort drew them, there is a legend that he is the chief's brother. Maybe that's how they would visit each other. After all, your dad never came back, he couldn't tell the chief about Grindelwort and his scary castle.“ I got goosebumps, she has got a good point. What if we are following the same path that my father did, what if we end up like him? Where did my dad get the ring? Why would he leave it to me if he didn't know where it would lead me? At this point I was questioning everything. Did I lead my friends and myself to death? Was my dad actually a smart man, or was he just a fool that followed a strange symbol and never came back? Lira fell asleep. I noticed that Axton was awake. He said that he heard our conversation. Then he asked me: „Are you doing it again?“ .“Doing what?“ I asked. He said: “ Are you overthinking and questioning your life because of something Lira said? Look, she might be your best friend, but not everything she says is true. Our chief was a good man. He wanted to help us, he wouldn't send you on a useless mission. Plus, you shouldn't believe in rumours.“ That gave me some courage and bravery.

The next morning we continued our journey. We didn't find any spirals for a while, so we lost hope. Then all of a sudden Apolo found a notebook. We opened it and it said:

### **Property of Keaddyn Nilar, if lost return to Tenira Nilar**

„Katara, aren't those your parent's names?“ shouted Axton. „Yes, this must be his journal!“ I was really excited. We found a lot of interesting things, but this one really shocked us.

I went to the library, and found out that once there was magic among the villagers. Grindelwort was the first one to master the memory charm, he deleted a part of every villager's memory, so no one to this day remembers magic. He did that because he wanted all the power he could get. There is a legend that there were 4 masters of the 4 elements: air, water, fire and earth. It also says that 4 new masters are born and that their names are written on the stone.

We didn't know if it was true, but it gave us an extra reason to keep going and to find the rock. We were walking for days, didn't find any spirals, or anything. We knew that we were on the right path because there weren't any detours, at least we hoped. All of a sudden we saw a dark, giant, creepy looking castle. We made a plan on how we were going to sneak in. We still didn't know how we were going to find the rock because the castle was giant and it was going to take us days. At dusk we snuck into the castle. It was dark and dusty. All of the walls and floors were black and the lights were emerald green. We heard footsteps so Axton and I jumped into the wardrobe and Lira and Apolo hid in a tall cabinet. I was trying not to breathe heavily so that Grindelwort doesn't hear me. I looked at Axton. He is a tall, nice looking guy with muscles. He has brown curly hair and sparkly brown eyes. In my eyes he was perfect. Grindelwort opened the door of the room that we were hiding in. He said: „I know that you are here, this castle is usually empty and I heard a sound!“. Then he opened the door of the cabinet that Lira and Apolo were hiding in. Lira screamed. Grindelwort took Lira and Apolo to a different part of the castle. We waited for a couple minutes and then got out of the wardrobe. „So what do we do now?“, I asked. „First we should find Apolo and Lira, then we free them and then we search for the rock,“ said Axton. „Ok!“ . We went out of the room and down a long black hallway. For the next two days we wandered around the castle, but there was no sign of anyone or anything, just long, never-ending hallways. All of a sudden I heard crying. We ran toward the sound. We saw a lot of prison cells. Then we saw Lira crying, while Apolo



was hugging her. They were sitting on the floor of an iron prison cell. When they saw us their faces lit up with excitement. „We will get you out of there!“ said Axton. Then something unbelievable happened. I heard a voice from behind me saying:“ Katara Nilar, after all this time.“ I turned around and saw a man standing in a prison cell. He had cristal blue eyes, exactly like mine. „Who are you?!“ . „Keddyn Nilar, your father.“ He said. I was shocked. I thought he was dead! „You’re alive!“ I said. „Yes, I am so happy to see you. You are so grown up..and..beautiful...how is your mother? „She is probably mad because I ran away..but she will be happy when we return together!“ „Get us out of here!“ screamed Lira. „There is only one way to get out of here.“ Said my dad. „The only way is through the top floor of the castle, the attic. You will se a pillar in the middle, it should have a spiral dent. Press your ring into the dent, the stone should appear and the prison cells will open. After that we can get out of here.“

Axton and I went to the attic. We heard footsteps behind us so we had to hurry. We found the pillar, it was in the middle of the room. I put my ring in the spiral dent. The lime green sedimentary green rock appeared on top of the pillar and the innocent looking wardrobe that was in the room opened. Out of the wardrobe came the 50 villagers that dissapeared! Grindelwort trapped them in his castle! All of a sudden he barged into the room. He looked really tall in his long purple cape. A black raven was sitting on his left shoulder. One of his eyes was red and the other one was green. He looked mad. He told us that no-one will get hurt if we give him the rock. „Never!“ I shouted. Moments later my dad, Lira and Apolo came. „It’s over for you!“ shouted my dad. „Ha, ha, do you really think that I am that stupid?!“ said Grindelwort as he snapped his fingers. A wardrobe appeared behind him. He went into the wardrobe and closed the door. Apolo quickly opened the door and there was no sign of Grindelwort. „He has vanished!“ I said. „Yes, but what are you waiting for? Look who the 4 masters are!“ said my dad. On the back of the rock it said:

### **The element masters**

**Katara Nilar – the master of water**

**Lira roetallah – the master of air**

**Axton zatar – the master of earth**

**Apolo kyric – the master of fire**

I read it and everyone was shocked. We couldn't believe it. One of the villagers pointed out that our physical appearance gives a hint of our element: Lira has platinum blonde hair, like air, Apolo has ginger hair and amber eyes, like fire, Axton's eyes and hair are the same colour as earth and my eyes are blue like water.

We decided to go back to the village and share the news with everyone.

Five days later we arrived at the village. Everyone was so happy that the village was saved. My mother Tenira cried of happiness when she saw my dad and I. We made a big party to celebrate. All of the villagers came to it.

The next year we learned a lot about our powers. Lira, Axton and Apolo were so excited and happy. I wasn't that happy, because I knew that one day Grindelwort will return, more powerful than ever and that the real war is coming...

TO BE CONTINUED...

*Mentor: Željka Gospočić*  
OŠ Ante Starčevića, Rešetari

*Klara Knaus*

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## **A WORLD OF EQUAL RIGHTS**

Well, hi, my name is Klara and I've been given an assignment to make my own story. So, let's get started.

So my story when translated into a movie or tv show (you never know) would be a short tv show of 10-15 episodes with one season, but it doesn't matter.

### **About my story:**

It's mostly about a group of teenagers who are just demanding their rights because they don't have their rights.

### **Introduction:**

New students appeared at St. Daniel in New Orleans, the main so-called "dolls" at school called them: freaks, you know why, because they're different from all of them, and these main "dolls" melt with jealousy. Everyone at school avoids them, but they don't call them weirdos, but jerks.

Now you wonder how different they are?

In a group of five teenagers, we have Finny, a skinny 18-year-old gay boy who listens to Taylor Swift all day. He has blonde hair and blue eyes, just like the ocean, he mostly wears tight jeans and baggy t-shirts. Finny is a quiet person because after he had his first boyfriend, his mother caught him and "killed" him. Finny after that wanted to do everything to not be here anymore, but there are his friends from this group to encourage him, his mother is also gay or lesbian by sexuality (it's the same)

As Ariana Grande would say now “Thank you, next”

Ladies and gentlemen, this is Violet, a girl who is Finnish by nationality, an 18-year-old who dresses differently from other girls, all black. She listens to Adelle to calm her depression. Depression has been revealed since she was 14 when her mother died in a car accident. She isn't not very friendly, but she is very caring, so dear guys, be careful who you choose, you might lose the game. Her hair is like silk, she has beautiful eyes, very brown a little more and even black eyes. She has red hair and freckles all over her face.

Now come to us dear ladies and gentlemen, Bette and Dott, Siamese twins clasped on their shoulders. Beautiful twins who are completely different in terms of their differentiation, Bette is a girl who wants to live her life the best she can, while Dott strives to go to the perfect college and have as much hope in herself as possible. Bette and Dott have never had boyfriends precisely because they are Siamese twins, so they have been arguing for a couple of years because Bette wants surgery so she can have a life of her own, while Dott doesn't want it because she is too attached to her sister, she loves her so much even if they are in argument. Bette listens to Shawn Mendes because like I told you, Bette is just a relaxed person when it comes to everything, Dott listens to Ariana Grande and Katy Perry because all she wants is to relax as much as she can.

And now we have Noah, they call him a jerk because he has vitiligo. He is white by race, but because of these spots on the body it is black and white. People at school call it a cow precisely because of those stains, in my opinion those stains are predispositions even if it is called a disease, but it is beautiful if you ask me. He has green eyes and black hair, he was adopted at the age of 6 months because his parents didn't want him for the very reason he has skin.

And last but not least, Cordelia. A girl who writes too much poetry that is so wonderful to read, lives with her grandfather because her parents live in the Netherlands and don't have enough money to afford for a bigger apartment to be able to live with them. She has heterochromia, so she has green-blue eyes and long brown hair. People make fun of her at school because she writes poetry and because she lives with her grandfather, as they say “yours are miserable that they don't have money for a bigger apartment”. She is the tallest in her group of friends, while for example Bette and Dott are 5'4 (165cm), Noah 5'5 (170cm), Violet 5'4 (165cm), and our dear Finny 5'8 (175cm), Cordelia is 6'4 (195cm).

**Middle part:**

It was the first day of school for our five, we knew they would tease us the way we looked. It is the first class at the moment and everyone in the classroom is waiting for the professor to come in, but until then everyone was scattering papers in all directions. After a few minutes, the professor came and pointed at us to enter the classroom. The students applauded at first, but after we entered the classroom, there was silence. The uncomfortable silence and looks were stopped by the main “doll” of the class with the sentence “what are these freaks”. We just sat in our seats and at her words everyone started laughing. After a nasty first day of school we decided to go to the park to gossip about the main “doll”. The best friend of the main “doll” eavesdropped on us and ran to tell her best friend. We kept gossiping about her until she came with her “doll”, not a second had passed since she came, but she immediately started making fun of us, especially Bette and Dott at the expense of their looks. She called them freaks because of their body disorder. Bette wanted to defend all of us and started calling the main “doll” a monkey, so she reacted by crying. She didn’t want to answer anything, so she just ran home, and we laughed and each went home. When she got home, she ran to her mother and lied to her about how the new students had insulted and beaten her. To which her mother replied that she would come to school early tomorrow to talk to the school principal. The main “doll” just laughed and went to sleep. The next morning, the principal enters the classroom angry after talking to the mother of the main “doll”. She says we beat her and insulted her to which Noah said “yes, it’s true, we insulted her, but she started first because she insulted Bette and Dott at the expense of their looks”. Noah sat proudly in his seat, and the main friend of the main “doll” got up and began to complain. “I’m not defending anyone here, but she went home crying which her mother can confirm” The rest of the class agreed with her response, and our five were punished for cleaning up the entire school by tomorrow night. Finny stood up and began to complain. “As the king of this group of “freaks” I disagree with what she said, we’re all different, but why should we be kicked out of society now at the expense of what we look like? How we dress? Which performer do we listen to? does it matter at all, for example, Bette and Dott, they are Siamese twins, should we now kick them out of society at the expense of what they look like? Of course not, everyone is special in their own way, so on behalf of our five I want you all to apologize to us, Bette and Dott for not deserving such comments. The principal just replied “we will ignore this situation but next time we will react sternly” Finny looked at us and said quietly “I didn’t want this”. This boring day was over and we didn’t want to go

to the park, so we immediately headed to the bus station and saw how the students were gossiping about us. We didn't pay attention to it, so we just walked our way to the station and kept quiet. We got to the station and waited for the bus but instead of the bus we got juice in our heads. Literally. Juice in the head. Wondering how? One of the "elites" approached us and said "my apology", and threw juice at our heads.

Cordelia got angry and slapped the girl who spilled juices on them. Of course this one responded by crying, but when her friends filmed and after a while stopped filming, she stopped crying and started laughing and said "I have evidence, and you don't, so evil always wins" The bus just came, and they ran to the bus while we looked at each other and were confused.

After several months of the same student behavior, we reconciled that we would become victims of violence by the end of school. The main "doll" enters the classroom with a hat on and his head down and just sits in his seat and is silent. The professor gets up and says, "Dear students, good afternoon, I tell you with sadness that our student has lung cancer, so she wears a hat because she lost her hair." Everyone was disappointed and called her a freak, but we saw the same person as from the beginning of school and accepted her into their company.

### **Final part:**

After so many great days spent with her and so many beautiful nights spent with her, you realize that she is still a great person and that she is not what she presents herself to be. Of course, they still called us freaks, but that didn't bother us anymore. Bette and Dott finally reconciled, had so many things to say to each other after their quarrel. Violet is unfortunately still depressed, but, she says, she feels better and better every day. Noah struggled that it was his skin that made him different, but in a positive way. Finny has a new boyfriend, and she says "it's better than bread", his mother forgave him after so many years and so many quarrels that she told him he shouldn't be gay because they make fun of him, and after that she told him he would have a mother because engaged. And I Cordelia, I'm not happy, but at least I'm happy because my friends are. I and no longer the main "doll" named Olivia got very close this summer of 2050. I think I fell in love, but I won't tell her. I was now with Bette and Dott to help me admit to Olivia that I liked her, at first they reacted "wait, are you a lesbian?" to which I said, "BISEXUAL PERSON AND LESBIAN ARE NOT THE SAME" To which Dott replied "it's the same to me" "don't get mad

at you Dott” - I said angrily. “Okay, do you want to help me or what?” I said nervously and tore the skin off my fingers. “Well, what’s so hard about saying to someone, ‘I love you.’” Bette said. “IT’S HARD, BETTE, IT’S HARD” - I said angrily and nervously at the same time. A couple of hours later we didn’t agree on anything, we just listened to music and danced. “I have to go girls” - I said storing my phone in my purse. “See you Cordelia!” “Good luck with Olivia by the way!” - Bette and Dott said taking our glasses containing juices. I get out of their apartment, take a deep breath, and head home. A couple of months after it all happened, I was celebrating my 19th birthday, there was everyone except Olivia, and when I realized she was gone, my mood dropped like autumn leaves fell on the trees on the floor. I called her on my phone, but she didn’t answer. I was celebrating my birthday literally sad, I asked Violet if she had any pills because my mood had dropped completely. My birthday is finally over, everyone went home happy, except me. One day Olivia approached me nervous and then I asked her if she was okay because she had never behaved like that, and when I wanted to finish a sentence and I couldn’t because ... she kissed me.

*Mentor: Sanja Vukina*  
OŠ Stenjevec

*Nika Mataić*

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## **FITTING IN**

Macy is a girl who lives in a small town with her mum and grandpa. She is 14, has brown hair and green eyes. She moved schools a year ago and was trying to fit in since then.

She wasn't lonely. Macy had friends. The only problem was that they were all fake. Everyone in her new school wanted to befriend Amy, the most popular, the richest and the meanest girl their town had ever seen. Amy was a bully and her father was a headmaster of their school. No one wanted to make her upset because when she's mad, she's even meaner than usual. All of Amy's friends were like that too. In fact, Macy was one of her best friends. That brings us to the question - was Macy mean too? Well, yes. She used to be nice and kind, but she has changed. A lot. And she did all of that for Amy to notice her.

Macy was blessed to have a grandpa who was her only real friend. They talked to each other every night while watching the sky. Her mum was always too busy to spend time with her daughter and Macy got used to it. She was happy with her grandpa and couldn't imagine life without him.

\* \* \*

It was September and Macy just came home from school. She made herself some tea. It was already getting dark outside. The Moon was almost full and seemed to close. It felt like you could touch it. Her grandpa Frank sat next to her.

"Hi" he said quietly.

"Hello grandpa" said Macy and looked at his old friendly face.



“Listen, we need to talk about something important.”

“Grandpa, I’m not in the mood for that right now” said Macy. She didn’t lie, today was a long day.

“It will only take a second, listen please” Frank wasn’t giving up. “Over the past year you have changed so much. I know what you’re about to say, we all grow as the time passes, but you aren’t the same person as before. What happened to that happy, silly Macy who would do anything for her friends and family? You became quiet, we don’t spend time together as much as we used to. You might look like yourself, my girl, but you’re somebody else.”

“Grandpa, it’s okay, nothing changed” said Macy with tears in her eyes.

“No, little one, everything changed. I want you to know that I miss you, I miss the real you.” said Frank and slowly left the room. Macy cried a lot that night and didn’t sleep a wink. She became very silent around her ‘friends’ after that conversation. She didn’t talk to her grandpa for a few days, simply because she didn’t know what to say.

\* \* \*

It was Sunday, very late at night. Macy was lying in bed and she thought about her ‘friends’, grandpa, mum and even about her life in the past. At this moment, she decided to change.

“I won’t be somebody else just for that little spoiled kid Amy to like me. Either way, I don’t have any friends to lose, not really” she said to herself. Finally, she could see how much she has changed over the years.

Macy woke up and prepared herself to tell Amy what she deserves. During the lunch break, she approached her and a group of girls she called ‘friends’.

“Listen, Amy”, Macy started, “I need to talk to you.”

“Talk to me? Why?” said Amy.

“So, I-” Macy started, but didn’t get to finish because Amy interrupted her.

“You know what”, said Amy, “I don’t care. Now, I need you to get me *Starbucks* before our geography exam. Go!”

“How dare you!” at this moment Macy exploded. “I am not your maid or even your

friend! You don't have any friends, none of us here does! All of them hang out with you only for your money and hate you for who you are! They hate your personality and ego! You are nothing more than a bully who puts people down just to feel good about yourself."

"What are you talking about?!" Amy was furious. "That's a whole bunch of lies! I- I am a great person... yes... and that's why everyone wants to befriend me... yes. Yes! Everyone loves me and now they'll hate you for this. You deserved that."

"I won't hate her!" said a girl who was sitting next to Amy and approached Macy. Amy just rolled her eyes and went across the room.

"Thank you" said Macy to that girl. She didn't expect that.

"No problem, I was about to tell Amy the same thing, but I didn't. I was too scared. By the way, my name is Kayla. "

"I'm glad you stood up against her this time, Kayla. See you around." said Macy and left.

"My grandpa is going to be so proud of me." That's the only thing Macy could think about on her way back home. She entered the house and straight away noticed that something was off. It was peaceful. Too peaceful.

"Grandpa? Grandpa Frank!" Macy shouted. "Where could he be? He never leaves the house until he sees me after school." Macy was confused. At that moment, her phone rang. She picked it up. "Hello mum. What is going on? Do you know where is grandpa? He's not here!"

"Macy", mum's voice was cracking in panic, "you have to come to the hospital. Grandpa got very sick and lost consciousness. Hurry up!" her mum then ended the call.

"No!" Macy screamed while tears were running down her face. She ran out on the street without locking the house. 15 minutes later, she was knocking on the door with number 307 on it. That was her grandpa's room. The door opened and she ran up to her beloved grandpa, her best and only friend. Something inside her knew it was too late. Doctors confirmed that. Her grandpa died from a heart attack. Macy's mum walked over to her daughter and hugged her. Everybody was quiet. Macy felt as if part of her had died. She couldn't imagine life without her grandpa.

"Did he say anything?" Macy asked her mum.

“Your name. Only your name.” she said. Macy looked at her once-happy-and-full-of-life grandpa and whispered: “Goodbye grandpa, I love you.” That was their last goodbye.

\* \* \*

It’s been 3 weeks since Frank passed away. During those 3 weeks Macy didn’t talk to her mum or anybody else. Macy misses him more and more every day. She didn’t say a word to Amy either. After all, she had changed herself for Amy to like her.

Macy sat next to the window, where she used to sit and talk with grandpa. She looked at the stars. They seemed so peaceful. Macy started to cry. Her tears were unstoppable. She felt so desperate. Green eyes found the Moon. She started to talk because she had so much to say. “Hi to anyone listening. Can you tell my grandpa that I am so incredibly sorry for everything that has happened recently. I am so sorry that I stopped spending time with him. He must have been so lonely and sad. I’m responsible for my mistakes, but it seems to me that all this is too much to handle. I miss him. I still have my mum, but it’s not the same and grandpa, if you can hear me, I realised that I’ve actually had one real, best friend. It was you. I am sorry for never appreciating you as much as you deserved. And one last thing, thank you for everything. Thank you for always loving me, even when no one else did. Love you, papa.” Her eyes caught a shooting star.

\* \* \*

### **15 moths later**

Macy now lives in Florida because her mum got a new job there. She moved schools (again) and tried to forget the whole thing about Amy. She still has no friends, but she’s working on it. It wasn’t easy for her to move on. She wishes she had more time with him, but that’s something she can’t change. Macy got really interested in astrology and got a telescope. She hopes to write a book about it one day and dedicate it to her grandpa. She couldn’t be who she is today without him, his love and his friendship.

*Mentor: Kristina Pavličević*  
OŠ Dobriša Cesarić Požega

*Laura Pavičić*

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## **CHOOSING THE RIGHT FIGHT**

Stepping off of the train, Leona Barlow stood, looking at her surroundings. She is in the country's capital, Avlont. It started out as a simple town and eventually grew and expanded to be the biggest city in the country. Also, in it is the very building that controls all Androids, Robots and A.I. in general, the Artificial Intelligence Control Center (A.I.C.C.). It made millions. People from all over the world bought the A.I. they created, leaving them filthyrich.

The company wasn't liked by the, now sentient, A.I. because of the horrible treatment they received, and especially by Androids, who went on to start a rebellion back in 2098., which turned into a war, raging on for the next four years, before it was won by the humans.

During this time Leona lived in a village with her family, but she always wanted to be a soldier. Not just because of cool gadgets, amazing weapons or shiny armor. She wanted to protect people.

Two years after the war, she finally got an admittance from the Human Protection Military (H.P.M.), after finishing the training. And now she's here! With riots breaking out again, she would have to get accustomed to the city quickly.

Shelton Presley was a captain. He moved to Avlont with his daughter, but somehow found himself working as a soldier when he was left with no other job option. He hasn't left the H.P.M. since.

Last night he decided that would change. He'd leave the military and try to figure out what to do next. His daughter would be much happier that way. Besides, there was no way he could go through more of those riots. The war left him with a scar over his

right eyebrow and with more graying hair than there should be.

The riots were getting to be more and more problematic. These ones include Androids, Robots, maybe even electric toothbrushes decide to rebel, who knows?

He stood up, picked up his papers and went to search for the general.

“No.”

“What do you mean ‘no’?”

“You can’t leave in this situation. The process of you leaving the military would take months to complete, especially due to the current events. We don’t know how long the protests are going to go on for. Therefore, no.”

The captain shook his head in disbelief.

The general continued, “Anyhow, there is someone I want you to meet. You could give her some advice, you are the captain, after all.”

Shelton looked between the girl and the general, “But-” “Dismissed.”

Shelton turned to the girl, he could only guess she was the new soldier he was told about.

“Sir! My name is Leona Barlow. I’m glad to be working with you,” She exclaimed, saluting and almost dropping the bags she was carrying.

He sighed, feeling more tired by the second, “Right. The name’s Shelton Presley, but you can refer to me as captain.”

She nodded in response as they started walking.

With a couple of weeks passing by, Leona was adjusting to her new surroundings. She managed to actually get the captain to open up a little bit. Not a lot, but it was progress!

Currently, the two were making their way to the center of Avlont, having gotten information that there was yet another A.I. protest going on in front of the A.I.C.C.. Shelton was looking tense, “Is something the matter, sir?” His eyes shifted to look around, “I’m getting a weird feeling all of a sudden...”

As they neared an alleyway, she only managed to let out a gasp as she was pulled into the darkness. She tried to struggle, but ultimately failed as something hit the back of her head, leaving her to lose consciousness.

Leona opened her eyes, “Where...?” She trailed off, looking at her surroundings. She and Shelton were in a room, tied up.

They weren’t the only ones in the room. Her eyes widened as she noticed the A.I. who were whispering among themselves. They were the ones who took them, then. From the corner of her eye Leona could see Shelton stirring awake.

“Oh, good, you’re both awake,” a feminine voice came from the corner of the room. The individual stepped closer, revealing a copper-colored robot. “What is the meaning of this?” the captain asked firmly.

“First off, we’d like to apologize for the way you were brought. It was the only way we could bring you here without attracting attention,” the robot said, bowing its head apologetically, “We wanted to ask for help from the two of you.”

Shelton scoffed, “Did you take us away to force us to do your bidding or something? What made you think we would help you after that?”

It let out a robotic sigh, “As I said, it was our only way. All we ask is for you to hear us out. Afterwards, we will let you go and you can decide on your answer.”

Leona nodded to let the robot know that they would listen. It wasn’t like they had much of a choice, but it was better to cooperate.

The robot seemed satisfied, “Alright then. My name is Gamma. I am the leader of our operation. Our goal is to be treated as equals by humans, which is why you’ve seen riots going on recently. They are relatively small because we are trying to keep people from finding out about our plans. It isn’t our intention to start another war.”

“The president of the A.I.C.C., having traveled abroad, isn’t aware of the current situation. The behavior of the employees went downhill, leading to the war that ended only two years ago. We want to contact the president, our creator, and inform her about everything. However, the only way to contact her is within the A.I.C.C. building, which A.I. haven’t been allowed to enter since the war.”

“Why didn’t you try and contact the president before the war started?” Leona asked, feeling a bit bad for all of the things the A.I. had to go through.

“We only found out we could recently. That’s why we need your help. You could enter the building and reach the top floor, while we cause a distraction. You will be rewarded for your hard work, of course. Still, our time is running out. You will be released now. You have until tomorrow to make your decision.”

With that, they were untied and led back out to the streets. Both were silent, still contemplating their decision. Leona realized that Shelton was about to leave, “Wait! Sir...” he looked over at her, “What will you do? Because I think... I’ll help them. I’ve always wanted to protect others, but now I see that the A.I. need it more than humans do, so... What about you?”

Shelton sighed, “Look, kid, I’ve already fought a whole war against their kind I don’t know if I can really put all that aside.”

Leona stayed silent for a moment, looking at her captain, “I No, I get it. That’s understandable, sir. Just If you end up not going, can I have your word not to tell anyone at the H.P.M.?”

Shelton nodded his head.

The next day, Leona was walking through one of the hallways in the A.I. Control Center. She managed to sneak in and steal a key card that led to the top floor. Gamma had informed her beforehand, that she just needed to connect a USB to the computer in the office and input the president’s number, which should be written on a paper, placed in the desk’s drawer. From there, a previously recorded message should be sent to the president. That was the only way to contact her.

She reached the elevator and let it scan the key card in her hand. Honestly, she would have felt better if the captain was with her, but it was his choice and she will respect it.

She heard the familiar noise of the elevator signaling it reached its destination. She ran down yet another hallway, however, as soon as she turned the corner, a gun was pointed at her.

She looked up and saw a man. Gamma had told her about him, too. He was the one that took over when the president left, and led things to the way they are.

“What business do you have here?”

He went to aim his gun at her head, but before he got the chance to shoot, he fell forwards with a yelp. Leona's eyes widened as she saw that it was Shelton who tackled him, "Sir?!"

He interrupted her while he was trying to get the gun away from the other man, "Now's not the time, kid! Go do your thing and let me handle this guy."

She didn't have time to argue, just rushed through the door leading to the office. She booted up the computer on the desk, watching in anticipation as it loaded.

"For a president of a high-tech company, she sure has a slow computer..." she muttered as it finally finished, putting in the USB. She clicked on an icon, lines of code showed over the screen and did their magic while she hastily opened the drawer.

She rummaged through the drawer before she found a note at the bottom of it. It read; "In case you need to contact me, here's my number."

Under the writing was a series of numbers. That's it! Leona typed in the digits, hurrying as she heard a gunshot fire out in the hallway. She really hoped the captain was okay...

The girl was supposed to wait until she received a reply, which, according to Gamma, shouldn't take long. She could only hope that was correct.

She heard hurried footsteps nearing the door and was ready to fight if she had to. The door handle suddenly turned and the girl's shoulder tensed.

"Kid! Are you almost done in here?" Shelton ran in. Leona let out a relieved sigh, "I'm just waiting for the president to reply..."

The captain looked at the screen, "Is that it?"

The girl looked over, her eyes widening as she saw text forming on the screen.

It said; "Thank you for informing me of the current situation. You can expect my return in a few days, to sort this all out. I apologize for all that has happened."

Leona examined the captain, "I'm glad you're not hurt, sir. What happened with that man, anyway?"

Shelton shrugged, "I knocked him unconscious."



Leona smiled, “Right. We should probably make our way out and report back to Gamma.

As they walked back to where the meetup spot was, Leona had just one more question, “What now?”

Shelton looked up, “What?”

“I mean... You helped out. Gamma said we would get something in return. What will you ask for?”

“I might ask them to remove me from the military’s database. Let me quit early.” The girl was confused, “Why do you want to quit so badly?”

“It’s a long story. What about you, kid?”

Leona laughed, “Well... I might ask to meet the A.I.C.C. president. I want to get to know her, I guess... and get her to buy a new computer.”

“Here we are. I can’t wait to break the news to them.”

Shelton was glad he helped. Not just because he gets to leave work early, but because now the

A.I. have the chance to be free. Does this mean he wants to keep being a soldier? No. Does he regret it, though? Who knows. Definitely not him. All he knows is that he wants to go home and spend time with his daughter. That, and maybe take a nap.

Leona felt really proud of herself. All those years she trained to become a soldier were worth it. It didn’t matter whether the person she was protecting was a human or an A.I. Everybody deserves to feel safe, no matter who they are or what they looklike.

*Mentor: Petra Radošević*  
OŠ Šćitarjevo, Šćitarjevo, Velika Gorica

*Vita Peher*

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## **LUCKY**

Animal fights were nothing unusual in my small town. It all started with a few stray dogs and cats; people made them fight, and then bet which one will win. People didn't like it at first, but when they saw that the stray animals, who won, were adopted, they accepted it, but prescribed more rules. First, carnivores can fight only carnivores, same goes for herbivores; second, animals were split in different categories based on the specie and size of an animal. For example, a dog couldn't fight a lion. Because of the new rules most people had some sort of animal which they would bet on.

My family owned a dog, but we didn't want him to fight. At first my parents didn't support the idea of animal battles, but as the time went and they saw the payment that the battle participants got, they changed their mind. I was eight at the time, but even after six years, nothing really changed. Animals carried on battling and the market for dangerous animals expanded. Suddenly, people started to buy and train exotic animals, like tigers and lions, for the competitions. And they sometimes gave animals chemicals which made them angry and bloodthirsty, but it soon became illegal. However, that didn't stop people from doing it.

My parents bought a German Sheppard after our first dog passed away tired of fighting. They thought of putting him in battles but they couldn't make up their mind for months. In the end, money won, so they decided that the dog will start fighting and I'll be its escort. They thought people would go easy on me because I was young.

A few days later Dad sent me to a nearest open battling match, made a bet on our dog and went home. The dog didn't have a name so we wouldn't connect with him, but for a match it needed a name. The judge asked about the dog's name. "Lucky," I said to the judge and I hoped the name will indeed bring the dog luck. They first

had another match set up so Lucky and I waited for our turn. As we waited, I looked at Lucky. He was unusually calm as the sounds of barks and growls grew louder. I felt sad for him. This was not his choice and I was afraid for him. I looked around the dark arena, then looked back at Lucky and whispered, "I'm going to get you out of here." I grabbed his leash and started walking out of the big basement where the competitions took place. I didn't care about the money I left behind, I just wanted to get out of there as soon as possible. At the exit a guard stopped me. "Why are you leaving? Didn't you just enter the competition?" the guard said. "I'm not feeling well, and neither is my dog," I lied. The guard didn't move an inch. He maybe saw the worried expression on my face and knew I was lying. He came closer, still blocking me from exiting the door. "You can't leave now, the competitors already put money on your dog, so if you leave, that means they lose the money," he said without missing a beat. I stood there speechless not knowing what to do. I couldn't get out of there, so the only thing I could do was to participate in the competition. I turned around to go back when something stopped me. Lucky was sitting in front of the guard and quietly growling. I pulled him back and he obeyed.

We were waiting in our corner for our turn again, someone called my name. I looked up and there was a girl standing in front of me. She grabbed my hand and brought me to a hidden door at the darkest area of the arena. "If you help me, I will help you get away from here," she said quickly. I hesitated, but I knew if I didn't get away from here fast Lucky will be fighting until the end of his life. We both agreed to help each other, and then she let me go out. I was happy to finally be outside and see Lucky relaxed. When I turned to face her again, I noticed something small peeking from her jacket pocket. She noticed that I was looking, and pulled out a small ferret, and held it in her arms. The ferret had bandages wrapped around its stomach and paws. "I saved this ferret after her owner left her after a rough match," the girl said "and I need you to help me get her to a pet sanctuary, because she can't fight anymore and I don't know how to take care of her with the wounds she's got." The pet sanctuary wasn't a place that a lot of people knew about. It was a place set on the border of two towns, so more people had access to it. The place was built by people who wanted to save and take care of animals that couldn't fight anymore or were injured. I knew where the place was, because we left our last dog there before he died. As I thought more about what she said I realized that Lucky could go to the pet sanctuary as well, and he would be able to live a peaceful life. "I can help you but only if Lucky can go to the sanctuary as well," I said smoothly. She looked me right in the eye, sighed and agreed. "We can meet here at eight tomorrow morning," the girl said and started

walking away, “By the way, I’m Luna.” “I’m Jack,” I said to her back.

As I turned back to go home I tried to make up an escape plan. The trip to the pet sanctuary took about an hour, depending on which vehicle you took. I didn’t even realize that I already walked all the way to home while I was thinking of a plan. My dad saw me from the window and rushed outside. He looked at Lucky to see if he was well. “Did you win? What happened?” he asked anxiously. I told him that the challengers pulled out of the match because their pets got injured. He sighed and let me in the house. I rushed into my room as soon as I entered the house and told dad that I was tired and I needed to rest. When I enter the room, I grabbed an old bag and threw some essentials for the trip, as well as Lucky’s food, and some money I had saved over the year. I put the bag in my closet and went to sleep so I could wake up early.

Before I knew it my alarm clock woke me up. I grabbed my jacket that was hanging on my chair and pulled the bag out of the closet. Rushing down the stairs I thought of how I would answer my parents when they ask me where I was going. When I entered their room I saw them sleeping, so I decided to write a note:

*I had to take Lucky for a walk because he wasn’t feeling well. I will come home eventually but I will probably take a longer walk across the town to see more battling arenas.*

I placed the note on their bedroom cabinet so they would see it. I took a breath of relief and walked out of house with Lucky.

Ten minutes later, I saw Luna with her companion waiting for us. She ran up to me and pointed with her finger to a bus station that was a near. “First, we’ll take the bus, and then we’ll walk to a train station. I’ll take Lucky and this little guy the rest of the way by myself, so your parents would not suspect something,” she explained. The bus came and we rushed to take our seats. We sat in the front so we had a clear view of where we were going. Luna looked out of the window and was visibly worried. I asked her what was wrong, but she didn’t respond. After a few minutes she finally spoke. She was worried that the sanctuary wouldn’t take care of our pets and maybe illegally put them into a battle. I was aware of the risk that we were taking but I was still sure that they will be in good hands. “I am sure that they will be fine,” I comforted both of us. Looking through the window I saw that we were getting closer to the train station. Suddenly, the bus stopped and the doors opened. We got up and exited the vehicle. I looked at Lucky, kneeled next to him, and started petting him. He was

an older dog, and you could see that he was tired and needed a calm environment to live in, so I knew this was the best choice for him. I hugged him for the last time as I heard Luna behind my back. “I will make sure that they take a good care of him,” she said calmly. We both turned back to our path. From afar we could see the train coming to the station. Luna grabbed Lucky’s leash and I gave her some money and dog food. Time was running so we did everything quickly, but the train already started moving. I stepped away, as I looked at Luna pulling Lucky and her ferret close to her. I waved to them and whispered “I love you Lucky. Have a good life.”

*Mentor: Josipa Kardum*  
OŠ Benkovac, Benkovac

*Petra Žepina*

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## **HATE ME TO LET ME GO**

Jane's point of view

Hi, my name is Jane River. My story is... let's just say, interesting and I'm here to tell it.

My life kind of sucked. Since I was born. When I was born my mom suffered from depression, so she killed herself. She didn't know how to swim, so she jumped into the river. Sometimes I think that she did not know how to kill herself, so she was like:

-Oh, my last name is River and I do not know how to swim, so I am just going to jump into the river.

You would probably think that it can't get worse than that...but it can. After my mom killed herself my father killed himself too. Sometimes I ask myself:

-Was I good enough?

-Did they hate me that much?

Did I mention that I was one year old when my father killed himself? They honestly didn't care about how I would feel, they just cared for themselves. After that I was sent to live with my aunt Rebekah. She was amazing. She cared about me like I was her own child. When I was six years old, I met Adam Glasswheel. We became best friends instantly. When I was nine, I met Mary and one month later I met Louise. We were all best friends. My life was great but when I was 17 my life turned upside - down...

England, London. June 15th, 1764.

-So, he asked you to meet him at the lake? How is that bad? - Louise asked confusingly.

-I don't know. He sounded so sad and so serious at the same time. - I said.

-Maybe he will confess his undying love to you? - Mary said and took a sip of her water.

-How is that bad? - I asked while walking around my room.

-Stop. Just do not think of anything bad. - Louise said, trying to calm me down.

-Do not worry, we will wait for you here. Now go. - Mary said with a smile while pushing me to the door.

I stopped at the door and turned around to look at them.

- Thank you guys It means a lot. - I said with a big smile.
- Okay, we know we are the best, but you must go, or you'll be late. - Mary said, waved with her hand for me to get out.
- Oh, right. - I said before running away.

I was getting closer to the lake. I saw Adam sitting on a bench looking at his hands.

Hi. - I said, greeting him.

His head shot up in my direction. I looked at him in the eyes. They were red like he was...crying?

-Oh my God! Are you okay? Did I do something? - Questions were just coming out of my mouth.

He looked at me with wide eyes.

-No. No, of course you... - He started saying.

-I totally did. - I cut him off. My hand went to my hair. My eyes were filled with hot tears.

-Jane, stop! – He yelled while standing up. He took my hands in his. I looked him in the eyes.

-You did not do anything. – He whispered while drawing circles on my hand.

When I calmed down, he let go of my hands and sat down again. He was staring at the lake. It looked like he was thinking. I took a deep breath and sat next to him.

-Adam, what's wrong? - I said, biting my lip. I put my hand on his shoulder.

The second my hand touched his shoulder he stood up.

-Everything! Everything is wrong. – He started yelling at my face.

I flinched and closed my eyes. His face sunk. I stood up and took a step back.

-Jane. I'm so, so sorry. – He said, taking a step towards me.

-No, Adam. If you're just going to yell and not tell me what in the hell is going on, then I'll just go. - I yelled back at him and turned around.

He took my wrist and turned me back around so I could look at him.

-I am getting... - He stopped in the middle of the sentence and took a deep breath.

-You're getting what, Adam? - I looked at him with annoyance written all over my face.

-Married, I'm getting married – His voice broke a couple of times while saying the sentence.

I blinked a couple of times trying to process what he just said. He's getting married!?! My blood went cold and my face paled. I took a few steps back.

-Why is that a bad thing? It is cool. That is cool. – I lied, trying to cover my feelings.

-Jane... - Adam started but I quickly cut him off.

-When is she coming? – I asked curiously.

-In two days. – He said like he was about to faint. I nodded.

-I'm sorry but I must go. I need to help my aunt with dinner. – I said on the verge of tears.



I quickly turned around again and started walking fast so he could not stop me.

-Jane, please... – I heard him shout after me, but I could not turn around.

At this point I was running through wood tears falling down my cheeks. I was just trying to come home and sleep. I burst into the house and ran to my room. As I open the doors, I saw Mary and Lousie sitting on my bed with smiles on their faces, but their smiles disappeared when they saw my red cheeks and red eyes.

-He is getting married. – I blurted out, trying not to cry, but as soon as the word ‘married’ left my mouth I burst into tears again.

-What! – Louise shouted in disbelief while Mary jumped off the bed and hugged me.

-He is getting married. – I repeated.

England, London. June 17<sup>th</sup>, 1764.

I ignored Adam yesterday. His fiancé is coming today. I don’t know if I can take the fact that the person, I’m in love with is getting married and I’m not his fiancé. Maybe if I had courage to tell him how I felt before, this mess would not happen. Adam asked Mary, Louise and me to meet him at the lake so we could meet his fiancé. I’m not sure if I want to go but Mary and Louise want to and they are dragging me with them.

We got there and saw Adam laughing with a girl. She is beautiful. She has blonde, wavy hair and she was skinny. She is perfect. I slowed down.

-I can’t do this. - I said aloud. Mary and Louise turned around.

-I know J, put please try. - Mary said and took my hand into her hand.

-Do it for him. - Louise added and took my other hand into her hand. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. I opened them and exhaled.

-Let’s do it. - I said and started walking towards Adam and the blonde girl.

When Adam heard us coming, he turned his head towards us and smiled. He got up and ran towards us. We let go of each other’s hands and greeted him. He hugged Louise first, then Mary and lastly me. We hugged for longer than usual. We stopped hug-

ging when Mary started talking.

-Hello. My name is Mary. - She said with a smile.

-I am Louise. - Louise also said.

-Jane. - I just said and tried not to look her in the eyes. When I finally looked her in the eyes she just ignored me and sent smiles at Mary and Louise.

-My name is Annabeth. - She said, still looking at them, not me. Louise noticed and went to stand beside me.

We spent the day showing the city to Annabeth. After some time, Adam and Annabeth left.

-Well, she is nice and sweet. - Louise said, sitting on my bed.

-She completely ignored me. - I said a little louder. Mary was trying not to laugh.

-She hates you. - Mary said while laughing. I looked at her with wide eyes.

-It's not funny. - I said to Mary.

-Well, you know what is not funny? - Mary said with a smile.

-She hates you because she sees that Adam loves you. - She said with even bigger smile. I watched her with a blank expression.

-Yes, he loves me. As a friend. \_ I said looking out of the window.

-No. He loves you in a romantic way. - They said at the same time.

-And what about you two? - I said with a smirk.

-What? - They said with wide eyes.

I just smiled.

England, London. July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1764.

It's been days and we didn't hear a word from Adam. Today is the day before Adam's wedding. My aunt wants to move to France, but she said if I don't want to go that we

are going to stay. I'm at the lake right now, thinking. I don't have anything here anymore. Except for my aunt, Mary and Lou, and the memories of my parents. A noise stopped me from thinking. I turned around and saw Adam.

-Hi. - He said sitting beside me.

I just looked at him and turned to look at the lake.

-Jane, I am in love with you. - Adam blurted out. My head snapped in his direction.

Mary's words were echoing in my mind.

-Adam... - But he stopped me from talking with a kiss.

I pulled away from him and stood up, tears in my eyes.

-Why are you doing it? - I asked him loudly.

-Doing what? - He asked confused.

-Adam, you know you are getting married. - I yelled at him. He just blinked.

-You can't lead me on if I can't never have you. You can't do that. - I continued.

-I hate you! - I yelled once more and ran away.

## Adam's point of view

I was sitting on my bed reading. I was interrupted by the sound of my bedroom door opening.

-You kissed her! - I heard Louise's voice.

I looked up and saw Mary and Louise standing in my room.

-Hello to you to. - I said, putting my book down.

-Why did you do it? - Mary said in her angry voice.

I just looked down.

-Why did you do it!?! - She repeated.

-She has o hate me. - I said, not looking at them.

-Why? - Louise asked, confused.

-To let me go. She must hate me to let me go. - I said standing up and looking at them.

-You could have done it before. - Mary said looking straight into my soul.

-I was scared, okay? - I said looking out of the window. Louise nodded sarcastically.

-Maybe it's for the best that she's leaving. - Mary said looking at Louise.

-Wait, what? - Looking at them again.

-She is moving to France. - Louise answered.

-At first she didn't want to, but now she does and all it's because of you. - Mary said looking at me with anger in her eyes.

Louise took her hand and just left my room. Jane is leaving...

## Jane's point of view

England, London. July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1764.

I am leaving today. Today is also Adam's wedding. I don't want to be there after what happened yesterday. The carriage just got here. I am outside with Mary and Louise. My aunt was already inside the carriage.

-I will miss you J. - Louise said sadly.

-We will miss you. - Mary said pointing at both.

We laughed and the group hugged.

-I'll write to you every day. - I said breaking the hug.

-We love you. - They said at the same time. We laughed again.

-I love you too. I must go now. - I said climbing into the carriage.

I waved at them. I was watching them 'till I couldn't see them anymore. They were gone.

*Mentor: Jelena Kovačević*  
Ekonomaska škola Požega

*Lara Crnjac*

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## **MARLO'S DREAMLAND**

What is the first thing you want to see when you wake up? Probably your bedroom where you fell asleep like every other person. But little Marlo wasn't that lucky; as he was slowly waking up, he felt kind of weird. As he slowly opened his eyes he saw the top of trees that had so many leaves that he couldn't see the sky. Marlo jolted himself awake and quickly stood up. He slowly looked around his surroundings and realized he was in a big forest. "MOM!" he yelled hoping to hear the response, but he didn't. "MOM!!!" He tried yelling louder but nothing changed. He knew that his mother taught him that if he gets lost to stay in the same place until she finds him, but to a seven year-old who just woke up in the forest and not in his bedroom, his curiosity became greater than his fear. He only took a few steps until he tripped and fell on the ground. As he got up he looked down and noticed that he was in a red oversized sweater that had white marks around his shoulders and neck, while there were some strange old brown boots on his legs and nothing else. Marlo never saw these clothes and just then realized that the sweaters' sleeves went over his hands. He tried to ignore his clothes and just continued walking through this unknown place, hoping he would see someone and ask for their help. As he was slowly walking around the forest he could only see big trees, stones and not a single animal. When he looked up he noticed that there were a few big holes and nests on the trees. "Those are probably homes of birds and squirrels." Marlo thought. He loved animals, but the best he ever got was a small white plush mouse for his birthday. He named her Coco and they became best friends. Just the thought of not seeing his best friend and mom ever again almost made him cry. Only a few minutes passed before he heard some strange noises coming from the bushes. Marlo stopped and looked in the direction that the noise had come from. He slowly approached it but before he could come any closer someone shouted "It's Hunter!" In the blink of an eye all the animals that were hid-

ing, came out of their hiding spots and started running away. Marlo got scared as he saw squirrels throwing nuts at him. What shocked him the most was that all the animals were bigger than their average size, while some of them had clothes. Marlo started running away with tears in his eyes since he didn't have any idea what was happening. As he was running he tripped and fell hitting his head against a tree. His vision was getting blurry and he saw a figure approaching him before he blacked out. In his head he hoped to wake up in his bed with Coco in his arms and his mom in the kitchen preparing breakfast, like every other day... Marlo started to wake up, once again, but this time he felt a comfortable bed. For a second he thought that he was in his room waking up from a strange dream, but when he sat up and looked around he didn't recognize the place. The room had wooden walls, a coward clock, two bookshelves, a window above the bed and the wooden door across the room. He slowly stood up still looking around. He made his way to the door, hoping to find out who brought him here. But when he opened the door he was confused when he saw that there was no floor. He peeked his head out and looked down. It looked like he was on the second floor of the house but there were no stairs to go down. The first floor had a kitchen, living room and ... "Hola kiddo! Finally awake!?" He heard a voice from the other side of the house. "No worries, I will bring you stairs in a second!" Marlo was confused. What did they mean "bring the stairs"? Then he heard the rolling sound coming to him and then he saw the rolling stairs in front of the door. "All right! You can come down now!", the voice from downstairs said. Marlo made his way down the stairs. He saw the person leaning next to the stairs had a strange green pointed hat, big blue striped shirt, green fur on the sleeves and... a grey tail with an orange ribbon! When he finally came down, the person looked at him and Marlo's sweat dropped when he saw a tall grey cat with blue eyes staring at him. "Sorry about that kid, I would have left the stairs there if I had known you would wake up so soon. Anyways, what's your name, kiddo?" The cat lady asked Marlo who was still in shock because of the cat which was taller than him. "M-M-Marlo Mrs. Cat lady..." he said shyly while the cat lady smiled. "Nice name but I will be calling you kiddo! And please call me Purli." The cat lady, now known as Purli grabbed her walking stick with her paws and started going towards the kitchen while Marlo was just standing there and watching her. "So, I found you in the woods a couple hours ago. You seemed like you were running from something. What happened?" Purli asked Marlo as he looked down at his feet. "S-someone yelled "hunter" a-and then some squirrels started throwing nuts at me. T-they were really mean!" Marlo said. Purli then took a bowl of strange looking candies and put them on the

table and signed Marlo to come and sit next to her on the sofa. Marlo sat on the sofa and was still looking at Purli. “Mrs. Purli...” He started but got cut off by her “Please, only Purli.” Marlo nodded. “O-okay Purli, c-can I go home now?” Purli raised an eyebrow at him “You will have to ask the king of the sky.” Marlo looked confused when she said that. “K-king?” Purli nodded “Yes, this place needs to be ruled by someone really powerful and the king of the sky is the strongest of us all.” Purli explained while taking one of her candies that looked like blue peppermint but had something similar to chocolate inside of it. “W-why is he t-the sky king?” Marlo asked still a little bit curious. “Well, he is a big white dragon with big wings and strong claws! His name is Drake, it’s said that he will grant you one wish if you come to the top of the mountain where he lives and if you give him something that has the same value as your wish.” Purli said while finishing her candy. “All right, kiddo. Any more questions or can we go and eat lunch now?” Purli asked as she slowly made her way to the kitchen. Marlo then noticed bandages on her left leg. “Purli, what happened to your leg?” Purli stopped and turned around to look at him. “You know they say that cats have nine lives? Well, that doesn’t mean we can’t get seriously injured.” Having said that, she continued walking to the kitchen with Marlo following her. As the time passed, lunch was ready. It was a strangely looking cooked fish with different ‘vegetables’ and some rice around it. It tasted surprisingly good and Marlo started stuffing his face with a delicious meal while Purli was eating slowly. “Hey, kiddo...” Marlo stopped eating and looked at Purli. “... I will let you see the sky king if...” Purli got cut off by Marlo “T-thank you! When are we going? D-do I need to br-...” and he got cut off by her raising her paw “Don’t interrupt me.” Marlo looked down in shame “Sorry.” Purli continued “As I was saying, I will let you see the sky king IF you follow a few simple rules. Don’t make many noises, if someone knocks on the door go and hide and NEVER go out without me. Understood?” Purli asked, but her tone of voice wasn’t as playful as before, it sounded a lot more serious. Marlo just nodded his head and quietly continued with his lunch. Suddenly his head started hurting, he held his head in his hands as he heard someone whisper “Don’t leave me...” Marlo didn’t recognize the voice but... “Is something wrong?” Marlo looked at Purli who seemed really worried. “N-nothing...” he said feeling a little bit bad because he was lying. A few days passed since Marlo came to this place, he and Purli became really close and often had classes where Purli tried to explain to him more about this world. “Remember, monokino leaves are special leaves that come in many sizes and colours. We use them to make our clothes, hats and shoes because they are easy to find. We will be passing them on our way to the sky king so you will see them soon.” Purli

explained showing Marlo the pictures. These days he learned about all poisoned and eat edible berries he can find in the wild, he didn't catch all their names but he knew what they looked like. He may have been a quick learner but he was also really clumsy. Every time he looked in the mirror he saw a bruise on his face or legs. Right now his emerald green eyes were focused on his reflection as he was trying to put his messy blond hair in a small ponytail, he couldn't do it. As he was in his thoughts, there was the sound that he didn't hear the past few days, the knocking on the front door. He remembered the rules Purli told him and ran into the kitchen. Marlo could see that Purli was also shocked but motioned him to hide. Marlo quickly hid in one of the lower shelves in the kitchen. When Purli opened the door she saw the last two people she wanted to see at that moment. "Hola Rufus! Hola Lee! What brings you two gentlemen here?" She asked with a forced smile on her face. Rufus was a tall German shepherd with a strong sense of smell while Lee was a deer and he was the sheriff around that area. If he is here, something bad has or will happen. "Hello to you too, Purliney. We are sorry to bother you at this time of day, but we have some questions to ask you, if that's alright with you?" Lee asked pushing himself into the house with Rufus following behind him. Purli rolled her eyes "Sure, make yourselves at home..." She was obviously annoyed at the two animals that didn't have any manners. Just because they were wearing suits didn't mean they needed to act like they were the most important animals in the forest. As she made her way towards them, Lee looked her in the eyes. "It's about shadows and another hunter." She stopped in her track and looked at the two of them in shock. "Some animals reported seeing them in the forest a few days ago. Unfortunately they got away..." Rufus said looking around her bookshelves. "And what does that have to do with me?" Purli asked a little bit harshly. Rufus stood in front of her and looked her in the eyes. "More villagers started having nightmares that made them turn into the shadow creatures. If this disease keeps spreading we are all in danger. Not only that but the hunter was last seen around this area. And we noticed that you weren't leaving your little hut either. So we put two and two together." Purli smacked Rufus's head with her walking stick. "Well, maybe I would have left my dear hut more often if I didn't have this stupid BROKEN LEG!" And she poked Rufus in the stomach as he was glaring at her. "Play your little cat and dog game later, you two. This is an important investigation, you, Rufus should keep this a secret and you Purliney should know that you aren't the only house we are investigating." They all glared at each other. "Alright gentlemen, would you like some tea maybe?" She asked with a forced smile on her face. "Actually, a cup of tea doesn't sound bad." Lee said. Purli then made her way to the kitchen



to “make some tea” for Lee. She kneeled down and opened the shelf where Marlo was hiding. “When I yell “Mouse” you need to leave through the front door quickly. Go up ahead and tell everyone that Purliney Whisker sent you.” She whispered as she grabbed a cup and some honey. Marlo just nodded as Purli smiled at him. “Want anything special in your tea?” Purli asked as she started boiling water. “No thanks, just extra honey.” Lee said still looking around the room. “Want to check upstairs while water for tea boils?” Purli asked. “No worries, we were planning to do that anyway.” Rufus said as he and Lee took the rolling stairs and started going into the first room with Purli following behind them. When they were in she yelled “I you find any MOUSE there let me know!” Marlo took that time to make a run for the front door. When he opened it he didn’t expect to see something so scary... the big black shadow in the shape of a wolf. The wolf growled at him and Marlo’s screams caught the attention of the three animals, Purli and Rufus were at the stairs while Lee peeked his head out of the room. Everyone was caught off guard when they saw the giant wolf shadow at the front door. The wolf then charged at Marlo and he barely managed to dodge him so the beast hit the couch. Purli quickly grabbed some books and started to throwing them at him. “How is this thing here, I thought they could just turn into them at night!” Rufus growled “They did, but it looks like they got used to the sun by now! What do we do?!” Lee glared at him “Capture the hunter of course!” Purli threw another book at the wolf who was now enraged, ”or kill that thing before it does more damage and harm to others!” At that time the wolf charged at them but hit the rolling stairs which rolled and Lee was left in the room with no way down, while Purli and Rufus were trying to find things to defend themselves. Purli then saw Marlo still scared stiff by the floor “Marlo, run!” She yelled and the wolf turned to look at Marlo but she hit him with her stick “Don’t even think about it!” Marlo took that time to run out of the hut without looking back. He had never seen anything similar to that beast before and the only thing he felt was despair... He left them in there without saying goodbye, without helping them. As he ran deeper into the woods there were more stones and mud on the way. Unfortunately he tripped and fell onto the ground, but luckily he didn’t get hurt. He slowly started getting up before hearing clapping. “Bravo, bravo! This is the material we need in our show, brother!” Marlo looked where those voices were coming from and saw a big frog in a nightgown and a smaller chameleon with a hat clapping. “Indeed... His fall looked really realistic, but his acting was priceless! He really looked like he was running from someone that wanted to murder him!” The frog said happily. Marlo was confused “E-excuse me... w-w-what is this?” When Marlo asked that the chameleon

started laughing harder. "Hahaha! You see that, brother! He even acts like he doesn't know that he is in an audition!" the frog laughed together with the chameleon while Marlo was still confused. "I'm just sad we can't take him, he is a hunter." Frog said making Marlo even more confused. "What! But we need him! He is the one we need for our show!" Chameleon yelled "Yes, but he could also kill us at any second when we turn our backs at him." "He wouldn't! He must have wanted to be in our show so badly that he had practised this for weeks!" "Maybe... but it would be interesting to be the first ones to have hunter in our show..." As they were arguing Marlo felt something poking his leg. He looked down and saw a small white mouse with an orange leaf that they used as cloak, the mouse was poking him with a needle. But the mouse looked familiar to him... wait "Coco?" Marlo asked. The mouse stopped poking him and quickly started climbing up him until she was on his arm. "You have to listen to me now... go backwards and don't take your eyes off of them. When they look at you start running and I will tell you where to go," Coco whispered in his ear. Marlo nodded and started walking backwards looking at the still arguing brothers. It didn't take long for the chameleon to look their way "Hey! She is stealing our actor!" Both the frog and the chameleon looked angry "Run!" Coco yelled as Marlo listened and started running. The chameleon chased after them on all fours while the frog opened his mouth and thousands of flies went out after them. Marlo looked back and was terrified of a sight he had seen and started running faster as both of them screamed while flies were flying around them. They already had problems with running around the forest and those flies didn't help. The chameleon then tried to catch them with his tongue but he was just catching flies around them. As flies were slowly disappearing and going away, Coco had enough and threw her needle which the chameleon accidentally caught and when he tried to swallow it he started choking and stopped chasing them. "That should slow him down!", Coco said proudly. And after a few minutes all the flies flew away leaving Marlo and Coco alone. Marlo stopped running to catch his breath while Coco got off of his shoulders and sat on the ground looking at him. Marlo finally caught his breath and looked at Coco. "Coco, why are you here? H-how, a-a-and where...?" Everyone could say that Marlo was really confused but Coco knew that they didn't have time for this. "Alright, listen here, Marlo. We need to turn the four-day walking trip into a one-day running trip, alright!?" Marlo was shocked "W-what..." Coco sighed "We need to go to mountain Shiro so you can see the sky king as soon as possible. Now, go right!" Coco yelled as she climbed onto Marlo's shoulder again. Marlo started solely running to the right with Coco looking around. "P-please tell me w-what's going on." Marlo asked. "Well, this is your dream, right?"

And every dream needs to come to an end. Unfortunately for you, your dream is slowly turning into a nightmare. That's why some animals are as mean as those two were, it's also the reason why shadow monsters want to capture you! If you stay here long enough, they will grow more powerful as the time passes! The sky king is the only one that can send you home. Now go left!" Marlo listened to her and started running faster. And that was how time went on, Coco was telling Marlo where to go until he stopped. "Hey, why did you stop? Are you alright?" Coco asked him. Marlo didn't need to say anything because when his stomach growled she knew he was hungry. "Can't really blame you for that... Alright, you go and sit next to that big tree and I will be back with some berries!", Coco said running off. Marlo sat next to the tree and looked at the sky questioning himself how far that Shiro Mountain is. Suddenly he heard a strange noise coming from behind the tree. He stood up and peeked his head to see a small blue bird with a pink scarf lying on the ground. "A-are you alright?" Marlo asked. The bird got back on her legs "Yeah, I'm just fi-AAAAHHHHHH!!!! Hunter!" The bird got scared by Marlo and quickly flew away. Marlo wasn't really shocked but sad. Everyone he saw in this world would run away from him or try to use him,... "I'm back!" Coco yelled while dragging a big yellow berry with her. She saw that Marlo was looking down "What's wrong? Still hungry?" Marlo looked at Coco with tears in his eyes "C-coco... why is everyone so mean to me?" Coco didn't have the heart to tell him but, she knew that he needed to know. She put a berry in front of him. "Please, eat this while I explain..." Marlo then took the berry and started to eat it slowly as he was looking at Coco. Coco sighed and began. "You know that the hunter is a person that hunts animals and kills them? Well, you are really the only human here right now, while everyone else is an animal. Every time a human came they would kill some of our friends so they could survive. When others see you they think that you will harm them, but they have a problem. They don't know how kind and nice you can be, they just don't want to risk anything..." Marlo then finished his berry and looked at the sky "Y-you want to tell me... t-they see me a-as wild animal w-while they see t-themselves as h-humans?" Marlo asked in a shaky voice and Coco nodded. "Yeah, but when we see the sky king he will definitely send you back home! And I will be there with you!" Coco said trying to bright up the mood. Marlo smiled at her and he held out his hand for her so he could put her on his shoulder. "A-alright Coco, which way to the mountain?" Marlo asked and Coco started telling him directions. As time passed Marlo was slowly getting better at dodging some of the rocks while running, but he didn't pay much attention to that as he was mostly talking to Coco about all the fun times they

had had. "I'm telling you, pools are the most dangerous things you will ever see. When you come out of them you will be stuck at hangers for a few hours!" Coco was complaining while Marlo just giggled at her silliness. Soon enough they saw a lot of giant and colourful leaves in the distance. Marlo immediately remembered something "monokino leaves..." He whispered as Coco nodded. "They grow around Shiro Mountain, which means we are close!"; Coco yelled excited. But as they came closer Marlo could feel someone watching them, something was off. Before Marlo could set a foot near the monokino leaves, the three figures jumped in front of him. Before Marlo could scream one figure went behind him and covered his mouth and another grabbed Coco. He tried to reach for her but couldn't. "Stop resisting, hunter!" The figure in front of him yelled, they were all dressed in black and had masks over their mouths so Marlo could only see their eyes. "Don't worry, Coco, you are safe from that evil hunter!" A cheerful female voice said hugging Coco. "No, guy! He isn't bad! He needs help!" Coco yelled. The leader turned to her "It's alright, you can tell the truth and he won't hurt you or anybody else." Coco tried to explain everything but nobody was listening to her. Marlo then got an idea, he licked the paws that were over his mouth. "Ew!" The animal yelled and removed their paw from his mouth "Purliney Whisker!" When he said that all eyes were on him now. "What did you say?" The voice behind him asked. "P-purliney Whisker sent me h-here... she said that I needed to see the s-sky king Drake..." Marlo said. The three mysterious figures took off their masks. There were two red foxes and one black rabbit, they all nodded at each other and looked at Marlo. "Follow us... Marlo..." The black rabbit said. Coco jumped on his shoulder and whispered "I will explain later, now follow them...". Marlo nodded and followed the two foxes in front of him and felt that the rabbit was staring at him from behind. Marlo had many questions but was too scared to ask any. "You know..."; the fox started "Purliney told us that she would send somebody here. She never did that before..." The second fox then continued "You must feel pretty lucky! I'm surprised you aren't captured by now kid!" Marlo just nodded his head. Everything was once again quiet, but then they heard something and everyone stopped. They looked around trying to figure out what made that sound. All of a sudden a giant lion shadow jumped out of nowhere and charged at them. Marlo screamed in horror and the rabbit quickly got them out of the way. Marlo was holding onto Coco as rabbit was carrying them. The foxes took out two strange looking bottles and threw them at the lion shadow as pink dust surrounded him. "This can't be good!" One of them yelled. "I know, let's hope there aren't any more around! The rabbit the started running and jumping while carrying Marlo in her arms. They

stopped near the giant red leaf. As the rabbit moved it away they saw a small wooden door in the ground. Marlo got out of her arms as she opened the door which showed a small tunnel underneath. “This is the faster way near the top of the mountain. If I were you I would be fast.” Marlo nodded and quickly jumped into the tunnel. He turned to look at the rabbit girl again. “Stay safe, little one...” She said and shut the tunnel door. Marlo was still scared for them because they would have to fight that beast all alone “No time to waste, quickly, start running!”, Coco yelled nervously at Marlo. Marlo started running through the tunnel “W-who were they!?” Marlo asked a little bit louder than he should have. “They were two twin brothers, Jason and James and that rabbit was my old friend Stella! They are guardians of the mountain, they stop anyone who comes near it. I believe Purliney, or Purli, was also a member but she got injured a month or so ago”, Coco explained. Right then they saw poorly made stairs out of dirt that were going up. Marlo took a deep breath and started running up. After a few minutes he finally spoke “C-coco I feel bad... I-it all went too fast for me! W-what if they got hurt?!” He asked Coco while still going up the stairs. “Marlo, some things are meant to happen fast. Some people will see it as useless part of their life, while others will see how important it all actually was. I’m sure they will be fine.” Coco said to comfort Marlo. After what seemed like hours of climbing the stairs they finally saw the exit. Marlo was happy to finally see the exit, but as soon as he opened the doors he regretted it. They were near the top of the mountain and it was REALLY cold and windy. “There’s no point in stopping now! We are almost there!” Coco yelled so Marlo could hear her. “Y-yeah, b-but I’m the o-one walking!” Marlo said as he made his way to the top. They were moving really slowly because of all the snow under their feet. As if the situation couldn’t get any worse, they heard a loud growling behind them. Marlo turned around and saw another giant shadow! It was a big bear and it was running towards them “Oh come on! Give us a break!!” Coco yelled as Marlo tried going faster. Marlo put all his energy into his feet to go faster... he couldn’t give up now! He was so close to finish this... But as they reached the top they were shocked to only see stones and snow... The dragon wasn’t here... “No... no, no, no, no... NO!” Coco yelled as he was looking around while Marlo looked in disbelief. It didn’t take long for the bear to reach them, he then jumped at them. Marlo accepted his fate and didn’t move a single muscle, what was the point anyway? As the bear was about to tackle Marlo a giant claw caught the bear and slammed him onto the ground. Marlo and Coco watched in amazement as suddenly the shadow started disappearing and all that was left was just a sleeping polar bear. “I’m sorry that you needed to see that, children...” A calm voice said behind them.

Marlo turned around only to be amazed as he saw a giant white dragon with blue eyes and beautiful crystal wings. "Y-your majesty!" Coco said bowing with Marlo following her moves. The dragon chuckled "Don't worry, children, nobody will do you any harm here. I feel rather curious, what is the hunter doing up here?" Marlo looked at Coco and she nodded. "Y-your majesty... I-I would like to go home. That's my wish!" Marlo said while bowing. "And what is your prize?" Marlo froze... he didn't have anything as a gift or prize to go back home. Nobody said a word as tears were gathering in Marlo's eyes... "I will take any task, punishment or responsibility if you let him go home! I will do anything for you your majesty... just please... send my friend home..." Coco said with determination in her voice. "Coco..." Marlo whispered. "Very well, I have never seen anyone do something like this... but again, this little hunter never seemed to hurt anyone... Alright, your wish will be granted. Well, I have high expectations for you, little mouse." The dragon said pointing at Coco. He then looked at Marlo "Tell me when you are ready." Marlo nodded and quickly rushed to hug Coco. "Coco... please come back home soon! I will miss you!" Marlo said almost crying. Coco smiled "I will, Marlo. I will." Marlo then looked at the dragon and nodded. "I'm ready..." The sky king then slowly reached for Marlo with his claws as Marlo closed his eyes... "...ar...lo...Mar... Marlo!" Marlo stood up and looked around... He was in the kitchen... He was sitting at the table with a bowl of cereal in front of him and his mom looking at him with worry. "Honey, are you alright?" she asked him. Marlo quickly hugged his mother and left her in shock. But then he remembered Coco "Mom, where is Coco?" His mom then patted his head "Oh, so that's what's bothering you!?" She said. "You left her at your grandparents' house yesterday. Don't worry, we will go there in a week to get her, I promise it will pass quickly!" She said smiling at Marlo. He was still a little bit sad that Coco wasn't there, but he noticed something at the kitchen window. It was a grey cat with blue eyes. Marlo stared at her in shock until she winked at him and disappeared. Marlo just smiled a little and went back to eating his cereal.

*Mentor: Barbara Hanjilec*  
Škola za umjetnost, dizajn, grafiku i odjeću Zabok

*Filip Dučić*

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## **SYMPHONY**

My colleague and I waited outside the newly opened U.N. building as instructed. I hadn't known him till then, and he seemed quite talkative. But since they advised us not to discuss our personal life, we stood in periods of silence. Soon enough a black Muntz halted in front of us and a man dressed in fine attire ushered us in. As we drove down East 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, the man who was sitting in the passenger seat gave us both two leather briefcases, vaguely describing our task.

The task was to enter a building and collect as much information as possible and describe what was going inside the said building. The man then proceeded to give us strict instructions on what to do before entering the place, explicitly stating that we were not to remove our copper helmets, which were in our briefcases, until we exited the premises. He also reassured us that we were both to be tethered to one another and centrally connected to a main rope which would be securely tied to the outside.

It was a bit different than usual, but I wasn't shocked or surprised by this, since this wasn't my first time working with them. Though, on the other hand, my colleague was quite curious and a bit paranoid. He asked the man if this had anything to do with the recent disappearances in Harlem. To which the man simply sat silent. I looked at my colleague and as we locked eyes, I simply shook my head. From then on it was quiet throughout the ride. We halted at a police stop. I noticed that the boarder extended around the neighborhood. When they let us in, I saw the road to my left blocked off. My colleague had his eyes dancing left and right, gazing at the red brick buildings of Harlem attempting to find any anomalies. It was obvious that this was his first time. He didn't have that long stare which most of us, over time, get.

We stopped and exited the Muntz. I noticed we were in a more densely populated area of Harlem, which I had known quite well. My mentioning of "densely populat-



ed” isn’t without reason, since the dead silence was utterly unnatural. I turned to the man who sat in the driver seat and, with a dash of confusion, asked where everyone was. He simply pointed behind me and drove off. I was a bit hesitant to turn around, but ultimately, I did. My colleague and I stood paralyzed to a sight which will forever be chiseled into my mind. An old crumbling theater engraved into a brick building. I say *engraved* since it just didn’t fit in. It was as if someone took the theater and crammed it into the brick building. The theater resembled rural, pre-world war theaters. Rotten wood encompassed the exterior and off-white giant lettering above the entrance planted a seed of uneasiness, which slowly sprouted as we came closer to the theaters entrance. The words, written in the dirty off-white lettering, read: “Theater of Wonder.”

Standing in front of the grotesque theater we did as we were strictly instructed. Whilst opening our briefcases, we were both surprised to find peculiar copper helmets, akin to the older ones used for deep sea diving. Before donning the helmets, I took my camera out, and put a roll of film in.

As we put the copper helmets on, we both checked if they were properly attached. The copper helmets were specially designed to muffle any sound, and on its three windows it had adjustable blinds, so to block our sight if needed. Second was the tether, which we tied around our waists to ensure we didn’t wander far from one another. Then to the tether we tied a tight rope. Which was tightly secured to a fire hydrant not far from the theater. We were also given knives to use if we had any problems with the rope.

The last step, which we both dreaded, was to enter the theater. We briefly glanced at each other, before lowering our adjustable blinds and entering. In all my years I had never felt such pressure on my chest. The feeling usually fades as you grow into this line of work, but this time; this time was different.

My colleague and I slowly opened the doors and finally entered the theater. I hesitantly put my hand out to not accidentally run into anything. It was a bit cold, and as we walked deeper into it, it seemed to be empty. I know that it was strictly forbidden to lift our blinds, but I simply couldn’t help it. With my experience continuously lingering over me, shouting at me not to do it, I gave in and I lifted the adjustable blinds enough to see the ground. It was rough concrete. Nothing menacing, but what did strike me was the pollen. It was floating about. I moved my head slightly to see how my colleague was progressing. He too had his arms out, obviously shaking. I sym-



pathized with him. My first experience was equally unpleasant even though it was easier for me. This place had something which truly penetrated the soul.

We slowly walked for about two minutes before I noticed we were approaching something big. I slowly lifted my frontal blind a bit more and saw two wooden doors in front of us. Like the ones out front, but these were less damaged. Turning my head backwards I saw the front door, through which we had entered. To this I lifted my blinds and saw what surrounded us. A hallway which had no end. To my right and left was infinite darkness, with the only light coming from the windows on the entry doors. The ceiling was moderately low, and I barely noticed some pillars in the distance. What continued to perplex me was the pollen, which was all over this infinite hallway. I couldn't deduce its source or even if it really was pollen. My focus quickly switched to the two doors which stood in front of us. My colleague did not lift his blinds, I didn't tell him I had lifted mine.

As we were approaching the doors, I felt a burning sensation in my heart. It befell me as soon as a muffled sound penetrated my noise canceling copper helmet. Hastily, I put down my blinds just enough to see where my feet were heading. The sound was very different, and I could make nothing of it. It grew slightly louder as I slowly opened the doors. My colleague was hesitant to enter. I thought he must have felt the same burning sensation I had. Nevertheless, I nudged the tether and it loosened. We slowly, and carefully, walked into whatever was on the other side. My eyes were focused on the ground which was covered with crimson theater carpet. Though my eyes were focused on the ground, the muffled sound, which was creeping through my copper helmet, distracted me. It reminded me of the microtonal music which I had read about last year. But it resembled more of a microtonal orchestra, which is something I had never heard.

The pitch shifted drastically, and the dynamic switched between constant volume and what sounded like pulses. It was quite hard to deduce what was producing the sound since all I could make out was some tone and loudness. Nevertheless, a few steps later I felt a sudden bump on my copper helmet. I slightly lifted my head to see the bottom of a pillar. Slowly extending my hand forward, I felt rock, but somehow the rock was wet, in some places even soggy. Quickly I moved my hand off the pillar and approached my colleague. He jerked as I touched him on the shoulder but relaxed as soon as I nudged the tether a couple times. I grabbed his hand and alluded him to put it in front of himself.

A couple feet into the place, the carpet slowly faded and seemed to be more damaged as we progressed. What gradually replaced it was a red sludge, which covered the wood underneath. It was of pink hue and red scattered dots covering it. In utter confusion I halted, straining the tether. Forgetting that my colleague had his blinds fully closed. I proceeded to walk forward, trying not to alarm him any further. He kept frantically nodding the tether, but I quickly calmed him by moving next to him. Though I could not calm him for what was coming.

As we progressed forward, in the mix of muffled microtonal ambience and sound, which I still cannot describe with mere words, came a sound of hysterical human laughter. It struck me on my right side and was suppressed by the copper helmet, but nevertheless damn near made jump. I wish I had only heard muffled human laughter, because what befell me, and my colleague, sent our minds into the deepest psychological oblivion. Screams of pain, cries of sadness, and laughter of the greatest joy, all came rushing up against our copper helmets. Both of us froze in utter horror. I swiftly closed my blinds, not knowing that my imagination would make up for what was unseen. Though by the time I was second-guessing my decision, it was too late. My entire body was paralyzed. I could feel winds of something passing by me. Left and right. Till this day I do not know if it was but my mind playing tricks or was it the source of the nameless sounds.

Soon enough the tether was pulled. My colleague was progressing backwards. I had much compassion for him, but I couldn't let him give up. For the price would have been high if they found out, and believe me, they always do. I pulled the tether towards me, grabbing the trembling hand of my colleague and squeezing it tight. His hand didn't, in the slightest, stop trembling, but he did progress forwards.

The muffled horrid pulsing of nameless sounds and the plethora of human emotion became louder, though not clearer. Together with my growing burning sensation, a knot was forming in my stomach. A knot which to this day I never untied. The knot tightened as my extended hand touched human hair. With a jolt I removed my hand and hairs on the back of my neck stood up. With this jolt I bumped into my colleague who then tripped to my left, pulling me down with him.

I felt the fleshy sludge which covered floor and the tether which frantically pulled on all sides. Quickly I stood on my feet, grabbing my colleague by the arm, attempting to pull him back up. He trembled and held my hand firmly. As I comforted him, we proceeded forward. The horrid pulsating sound crushed my chest, and the screams

of people didn't help. I felt the tether tighten as my colleague slowed down, I too, slowed down for him, to catch up.

Together we took two more steps, until I could feel wood. It was the stage. Perhaps the source of the eldritch which so persistently pierced my copper helmet. I took my camera out and stepped back. Holding the camera in my hand, I felt around it, hovering my finger above the shutter-button. It was a gamble, but I raised the camera above my head, pressing the button a couple times. As I did this, I felt my tether tug. Stuffing the camera back into its case, I approached my colleague, in hopes to lighten the tug, but it didn't. He kept on tugging in all directions. My heart began to race as I attempted to grasp him. Ultimately, I did, though this was futile. My colleague pushed me to the floor and landed on top of me. I heard his voice cry out to me. Attempting to scream through the chaotic pulses of grotesque sound. I couldn't deduce his voice, until he got closer to me. His voice struck my core, momentarily paralyzing me.

"Turn back... Turn back..." -his voice crackled and was on the verge of bursting from either tears or laughter.

I pushed him off me and went to stand, but the tether pulled me back to him. To my surprise, he didn't move. *He's dead* -I thought to myself, but I was far from the truth. In a jolt, my colleague jumped at my copper helmet, attempting to take it off. I fought back with all I had, but his strength was immense. My helmet was nearly off, and the sound was clearer. My sight blurred and skin itched. It was as if my organs tightened. It burned.

Having no other choice, I screamed and went for my knife, plunging it into his abdomen. Multiple times I did this, until I could feel his grip loosen. I pushed him over, cutting our tether and fixing my copper helmet. As I stood up I could feel something creep up behind me. Shaking this feeling off was impossible. So, I slowly turned to face it, whatever 'it' was. It slowly came closer and closer, until its presence froze my veins. My breath was stolen, presence captured, and soul caged. This was something which I had never encountered. Nothing remotely similar.

My legs relaxed a bit, and I could cautiously turn around and follow the rope. The sound, as expected, dissipated as I exited the theater and entered the endless hallway. I closed the doors behind me and walked as fast as I could towards the exit with zero intentions of taking my copper helmet off. It took a while to open the exit door, but

as soon as I did most of the weight loosened. I felt the warmth of the sun touch my pale skin, and cool air breezed through my fingers.

I felt many hands take a hold of me to which I instinctively resisted. Fighting wasn't the brightest idea, but my state of shock was quite extreme. They sedated me, heavily, which made me incompetent to process the film from my camera the following morning. They told me they had done me a favor since the guy who processed the film slashed his wrists in the darkroom. They confiscated the film and stored it somewhere, god knows where...

I'm writing this because I have a growing feeling this might have been my last job. They've kept me in this hospital for almost three weeks now. With no logical or reasonable explanation, which to me sounds like standard procedure. Nevertheless, if you're reading this, that means I was right. And to be honest, I'm not saddened by this, nor do I have any drive to further live. The horrid sounds which filled that wicked theater have devoured my sanity. I hear its muffled pulses and ungodly screams of the public ceaselessly. It haunts my mind; not knowing what exactly happened to my colleague. Could I have saved him? Probably not. Though it still answers nothing. Perhaps the lack of knowledge is the very reason why I'm still alive to write this. So, let's just leave it as it is... My name is **REDACTED**, and I hope death will be merciful.

Signed,

**REDACTED**

*Ana Fišer*

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## **DUTY CALLS**

1.

„Amelia, the new client on line 2. A middle-aged man, abstracted and nervous. I would say the problem comes from above. Can you take over? “a young assistant recited officially, then held a breath and was ready to receive an avalanche of words from the other side of the phone.

„What is it about? “was an unexpectedly short answer.

„Excuse me, I didn't ask, he said he needed you personally and that it was very urgent. “

„Of course, it is urgent to everyone when it's over their head. I'll take over only attractive cases, and this pretentious mediocrity doesn't sound like it at all. “

„I apologize to be so direct, but I think this kind of case would be welcome. As I said, I think this is a large-scale intrigue, for which this man would be ready to pay rather large sum of money “, replied the girl, trying to calm her own voice trembling.

„Kimberly Harper, do I pay you to estimate the assets of my company or to take over calls such as this? I would like line 2 to be free next minute. Try to act a good assistant just one time, which is actually your job description! “

She hung over, and the young assistant finally started to breath and tried to calm too fast palpitations of her heart which usually followed each similar call. The phone rang again and the deafening sound stopped the silence in Kimberly Harper's office.

„When you finally decide to bring coffee that I asked, make sure the aspirin is next to it, if it's not too much for your crowded schedule. “

Kim immediately reached her bag and surprisingly fast found her phone by memory. She sneaked out of her office and hurried up through a long hallway towards the balcony, which had a Central Park view.

„Zoe? Are you free? “

„Wait! Don't say anything. I'll can tell that you're calling because of your sadistically-minded boss who asked you, this time, to buy her cat a new mini-version of raincoat because yesterday's one is not in top ten most modern ones according to today's Cosmopolitan? “

„Zoe, I can't stand her anymore! She doesn't behave as a human being! I still tremble because I had to turn down the man, who turned out to be the secretary of former supreme court judge, just because madam is at the moment in a mood for coffee, which she didn't even ask for! At least she didn't say it as civilized people usually do. Anyway, please tell me what happened to you today. I want think about anything else just for a moment to take away my thoughts from that creature! “

„What can I say? You know that my family is in large debts. I listen to lawyers for days and don't understand them and I don't wish or can understand them as an average librarian. But I also think that you have other important things to worry about. You understand that your mild and emphatic boss would throw you to her hungry sphinx cat if she heard you just called her madam? “

„Please, don't mention that hairless creature! As to your family, you know that you can count on me in any moment, if you think I can help. Unfortunately, I have to go now, someone needs an aspirin for headache caused by hairspray overdose. We'll hear, if I manage till the end of the shift. “

## 2.

Amelia Ryland looked through the covers of Times and Daily Mail, slightly twisting her upper right corner of her red lips, which should be understood as satisfying smile.

*Blair Lewis, is that the new pseudonym of famous American scandal revealer?*

The veil has been torn off plastic surgeon Harris! One more success of affair queen, who still manages to hide her identity!

After her blessed satisfied face expression disappeared and her face got harsh look

again with indifferent red line above her chin, she picked up the phone and called her assistant.

„Kim, do you have anything to do with today’s titles or these pretentious scribblers finally learned how to bring proper news? “

„No, Amelia, I didn’t manage to talk to editors yesterday. I can’t say I have anything to do with those titles. “

„Oh, I would never think before that your neglect will be of any use, but, fortunately for you, I can say that you successfully *didn’t* do it. It was time that one can read something in the morning while drinking coffee! “

After her triumph speech, she blurted some more words through half-closed lips not lifting her head off the newspaper pictures:

„Close the door on your way out. “

After executing the latter order, Kim went to her office. As any time by exiting, her look stopped on the framed photography of a five-year old boy with big dark eyes. The boy smiled at Amelia’s desk. She found out by chance that this was her boss’s nephew.

„Another enigma“ she thought, imagining at the moment Amelia’s eternally dark face next to the boy standing in front of her. She shook her head quickly not to think about it.

The phone rang again.

„Miss B’s office. “

„Amelia, I need to cancel our evening agreement. I can’t get what you asked me. Don’t call me anymore. “

Hearing Amelia’s name, Kim stopped breathing as the identity of her boss was kept as a top secret. She appeared publicly under various pseudonyms which usually started with the letter B. Kim didn’t understand this need, but she didn’t think much about it. She thought about it as her boss’s trademark which every private investigator probably had. Namely, Amelia declared herself as such. As a matter of fact, if Kim put more attention to her boss’s peculiar demands, she probably wouldn’t be left too much time which she already had too little.

„K. Harper here, Miss B.'s assistant. She's presently unavailable, but I'll give her your message if you want it.“ She said it as if, by the least change of her voice mode, the unwrapping of tangled wool ball would be started. Especially because of the fact that the voice on the other side of the phone seemed familiar, in one very short moment, when the person lost his, up to that moment, very confident, deep voice. She blacked out for a moment. The calls of old clients always meant the same – the new lawsuit against Amelia. And this one, apparently, also knew her identity.

The call ended without an answer. Why would Amelia hide information regarding client arrangements and visiting? Kim always did that anyway! She was the one that answered dozens of calls a day from her own sources, the one who often went to secret parks, the highest floors of luxurious buildings, whose windows were usually carefully covered by heavy curtains, as well as to not too luxurious wooden cottages by night, all to get the newest information or acknowledges from clients or potential witnesses. They were, after Kim's procedure, examined by the boss having usual criticisms regarding time, but never regarding quality of done work.

„What was this supposed to mean? “ she thought and felt slight contractions in her stomach. She realised she was on the wrong line at wrong time.

### 3.

Three months went since the last big announcement of Amelia's venture. The list of refused calls grew longer, and Kim slowly, but certainly advanced to her breakdown. The last cases had always more indelicate mistakes and Amelia was aware of it.

Still, it seemed that nothing was more important to her than keeping her head in the skies as well as her heels on approximately the same height.

„Amelia, call for you from the ambassador White. Can you take it? “

„I said, close that case. I'm no longer interested. “

„But we are already engaged in it and I gathered several good stories as you said the case was intriguing and you would take it. I think we could come, in several weeks of work, to some revolutionary results. “

„Kimberly, do I have to remind you daily that the range of your work doesn't include deciding which case we will take as well as care for my company “, the boss answered to her with big effort, closing her eyes and gently massaging her temples, „stick to



the calls while you're in the office because that's what I'm paying you for. Besides, who are you to evaluate the *revolutionism* of my results? You are here by my good will and you know it. Before you, my public echo was the same, if not bigger than today's, and believe me, it'll be the same after you. Therefore, I repeat, stick to your part of the work. "

„Amelia, I just wanted to say that we refused many cases lately... "

„Close the door on your way out. "

Already at the door of her office, Kim heard a ring. This time, it was her only contact with outdoor world – her phone, so that she ran, hearing only the beginning of the melody *River Flows In You* and quickly put it out of her bag.

She guessed - Zoe. Finally!

„Hey Zoe, I'm still alive, don't worry. "

„Did you tell her? " was the question without greeting.

„Not yet, I tried, but it ended again with her monologue – *I don't pay you to advise me.* "

„And you let it finish like that again? "

„But you can't talk to her as you talk to a normal person. She doesn't listen to me at all! "

„Stop sounding like talking about some marriage problems! She doesn't listen to you..." Kim almost felt strong shaking of the head on the other side of the phone.

„The next thing for you to do is to go into her office, tell her all, although she already knows all of it, and show her that you are not primitive or naive as she thinks. And you'll leave *the door open on your way out*, did you understand! "

„You're insane! I adore you. Anyway, I would like to see you in this position, to have to tell to this kind of creature that your working conditions are not too satisfying for you ", mumbled Kim smiling at the phone.

„Then quit. "

The moments of stony silence followed.

„Zoe, you know very well that I can't quit. Maybe you don't understand it, because you never worked for this kind of company, but I'm within the system and can't go *out* of it just like that. Even if I had an argument with this freak, my name would still stand on documents. “

„With all the respect to you and her Kim, I would rather work, until the end of my life, in the library, than for some kind of celebrity *investigating* company which, above all, represents itself to be what it's not, and I'll say no more. I'll give you another advice, although I don't know any more why am I trying. You obviously don't intend to go out of that box of yours in which everything is solved by itself and everybody is satisfied in the end. Think about how many clerks, beside you, still work for Amelia Ryland. “

„Please, Zoe, you know that I don't think like that. I don't even know what I'm saying. I'm completely insane. “

„Maybe you'll get along better now. “

The call ended. Kim stood without moving not taking her sight out of the empty screen and thousands of thoughts raged in her head.

*What has just happened?! Is it possible that the horror situation from just before grew into even larger disaster that even overpasses this awful job?*

In one moment, it seemed to her she would faint, but a new phone call stopped her from collapsing.

She refused it. This time she was the one to refuse it.

„It's over “, went through her head while she bravely walked towards Amelia's office. The avalanche of thoughts in her head was distracted by a quick greeting of some unusually deep voice.

„Hello“, said a man of average height, pretty good looking. He successfully avoided bumping into Kim who was deeply into her thoughts. After she greeted him as well, she thought it was very unusual she didn't see him before here, as he wasn't from those she would forget right after seeing something else, like some pictures standing all over the walls of the hallway. The associations led her thoughts further to the interesting fact, which was a few years ago explained by Zoe, that men tend to change their voice when speaking to women. If they consider it important to sound like Syl-

vester Stallone, they should at least try to sound like him. Failed tries of transforming tenor into bas, like this one was, have completely opposite effect.

And then she came up with a thought which at the same time froze her blood and brought a smile to her face. This was the voice which seemed familiar to her the other day on the phone! Failed depth of voice imitation.

Overwhelmed by emotions about this revelation, she found herself in front of Amelia's office. She stood. Only misty glass door separated her from final freedom. And the door opened. Only before Kim knocked. Her boss stood on the door. Her eyes were flashing towards Kim, who was just a half meter from her while she was blurt-ing one word through her teeth as long as she could.

„TE-LE-PHONE. “

„Amelia, I would like to talk to you, it's important. “

„You *would like to* sit at your table and pass the call which just ended. What do you think is that important that you should miss calls which... “?

„Please! I need to talk to you seriously. “

She knew that something like this is life-threatening. But now it was necessary. Such perfect expression of inner fury on her boss's face couldn't be seen for all these years. But now, it was there. At that moment, the longest silence of all ended by Amelia's praiseworthy performance of deeply disappointed righteous.

„Come in. “

„First, I would like to inform you about White case news “, after short presentation of her revelations during last week and unsuccessful trying to calm her trembling palms, Kim continued „and at the same time I would like to inform you that this is my last case that I investigated for this company. With this case finishes my work here. My cancellation period starts today. “

Amelia looked her directly into eyes, so penetrative that Kim shuddered, and then she said:

„Close the door on your way out. “

## 4.

Kim has already been unemployed for a week. Although she has been trying to convince herself that the whole story with Amelia and her company is in the past, something in her just can't make peace with that fact. Is it possible that she misses it? No. Kim may be a sensitive soul who always places the needs, and even wants, of others far ahead of herself, but it still can't be possible that she can miss that kind of terror. It has to be something else.

Communication with Zoe has started to resemble what it once was. The melody of *River Flows In You* has once again become a part of her everyday life.

Up until now, since she got her degree, Kim has never been unemployed. She was lost in her own loneliness and the all-consuming unproductivity she found herself in, was wholly unnatural. She was used to finishing tasks, revolving around deadlines and being under somebody's control. Now, in order to forget about it all, she reached for her phone buried under a pile pillows, books, chargers with extension cords (from which one would assume that she planned on not getting out of bed for an extended amount of time) and a ridiculous amount of packages that used to host Doritos, pizza with extra cheese, Oreos, Ben & Jerry's and the rest of the Junk food family.

Her habit of opening every internet portal she knew, almost before even opening her eyes, couldn't disappear even now, when nothing relating to politics, marketing or anything and everything in between the two was of any importance to her. Doing as she did every day, she was greeted with piles of, mildly said, hysterical headlines.

*Who is senator Banks' classy secretary actually and is he visiting an investigation company privately or for business?*

*Senator Banks caught in an affair? What does his secretary want from a private investigator?*

*Miss B(anks)?! Coincidence or scandal?*

Her phone was only saved from its destined screen shattering by a thick quilt, after Kim unceremoniously dropped it from pure shock. Her head was swarmed by thoughts, information and data which she thought she successfully repressed up until a couple minutes ago. The roulette wheel in her head finally stopped spinning when her gaze landed on the cover photo of the article she opened. She found the

eyes of a man with average height, but significant good looks, ones that wouldn't be easily forgotten while looking at the numerous pictures standing all over the walls of the hallway of her now former company, staring up at her.

“Senator Banks’ secretary?” she thought, remembering the time she almost crashed into him in the hallway.

Yes! Now everything makes sense. Pretentious deep voice on the phone, the same one from the hallway and now the cover image. Alright, so maybe she didn't understand when he said that he failed to acquire information for Amelia. And the fact that he knew her name, even though it was never, ever, mentioned in public, also wasn't making much sense. And the sentence: “Don't contact me again.” *Again?!* Does that mean that he was in constant contact with her boss, and that Kim had no idea, even though her main job was forwarding calls?

Alright, so nothing makes sense. She had to admit to herself that she was, yet again, on the beginning of the story of Amelia, the office, the company, the public and everything else she, so enthusiastically, gave up. And just so she felt like she was at the office again, the phone rang. Her face took on her old, pale expression, she felt her hands beginning to shake and the rest of her body freeze up, when her screen flashed up with a –B. She accepted the call.

“Kimberly”, said Amelia with a significant shake in her voice. Kim recognized it as a, to put it mildly, a sign of hopeless despair, “I want you to come back. The truth is that nobody else lives up to your standards, therefore I want you to come back to work on Monday. The girl currently calling herself my assistant, can only dream of the qualifications she supposedly has.”

“Amelia, I appreciate your words, but my decision has been made after careful consideration and I don't intend on retracting it.”

“Alright then. I just want to know, what you plan on doing down the line? Find a job at a different investigation company? I hope you know that, that isn't how it works...”

*Was that just attempted blackmail? Is it possible that she can't issue a single request like a civilized human being?* But Kim had to admit to herself that she wasn't really thinking ahead. By all accounts, Amelia wasn't very likely to give her glowing recommendations. So yes, she was being blackmailed.

“Accordingly, you'll have your own assistant, which guarantees you more freedom.

I'm ready for minor concessions and regarding your salary...”, she said theatrically and after a successfully staged out typing on her calculator, she continued, “... I'm expecting you on Monday in my office.”

“Alright, I accept.” Kim uttered, felling shame, bitterness and a strange sense of satisfaction wash over her at the same time, “...under the condition that...”, but the call was already disconnected, probably a second after she heard the phrase *I accept*.

## 5.

In twenty days, in the period from her last visit here, Kim felt that the atmosphere in the office, as well as in the company in general, changed greatly. Something was in the process and just needed to come out and it seemed it would overflow the public and portals. In the office next to hers was a young, evidently frightened girl. It was easy to conclude that this was her new assistant.

„Hi, I'm Kim“, she said eagerly and enthusiastically as much as she could, in order to bring the poor girl back into life.

„Nancy“ said the girl and gave her nicely manicured hand, „Miss B. is expecting you in her office after talking to man who is presently in there. “

„Nancy, please don't talk to me in that manner, I'm barely older than you. Tell me, who is the person at Amelia's office? “

Hearing her name, the girl shook a little.

„It's confidential, but I suppose I can tell you. Eric Morgan, the general secretary of senator Banks. “

After more than half an hour waiting, misty glass office door finally opened. The secretary went out of Amelia's office triumphally, nodding his head when passing by Kim. She went nonchalantly towards her boss's office feeling as if she won former herself, who would normally, in this case, feared to death. The door closed.

„Kim“, started Amelia unusually quietly, „it's all collapsing, to be honest. I suppose you know the man who just left the room.“

„Eric Walker, the general secretary of senator Banks. You probably saw the articles... Amelia, what's this all got to do with us? I need to know.“

„What do you think, why did I ask you to come back? Here it is, I've got evidence of Banks' affair regarding arms trade. He's got connections with Arabian emir“ Amelia stopped suddenly, still went on after clearing her throat, „Malik Abbas.“

Kim frowned slightly after Amelia's pause and said.

„Ok, does Walker know about it? “

„Does he? Yes, and even more. He asks us to destroy evidence as everything is revealing bit by bit and the senator's position is in danger. “

„We will not do such thing, I suppose. The public needs to know this. “

„Wrong, this is exactly what you're going to do next.“ said Amelia. Her voice trembled again. Kim trembled as well.

„But we can't allow arms trader to sit in the senate. They are just discussing this statute amendment. “

„Kim, you don't understand! I *have* to do this.“ Amelia easily put off Pink Gold Prada glasses, easily folded them and put them on the desk. Then breathed in deeply and turned framed photography which stood on her desk next to Kim.

„This is Ryan. From the Arabian name *Rayan*, meaning brave. Just what his mother isn't... “

„What are you talking about Amelia? His mother is ...“ Kim stopped and looked her boss. She looked her straight in the eyes, having completely opposite feelings than ever before and then, she easily nodded her head, almost completely pale. They sat for a while in silence as two friends. Then Amelia started:

„Now you understand why we must destroy the evidence. “

„Amelia, I don't know what to say, I, ... I had no idea... “

„Of course, you didn't know, nobody did. What do you think, why did I need all those idiotic pseudonyms? I don't play private detectives from movies. “

„May I ask, I suppose, Ryan's father is ... Abbas? “

„Walker supposed too, and today, he knows. I don't know who gives him information, but I do know that they can't go in public under any circumstances. “

„I see. He blackmailed you that he would announce the story in case the evidence wasn't destroyed. Did he give some deadline? “

„Tomorrow at midnight, all media that anyone cares about, will be satisfied to have the story about *affair of affair queen* and those who are ready to transfer certain amount on Walker's account, will also have my and Ryan's name, family name and picture on the cover. “ Amelia took out a cigarette box from a Hermes bag and lighted a cigarette, in spite of a pretty big sign on the front door of the company, as well as bright white curtains. Kim slightly coughed, but after her boss looked her harshly, she recollected and continued:

„May I ask you one more detail that's not clear to me? “

„Ask, we are talking openly. “ replied Amelia slightly twisting her upper right corner of her red lips.

„What did Walker need to get for you, but didn't succeed? “

„I beg your pardon. For me? “

„Yes, that's what he said in the phone call before, you know, my resignation. “

„I don't know about any phone call by Eric Walker. “ Kim realised that she never really told Amelia about that phone call, about deep voice and everything. She shuddered. It would have been differently if she reacted in time. She should have realised it.

„I apologize. I don't know what else to say, I simply forgot. I thought only about my last days here and therefore I overlooked the fact that I didn't tell you. “ Another sharp Amelia's look followed and then also a deep breath.

„What did he say then? “ she said with effort closing her eyes again and tenderly massaging her temples.

„He said: 'Amelia, I need to cancel our evening agreement. I can't get what you asked me. Don't call me anymore,' I was shocked that he knew your name, but now I understand. I only don't understand what the call was about. “ Amelia started to laugh suddenly, in a way that was really hard to understand. The closest description would be something between bitterness, resignation, and honest human laugh and then she said:



„Oh Kim! This was not a call for me, it was for you. He knows very well that you answer clients' calls and that it is not very easy to get the phone number of my office. He wanted to upset you by giving you idea that there's someone out there who knows my name, but in the first place, to get you to suspect my honesty towards you. He wanted you to think that I hide information about clients from you, in which he succeeded, as you quitted your job. “

Kim stood in horror. Where does this lead to? First blackmailing, a secret child, then senator who deals with some Arabian arms trader, who is, in the end, the father of Amelia's child, whose picture is in her office and above all, some mental games that her, Kim Harper, the average girl from Missouri, directly involves into the story.

„Amelia, leave Walker and senator to me, and you deal other clients“ she said resentfully and proudly went out of office. Ok, not that proudly not to close the door on her way out.

## 6.

A luxurious Washington restaurant Sospeso was situated in one of the most popular blocks of H Street Corridor. An elegant synergy of history and modernism, yet rustically designed, made the hotel one of the most luxurious restaurants in this part of the town. Kim loved it always, especially because of its cosy Mediterranean and non-conservative setting, which made it completely opposite to stiff atmosphere of her office. But, instead, Kim wasn't relaxed. She sat at the table by the window having turbulent city view, dressed in unbranded, very elegant white slim fitted coat having high collar. It was perfectly matching high heeled black boots reaching her knees and tenderly white gloves. This outfit emphasized her slim figure and long, thin legs. A man of average height, pretty good looking appeared exactly at 7 p.m. on the entrance door. He was wearing a black Burberry coat, perfectly fitted and elegant Gucci half boots. His attitude showed his confidence and self-importance. He directly approached Kim's table and bowed slightly, getting nearer to her, although she was aware that this was more than deceptive. She only waited to see what kind of voice he will perform this time.

„Finally, we meet, Kim Harper. “

Although fear and excitement boiled inside of her body, which were also mixed with suspense of this plan, she managed to overcome her trembling voice as well as nervous drumming of her fingers on the table and nonchalantly said:

„Good evening Mr. Walker, feel free to sit. “

After that, the performance of indifference, icy looks and carefully dozed smiles continued.

„What can I do for you? “ he asked having elegant, seductive voice. Without saying anything, Kim gave him a photo turned upside down. Secretary's face froze with startled expression.

Less than ten minutes from entering, Eric Walker left the restaurant quickly and left his company to finish her long espresso. Her face looked satisfied.

7.

Sitting back in white leather armchair in Amelia's office, having glass of Evian water in her hand, Kim was retelling her boss the details of the meeting, showing her the photos of senator Banks in not too favourable situation on wild party in New York night club, surrounded by many, barely adult girls, among which, his fifty-year old wife would feel even older. Next to plenty of glasses and empty bottles, there was a phone having on its back side the traces of white powder. At the same time, Amelia told her the whole story about her five-year old son Ryan and his father Malik Abbas. From the beginning to the end, as if she was her best friend, she was telling her how she met him one summer on a business trip to United Arab Emirates. They were both on a business lunch with the ambassador of the United States, she, as a representative of an American technologic company, and he, as emir. He seemed to her, at that time, very down-to-earth and normal, especially for such a young man in that high position. Later, he turned out to be exactly the opposite. She didn't know, of course, about his involvement in arms trade, which just began. Approximately a year after, Ryan was born in the United States. Malik Abbas already had a bad reputation and Amelia was more than terrified about it. Her career in investigating company was only planned, and she knew very well that this will end on covers, which will definitely have a negative impact on her career, if someone finds out that the father of her child is an arms dealer. But the situation developed positively in favour of Amelia's company, as Abbas didn't care too much, either for her, or for the boy. Until one day, when she already was a boss of her own company and had the assistant Kimberly Harper and started to investigate the case of senator Banks. From her, actually Kim's sources, she got the information that the senator was involved in arms trade based exactly on stores from United Arab Emirates. The arms stores were owned by, who else, but Malik Abbas. And how life usually tends to spice up

the things just when we don't need any spice, the main secretary Eric Walker came, defending his employer, senator Banks. From still unknown sources, he found out the connection between Amelia and Abbas. And the blackmail chain started. The first one was started by Walker when he asked for destroying the evidence of senator's connection with Arabs, threatening to reveal Amelia's secret. In those days, she got a phone call from the area code +971 which was only to be connected to one person - Malik. Of course, he didn't call personally, but through his secretary, or whatever the name is of such a position in his country. This one said emir wanted his son and had the right to be with him. The whole Amelia's life flashed in front of her. Not only that her carrier was ruined, but her son was also in danger, being target of Arab arms dealers, with his father on the head. Accidentally, his father remembered that he exists and wished to have him by his side just at that time, giving him the opportunity to be some successor of emir or whatever. Amelia believes it was not a coincidence that this happened just now when Abbas's main buyer from the United States was investigated by her company. And there's a blackmail number two. In case Amelia doesn't stop her investigation, Abbas will persist to take his son to Emirates.

Amelia turned to her assistant, took her hand, and honestly said:

„Kim, I want you to know that I never had a problem with you personally, I merely saw I had to have a firm attitude and couldn't believe anyone. I was afraid for Ryan more than ever in my life. I can see now that I was wrong about you and I honestly admit that, without you, none of this could have been solved. “

„I understand Amelia. As for Walker, I have to say I wouldn't have succeeded, if I didn't follow their steps very carefully and used them exactly against them. So, the third blackmail in a row was, actually, mine. “

*Mentor: Dora Božanić Malić*  
Prva riječka hrvatska gimnazija

*Milica Ivaniš*

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## **PURPLE AZALEA**

Resentment, discomfort, shame

Feelings I have become accustomed to when looking at myself in the mirror.

I tried lifting my spirit by searching for my virtues if there were any, to be honest.

I have to admit my blond curly hair looked better than most days.

Also, I noticed my eyes didn't seem as sleepy as usual. My skin, well, it was as bad as it could get.

But then I saw them.

Paunch stomach, cottage cheese thighs, ham arms

I couldn't seem to fail to see these flaws every time.

Exercise more.

Eat less.

Count your calories.

Skip meals.

But I'm emotionally and physically drained.

'Doesn't matter, ' my mind says, 'it's not enough. Try harder. '

Even when I'm alone, this demon can't seem to get out of my head.

Living with it has been obnoxious in this past year.

Everything I thought or did being rectified by it.

I never saw it. On no account have I ever repelled. Just like a parasite, it was feeding off my misery, and I was letting it.

Putting these thoughts aside, I realized I hadn't eaten since lunch yesterday. Strangely enough, I didn't feel hungry. I've become accustomed to this feeling, and it seems I have become more and more addicted to it.

It was exhausting. Nevertheless, I needed to keep going.

My mind was becoming hazy with all these thoughts. I slowly became overwhelmed, so I decided to go to one person I know would understand me.

My older sister Azalea. She is my rock. The only one I could profess to without being ridiculed. She knows my pain since she is experiencing it on her skin.

I will never forget the day she found out about my eating disorder.

Memories started kicking in, and I felt as if I was reliving them all over again.

Azalea caught me. She saw right through me. The demon that was eating her up appeared in me. She knew the feeling, it wasn't unfamiliar to her, but she was sad her sister had to go through it herself.

That day, I made myself throw up.

I know it's the last thing I should have done, but at that moment, I felt as if it was my only escape.

I'm appalling and disgusting, and I'm well aware of that.

Unfortunately, when Azalea found me, I had already done it, and there was no turning back. I promised her I would never do it again, that I was only feeling sick, so I had to puke.

Deep down, I knew I lied to her and that it wouldn't be the last revolting thing I'd do to myself.

For some sickening reason, while I was doing it, I felt that I was in control of my actions for the first time in my life. Starving myself, throwing up the food gave me a sense of control.

My entire life, I was living for someone else.

Maintaining perfect grades, behaving suitably, so I would be socially accepted. I was getting tired of it, so I found a way to control at least some fraction of my life.

After seeing me that night, Azalea escorted me from the bathroom to her room. We talked about each other's problems, and it helped me a lot to talk about my feelings.

'Lia, why haven't you said anything to me? You know I'm always there for you.' she cried out.

'Az, I thought you would look at me differently. Everyone judges, so I thought you would too. You don't know how it is. I'm not able to look at myself in the mirror. It's strenuous for me not to think about food, my weight every second of every day. It's torture!'

'I know you might feel as if you're alone in it Lia, but you're not.'

'Ugh, I should've said something earlier, but I think now is a perfect time.' she seemed like she struggled to tell me something.

'Do you remember when Matteo left me?' she said while tears started forming in her eyes.

'Yeah?'

'Well, after the breakup, I felt paltry. Matteo made me feel good about myself. Eventually, when he broke up with me, I felt like that piece of me faded away. I started paying more attention to my appearance, and I started starving myself. The worst thing is that it didn't matter for how long I went without food because, in the end, I was never content with the way I looked, and I still feel that way today. Look, Lia, I did some things I never want to talk about, but I want you to know that I get your pain, and it hurts me to see that my baby sister is going through the same as I am.'

'Az, I had no idea. You never told anyone, and frankly, I haven't noticed anything.'

'Lia, I don't expect you to magically solve our problems now. I just want us to talk more to each other. Talking it out will probably benefit us more than closing in our own four walls. Don't you think?'

'Yeah, you're right. I love you Az', I tell her as I hug her.

‘Love you too, L.’

I wish I knew at that moment just how wrong I was to believe her.

Since that day, we have never spoken about our problems again.

My sister started drifting away.

I couldn’t help but notice that Azalea was getting skinnier and skinnier. Of course, our parents hadn’t spotted anything, nor were they suspicious of her actions or looks.

She was getting grumpier, and her hair started falling out a lot. It was as if my sister disappeared. My sweet and caring Azalea was replaced by a pale ghost, who never even tried looking my way, let alone talk to me.

Every time I thought about helping her, I chickened out. In my mind, it didn’t make sense to help her conquer her demons if I wasn’t even able to vanquish mine.

On the other hand, mentally, I was not making any progress, and Azalea not talking to me, just added oil to the fire.

Slowly but surely, my grades started dropping. I couldn’t focus, and my concentration was so bad, to the point I had no idea at the end of the day what I did in school.

The only thing I could focus on was how hungry I was.

I fulfilled my days by planning on what, when, and how much to eat the next day. That way, I would engross myself with something else and not think about my sister.

As for Azalea, she always seemed to be locked in her room with whatever thoughts she had and didn’t want to share with me. I just brushed it off as typical teenage behavior. I mean, I’m a teenager myself, and I can understand how it is when you want to be left alone, but there was something more to her behavior.

She distanced herself, and that was unusual for Azalea. She analyzed her problems, never ran away from them.

One day, I went into her room to return a pen I borrowed from her when I came across her diary. As far as I knew, Azalea stopped writing her diary in sixth grade.

I looked at the text, only to see that the date on top of the page was from the day after she confessed to me that she was struggling with body image. I couldn’t help but read what she wrote.

‘ I ran into him again. Honestly, after he left me, a part of me hoped I would see him. I assumed that he would want us to get back together after he saw how better I looked. I lost a lot of weight because I thought that way I would attract him again. It’s not like I didn’t see all the model type girlfriends he had after me. It hurt me but also pushed me to be better, to look better. ‘

I couldn’t believe my eyes, nonetheless, I continued reading.

‘He didn’t even spare me a glance. Too engaged in his new girl toy to even say hi to me. It hurt me. I thought I was more to him, but it seems as if it was all in my head. I can’t help but feel trivial. He meant a lot to me, and his praise for the way I look did wonders for me. If now I’m not good enough, I’ll make myself better.’

To say that I was shocked would be an understatement. To know that she was doing all of this because of him was a complete absurdity.

If she wants to behave childishly, then so be it. I thought I could help her, but I decided against it. I have enough of my problems, to deal with her childish ones.

Coming back from memory lane, I exited my room in search of my sister. I went into her room since she was there almost 24/7, but this time she wasn’t. I looked around other rooms in the house, but apparently, she wasn’t even in the apartment. I called her, but it just turned to voicemail. After failed attempts to summon her, I texted her if we could meet somewhere to talk. I needed my big sister now more than ever, even if we weren’t on the best terms.

After two hours, there was still no sign of Azalea.

In the end, I decided to go for a walk. Maybe that would ease my mind a bit.

I went towards Millennium park. It was Azalea and my favorite place for walking and chilling outside of school. Park was big enough you could walk around for a good hour.

Subconsciously, I hoped that maybe this is where Azalea went since she was coming here often. She liked running here and clearing her thoughts every once in a while.

As I was walking around a park, I spotted something near the big old oak tree. After a couple of seconds, I realized it was a woman lying on the ground.



I thought that the person had passed out, so I started running towards it. It was a girl, and as I rolled her around since she fell face to the ground, I recognized the girl.

It was no other than my sister Azalea, passed out on the soil for God knows how long. I started screaming, hyperventilating. I was so scared, but I figured I had to be calm and collected for her. I dialed 911.

Unfortunately, when the paramedics came it was already too late.

She was dead.

*Seven days later*

Here I am, standing at the place where I found my sister just a week ago.

The doctors told me she died of malnutrition. The information hit me like a hard rock.

I could've been there for her, but I was so immersed in myself that I didn't want to help her. What a wonderful sister I was...

I lower my hand in which I'm holding a purple azalea, just as rare and beautiful as my sister was, and put it on the ground. It was her favorite.

After Azalea's death, I decided to face my insecurities and accept them. I want to be better, not just for myself but for her too.

'For you, my dear Azalea, I'm ready to make a change.'

By : bel13

*Mentor: Dora Božanić Malić*  
Prva riječka hrvatska gimnazija

*Ana Ivković*

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# THE SECRETS OF THE MOON

## PART ONE

Jennifer was nervous. She was late, and she hated being late, more than anything. They were running: Jennifer faster and her friend, Charles, slower. They nearly reached their destination. ‘Charlie, will you please hurry up a bit? This thing will not just wait for us, you know!’ shouted Jennifer. ‘I do not recall signing up for this when I came to visit you here!’ Charles replied, which provoked Jennifer even more: ‘Oh, quit your whining and just hurry up! You don’t see this every day in England.’ Charles rolled his eyes and said: ‘No, and I like it that way. I came here to take a break from work for two weeks, not do this!’

Then, they arrived. There was a small crowd and a single man in front of them, yelling offers. People were loud and competitive, desperate to get what each of them wants; pushing each other and squeezing, trying to be noticed by the salesman. All of the above means only one thing: they came in late.

The man in the front was yelling: ‘Five hundred, do I hear five hundred? Yes, my ears serve me; is there a counteroffer? Oh, there is! One thousand dollars ladies and gentlemen! Is this warehouse going to our gentleman over there?’ The man kept on going, talking so fast it could have been called rapping. Jennifer did not actually want to do any of this: she lost a bet to her friend and the deal was to do something that she would never do on her own. Buying a warehouse on an auction was one of those things. Seeing the auction, Jennifer decided that she did not enjoy the idea of spending any more time than necessary in this place, so she did what had to be done.

‘Six thousand dollars!’ she yelled, loud enough for the whole world to hear her. The crowd and the man fell silent when they heard this. Stood dead in their tracks. Even

the auctioneer didn't expect anyone to go this high, though he did not complain – the bigger the money, the better. After five seconds of absolute silence, he announced: 'Three, two, one... And the warehouse goes to our newcomer over there, the red-headed lady!' Snapping out of shock, everyone sighed in frustration. But, oh, there were more warehouses to buy.

Jennifer and Charles approached the salesman to sign a document on his tablet and took the keys. The number inscribed on the keys was 129. Great, Jen thought, now we have to walk, too...

As they were making their way, Charles couldn't help himself but comment: 'Jen, remember the times when you had to sign an actual paper? Like, take a pen and sign your name on it? It feels like it was so long ago... I miss the good old days.' 'What did you expect? That people will still be signing physical documents in things like these in 2025? I mean, we maybe even would, but that corona pandemic in 2020 just pushed things in this direction sooner than expected.' Charles shrugged and said: 'I know... Just, all this seems so advanced, which reminds me of how fast the time is passing and how things used to be.' 'Well,' Jennifer started, 'there's nothing we can really do about it now, can we? It's not really up to us.' Charles agreed with a small, sad nod.

After about ten minutes of walking, they came to the warehouse number 129. All they had to do now is open it and see if there's at least something worthy inside it. Jennifer unlocked it and slid the doors upward, opening them.

Inside the warehouse were many objects, mostly some dusty, old furniture, such as an old desk made from oakwood, or a big, dark cabinet with glass in the middle. They were made from the same material and colour and it included: a desk, a cabinet, two big closets, two smaller ones (about a metre and a half tall) with big and small drawers and an old TV. They stood in the centre and on the right side of the room. It looked as if someone's living room was transferred there. There were also some books standing on the desk. Old and yellow, with a certain scent that comes from disuse for many years, among which were history books and great works of fiction. They had hard covers, inscribed with gold, capital letters.

There were some wooden boards on the left, materials that never found their purpose and were just standing there, waiting to at least be used as a replacement. Next to them were a few big, black plastic bags filled with some letters, mostly documentation and such.

Although the room had a strong, dusty smell, the two friends entered it. They were checking out the furniture, seeing if they were still good. 'Hey,' Charles said, 'you think you can get some money by selling all this? Since they are old and preserved, collectors or people who fancy these kind of things may offer a handsome price.' Jennifer nodded in agreement and said a bit absently as she was checking out the letters: 'Yes, I think it could be worth something. Perhaps it will repay me the load of money I just spent.' Charles laughed at that and replied: 'It is actually a wonder that someone who has a PhD in physics would do something so irrational. Consider me impressed.' Jennifer smiled. 'Well, some risks are worth taking, I guess...' At that moment, a small, leather diary caught her attention. It was among the letters, barely visible. She trailed off and dug it out. It was brown and plain, with no writing on it, just leather and pages made of paper inside it. Its smooth skin was pleasant to the touch, luring you to hold it. Charles noticed the sudden silence and turned to Jennifer. He looked at her with curiosity in his eyes. 'Jen, what is it? Oh, god. Is that a real diary? Made of paper?! These things are so rare these days! Open it, open it!' Although Jennifer was a bit absent, lost in her thoughts and admiration, she did as he said. On the first page, it said '*to my unknown saviour*'. Jennifer wasn't sure what it meant, but thought maybe to find out later. She turned the page carefully not to damage the paper and read the words on the right out loud: 'A Space diary by Neil A. Armstrong' Charles inhaled excitedly and exclaimed: 'BLOODY HELL!' he stopped for a second, his eyes wide, then continued, 'It's his personal diary from a mission! What if it's from a Moon mission? That would prove that the Moon landing was real! How did it get here?! Let's read, please!' 'Alright, let's see what he has to say to us.' Jennifer replied to that with a smile on her face and eyes wide.

## PART TWO

You, reader, are a randomly elected person who has access to my Space diary from the Apollo 11 mission. I will share all my important thoughts, feelings and experiences that occurred at the time of the mission. From now on, this "file" is Your responsibility, and I would like it to be treated with caution. As for why I am passing it so many decades after the event, You shall get your answers later, after everything is properly explained.

*'Am I the only one who thinks that there will be a plot twist and it was actually not real?' asked Charles. 'Yes, Charlie, you are. Now, I would really like us to keep reading.'*

*That answer made Charles murmur something almost inaudible.*

Now, to many people, this mission is fake. Recorded in some studio by the US Government, invented just to beat everyone else to the Moon. To others, it was real; an adventure and an act of heroism and patriotism. Everyone may think whatever they want about the landing, but to me, it was very real.

Details of our preparations are irrelevant, so I will skip them.

We took off in our rocket on July 16 at exactly 13:32 (by Coordinated Universal Time) from the Kennedy Space Center. We did all the procedure necessary to keep ascending; it went smooth as the surface of a frozen lake. I will admit that the feeling I had while we were rising was something like going too fast on a swing, only harder.

As we were exiting the Earth's atmosphere, beside thinking about all I was doing, I also thought... I thought that I was exiting EARTH. My home. A place where people live, where humanity was born. We had a great desire to leave it; not so we can find a better place to live or just see our fellow neighbours, but to explore something that is outside our limits. Something we see every night and think we know so well, but never really touched until the landing. And I thought it was magnificent.

*'Wow. I never saw Neil the great Armstrong as a poet. This is a revelation.' Jennifer stopped to ponder for a second about that comment. 'Actually, I think I have to agree with you on that part, Charlie. I more saw him as someone like...' 'Like you.' Charles added, smirking. Jennifer nodded in agreement and continued.*

The next part is also irrelevant to the plot. Nothing you do not already know. Just going through empty, black space, chatting, detaching some parts of the rocket, correcting things where the correction was needed and doing the procedures. There were around four more days until we actually land, so there's nothing worth sharing. Rather, I will skip the story to a point when we were ten minutes away from the landing.

It was highly stressful. There were only Buzz Aldrin and I in the spacecraft that was supposed to land- Michael Collins stayed on Columbia. I was afraid for our lives beyond any description, because the shuttle was going at a higher speed than it should've. I switched things to semi-automatic so it can land somewhere appropriate, and took the reins. It was me who piloted the Eagle, and I felt as if I had a whole planet on my shoulders. It was mostly up to me to land safely, succeed and secure the

safety of Buzz and myself. I felt almost dizzy from the amount of pressure I had on me. I could not disappoint all those people who counted on me. On us. I had to do it.

*'No. I don't know how he did it.' said Jennifer. 'What?' asked Charles, in confusion. 'I mean, I don't know how he handled it. I was cracking my head over a small exam in elementary school. Passed out a few times in college. If I were in his shoes back then, I think I'd just burn out. Literally.'* Charles laughed at his friend's statement.

The following are the information available on media, but they will lead you to the event known only to me, so I'll write them down. As you've expected, I landed the Eagle successfully at 20:17:40 (UTC), miles away from a targeted spot because of the high velocity I mentioned earlier. After confirming that the engines were off and that we did all from the checklist, I gleefully said: 'Houston, Tranquillity Base here. The Eagle has landed.' In that moment, I believe everyone breathed a sigh of relief, including myself. We were in a spacecraft on the MOON. We did something for the first time in all of human history. Something that'll fascinate the next generations and stories will be written about. A marvellous achievement that only the rarest of people had the opportunity to make.

We didn't exit the spacecraft immediately. There were preparations that took hours before we could go out. It took around half an hour longer than expected because the conditions were not ideal as they were on Earth. Nevertheless, we made it.

At 02:39:33, the hatch was opened. Some minutes later, at 02:51, I began descending to the surface of the Moon. At some point I had to set up a camera so we could broadcast the video worldwide on TV. The footage looked as if it had pixels the size of an elephant, but most of the things were still visible. The cameras were not yet good back then, but they fulfilled their purpose. Then, at 02:56, I had finally set my foot on the Moon and said my most famous quote: 'That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind.' It didn't take a long time for me to come up with that sentence, truth be told. It came almost... Natural to me. Seemed like something short, yet powerful.

Around twenty minutes later, Aldrin joined me on the surface. We didn't have troubles walking, really, but it was quite odd to walk so slow and in a place with so little gravity. Frankly, I felt drugged: I was walking slowly and on the Moon...

The thing which is troubling most of the Moon landing sceptics is the flag. I set up the USA flag on the surface, feeling rather proud. It felt like I just marked the Moon

with something that said ‘This is ours now. More than ever before.’ The troubling part is that it looked like there was wind moving it, which is absolute trash. We made it look that way, just to make it look more powerful. No flag’s good without the wind. The secret behind it is that we put small objects, unknown to the public, on its “back” side, that made it flutter. Even I do not know fully what those things are, this was all they were willing to share with me. But many people use that flag to say that all this was fake, and it somewhat angers me.

*‘Now that is... a plot twist. Who would have thought anything near this existed?’ Charlie commented, to which Jennifer replied: ‘I do not know. But that is one mystery less, I suppose. I wonder what else he has in store for us...’*

Now, every person who was involved in this mission will say that they know everything. Every step, exact timing and every event. For the most part, they are right.

However, there is one thing nobody knows. Not the support team, not the Government, not even Buzz or my own family. Something that only I know, and soon, You will too, reader. What I have to say now is something you will treat as I say, later. And keep in mind that this will change Your life, one way or another. Lucky are all the people who do not know this. Ignorance is bliss, reader.

So, everybody knows I went on a lunar walk. I walked 59 meters away from the Eagle to collect some samples. Or so they said. The 59 meters was actually the point where they lost me.

*‘Now what in the name of Christ?!’ shouted Jennifer, but before saying anything else, she just decided to keep reading. The curiosity got the better of her.*

Something that the government removed from ALL the pictures was a big hill. They photoshopped it out perfectly. The reason for that is me. As I said, they lost me after 59 meters; it was my last known location. At that point, something actually hit me. Something going at a high speed, probably some solid, small object, though that is only what I think. Even now I don’t know what it was, and I think I never will. It hit my helmet and sent me flying behind the big hill. I landed in the darkness, just a few strings of sunlight peeking in some places. My helmet was cracked, mostly the transparent part. It was, what I assumed, beyond repair. My oxygen started going out, very slowly. If it was water, it would’ve been dripping. Since I fell on my back, my suit got crushed in some places, every single damage being nearly fatal. As I was laying down, I froze. My mind stopped thinking for a while, only life flashing before

my eyes, seeing all I missed, all I could've done differently... Every mistake creeping into my awareness, making me regret my actions. There were also nice memories of me having the time of my life. Everything came flooding in, only because I subconsciously knew that I was as good as gone. A living deadman, nothing more. And if things were different, I would've died. Run out of oxygen, choke on nothingness, on vacuum. Buzz wouldn't have the time to recover me. I calculated I had maybe forty-five minutes left to live, which was a depressing thought.

I was frozen until I heard something, almost in my head. I thought of it as a hallucination, but still decided to look around, because if I was to be alone there, why not at least let my imagination be my company? Somewhere on my right, in deep darkness, I saw a figure. Slim, tall. Looked as if it had limbs, but not quite... Human. I wasn't sure what I was seeing, but the figure started approaching me slowly, as if its steps were the size of ant's. The sight made my mind go from a freezing state to a sudden race. My heart was beating hard inside my chest, so much I almost heard it. My breaths shallow, almost empty, so that my lungs would not expand too much and the enemy detect movement. I couldn't blink, which made my eyeballs go dry, although I couldn't feel any pain from panic and adrenaline. I fainted in fear for about thirty seconds. When I woke up, I was even more afraid because the figure was suddenly closer to me. I tried to say something to my team, to Buzz, anyone, but my communications were broken, and so my cries for help were in vain. Just sounds for me to hear.

It took maybe two minutes for the figure to come half a metre away from me. I looked up at it and realised that what I was seeing was not my imagination. It was an extraterrestrial being. An alien. A form of life that lives outside of the parts we know. Its skin, or whatever you'd call it, was of a darker color. Not really dark, but also not light. It looked like a shade of orange. It had three limbs on the bottom of its body, slim. They looked like they were being more and more separated by the evolution, allowing the organism to either somehow move (similar to humans, I'd say) or slither. Also two limbs on the upper part of the body, a bit wider, perhaps fatter. The skin on the tips was something like plasma, or an amoeba. Like it could be bent to the will of the organism. It had something you could call a head, but with no neck connecting it to the "torso". There was an opening about in the middle, probably for some form of communication with the others. It definitely had three eyes, one in the middle, the other two on each of the two sides of the head. Its middle eye was looking directly at me and I fainted again.



When I woke up, I was standing on my feet in a still severely damaged suit. The alien was a meter away from me and looked as if it were inspecting everything on me. I felt as if my soul was separated from my body; probably from much panic and fear. I knew it could not hear me since there is no atmosphere to carry the sound, but I still said: 'What... What are you? What are you doing to me? Who are you?' I did not know how it heard me, but it replied by moving its 'mouth', saying: 'I already see questions on you, but I have time for only a few. Who and what is not important. How I hear you is by special waves, too advanced for you to understand. How I understand you is because the device on my back translates all our known languages into ours, and transfers ours into yours. Why I saved you is for you to carry a message.' I was confused beyond any scale. 'What message?' The alien replied with: 'Your kind may someday have a part in the events to come. Not now, not soon, but may have. Depends on you alone. What we know of your kind is that you can be easily manipulated, swayed by an appealing bounty. The ones who seek destruction may use it once. We do not want that to happen and I am here to give you this.' With its upper limb, it handed me a small, black piece of a strange material, one I have never seen before. 'It holds the secrets of my kind: where we live, what we are, what our intentions are. Once your kind is intelligent enough to decode it and use it, you may become our allies. Or enemies. Depends on you, human.' I was still shocked, but managed to ask: 'You are not coming to Earth? For us? How do you even communicate?' The alien was about to say what will be the last thing I would hear or see from it: 'No. You are not yet ready, or advanced enough. No real use of any alliance with you. We tried many times, and you interpreted us as your gods. We are not your friends nor enemies, but we will see once which of the two you will be. How we communicate is also by waves, and that is how you can hear me. It is too advanced for your still small minds. Now, human, I must go. You deliver the message however you want, but keep in mind that this piece may push your development in the right direction.' It stopped for a second and then said: 'Farewell, commander.'

As it suddenly went away at a high velocity, something odd flowed over me and repaired my damaged suit. I do not know how, but it's probably too much for my brain to comprehend. It gave me enough extra time to come back to Buzz.

Although I knew my time was short after the encounter, I was standing for five more minutes, just thinking. Then I came back to the Eagle and said what needed to be said. That I got lost and my communications were off for a while. Though worried, Buzz was happy that I made it back alive. The Government managed to cover up my

disappearance perfectly. The rest about how we came back is non-essential too.

For many years to come, the events kept me up all night, made me sweat, have nightmares, paranoid scenes and more awful things. Eventually, they stopped. I thought for a long time about what is the right thing to do, but in the instant when I landed on Earth, I knew one thing: I would not have anything to do with it. I will deliver the message and stop. No more Space, no more responsibilities, no more important contributions to human kind. I decided to live my life how I want it. After all I've seen, I decided I was done. Even now, when I'm in my final weeks, I know it was the right thing to do. I sealed it all in this, left it for the next generation, the smarter one, to decide what's the best.

So, reader, on the next page there is the object that the alien gave me. I put it in this diary, and I will soon put it somewhere where it will be found years later. If you want to turn this in, do it anonymously. Doesn't matter in which way. If you decide against it, at least be sure that your choice has valid points.

The fate of everyone depends on you now, reader. You were the one to find this, You are the one to make the call. Your decision. The world is in your hands, and I hope the good ones too.

Commander Neil Alden Armstrong is signing out.

### PART THREE

Jennifer needed a minute to soak up all the information she just got. She thought about Neil, his side of the story, what really happened. She thought of what the alien said. She had a thousand questions, but the biggest one was: What to do?

She turned the page and found the strange piece. It was smaller than her palm, black and solid. Pleasant to the touch. Warm. Soft. Charles leaned in to look at it too. They were silent for full five minutes before Jennifer spoke: 'Charlie... What... What happened?' Charles was as confused as she was, and replied: 'I don't know... This is something that no one would even... I cannot imagine the burden he had on his shoulders...' He trailed off for a minute and got himself a bit out of the shock, enough to ask Jennifer something. 'Jen, do you think we should publish this? I am a journalist, I can do it. I can make you anonymous, do whatever it takes. This HAS-' 'No,' Jennifer cut him off, 'no, this does not go out just like that. Imagine the chaos it

will cause. Neil was a smart man, he probably knew it too. It mustn't go out so suddenly. Many will not even believe us.' Charles slowly shrugged. 'Then what do you propose we do?'

She deeply pondered the question. If she does nothing, the world will likely go to a bad path. On the other hand, if she turns it in, the humanity may choose a good path... But what if the alien itself was bad? What if it lied? How does she know what its intentions are? Where its loyalties lay? She had so many questions, and not one answer. Her heart was beating, hard and loud. Breaths quick and shallow, head getting dizzy. Her mind calculating thousands of possible outcomes, good and bad. She thought of her family and friends. Her dog. Everything she thinks she knows, all that she does every day. The indecision was making her even more nervous. For the first time in life, she wasn't sure what she should do. It took her some time, and Charles was held in anticipation. 'Jen?'

She stands there, frozen. Mind overflowed with information. Her nerves waiting for an order to move. Eyes looking, but not seeing. Processing nothing; seeing only black, because her mind is lost in thoughts. Thinks of everything and everyone, all the families she is responsible for now. Even at the brink of sanity, her mind is unable to decide. So many people depending on her. So much responsibility on one's shoulders, slightly more than she alone can bear.

She does not know what to do.

*Mentor: Anita Ivanković*  
Medicinska škola Osijek

*Ivan Nemet*

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## **ONUS**

Beginnings are very hard to write. It might be easier if you're doing it during a beautiful, sunny day, but Father Ashwell decided to write one late at night, with only his little desk lamp to illuminate the pages. Father Ashwell is a fairly old man, in his late 80s I believe. Still, he had quite the vitality. Every day, he performs mass in the morning, noon and evening with the enthusiasm of an energetic youth and the sparkle of a bright star in his hazel eye. Now, you might be wondering what his secret is. Well, some people say he has God's blessing, some say he's really healthy, but really it could just be all the drugs he buys with the money people give at the end of mass that is supposed to go to a children's charity. Which it technically does, though only about 10% of it. It's an amount he considers to be fair, since people don't usually donate even that much. If the charity fails financially, it won't be his burden to bear. After all, the man DOES need the rest for all sorts of important things, like "not paying taxes" for instance.

With that kind of busy life, he only has time to write late at night. What's he writing about, you ask? Why himself, of course. Due to popular demand, he is writing an autobiography of his enthralling life, from beginning to end. He's still stuck at writing the beginning, however. He just can't seem to concentrate enough to do it. This is due to a strange feeling in his guts. Don't worry, it's not the drugs, it's just the person hiding behind his window curtain.

Yeah, they've been there for a while. They've actually been waiting for the clock to strike 11:34 pm, which is right now. With their hands behind their back, they make their presence known by taking one step away from the curtain, making sure to stomp with their boots as loudly as possible. This immensely startles Father Ashwell, who jumps out of his chair and accidentally knocks over his desk lamp. It wouldn't

have been useful, anyway. The person is enveloped in a pitch black coat and wears a harrowing skull mask, which made it impossible for Ashwell to discern who they are. Instead, Ashwell decides to turn round and run for his life, yelling for help with his frail voice. He runs through the long, dark hallway and enters the second long, dark hallway, and then the third. Wait. No, that's not right. Oh, I see, he's actually running through the same hallway over and over again. Meanwhile, the person with the skull mask, let's call them S, is still standing in the spot they were in when Ashwell first noticed them. It seems they can see where he is through the mask. It's probably amusing to watch a guy run in the straight-line equivalent of a circle over and over again. After they've had enough, they snap their fingers and Ashwell's running is immediately stopped by a wall he runs into. Good thing, too. He might have clumsily tripped on his green robe and slammed his face on the floor. Now he only clumsily slammed his face on a concrete wall. He turns around whilst recovering and sees S in front of him.

The two of them are now in a decrepit gray room. The only way out seems to be a door with a glowing keyhole behind S. Ashwell, trembling with fear, attempts to communicate with the tall, intimidating person in front of him but before he could utter a syllable S removes their mask, shocking him even more. They have nothing. No eyes, no nose, no mouth, no ears, not even a single lock of hair. All they have is an exceedingly thin, pale coat of flesh and yet they seem to be completely aware of their surroundings given the fact that their face seems to be constantly focused on Ashwell. At this point, the priest's mind is riddled with questions. He doesn't know what is happening and is trying to figure out what to do. He thought of screaming, crying, playing it cool or even offering his captor "anything they want" but he knew very well none of that would work. Interestingly enough, he didn't think of reaching out to God for help. After a good while of dead silence, S finally raises their index finger, as if they want Ashwell's full attention. With their other hand they reach down a pocket on their coat and pull out a key. The key is a strange sight to see. It's a big, silver key with what appear to be small lilac diamonds embedded on its handle. They make their way to the only door in the room and unlock it. The key then dissipates into a puff of silver and purple smoke and S opens the door. It reveals that on the other side is a set of stairs descending to somewhere outdoors. Ashwell can feel the cold night air breezing through. S, still focusing on the priest, then steps away from the door and points to it with their needle-like finger. Though he understands what is being conveyed to him, Ashwell decides to try his luck and ask something. With an understandably big amount of hesitation, he blurts out a terrified "Why?" to the

spine-chilling specter and immediately regrets it as S furiously screeches at him. They stomp with their boot again only this time they shake the entire room, causing the priest to stumble. He gives up trying to comprehend his predicament and sheepishly walks to the opened door. He walks out to the stairs and looks over the horizon, it seems to be an enormous forest. The door behind him closes and dissipates just like the key did. Ashwell walks down the stairs, steps down on the tall grass and takes another good look.

It's all just oak trees as far as the eye can see. He turns around and sees that the stairs are now gone too, replaced with more ominous trees. However, a small figure behind one of the trees catches the priest's eye. He carefully approaches the figure, hoping that it's another person. It is not, unfortunately for him. It is a life-sized wooden statue of a child. It looks petrified. As he looks around some more, he notices more and more statues with the same expressions. Some of them look younger than the one first seen, others look older. His examination of the effigies is then cut short when he notices a warmth radiating from the distance. It's fire. Something is shooting it out. As the source of the flames creeps closer and closer, Ashwell manages to make out what is happening. The fire is being shot out of a set of flamethrowers connected to a big tank-like machine trailing behind. The flamethrowers are being held by people who are very clearly made of stone, all clad in dark red suits. They are marching in a V formation. The priest then hides behind one of the trees that the arsonists don't have in sight. He monitors them for a while and manages to get a good look at them when they finally come near. To his shock, he recognizes almost all of them. They're all other priests, some of whom he knows personally. Their formation is being led by someone with the face of a deceased pope. They finally reach some of the wooden sculptures and engulf those in flame, too. There seems to be a high pitch noise coming from them as they burn. It all seems so sick. He then diverts his attention to the machine itself and sees a glow under the hatch that leads into it. He recognizes it as the same type of ghostly glow the keyhole of the door S had unlocked. If the keyhole is there, then the key must be nearby, as well. Further scanning of the surroundings confirms that assumption to be correct. The leader has the key on his belt. Ashwell waits for them to pass by and starts following them from behind. He ducks to go under the tubes and makes his way to the leader. He snatches the key from "the Pope" and rushes to the machine. Strangely enough, none of them notice, or care about what he did. He opens the hatch and drops down into the machine. There, he sees the door, but also another keyhole. This one isn't glowing and is located on the big control panel of the machine. The panel has a few screens above it, showing the

destruction currently unfolding. The text above it indicates that, should someone insert and turn the key in it, the entire machine would shut off. Ashwell remembers that the key disappeared once S turned it and, not willing to risk it, instead opens the door. He looks back at the screens of the burning statues, but pays no mind to them. "I have nothing to do with this" he thinks to himself, "It's not my burden to bear." He enters through the door and shuts it. As he does so, he feels a slight twinge in his chest.

The door is gone now, and Ashwell is in a new area. He's indoors again, this time in a giant museumesque building. The left and right walls are decorated with picture frames, all of which are blank. In the middle of the room is a pedestal that has another key on it and at the very end is the next door. The roof is made entirely of glass, allowing the empty night sky to be seen. The place is also filled with butterflies. The butterflies have beautifully multicolored wings. A lot of them have the stripes of a rainbow, but an equal amount have stripes making very different, very specific patterns. Blue – pink – white, red – beige – white – purple, green – white – black and many, many more. Eventually, the blank spaces in the frames reveal themselves to be singular eyes split horizontally. They lack irises and their pupils are shaped like crosses. The eyes begin to radiate their own menacing glow, and soon divert their attention to the butterflies. As it turns out, the lights are actually tractor beams that pull the butterflies towards the eyes. Once the butterflies are pulled close enough, the eyes open like a mouth and consume the poor, unsuspecting creatures. They too let out high pitch noises upon being ingested. None of the beams affect Ashworth, leaving him to freely go towards the pedestal. He tries to get a move on but finds himself unable to walk very fast for some reason, forcing him to see and hear the fate of every single butterfly in the room. He finally reaches the pedestal and grabs the key but notices another panel with a keyhole on the pedestal. This time, it's a smaller panel with a tiny little screen showing where the butterflies are now. They weren't consumed, rather they were forced into a giant glass container in another room. Squished together, they are completely incapable of moving. It won't be long until they can no longer breathe due to lack of oxygen. The high pitch screeching can still be heard. As can be seen on the panel, they can be freed using the key. Ashwell, once again, doesn't seem to care much and continues his slow walk to the exit. "Yes, they'll die," he mutters, "but they're animals, they're not as alive as I am. It's not my burden to bear." He unlocks the door, goes through it and the key vanishes. This time however, the slight twinge grows into a deep pain that sends the elderly man on the floor.

As Ashwell gets up from the cold floor, he hears an unfamiliar voice speaking to him. "Sir? Sir! Are you alright, sir?" a young man asks. "Ugh, I'm fine, where-" he looks up and sees a plethora of young people, who all seem to be partially roboticized. They're all imprisoned in a giant cell, dangling in the air. It's being held by a single giant chain. Ashwell could barely stand up or move. He felt strangely heavy.

"What's going on here? Why are you all in a cell?"

"Because of our insignias, sir."

They all had robotic chests with a round screen showing a certain symbol. The dark-skinned young man talking to him had a quarter moon with a star in it. A girl next to him had a hexagram. Another, older fellow had nothing shown.

"Your insignias? What's wrong with them?"

"They're not doves."

"Doves?"

"Yeah, the dove-bearers don't like that. So, they locked us up in here. There's more of us here." He points to all the other cells in this humongous, but empty, area.

"So, what are they going to do to you?"

"They say no one who ends up in this place leaves alive."

Hearing that, Ashwell had nothing more to ask, or to say.

"Wait...." exclaimed the previously mentioned girl, "What's that on your necklace, sir?"

"Necklace? I don't have a....." he looks down and, unbelievably, he has a necklace, and the next key is attached to it.

"It's the key to the cell!" the girl joyfully announced. Everyone in the cell began to excitedly plead the priest to give them the key.

"Now hold on!" he belts out, "THIS is MY key, I need it! I can only use it once!"

"But sir, it's the exact same one the guards use!" the girl insisted, "If you unlock the cell for us, we can help everyone else here escape!"



“Such naivete.....You’ll just get captured again! Look at this place. Those bars are the least of your problems!”

“Please, sir! Please help!”

“SILENCE!” the girl’s desperate pleading was interrupted by a dove-bearing guard. The guard is standing on a floating platform that she is controlling with a holographic keypad. The guard was a skinny, slightly tan woman that wore a dark green suit. Her raven hair was tied in a bun and her eyes were heterochromic. One was blue, the other gray.

“I have detected a key in this cell. WHO HAS IT?” the guard demanded to know.

The young ones next to Ashwell silently begged him to be quiet, some of them were close to tears. Unfortunately, nothing was to come of it.

“ME, THAT’S ME” the priest screamed out in pain. “I’M HERE BY ACCIDENT. I NEED TO GET TO A DOOR”.

The guard, intrigued, sends a small flying beetle to scan him. Upon completion, the beetle glows blue. The guard then immediately teleports him to her platform, with the key still with him.

“Alright then, sir. I deeply apologize for any inconvenience these kids may have caused. I know exactly which door you’re looking for.”

She sets a course on her keyboard and the platform begins to travel. Ashwell takes one last look at all the kids in the cell, who now look at him with either deep sadness or disgust. He averts his glance and begins to question the guard.

“So, what’s going to happen with the kids?”

“Well, they’ll most likely just end up changing their insignia to a dove.”

“.....and if they don’t” he asked worriedly.

“We will throw them in the incinerator with the rest of the garbage” the guard proudly proclaims.

Ashwell thinks about what he just heard for a while. Now, if anyone else was in this situation, they would be filled with immense guilt and shame. They would consider jumping off the platform or maybe push the guard off and go back to help. Ashwell

sort of felt these things but dismissed them quickly. He was angry, he was in pain.

“It’s not my fault they’re here. It’s not my fault they’re too stubborn to change a stupid screen. I’d do it if I had to! They brought their fates upon themselves. I have spent my entire life living in the Lord’s image, I have amassed great fortune from it. I DESERVE TO LIVE MORE THAN THEY DO. THE LUXURIES I CAN AFFORD WITH MY MONEY I HAVE RIGHTFULLY EARNED. THESE THINGS HAVE ESCAPED MY GRASP THROUGHOUT SO MUCH OF MY LIFE AND THEY SHALL NOT ESCAPE NOW! THEY HAVE BEEN GIVEN TO ME BY THE LORD. BECAUSE HE IS GOOD. HE PROTECTS ME. THAT’S WHY I’VE MADE IT THIS FAR. THOSE BRATS HAVE PROBABLY NEVER WORKED A DAY IN THEIR MISERABLE LIFE. I DON’T CARE WHAT HAPPENED TO THE CHILDREN, OR THE BUTTERFLIES OR THIS SAD BUNCH OF MILLENIAL GARBAGE. THEY DO NOT LIVE IN THE LORD’S LIGHT SO WHY SHOULD THEY LIVE AT ALL? THIS IS NOT MY BURDEN TO BEAR! “

“I agree wholeheartedly, sir!” the guard responded. “You know, you remind me of my local church pastor.”

“Thank you!”

“You’re more than welcome! Well, here’s your stop.”

The platform halts right in front of another one with the door. Ashwell carries himself onto it and bids the guard goodbye. He unlocks the door and enters.

Weak, tired and drained, Ashwell finds himself back in the same room he started, only now with a slight difference. In the middle of the room, there is a black tar pit. S is quietly standing on the other side of the pit, “looking” at Ashwell.

“What? Shocked by what I said back there?” he asks with fury in his eyes.

The place remains dead silent once again for a while. Finally, S seems to be ready to say something. A reverse reverb of their deep, multi-layered voice is heard as they finally proclaim:

“No.....We’ve heard people say much worse, honestly. Your secretion of word vomit didn’t make much of an impact.”

“If what I said was word vomit, then what in the world would you call all these horrible trials you cooked up. I barely broke a sweat and yet I beat them all.”

“You.....”beat” them? Interesting choice of words.”

“What do you mean? I DID beat them. I got all the keys in the keyholes. I didn’t waste a single one! Good God, I’M HERE, aren’t I? I would’ve been trapped in one of your horrible worlds if I didn’t use the keys properly. They would’ve...”

“Disappeared? Does that make you think you would be trapped?”

“Ye.....well.....you mean I wouldn’t...be...?” he wheezed out, his mind being on the verge of collapsing completely.

“No. The panels would’ve given you different options to progress. All you had to do was be willing to make a sacrifice. But why would you, right? After all, you’re just an incredibly rich old man close to reaching 90 years of life who lived in comfort ever since he was 25. Why would you be willing to stand up for those who were abused, downtrodden and ostracized their entire life? You wouldn’t.”

Ashwell broke down into tears, he screamed and moaned louder than he thought was possible. The guilt finally got to him, he had no more excuses to calm himself with. He had nothing. He was a complete and total wreck. All those things he did, he did for no reason. All those lives he ruined, he ruined for nothing. It was all his fault, it was all on him.

It was his burden to bear.

“If you’re done, the final trial awaits you. Step into the tar pit, if you stay floating, your soul can move on. If not, I wish you luck.”

Ashwell got up and walked towards the pit with his head slumped down in shame.

“If you want to pray to your god, you’re allowed to. It never helped anyone who has been here, though. Fantasies tend to not have any effect on reality.”

Ashwell didn’t listen, he reached the edge. Before he stepped in, he looked at his tormentor one last time.

“What’s your name?” he questioned.

“People have called us many things in many languages. Personally, we prefer the name Smrt.”

Ashwell nods. He then steps into the tar pit and immediately sinks. Just like that,

in the most pathetic and unceremonious way possible. Smrt stands there in silence again for a while. They then make their way through the door behind them. When they close the door, the room ceases to exist. Leaving nothing and no one behind.

Endings are hard to write. They do not allow you to write more after you're done with them. They are the result of all of your writing up to that point. They demand from you to either invert all of it in one grand twist or to stick by it and accept the consequences, both good and bad, that come with it.

So please, be careful how you write your ending.

*Mentor: Jelena Kovačević*  
Ekonomška škola Požega

*Mia Puljić*

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## **THE GHOST DIMENSION**

Was this the most thrilling thing ever? It must have been at least one of the most exciting ones!

For Dr Jaice Riche it was definitely the best moment of his life, something he will remember until the end of his days. However, like everything in this life, exactly how exciting or not something was, came entirely to perspective. All the books in the world wouldn't be the slightest bit of interest to someone who couldn't read, the true value of their existence would be wasted on unattuned eyes.

Are you a proud soldier, fighting to liberate a frightened population from their cruel overlords? Or are you a faceless drone of the foreign invader, who has to come and destroy local people's life? It depends where you're standing when you ask the question.

So, a scientific discovery such as this one, which immediately rises to one of the best, most exciting things for a man like Dr Jaice Riche, wouldn't turn any heads at a primary school for example. With the colour of the pen to use next being much more vital question on the youngsters' minds.

Dr Jaice, however, was a man of science, an astrophysicist to be exact, and this discovery was not at all wasted according to him. It was the most important thing he had ever done.

Pulling up his collar up against the heavy rain and bitterly cold wind, he energetically galloped towards the front door of a rather expensive looking home. Following the stark outdoor lighting fixtures that lined the front drive, while dodging the various flowers that encased the pathway, he came to a grinding halt outside a thick wooden door.

The wind had been picking up all night and it had finally sapped all the heat from his body. He was freezing, soaked through and because of his avoidance of driving, exhausted. He had practically run the entire four miles from his lab to the door he now stood in front of, having stopped only momentarily when he thought he was about to pass out. Despite all this, however, nothing could wipe the smile from his face. He battered on the door, impatiently waiting to meet the occupant inside.

Dr Jaice Riche was in many ways not a stereotypical being. Having a very different personality to most, he was very easy to label. On top of this, the fact that he dressed like a cartoon character that had come to life; wearing the classic lab coat and brown slacks most of the time, made him fit into the nerdy awkward scientist category very nicely. As well as looking like a perfect model for “Laboratory safety gear” he had never really in all his life managed to get a good understanding of people. Their strange obsession with social interaction and how they very rarely thought of the grand picture had always been a massive obstacle for him to overcome. As a result, he would avoid social interactions as much as possible. Taking the time to continue with his research instead, and when he did indeed have to socialise, he remained as quiet as possible. All of this made forming positive impressions rather negative. People and their compound emotions, as far as he could tell, seemed to have very little logic or structure to them whatsoever; continuously changing or updating as they pleased. One moment they were happy and the next they were sad. One day they were entertained, the next, bored out of their mind. It just didn’t make any sense or order.

The main problem seemed to be the fact that Jaice couldn’t predict them. People and their ambiguous emotions.

He liked knowing things beforehand, having plans that could be kept to in a timely manner for everything he did. Even on his days off, where any normal person would do as they please, Jaice felt a desire to have an incredibly detailed checklist, a series of productive tasks such as housework and continuing with research. He would even go as far as planning everything up to a second and if anything was just a slightly bit off, he would be perturbed. Only after he had completed all of his tasks, he could relax.

That was one of the reasons he fell in love with astrophysics, the precise movement and position of the stars and their surrounding planets being mathematically predictable. He took a great deal of pride and comfort in knowing exactly how an object and mindboggling mass was going to behave. With the exception of tonight, his life

was a regimented and predictable ensemble.

Now, saying all that, Dr Riche wasn't a complete social outcast. He did have a doting wife and three adorable young daughters; all of whom he loved dearly. He didn't struggle with everyone socially, just with most people. His wife was a perfect example of someone who he did get along with, being an understanding woman with a whole lot of patience.

His childhood had been pretty much the same as his adult life, preferring the company of his toys to other children. He had been a rather lonely child and would have no friends if it wasn't for a man standing on the other side of the door.

Noah Cavero opened the mentioned door much quicker than Jaice had anticipated. Considering how late it was, he had expected a cautious prying open of the door, allowing Noah to assess who the unexpected visitor was from a position of relative safety. However, contrary to his predictions, Noah swung the door wide open as if allowing a pack of wild beasts to run past him into the cold night. Jaice stumbled a bit; having his arm resting against the door, before composing himself and looking into the face of his oldest and dearest friend.

"Jaice? What are you doing here? It's so late!" Noah exclaimed, pausing slightly to allow the surprise to sink in, Jaice being the last person he would have expected to see on his doorstep at this late hour. "And you look like crap! Come on, come in for heaven's sake, get out the rain and get warm. How can I help you?" He continued moving aside to let his friend pass.

Jaice did as instructed, shuffling into the large hallway eager to get inside, but not because he was cold, (no,) he was far too excited to care. He couldn't wait to shift the weight of his mind.

"Thank you, Noah, I appreciate this. I know it wasn't planned and you know more than anyone how this conflicts with me, but I just have to tell you something. It couldn't wait. I needed you to know, it's something wonderful, something spectacular, something..."

"Okay, I am sure it is but let's at least close the door before we get started, eh?" Noah butted in, trying his best to keep the rain off his dressing gown as he closed the heavy wooden door behind them; the harsh weather becoming just a pleasant pitter-patter against the old wood, echoing down the large and rather expensive looking hallway.

“Noah! Who is it?” Noah’s concerned other half worriedly shouted from some unseen room. Understanding the confusion and concern, Noah hastily replied. “It’s okay, dear, it’s just Jaice. A social visit, nothing to worry about. Go back to bed!”

“A social visit at this time?! Who does this man think he is? Barging in like that, we have our own lives to live, you know...” was all Jaice heard before Noah escorted him around the corner, into the sitting room and closed the door behind him; the room obviously being heavily sound proofed, as the angered cries became just inaudible muffles as soon as he closed the door.

“Again, I am sorry Noah I know this is very unorthodox, I... I didn’t want to cause any distress. You will apologise to her for me, won’t you? I won’t stay long, I just needed to tell you!” Jaice fretted; worried his friend would become angry too. Nevertheless, Noah didn’t seem the slightest bit bothered at all.

“Oh, it’s fine; it’s just that she has an early shift tomorrow at the hospital, it always makes her a little hostile, she’s not a morning person and she worries about getting enough sleep beforehand but in all honesty, nothing to worry about. She’ll be okay. Now take a seat and take off that damn wet coat too, I feel cold just by looking at you” Noah comfortingly replied.

Once again, Jaice did as instructed, folding his coat and placing it down on a nearby coffee table before taking a seat on one of the many large leather chairs that circled the room.

This room, just like the rest of Noah’s house, was incredibly well furnished, taking a lean towards the old fashioned in places but always maintaining the sense of luxury that Noah had obviously enjoyed. He was a very successful man after all, being a very important person within the publishing and literary world. He was the head CEO of his publication (publishing) company, and due to having lots of fingers in many other pies, he had become one of the major influencers in the writing world. And as you can imagine, that came paired with an extravagant lifestyle. Not that he didn’t deserve it though. Through their time together, Jaice had never known Noah to not be working. Even on his days off when the two would sometimes meet up for a few drinks, Noah would always have something on the go, an email to write, manuscript to check or a call to do. He was also a very sociable man, his phone constantly ringing with invitations to parties or expensive trips away. Perhaps that is why Jaice and Noah were such a good pairing; Noah made up for what Jaice lacked.



“Now, my old friend, what is bothering you so much? Couldn’t it wait?” he chuckled. “From the sound of it, it’s a good thing, but if I’m being honest, it is hard to tell. Most good things can wait, at least until morning” Noah said pouring out two drinks from a nearby cabinet. “Oh, it’s definitely a good thing” Jaice replied. “This couldn’t possibly be bad, or at least I haven’t thought of any negative outcomes yet. No, yes, it is definitely magnificent; it completely reshapes our view of the universe!”

“Well, I must say that even for someone like me that does indeed sound intriguing” Noah added as he sat down opposite Jaice, handing the nervous man his own drink, before sitting back and taking a sip of the golden-brown liquid himself.

Jaice meanwhile didn’t sit back. His elbows were on his knees, his free hand was fanatically fumbling around with his chin in attempt to calm his thoughts. After a short while, however, he gulped down a mouthful for the same reason.

“So...” Noah coaxed with a smile on his face. “Will you tell me?”

After taking another gulp, Jaice locked his eyes with his friend and composed himself.

“Because of the complex nature of this topic, and since I don’t know how much you know about astrophysics or even science in general, I feel like it makes sense to start from the very beginning and work my way up, just so that it’s easier for you to follow along.”

“That makes sense.” Noah agreed. Again, with that warm smile that has the ability to calm even the most distressed of souls.

“Okay so.” Jaice began. “Despite your lack of knowledge of science, even you will know that the world we live in, all the animals and plants, all the stars in the sky and indeed everything in the known universe is made up of matter. Plain matter that forms everything.”

“Well, I am glad you have finally realised that, my good friend! I’m glad it brings you such happiness!” Noah chuckled seemingly pleased with his little banter. Jaice didn’t react besides a small salty smile that quickly faded away. This was not the time for messing around, so he continued as if nothing had happened.

“Well, alongside this “normal” matter, and I use the term “normal” because, same as everything else it comes down to perspective, there is also anti-matter.”

A spark of recognition appeared in Noah's mind.

"Yes, yes, I remember you talking about this before! Atoms that have different properties than normal... they have a different electric charge or something like similar around that area? In the same way two ends of a magnet have a different charge. Am I right?"

Jaice was quite surprised with the fact that Noah recalled anything about his last lecture because he had always assumed that his friend forgot everything the moment Jaice left the room. This unexpected amount of retention came to Jaice like a very pleasant surprise. It was nice to be on the same page as his best friend again, to make a change from difficulties they had faced throughout their time as friends.

As a child Jaice would spend his days reading scientific journals until he found something that would catch his eye. He would then endlessly enthuse to Noah about the latest findings and the most recent theories as well as his opinion about them. Meanwhile, Noah was always more bothered with his new shoes or a fancy new watch, not really listening to Jaice rant on. This would often cause some tension between the two of them as Jaice would get frustrated with his friend's attitude and the lack of interest in the topic. He thought that the workings of universe are far more important than the company logo you have printed on your shirt. Eventually though, he accepted Noah's different outlook realising that was better to have a slightly disconnected friend than none at all.

Considering that, this recollection came as a bit of a shock but definitely a good one. And Jaice was actually quite proud of him. He just hoped that he would remember what he was about to tell him.

"Yes, you're not too far off, it is something along those lines. Anti-matter has the exact opposite charge to normal matter but the same mass. A hydrogen atom that is made up of one neutron, one electron and one proton has the same atomic weight as anti-matter hydrogen atom that is made up of the anti-matter equivalents. Protons have a positive charge and electrons have a negative charge, the anti-matter copies have the corresponding opposites."

"So just like the magnet example I have used." Noah proudly assured himself.

Jaice nodded in agreement. He couldn't be bothered with explaining how the magnet's north and south pole were due to the atomic structure of the magnet as a whole,

and not the sub-atomic particles at each end being fundamentally different but Noah's level of understanding would do for now, so he just continued explaining.

"However, anti-matter is incredibly rare in the natural universe. You would struggle to find it outside of a controlled laboratory. This is because a piece of "normal" matter comes in contact with anti-matter, the two will completely annihilate each other destroying themselves in the process and leaving nothing behind" Jaice explained.

He was quickly able to tell that Noah didn't understand the last part; his face expression gave it away.

"In other words, they both go boom." Jaice reiterated.

Noah nodded his head in understanding. "And so, this discovery of yours involves this anti-matter, doesn't it? You have found some? In the wild, untouched?"

Jaice shook his head violently "Not at all, I am just laying the groundwork for you, so that you understand there can be different forms of matter."

Noah took yet another sip leaving the glass completely empty. "So, you're telling me that there is another form of matter, different from these two you just explained?"

This time Jaice nodded, excited to get to the point of his visit.

"Indeed, there is, we're talking about a form that is completely new to science. A completely separate form of matter that until very recently, nobody had any idea existed. Something that changes the way we look at the universe, and what's especially brilliant is that this matter isn't a rare thing like anti-matter, it's far more abundant and can be found pretty much anywhere in nature."

Noah rubbed his chin; he did that whenever Jaice explained something new to him.

"Okay, what I'm wondering about right now is, how come it has taken this long to find it? Surely if it's so abundant, and we can find it anywhere then we would have found it before now? We can't have been looking very hard if we have missed it this whole time"

Noah challenged, this was a good point Jaice had hoped he would raise.

"That's the brilliant thing, this "invisible" matter as people call it, doesn't interact with normal matter in almost any way. We can't see it, we can't feel it and it doesn't

emit or reflect any light or any electromagnetic waves. According to our senses, it doesn't exist."

Noah frowned a bit, looking down at his left hand as if he was holding a piece of this ghostly matter. After a slight pause he continued with his line of inquiry.

"So how do you know it even exists at all? I'm not trying to be funny or anything, it's a genuine question because if you can't see it and you can't measure anything from it, how do you know it's there?"

"At a glance I even agree with you." Jaice replied. "It would seem to an educated observer that there is nothing there, that it's just empty space. But that's only because you're not looking for the right signs. There is evidence of his matter existing, plenty of it in fact. However, it's just not down here on the ground. It's up there among the stars" Jaice said while gesturing up to the sky with his hand, keeping his eyes locked on Noah's, curious to see how he would react. "This invisible matter interacts with our normal matter in one way. It interacts with all of us in only one way, through gravity. We can see these effects if we just look from the right perspective and search for the right signs."

"Like what?" Noah asked. It seemed to Jaice like he is following along nicely, an unusual pattern for him. Normally by now, Jaice would have had to repeat himself multiple times just to get the point across. Before arriving, he had been preparing himself for the broken record style of explanation he would have to employ. So this newly achieved level of attention from Noah was a very welcome surprise. Maybe the unconventional condition of Jaice's arrival made him realise this was something worth paying attention to.

"Well, to start with, there isn't enough normal matter to account for the size and complexities of galaxies. Mathematically there isn't enough matter to create the gravitational field necessary to hold galaxies together; in theory they should just break apart, sending all the stars within them into the depths of space, but they don't. Now I admit there are some theories about extremely large black holes at the centre of galaxies acting as a sort of gravity anchor. Holding everything in place, stopping stars from being just randomly scattered. However, that theory still doesn't explain the structures we see in galaxies. Their shapes mathematically don't fit with this idea. There just needs to be more stuff, something to hold galaxies together, to give them the necessary building blocks. Something we can't see."

Jaice paused, thinking it better not to overload his poor friend's mind. Noah meanwhile continued his insistent chin rubbing. After a few seconds of contemplating, Jaice continued.

"As well as this, light also seems to do strange things that can only be explained by presence of something. Light coming from distant sources seems to bend around seemingly empty areas of space, as if planets and galaxies were there, but when we look with our telescopes, we find... nothing. Again, that can only be explained by actually having something there. There are areas of space completely devoid of any stars or galaxies, yet we still see this light bending effect."

Noah put his glass down on the table, "So everyone only suspects something else out there, just floating around? Holding everything together as you say, but it can't be proven 100%?"

"Yes, it's only been an educated guess... up until very recently!" Jaice beamed with a big smile on his face. "Existence of this mysterious matter had only been suspected due to those signs and since we can't see it, there isn't any concrete evidence that something is 100% there" he explained.

"However, I can now confirm the existence of this incredible substance with 100% certainty. That's why I came here, Noah! I've invented a device that lets us see it!"

Both men sat in silence for a moment allowing the thick air to settle as Jaice's shocking words bounced around only to fade away and be replaced by the gentle pitter-patter of rain on the windows. Noah was truly impressed with his friend, normally he would have drifted away in his thoughts, went off to get another drink, something to eat and even try to change the topic but this time he could tell that Jaice was deeply invested, how could he not be?

Noah sat forward in his chair and poured himself another drink while contemplating and coming to terms with everything he had just been told. This idea that universe had yet another layer to it that had passed unseen until now. Suddenly his world seemed even smaller than it had before.

"I won't bother you too much with the details of the way it functions but fundamentally, look at it as the invisible matter telescope if you will. There is a complete electromagnetic spectrum of this matter out there unable to be detected by any device except mine. My device detects this spectrum and transfers it into a usable format.

Just like normal telescope picks up the light from normal stars, my telescope picks up dark light coming from this invisible matter and converts it into an image.”

He expected his friend to struggle with processing everything he had just told him but after just a few moments he asked a rather simple question in a calm, relaxed tone.

“What does that stuff look like?”

This took Jaice off guard. At first glance this may seem like a stupid question especially considering the fact that we are talking about an invisible substance, but this was actually an incredible question that even Jaice himself hadn’t really considered.

Since his telescope’s converted images were incredibly basic; having no colour and only showing the contrast between light and shadow, looking like a somewhat blurry black and white photo, it was hard to know what it would actually look like if we could see it.

After all, this stuff was invisible! It could be any colour and texture it chooses. In fact, it could be a completely new, incomprehensible colour that nobody could ever possibly imagine in their wildest dreams.

“I can’t give you a definitive answer to that, we don’t know enough about how this matter interacts on a small scale. However, on a big scale it seems to have the same structure as normal matter. Comprehend this, empty areas of space where light begins to bend is where we can find whole galaxies of that stuff. Just imagine that! Millions upon millions of stars and galaxies that are completely invisible to our eyes! Hold up, take a look at these!”

Jaice said as he rushed to his coat. After a few seconds of fumbling around in the pockets he finally pulled out a collection of slightly crumpled pictures that he had taken by his telescope only hours before.

Noah gazed upon these pictures with obvious amazement, another side of existence that he had missed his whole life. All those planets, stars and indeed whole galaxies floating motionless in the dark sky. He had never seen such a thing.

All of a sudden, Noah exploded with energy taking the picture in hand he beamed at Jaice with great enthusiasm.

“Well, I have to say, Jaice, this is absolutely amazing! You have to tell people, in fact,

why not publish your findings! This is going to be massive. I can have a word with a few people and before you know, everyone will be reading about the incredible discovery of Dr Jaice Riche!”

He lunged forward to give Jaice a bracing hug which Jaice endured with an awkward smile on face.

“I can already see the title,” Noah continued, “The Ghost dimension. Best seller! Book of the year! Book of the decade! Well done, my friend!”

Jaice had never thought about writing a book for the common man. He had always been satisfied with the idea of sending his findings to a scientific journal so that he is known and respected by scientific community... only. To finally see his own work, he had given so many hours of his life for, in a publication similar to those he used to read as a boy.

But now the idea has been planted, it quickly became very alluring, the whole world being captivated by the brilliant mind of Dr Jaice Riche! He did see the appeal and a small smile grew across his face.

Noah continued to list through the numerous pictures, spreading them out onto the table in front of them forming a colourless collage. Eventually he reached a picture that looked seemingly different than the rest. It was another planet, hanging out in the empty void of space, this time though there was an unusual mix of light and shade showing distinct lines and dots all over its surface. Noah’s heart skipped a beat when his mind realised what those lines may be.

“Is that... what it looks like? Is that what I think it is?” Noah gasped, his mind racing with various possibilities. Not sure what he wanted the answer to be. Jaice meanwhile looked like he is about to burst from excitement.

“Absolutely! Those are lights, millions of them! Covering the entire planet!”

Noah almost fell over. Even he, a man who knew nothing about inner workings of the world, understood how rare life was in the universe. Let alone intelligent universe, and the idea that he was now looking at an alien city both excited and terrified him.

“Are you sure this isn’t just some trick of the light or some weird texture of the planet? Or an error with the equipment as you say? Are you sure this isn’t natural?”

“I am certain” Jaice said with a stern look on his face.

“But how do you know?” Noah replied while taking another sip from his glass.

Without saying a single word, Jaice pulled out a small silver device from his coat, held it up next to Noah’s head and clicked play. Suddenly the unmistakable sound of music filled the room as the two men became the first in history to listen to alien radio.

The singing that was coming out of a small device was strange and definitely not like anything Noah had ever heard before. But one thing was sure, although it wasn’t familiar, it was beautiful.

“This signal was coming from that planet along with many others.” Jaice stated with excitement after a few seconds. “I’ve recorded multiple recordings like this. Most of them are playing various types of music or some sort of discussions in many foreign languages. One thing is for sure though; all of them are just as bizarre as this one.” Once again neither of them said anything, letting this foreign music and language fill their ears. Confirming in their minds that despite the vast emptiness and hostility of the universe, we are not alone in the universe.

And this was the moment when human race was discovered.

Jaice and Noah were not as you might have been imagining, two ordinary men sitting in a rather expensive guest’s room discussing findings of a lifetime. No, they were not ordinary, and they were definitely not human.

The picture of the shining planet that was covered in dazzling lights was not a picture of a bustling alien world, it was a picture of the Earth.

And that music that filled the room and confirmed existence of other intelligent life in the universe wasn’t coming from an alien source, but from a completely normal Earth-bound radio broadcast.

From our perspective, Jaice and Noah are the aliens.

Those being the best translations of their names to English, two of them were the men who were made from a mysterious type of matter that made them and all other aliens invisible to any human who would try to look upon them.



It seems absurd to think that the first two intelligent races to come into contact with each other were not even made from the same matter. Wouldn't it have been so much easier that both species were at least made from the same type of atoms? The universe is big and complex enough that finding other life is next to impossible without having to cross the inter-matter barrier. But then again, like everything else, it all comes down to perspective.

*Dragana Relić*

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## **LAST SUMMER**

Last summer I was at my aunt's in Dubrovnik. It was July and it was very hot.

She doesn't live in the center of the city, but rather a few kilometers away.

The days were wonderful, I went out to the beach, to cafés, I met new friends, I had fun and enjoyed every minute of my holiday. However, one evening around 8:30 I went out to the beach to relax, because evenings are best for being on the beach, there are no crowds, just nature and me. I took my towel, spread it out and sat on it. I put my arms around my knees and looked thoughtfully at the sea. I was wearing a T-shirt and shorts. "Nice evening, isn't it?" I heard a male voice behind me. „Yeah, it is.“, I replied and smiled. It was a boy, I would say a year or two older than me. Tall, black, handsome... He had a T-shirt and shorts.

He sat down on his towel next to me. "So let's meet for a start, I'm Ivan, nice to meet you." "I'm Mia, how do you do." "Well, I haven't seen you here before, where are you from?" he asked me. "I'm not from here, I came here to visit my aunt, I'm from Zagreb." "How do you like it here?" "It's very nice, especially in the evening, when the crowd calms down, it's really beautiful. Although I don't have to tell you because you already know, as you live here after all." "I don't like the sea and the beach so much." "I was surprised. You're kidding, aren't you? I would give anything to be able to enjoy this every day, and you don't like it. But the tastes are different, I suppose" I said. "Now you say so, but if you lived here all the time, you'd get bored, believe me." "Come on, fine. What do you do in your free time?" I asked him. "I mostly do sports, go swimming, read some books, watch action movies ..." "He reads books", I thought, "okay this sounds interesting." "And you?" he asked me. "I'm not into sport, I learn languages alone, I watch movies and series, I go for a walk." "What languages are you learning?" "I mean, maybe I could help you, and I'm interested." "He asked me with

a smile. "Spanish, I'm a beginner, but I'm trying." "Really, I've been learning Spanish for a long time. If you need help, tell me." "Thank you. "How long will you be here?" he asked me. Two more weeks, and then I will go home." "Do you want to go to the cinema with me tomorrow?" I wondered a little bit." Of course, if you don't want to, no problem." he said politely. Of course I won't turn him down. "Okay, why not?" "Great, tell me a little more about yourself. Ask me whatever you want about me, too." " Well, okay, I don't know what to tell you, but, I'm a big optimist, I like cooking, mostly cakes, I'm organized, I like shopping, you?" I asked him interestedly. "I like sports, music, movies, animals ... Do you have a brother or sister?" "No, I don't, you? "I have a younger sister." "Nice, do

you live nearby, or not?" "I'm a little farther away, if you want I'll show you tomorrow." "Okay." "Are you here alone, or with your parents?" "I came here alone to rest." "Sorry, I have to go, parents are calling me, see you tomorrow at 7?" "See you, of course."

He hugged me and left. I was stunned but felt good.

The next morning I woke up around 9:00, I had breakfast and immediately went shopping because I had nothing to wear in the evening. I was there for hours and chose a light blue dress. After that I went for coffee because I was too tired. I had lunch around 1 p.m. and spent the whole afternoon thinking about that night's event. I called my best friend Clara, to talk about something else. I told her everything, and she was more excited than me. She supported me. When I looked at my watch, it was already 5 and I had to start getting ready. I took a shower, styled my hair, put on make up and got dressed. By 6:30p.m. I was ready. The evening before Ivan and I had exchanged numbers so he called me and asked if I was ready for him to pick me up. I was incredibly excited. An indescribable feeling. He picked me up, we walked because

it didn't take long to get there, some half an hour walk. We watched the movie "Love is Sweet", which he chose and I was amazed by the choice. I liked him even more because of it. The movie lasted about 2 hours, it was really nice. I was trying to think about the movie, but it didn't work, besides, Ivan kept making me laugh. I couldn't think about the movie. At the end of the film, Ivan kissed me, and I almost fainted because of the excitement. I kissed him too, but the lights in the cinema came on quickly, unfortunately. We walked out of the cinema holding hands. We talked all evening. I didn't want to go home, but I had to, because it was already around 11:00

pm. He showed me where his house was and gave me a goodnight kiss. His house was not far, we were very near. We were chatting long into the night. I called Clara in the morning because I had a million messages from her. I told her everything and she was in shock. She was really happy. Ivan and I went somewhere every day. One day for ice cream, another for coffee.

We were going to the club together, we were on the beach, watched the sunsets... I was at his house. Time passed quickly and I had to go home to Zagreb but he promised to come at the first opportunity. Last summer was the most beautiful of all summers but Ivan and I are still together. After some time he will move to Zagreb as his parents got a job there and found an apartment. We will be together every day. I cannot wait.

*Gabriel Sokolaj*

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## **BENEATH IT ALL**

*March 22<sup>nd</sup> 6:30 AM*

Woke up. Dark. The shutters are down? Casey. Not on her side of the bed. It's still warm. She just woke up. The smell of coffee. I can't see anything, where's that damn window...

GODDAMN IT

My weights are never there, I must have forgotten them last night. My toe is throbbing; I can feel it, the blood rushing, the pain, the warmth. Finally, the window. Sunlight, feels good, a better kind of warmth than the one emanating from my toe. It's weird - I never forget to put away the weights.

I walk into the kitchen, pancakes, coffee. Casey, Oklahoma born and raised, always loved the feel of small towns and I'm doing everything to give it to her, which in New York is damn near impossible, a move to the outskirts of the city is seems to have scratched that itch. Sure, the commute to work is long, but seeing her smile makes it worth it, it's better than the sunlight. There it is, the smile, it makes the pain in my toe subside.

"Good morning babe, everything all right?"

"It's all good; I stubbed my toe."

"How? The room is always so neat, you make sure of that."

"Guess I forgot the weights."

"Doesn't matter anyway. Coffee?"

I nodded. Walked over and kissed her on that perfect smile. Coffee, good, needed it, hadn't slept well at all, possibly getting promoted today, I keep my cool. Casey is the artistic one, she has to express herself, I'll just work it off, with the weights. I always put the weights back. The pain in my toe subsided, but there's still a ghost of it. I go out the front door, ah the grass is perfect, looks green and even. I let it wash over me, newspaper; have to know what's going on around me. Back in. Casey sets the pancakes in front of me, I still feel the calmness. Mornings outside of the city are beautiful, serene, perfect...

So what is happening? This team beat that one, this politician is corrupt, exhibit at the MET tonight. Casey might like that, I have no idea what's going on at any of the exhibits, but she does, and she also does her best to explain it to me, it's not that I don't appreciate the art, it's just I don't see what's special about seeing it in person, why one needs to see it, you can see it on your phone. To each their own, Casey doesn't see how burying myself in legal paperwork bring me joy either, but it doesn't affect our relationship. I'll pick up the tickets on the way back. Keys. Check. Wallet. Check. Briefcase. Check.

"Goodbye babe"

"Bye honey"

*7:00 AM*

I always found driving relaxing, I love Casey, and there is nothing better than snuggling up to her on the couch and watching our favorite 90s movies, but from time to time, one needs peace and the ability to sit alone with ones thoughts or think of nothing. This time, I didn't find it as relaxing as usually, the stress of the promotion was overbearing. The fear and dread of not getting that promotion was even worse. Then a thought began to creep up on me, the weights, how could I have forgotten them, I never forget them, I'm a perfectionist, I groom and keep neat, I finish every case I get in record time and in an exemplary manner. What if I wasn't? What am I doing? It was a onetime thing; it's not repeated behavior, not instilled in me. I strive for perfection and I'll be damned if I don't achieve it, weights are inconsequential to this. I need all my energy for the deposition today, it needs to go well. My career depends on it. Casey is counting on me. She's been supportive through it all.

Driving is therapeutic. I remember when I first got the job. I soaked through my shirt in the interview, I was sure bombed it, there was no way I'd get a call back; driving helped me regain stability... My phone is ringing, it's Casey.

"Hey babe, I was wondering if you'd be interested in going to an exhibit tonight."

"At the MET?"

"Yes? How did you know?"

"I read about it on the paper this morning, I was going to surprise you but you beat me to it."

"Great minds think alike, right?"

"Oh well I don't know if I might be as great as the Renaissance woman."

"Don't beat yourself up, we can't all be perfect."

"There's the cutting with."

"Best of luck at the deposition today, love you."

"Thanks babe, love you, too."

The one central balance in my life is Casey; she always brings me back from the darker side. She stuck by me throughout some of my toughest times when I couldn't even get out of bed.

If I bomb this deposition today, I will have some new trauma to obsess over. No. You've been working on this case for months, late hours. Hours that should have been spent with Casey. She's been such a saint this whole time. People understand once you give them a chance, I always assume the worst, I always think of myself as a burden. Ironic, a lawyer who doesn't accept the evidence. Focus. As you should have focused to put the weights back. There it is again. Those damned weights.

In no time I'll be at work, boss will be breathing down my neck. I'll just clear my mind driving and focus on the road, warm myself with the thought of Casey's smile.

8:00 am

All these bastards, with their phony smiles. They all want the promotion as bad as I do, and they'd step all over me to get it. My assistant. The only person I tolerate here. Young kid, ambitious, does his job, and does it well. I got lucky, good assistants are hard to find, and taciturn assistants are even harder. She would have been good at any advertising firm, her networking skills are unprecedented. Made a good coffee.

"Aspirin now."

"Yes, boss."

Massive headache. Stress probably. Need the Aspirin to keep me grounded and back on track, I have a lot of documents to pore over and prepare for this deposition. No such thing as too much huh? Thank god it stops at the Aspirin, could have been worse, no scotch in my office, no celebratory drinks. My old man was a mean drunk; I vowed never to be like that. Alcohol, drugs, they all ruin a person, bring out the worst. All I crave is to finish everything and do all I can to bring harmony to my life, I adore perfection. I don't expect it from others, but need it from myself. Like putting the weights back? Ah my aspirin.

"Here ya go."

"Thanks, kid. What's the schedule for today?"

"They moved up the deposition, scheduling conflict, it's at 1."

"Good gives me more time to prepare."

"You still need more preparation? Your level of perfection should be imitated by most people in this office."

"If you got a job, you better do it right."

I watch the Aspirin dissolve, the bubbles rise and disappear. As in life huh? Something therapeutic about it, watching them rise and dissipate in the air. I'm always looking for something therapeutic, escapism. The tablet is gone; the water has that white color, ready for consumption... That's better, it helps, and it really does. I can feel the headache subsiding now, not fully gone but tolerable. Grizzly murder didn't think I would have the stomach. I'm not saying my client is guilty, but this deposition has to go well. Murder. How does one even do it? I mean, what's going through your



head at that moment? Knowing you have the power to end a life. Knowing you did end a life. Looking at yourself every single day and thinking what a dirty bastard you are. I think its weak, especially this, man murders wife, presumably, because the situation hits the fan. No self-control. The horror he must have felt upon realizing what he'd done, or was there no feeling of guilt, did the realization of what had just transpired, numb his senses? Kill every nerve ending and make him incapable of feeling guilt or any remorse. I say again, my client is innocent until proven guilty, but how, no alibi. I wish it were that easy. It's gotten mass media attention too, they swarm like flies whenever they hear of anything like this happening, all they can sell is fear and horrors, they don't want the truth, they want sales. This sells and it sells damn well.

How am I going to spin this? There is nothing, not a shred of evidence proving the contrary, and yet not a shred of evidence proving he did do it. The woman's face was mutilated beyond recognition. The husband is a nobody, allegedly he was getting wasted in a pub during the time when the murder occurred, but there is no one to back his claim, it's a he said, she's dead case. I need a breather, I've been going through all these files for days, going through similar cases, and they're all cold cases, lack of evidence, evidence insufficient. What is sufficient?

*9:30 am*

I was going insane in that office, locked in, hitting every possible wall there was. Nothing. Walking around the building. Look at all of them, every one of them smiles, as if they're my friends, but deep down they want me to fail, they want that position as much as I do. Rooting against your own coworker. Isn't our job supposed to be helping people? Even doctors, they save lives, but they want something in return, not just money. Attention. Fame. They adore the spotlight, live for it; they wouldn't know what to do without it. I'd like to believe I'm the exception, but I'm no different. I'm just as bad. If not worse, I lie to myself that I'm doing it for Casey, to be able to give her all she deserves, deep down I know it's all for me. They owe me that position, I deserve it.

The break room. No break here either, it's full of these odious faces. Keep proper decorum. Stay calm.

“Hey! Working hard or hardly working?”

Ben, despicable little pest, can't stand him, always acting nice, while not having a nice bone in his body, always making a bad joke and always trying to rouse a reaction out of everyone with thinly veiled insults. He wants a reaction, needs it, he'll use it against you. Anything you say can and will be used against you, it's one of the first things we learn. Make you seem unbalanced, crazy. Breathe. Focus. Casey.

"Hah well you know me, always trying to put the hours in."

"How's everything with the case? Anything come up?"

"Nothing yet."

"Something is gonna come up. You have a lot on the line, wouldn't want to disappoint anyone."

There it is, he goes straight for the neck, his preying eyes now lie in wait. He's not a predator. More like a fisherman, throwing the reel in and waiting for something to bite. If I bite that hook there is no going back, why would I bite? It's comfortable in the water. Water. Ocean. Calm.

"I don't think it's gonna be a problem, you know how it is in our line of work. Unpredictable"

"Indeed"

Can't let him get me down. This isn't all a façade. I am a great lawyer. Infallible. I try to be. This little weasel is not going to get into my head. Not today of all days. Can you imagine the disappointment? Casey's sad eyes, if I were to tell her I failed. I couldn't do it. I couldn't do my damn job. She's so ambitious, does everything. She'll run to Alaska at 4 in the morning if her job required her too. Yet she doesn't know this kind of pressure. Creating art is hard sure? But having a man's future on the scale is even harder. It's not just my career on the line; it's his life on the line. I'm fighting for him. Hard not to crack, especially when the cards are stacked against you.

*11:30 am*

Nothing. NOTHING. I stare at a case file, the words have become meaningless, and the page might as well be blank. I'm starting to hate this guy, loathe him. He's just a weak prick who couldn't take it anymore. What did she say? I wonder. Did she insult

him? Tell him off for the liquor on his breath. I've seen it many times, my dad always got told off, but he'd just walk away with his tail between his legs, if only he had the guts to kill my mother. Can't stand her, I'm glad I got away from her. There is no other hope in small towns, you either get away or rot away. What pushed this bastard over the edge? What made him stab her, mutilate her, not even her own family could have recognized her, but these two have no family. The neighbors knew nothing. He's a nobody. What am I even saying? I'M DEFENDING HIM. Not persecuting him. It's a perfect crime I have to say. No DNA. Nothing.

Even this pity excuse of a human can do everything perfectly. Envy? What am I envious of? I'm talking about a killer, am me losing it? It's not even about the promotion anymore, I just want the answer. Who did it? If not the husband. Who? There is no one. Maybe the neighbor, she did report the crime after all. Trying to pin it on the husband. Could it have been a jealous lover? Crazy ex? She had no ties. No record. Nothing. The husband won't reveal anything. He was drinking. Why was he drinking? What's he running from? Why is he hiding?

"Boss, you okay?"

"Yes"

"You've got that glazed look over your eyes"

"I'm fine."

"Right, well I'm off to lunch"

Lunch, yes. Great idea. I'm hungry. Empty stomach doesn't do well under pressure.

Where to? There is an abundance of great places, especially in New York; this is the city that never sleeps after all. Never starves either. Could go for a classic and just have pizza or is that too blue collar for me? Not going to any of the brunch places, that's too upper east side. Ah perfect, a diner, not a hole in the wall. Empty table at the corner. Perfect. Silence. Waiting, always hate this, having to wait, in silence, sitting there looking like an idiot, everyone probably thinks I got stood up, or something or other. Waitress, great. She seems nice.

"How do you do. What can I getcha?"

"BLT no mayo and a Coke."

“Nice and simple, I like it. Anythin’ else for ya?”

“No that’ll be all, thanks.”

“Ma pleasure”

She was nice, the southern accent really sells it. Not too many good things I can associate with the south, grew up there and hated every second of it, thank god they had buses so I could get away. Awful place, but seeing a southern face in New York is not bad. They’re much nicer than the actual southern people, they came here to follow a dream and are full of hope, they’re young, they’ll learn. My cynicism is rearing its ugly head as always. It worked out pretty well for me, but I had no dreams or goals, I just wanted to run away after school. I never knew I’d be here today. My food arrived. It doesn’t look like much, but I don’t need much. I’m here for a break, not for gourmet dining. Another form of therapy?

“Here ya go, enjoy!”

“Thank you.”

It’s big, will I be able to finish it? Shut up and eat the goddamned sandwich. Big bite. It’s full of flavor. Hitting every tasted bud, I feel juice dripping down my cheek. It may not have looked like much, but this was a pleasant surprise. Even the coke tasted superior, it was just a normal coke, but the rest of the experience elevated it to a higher level, made it like some magical elixir. If this was my last meal I would not complain. Perfection. Everything seems to lead back to it when I’m in the conversation. What is my obsession with it? Is it because I never saw it from anyone around me? Did I always expect everyone to be perfect and they let me down without ever knowing it? Those damned weights. I feel my toe again.

“Taking a break I see.”

Ben, I’ve never been happier to see this sniveling rat, I guess if you don’t want to be lonely, the company which you’re with doesn’t really matter. I just want a break. Harmless banter with this goon won’t hurt.

“Yes well I can’t permit myself many, unlike some.”

“How’s your case coming along?”

“It’s coming. Hit a little wall but nothing I can’t climb over.”

“I’m sure you will.”

“So what about you? Any cases? Or have you been too busy interrupting lunches?”

“Didn’t realize I was interrupting.”

“What’s done is done, you might as well stay.”

I hear the click clack behind me. The waitress.

“Hiya, willya have anything?”

“Just a coffee.”

“C’ming right up.”

“She seems sweet, especially from behind.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

Of course he’s a pervert, the kind of guy who thinks that women wear make up for him. He walks into a bar and thinks every woman’s heart skips. Wouldn’t want to knock him off his own pedestal.

“Yes, you’ve got a hell of a wife, why should you care.”

Trying to get me to react. Resist. Give him nothing.

“She is great.”

“I said that.”

Have a sip of coke, relax.

“Here’s yer coffee sir.”

“Thanks sweetheart.”

My restlessness is gone; I’d rather get back to work at this point.

“Ben. A pleasure as always”

“Indeed it was.”

The urge to punch this man is great. I learned to control myself at a young age.

Expressing your opinion is dangerous. Reacting is detrimental. Punching him in the face would just be self-destructive. So I shut up. Get back to the office and bury myself in my work. I always crave a good case.

*12:30 pm*

The wall is still there. Impenetrable, doing anything would be better at this point. Spoke to the persecutor, they have nothing and neither do I. They can't prove he's guilty, and I can't prove he's innocent. It's a stalemate, no evidence; it should be a cold case. Yet something's gnawing at me. I have to find out. The persecutor is breathing down my neck; he doesn't want to give up either. It's a long standing rivalry between us; we've butted heads on more than one occasion. He does not give up, and I'll be damned if I do.

I have to mentally prepare myself for this deposition, the neighbor, maybe she can help enlighten me on this whole situation and give me something resembling an answer. Answers I so desperately crave. I need to do this; I need to prove I'm a great lawyer. A perfect lawyer. Who am I proving myself to? Casey? No, she's always assuming the best. Her sunny disposition is juxtaposed to my brooding. My father? Couldn't care less about him. Mom? I think I've called her once since I came to New York. I don't crave a relationship with them, Casey is very close with her parents and yet I don't envy that. She has parents that are worth being close to, warm, kind. Decent people. Do I want to desperately prove to myself that all my hard work was not in vain? The American Dream is still alive? Heh, I'm not that patriotic. I'd be just as happy in Italy. Deposition. OK. Preparation. I'm more than ready.

I need this confession; I need her to say something. Wait. Something. The neighbor knew the husband was at the bar. How? She knew so much about the husband. Where he worked. How he talked. She knew about his drinking issues. His problems with the wife. She claims she was a close friend to the wife, yet she knew nothing about her. Why would she pin it on the husband? She killed the wife because she loved him. He rejected her? Why not take care of him too? Tie up loose ends? She claims to have also been out that night. Her friends can vouch for her. What about a space? A period of time when she might not have been there. How long would it take? It would explain the mutilation. It wasn't the husband lashing out, picking up a knife and stabbing her in the heat of the moment. It was deliberate it was fueled

by hate and rage and most importantly. Desire. Of course it was the neighbor. The jealous lover. The classic trope. I have my smoking gun. I need this case. I have this case. I have the promotion. I am the perfect lawyer. The end all be all. I did it.

1:00 pm

Walking into the room. I feel utterly confident. No sweaty palms. No labored breathing. No light headiness. A slight sting in my toe. Inconsequential. I look at her. Filth. An act of passion. Human nature got the best of her, she wanted to clear the competition at any cost, and she didn't realize it would take her out of the race. The murder was premeditated, but the aftermath was not. Did she tell the husband? Why isn't he coming out with anything? A classic he said, she said. She's more believable, well established member of society, preschool teacher, enough volunteering to put Mother Theresa to shame. Was the love unrequited, this obsession, infatuation? It was her down fall. They say love will make you do anything, but no one thinks a lover will go this far. Was there an affair? Did he break it off? Fueled by the rage of rejection, she wanted to eliminate the only obstacle in her way.

Look at her. Sitting there. Not even a bit of sweat. I eye her. She stares back. Cold faced. She believes she's innocent, has she lied to herself.

I sit down, calmly, nonchalant. I take a deep breath and I begin.

"Miss, you're the only witness we can get for this case. Would you like to recount the whole story for us?"

"Of course, I was coming home from a late night hanging out with my friends, and I saw my neighbors' door wide open, I thought there may have been a mugging, I called the police, and went ahead and sat in my apartment until they came. I knew the husband was out. He usually went drinking on Saturdays. I had heard them fight a lot recently and seeing as he was the only person that could have done this; the police made him a suspect."

"When coming from this night out, did you happen to walk or were you driven?"

"I walked since the club was near my house, and I do not usually get very intoxicated when I go out."

"Were your friends intoxicated?"

“Moderately so”

There it was the last thing I needed to end this. Walking distance. Her eye witnesses were intoxicated. She could have slipped out easily, and gone unnoticed. I have it. Let's end this.

“My idea is the story is different, there is no evidence of the husband actually having committed the murder, but you claim to be close friends with the victim, and yet knew nothing about her. You did however; know everything about the husband, the man whom you loved.”

My heart is racing now. The words keep coming. I don't know what I'm saying any more, but I know it's right.

“The wife was the only obstacle; you slipped out of the club, cold heartedly murdered the wife, so you could be with your true love, the one person you would have done anything to be with, your deepest, darkest desire. You went to tell this to the husband, expecting a positive reaction. Finally, the one obstacle in your way was gone; you had taken care of it all out of love. You murdered the wife, and expected to get away with it and get the guy. Something happen although, something you could have never expected, the husband didn't want you, he looked at you as if you were a monster. Heartbroken, you decided to pin it on him.”

“WHAT? Are you insane? I want to leave now.”

“NO, YOU CAN'T LEAVE, YOURE MY LAST MEDAL, ALL I NEEDED FOR ETERNAL SUCCESS.”

“Sorry to interrupt.”

I turn around, to my disgust, it was Ben.

“The husband just confessed, but great show, a little too much hoop jumping for my taste. There was something Shakespearian about it although.”

NO. It can't be. My career. My research. It all didn't stay afloat. My promotion. I can't be wrong. I wasn't. Ben is lying. He's trying to make me seem wrong. I know I'm right. I feel queasy. My vision is blurred I have to get out of here. I head for the door. Only to be stopped.

“Wow, buddy where do you think you're going? We need to discuss this with the



seniors. Hope it won't hurt your promotion.”

This bastard, he waited, I knew he waited. He expected me to self-destruct. Look at his ugly mug. I tighten my fist and unleash it at full force against his face. He goes down. My fist is throbbing. I feel content. That's something I wanted to do for a long time. I look down at him. Blood spewing out of his nose. I dash away. Front door. Parking. Where's my car. There. I get in and start driving.

What just happened? I'm driving now, therapeutic, I ponder. I had lost it. I was driving. Directionless. I didn't want to think about anything. I know I was right. They were wrong. The neighbor did it. I know.

I pull up to a little pub. Everything else went to hell, why not destroy myself too. I walk in. It's a dark little place. One single light bulb. Long bar with a few booths. I like it. Gives me privacy. I sit at the end of the bar. Awaiting. Look at all these pricks. Sitting here. At 1 pm. Drinking. Escaping. I guess they're my people now.

“What'll it be?”

“Bourbon, neat.”

“Coming right up.”

He sets a coaster in front of me, with such ease, his job is easy, no room to screw up. I stare at the coaster, this is where I wanted to be. Far away from that office. The prospect of the promotion, all of that. The bartender sets the drink in front of me, I thank him. I pick up the glass and drain it. There is a slight burn; I feel it for a second. It's gone. I feel nothing. I order another. Drain it. Another. Drain it. It's the only comfort I can find right now. It feels good. Right.

3 pm

I had been drinking for hours. Sulking. I had to get leave. Go home to see Casey. I leave the money for the drinks. I get up. Woah. Can't stand. Swaying. Can't see straight. Blurry. Bathroom. I go into one of the stalls and kneel down. I begin to vomit. Everything is coming out. The BLT. The liquor. Breakfast. Finally I am able to get back up. I'm still drunk but feeling better.

I head outside of the bar and breathe in the New York air. Full of smog. Stinking. I

still love it. I love this place. I'll find a new job; I'm not leaving the city. I head to my car and begin to drive. I shouldn't be, yet I do drive. I don't care anymore. If I'm lucky I'll crash. Not therapeutic this time. I finished my therapy inside the bar and paid the price in the bathroom stall. I sit there. Empty minded. What a curse.

4 pm

I got here in one piece; I drive around the neighborhood, looking at all the nice white houses, the picketed fences. A goddamn Norman Rockwell painting. That's the front image at least. Beneath all of it, they're all dysfunctional, narcissistic bastards. Stabbing each other in the back at every twist and turn. They hate each other but say "I love you". They marry for status. Their marriages are a sham. A business deal. High stakes escorts. I do a couple more circles. Pondering. Cursing. Does it all apply to me?

Finally I pull up to the road towards my house. I'm going fast. Who cares? Someone is in my driveway. I can be a hero. I saved my household. I can see the newspapers. They'll beg to have me back. I hit the gas and I hit the perpetrator.

I get out of the car to get a look at this cat burglars face. I get closer. Long hair. Golden locks. WAIT. Blue eyes. NO. The flowery dress. Her smile is still there even in death. Casey. I'd killed her. In my self-obsessed goal of being a hero. I'd taken her life. I was not better than the neighbor.

I kneel down. Tears stream down my face. I try to grab her hand. Hold it one last time. Something is in it. I take it. Bring it closer to the headlights. It's a pregnancy test. It reads. Positive.

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"Anyway yeah that's why I'm in here. What about you?"

My now cellmate starts talking, I don't listen; I just needed him to listen. Therapeutic. I get what I deserve. After all this time, my toe, it still stings.

*Mentor: Tihana Pavičić*  
II. gimnazija Osijek

*Eva Šalavarda*

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## **THE WAY OUT OF THE INSANE ASYLUM**

I have a mental illness, but I am not crazy. I prefer to be called abnormal. Crazy sounds kind of savage to me, but you will see that I am far from it. And yes, I have a lot of issues, but I cannot just get over it. And I would appreciate it if you would not judge my story by the chapter you walked in on. My name is Julia and I have bipolar disorder. Besides that, I love to draw, and I am rather good when it comes to poetry, at least if you ask me.

### **Julia**

“Eat your breakfast Julia!” My mom yelled as I picked through the food on my plate. “No, I’m not hungry, I told you already. Why is it so important to eat breakfast, I will eat later, I won’t starve.” “You know I have to take care of you, given your condition.” she replied. I shrugged as if I had no idea what she was talking about. I do not like it when she treats me like I am incompetent. It is not the same as being mentally ill. Given how much she reads about it she should already know that. Slightly irritated and angry, I picked up my bag from the floor and went to school. If you asked other teenagers what their biggest fear is, they would answer “that I will never have a boyfriend/girlfriend” or something like that. My biggest fear is my illness showing up in its strongest light at school. Everyone already thinks I am crazy anyway. But it happened. I was sitting in a biology class, listening to my professor, and suddenly I got an incredibly strong urge to say something. So, I did. I started talking non-stop. I was saying how great it would be if a man knew how to fly. I waved my hands hysterically as I explained my thoughts and promised the class and the professor that I would make it possible. Everyone looked at me weirdly, but I did not care at all. With a big

smile on my face, I ran out of school and ran all the way to the mall. There I bought the things I needed for my “flying man” project. I also ran all the way home with the desire to tell my mom my plans as soon as possible. When I came home and stood in front of the door, I felt a sudden drop in energy. I wondered how I even had the strength to run that much. I dropped the bag of things from my hand and lay down on the floor in front of the house. I lay like that, motionless until my mother saw me. She let out a piercing scream to which I did not react at all. She asked me anxiously what was wrong. I replied that everything was fine, I just did not have the strength to do anything. She tried to take me to the house, but I did not move. I clung to the cold concrete and she could not do anything about it. She had no choice and she called in professionals who work with people like me, you know, psychiatrists. When they saw me like that, they suggested that it was best to take me to a psychiatric facility for a while. So, to the insane asylum. I in the insane asylum, can you imagine that, with all these lunatics!! But my mother agreed with a heavy heart. And so, I began my stay in a psychiatric facility. When I got there, I saw a large, grey building. “It doesn’t look very hospitable,” I thought. I entered quite calmly, which was strange there. I knew there was no point in resisting the inevitable. I settled into my room; I even had a roommate. Her name is Elena, but that is all I know about her, she does not talk much. I tried to start a conversation, but she just shook her head. “You know it’s not very interesting when I have to talk to myself. But okay, I understand, you’re not very talkative.” I did not quite understand why she did not want to talk to me at least a little bit, yet we would live together for a while. I sat on a slightly hard and uncomfortable bed, but I cannot really complain, this is not a 5-star hotel. I decided that now I would be silent until Elena started talking to me. I sat so still and quiet for a total of nine minutes and thirty-six seconds. Then I could no longer bear the deafening silence. “Maybe you could show me around?” I asked Elena. “Of course.” “Well, you speak!” I said jokingly. Elena even laughed a little. “And why are you here?” I asked her. “And what do you think?” “I don’t know, I wouldn’t want to guess.” “Depression. You are here because of bipolar disorder, aren’t you? So, we’re kind of alike.” “Well, actually, we’re not exactly alike. It is harder for me after all. I get a sudden depression, it’s definitely worse than your condition.” “I wouldn’t agree. There will be dinner soon, come I’ll show you where we eat.” A narrow hallway led to a square-shaped room where everyone ate. Elena walked to the table where two more girls and two boys were sitting. “Hi guys. This is Julia, she’s new here.” “Hi.” I greeted them with a big smile on my face.

Elena

Hi, I am Elena. I have been in a psychiatric facility for 3 months now, and I am here because of depression. I even met some friends, which is unusual for me because I am not exactly extroverted. When I heard I was going to get a new roommate with bipolar disorder, I was curious because she might be someone I could, at least to some extent, identify with. Of course, it was hard for me to start a conversation with her. I thought, it would be easier for me to make friends with her if I met her with my other friends. That is what I did. I tried to mask my mild concern about the new friendship by confidently introducing Julia to the others. "Julia, this is Kate, Robert, Rachel and Luke. They are my friends here and often the only positive side of this place." "I'm so glad to meet you, I'm Elena's new roommate", said Julia. I was surprised at how friendly she was, nothing like me. Strangely, we have similar mental illnesses, and yet we are so different. Honestly, it discouraged me a bit, but I kept introducing others to Julia. "You must be wondering why they're here, aren't you? Well, Kate suffers from a conversion disorder, Luke from schizophrenia, Robert from a delusional disorder, and Rachel from a paranoid personality disorder. "I've never heard of a conversion disorder. What is it?" Julia asked. "Kate thinks her arm is paralyzed even though it's not and it's all just in her head, but the idea is so deep in her brain that she really can't move her left arm. She moves it sometimes when she does not pay much attention, but it is not enough proof to reassure her. " Luke replied. "What do you know Luke!" Kate shouted a little irritated. "Wow, that's crazy!" Julia exclaimed. "Well, isn't that why we're all here, because we're crazy? And Kate's gone well, some go blind or deaf." Rachel said. "I'm not crazy. Elena isn't crazy either. Isn't that right, Elena?" I did not know what to answer, all this created great anxiety and pressure for me. But I did not want to lose a new friend so I just muttered: "I don't know." Now everyone was already noticing my nervousness and drop in goodwill. I hate when that happens. So, I try to be as positive as possible around other people, even though I do not really feel that way. When people notice my depression, it is as if they are sinking into a state of inevitable sadness with me. They all become unusually quiet, but not because they have bad intentions, just the opposite. They want me to feel more comfortable so they adjust to my mood, but they do not know that it just makes me feel even more empty. If only I had the courage and will to say it bothers me, but that is not the case with me. I disconnected for a moment from reality, but I started paying attention again when I heard Julia talking. "I've only been here a couple of hours, and I already want to get out of here. But I do not want to go home. I mean I love my mom, but it all suffocates me. I just want to be free with people who can actually understand me." I went back to my thoughts again and thought how nice it would be to be free.

My parents left me here anyway and they probably have no plans to come back for me. I have no reason not to be free. At least one day. I winced again when I heard Julia shout. "So why not? That is a great idea. Why don't we run away? It cannot be that hard. There are six of us, they won't be able to stop us." Julia had her manic episode, and that means depression afterwards. "I'm with you, Julia, but we have to plan it well, yet it's not as easy as you think." Luke approved of Julia's idea. "I don't really trust her. She just came here and now we should all just listen to her?" "Come on Rachel, why are you so negative." "I'm not negative, Kate. I just don't trust her at all, and neither should you." "Why don't you listen to me, Rachel? That's a great idea and you shouldn't be against it!" The tension grew. Julia was clearly not happy that Rachel disagreed. I knew that now it was my turn to declare myself, but what can I say when I do not have an opinion. Julia looked at me with signs of anger in her eyes and without thinking I exclaimed, "I think that's a great idea!" Will I regret this? I reassured myself that Julia would change her mind as soon as her episode ended and she became depressed. I looked at Rachel and noticed how angry she really was.

## **Rachel**

As Julia passionately talked about her plan to get out of here together, I sat at the table with my arms crossed and felt the anger mixed with suspicion slowly begin to grow. I did not know how long I would be able to keep quiet. Julia did not stop talking and finally, my anger peaked and I got into an argument with her. How can she give false promises to my friends like that!? And worst of all, they believed her. Luckily, they have me, I am not so naive. Robert had not said a word all this time. That was my chance. I can at least convince him that Julia is not as reliable as everyone thinks she is and that we should not trust her. "Robert, can you help me get these plates on the shelf?" "Yes of course." I waited for us to move away a bit and then I asked him "What do you think of this idea of escaping?" "Nonsense if you ask me, we'd never be able to do that." "So, you don't trust her?" "Not really, it's all kind of too hasty for me." "I agree, I don't trust her at all. She's acting like she's been the leader of the group since she came." You know how Robert has a delusional disorder? I decided to take advantage of it now, I need someone on my side. If you do not know people with delusional disorders often misinterpret the situation. It helps me right now because I can convince Robert that Julia is trying to do something bad and will hurt others. "I'm just afraid she wouldn't hurt the others. Escape isn't harmless." "You think she wants to hurt them?" "I don't know, it's possible." "We have to stop her then!" At that moment, a great idea came to me. "Or we can let her carry out her plan and let others

see that she is dangerous.” “But you see they don’t notice it.” “They will don’t worry. We just need to show it to them at the right time.” “How do we do that?” “I don’t know yet, but we’ll come up with something.” Robert and I went back to the table where the others were. Julia had calmed down a bit. “What is it? You gave up on the idea?” “Not at all.” I went back to my room and lay down on the unfurnished bed. I took the pillow off the floor, put it under my head and closed my eyes. A loud scream woke me up in the middle of the night. It was coming from the next room. That was Luke. He was hallucinating again. He shouted at the window and stared at the wall in fright. It certainly sounds scary to you, but it is nothing new here. Especially when you are in the room next to his. I cannot say I get enough sleep often. When I went back to bed I could not sleep. I rolled over for the rest of the night. The next morning, we all found ourselves at the same table again. Julia was not in as good a mood as she was yesterday. “What’s wrong, Julia?” Luke asked her. “Everything’s fine, I just didn’t get much sleep.” I thought there would be no need for my plan anymore. Julia looked tired and unmotivated; she certainly does not even remember what she said yesterday about running away. For a long time, we all ate in silence, each engrossed in their own thoughts. “Let’s meet here at midnight,” Julia said suddenly. Everyone agreed so I just shrugged and said okay. The rest of the day passed rather calmly. Strange isn’t it? A quiet day at a psychiatric facility. All day I thought Julia had forgotten about the escape plan, but of course, she hadn’t. We reached the table at midnight. Everyone except Luke. “Where’s Luke?” Kate asked. “Luke can’t come. He has scary and disturbing hallucinations so he cannot get out of the room. He’ll be fine don’t worry.” I answered. Everyone immediately sank. Everyone except Julia. She set out resolutely to say, “I have decided it is best to carry out an escape plan.” I looked at her in wonder. “How?” “It’s actually extremely easy. We must do it at night, that is for sure. And we must do it separately. So there is less chance of being caught. We all have small windows in the rooms, right?” “Yeah, but you can’t go out through them unless you break them, and that would be heard.” “I know, that’s the point. We need something to distract them. The windows will do that. We will break them all at the same time and hide right away, but somewhere safe. Above our beds are the ventilation ducts. When we hear that the guards have come out to find us, we will come out of the ventilation ducts. Behind the building, there is a large field. It is deserted and the grass is huge so we will hide there for a few hours. At dawn, we will head towards the city. “

## **Luke**

After experiencing one of my episodes after a long time, I felt completely exhausted. I lay in bed all morning, barely able to drag myself to breakfast and refused to go to lunch even though it only took me a few steps to the canteen. As I lay quietly on the bed someone knocked on the door. "Come in," I said softly. Doctors who worked at the institution entered the room. They probably came to check on me after tonight's episode. One of the doctors pulled up a chair and sat down next to my bed, so close that I could hear his heart pounding. An expression of deep concern could be seen on his face. That phenomenon affected me so much that I became nervous. But why? I do not know, I guess I felt something was wrong. "I'm fine, Doctor, I really am." I looked him straight in the eye as I assured him that everything was fine with me now. But his eyes did not believe me, and neither did he. His eyes narrowed and seemed to get a little gloomy as he uttered a sentence that did not make sense to me at first. "You may be fine now, but not for long." Not for long? What is that supposed to mean? The doctor seemed to be having a conversation with my thoughts and he answered the question. "That means we've spotted a pattern in your episodes. And if we are right you should have them again very soon. We need to tell you that this time it is going to be a little worse than last time. That is why we came to be with you. If at all we can facilitate the process. " "But I am feeling fairly good. Sure, I'm a little exhausted from last night, but other than that, everything's fine." I did not really believe something so bad was going to happen. I admit I acted irresponsibly. I perceived the situation as frivolous and untrue. But I had no choice then to stay lying on the bed while the doctors sat and stood around me. I looked around and wished the doctors would leave me alone. Suddenly I saw a big hand going towards me, towards my neck. She grabbed me by the neck, and I started screaming. I only heard the doctors shouting "it's started" in a panic. I shivered on the bed trying to shake that hand off my neck. Who is this person? Why is he attacking me? I could see nothing but that hand. Everything else was covered with a veil of darkness. I just heard the doctors. They fought for me. They fought against that hand, against that terrible man attacking me. Their and my struggle lasted all night and only began to subside the next day. The hand loosened its grip, and I began to see shadows. I saw the shadows of the doctors who saved me. During the day, the hand disappeared. It left me alone. Robert came to see how I was. "Hey Luke. How are you?" "I'm fine now. It was terrible, and when I just think I did not want to trust them. I'm glad they stayed with me anyway. I couldn't go through it alone." "It was tense for sure. Good thing you were not alone. You see, that is why we should not run away. Don't you agree? It is too dangerous,



especially for us. We're not capable of going through life on our own." "You're right, we're not, but that's why I want to run away." "I don't understand, you just said you were glad you had someone with you." "Well, I was glad, but I can't do that all my life. I need to be independent; we all need to. And I cannot do that while someone here is watching every move I make. I want to feel normal, and this is not how a normal person feels." "You'll never be normal. How can someone with schizophrenia be normal? Do you hear what nonsense you're saying?" I do not know why he was so upset about it. For me, it was not nonsense. "Yeah, we need to meet at the table tonight to try out an escape plan, be there at eleven." "An escape plan? Did you come up with it?" "Unfortunately, yes, Julia came up with it. Anyway, be there and don't be late."

### **Robert**

You probably see me as a negative character. Just because I do not trust Julia. You also see Rachel as a bad person, don't you? That is not true, there is nothing wrong with caring for friends. Talking to Luke upset me. He is different from others, like all of us, but he wants to become a normal person. If that is his wish, there is nothing I can do about it. That evening we met at the table, as agreed. This time we were all present. "I'm glad you all made it. And Luke, I hope you feel better." "Yes, I'm fine now, thank you, Julia." "Julia please let's go with the plan already, some would like to go to sleep." "Yes of course Rachel. Luke, you did not hear the plan, so listen carefully now. "I didn't really pay attention to what Julia was saying. Instead, I looked at my other friends and watched their facial expressions. You would be amazed at how much you can learn about a person without her saying a word and only because of the facial expressions. I looked at Julia first, she had an excited expression on her face, and I could see how much this ridiculous plan meant to her. Maybe not so much the plan itself as the idea of freedom and comfort she felt when everyone listened to her and she was in the spotlight. Elena looked worried; I would say even scared. She doesn't talk much so you can't know exactly what she thinks. Luke had a serious expression on his face, he was focused on what Julia was saying. Kate listened to Julia just as carefully. Kate is a genuinely nice person, but a little naive. And in the end, I looked at Rachel. She could not stand this, her face showed that she wanted Julia to stop talking as soon as possible. When Julia was in the middle of her speech, Rachel kicked me under the table and showed me to come to the side. "Do you hear what she's telling them? She's completely crazy." "Yes, I know that. You dragged me here just to tell me that?" "Of course not. Firstly, I could not listen to her anymore, and secondly, I have an idea of how we're going to sabotage the plan." "I thought

you wanted them to realize for themselves that Julia and her plan were bad.” “Well, I did, but we don’t have much time left, and they haven’t changed their minds.” “Okay then, what do you suggest?” “We’ll sabotage the plan by confusing Kate.” “I do not understand.” “You know Kate is naive.” “Everybody knows that.” “We’ll use it. We all need to break the windows at the same time. And the plan can only work that way. So do not break the window on time, and since Kate’s in the room next to yours when she doesn’t hear you break the window, she won’t either.” That way more guards can go to their rooms and catch them. “It is not a bad plan. And what are you going to do?” “Absolutely nothing, I’ll pretend there’s no plan at all.” That was very cunning of Rachel. I am not sure if I feel like I am doing the right thing. But I cannot leave Rachel now. She is counting on me, and as her friend, I must do what I promised her. If only it was not so complicated. Think about how one event can change the course of your life. It does not even have to be a particularly big and important event. Like when we met Julia. If we had not met her this would not have happened. I would not have to turn my back on my other friends. If only Julia had another roommate, we probably wouldn’t be friends. But everything happens for a reason. At least I think so. So does this. And I hope that this situation will have a good ending. We decided we would try to escape tomorrow. That is it, it is really happening. “Don’t forget exactly at midnight, we all have to break the windows. All at the same time. I hope you all know what is next. We do not want our plan to fail. This is our only chance.” said Julia. When I got to the room, I could finally be alone. I spent that time thinking about everything that follows tomorrow. It is not a small thing. All this will be over tomorrow.

## **Kate**

Do you want to know how I feel about all this? I am nervous. I want to do that, and I support the idea, but I do not think I can hide my nervousness. Especially since I cannot move one arm. I think it will make it exceedingly difficult for me to escape. But I am optimistic, and I believe we will succeed. Today is the day of escape. My heart beats hard all day and I am waiting for the beginning of the plan. I was not able to function normally all day. I am sure the others are just as impatient. But the only thing we can do now is to wait and hope for the best. As we had agreed, we started the plan at midnight. I was ready to break the window and I waited to hear Robert so I could break it at the same time as him. The hands of the clock overlapped, and it was exactly midnight. But I did not hear Robert. A moment later Robert broke the window, so I did the same. Now I had to climb into the ventilation duct. It was

a challenge for me as I only had one functional arm. I tried to grab the edge of the ventilation duct, but I could not pull myself up hard enough to be able to get into it. I started to panic. What am I going to do now? They will catch me, and I will not be able to escape. I felt panic and stress began to overwhelm me. I soon started crying, it seemed to me at the time to be the only possible solution, although not highly effective. The guards entered my room. I knew there was no salvation for me now. I will not be able to escape, and I will never be free. They saw a broken window and knew they now had someone as a source of information to find out what was going on. They sat me on the bed and started questioning me. "What's going on here? Don't say you don't know, it's obvious you know, and you were involved." "Nothing's happening. I felt anxious and trapped so I broke the window. That is all. I am so sorry if I made a mess. It was not my intention. "Are you sure you have nothing more to tell us?" "Yeah. That's all that happened." I could not even finish the sentence when another guard entered the room. "We have to go now! We found five more broken windows. The children are nowhere to be found. We have to find them." He said they found 5 broken windows, which means they all managed to escape. I really hope they did. "Do you know anything about why there are five more broken windows?" asked the guard who remained watching over me. "No, I don't know anything. I already told you why I broke the window." "It's a big coincidence that you and the other five kids broke the window at the same time. I don't believe your story, and you understand why. So I think it would be best if you told the truth." If he already wanted to hear the truth so badly why wouldn't I tell him the truth? Don't worry, I won't betray my friends, I'll mislead the guards. "Okay, maybe I haven't told the truth before." "Do you want to tell me now?" "Yes, I'll tell you. They wanted to escape so they broke the windows and went out through them." "Thank you so much for your honesty. You saved your friends. Who knows what would happen to them outside. I'll let the other guards know right away." Was the guard right? Did I make a good decision? What if I didn't help them this way and they really do not feel good on their own outside. I thought about it for a very long time. The guard who stayed with me was silent and seemed absorbed in his thoughts. A couple of hours after the guards went out to look for Julia, Elena, Luke, Robert and Rachel, they returned to my room with disappointed faces. "We couldn't find them." When they uttered those words, I felt a sudden relief. A big stone fell from my heart. I didn't sleep all night. When the guards finally left my room, I tried to calm down, but I couldn't. I am trapped here, and now I am also alone. I have no more friends here. I decided before dawn to go out on the terrace at the back of the building and look at the field. I went there

hoping to see my friends happy and free at dawn, as agreed, coming out of the field. I stood there for about an hour, it was chilly, but I didn't mind. I just wanted to see my friends for the last time. As soon as the sun pierced its shining head above the clouds, I saw someone coming out of the field. I rejoiced, but I did it too soon. Only Julia and Elena came out of the field. Where were the others I wondered? Then I noticed Julia carrying something in her hand. It was a thick piece of wood, stained with blood. What happened in that field? I heard Julia say "Elena stop whining and let's go while we still can. Or I must remind you how you'll end up if you want to come back. Whether it's Kate or because you don't believe my plan, I can't risk someone ruining this for me." "But Julia, you killed them. I didn't want this, I just wanted to be free, but this is not freedom. I'll go back inside and tell them everything." Then I witnessed something I will never be able to forget. Julia slapped Elena hard on the head with a piece of wood. Elena fell to the floor and lay there motionless. I screamed and Julia noticed me. As soon as she saw me, she started running. Crying hysterically, I ran to the guards and told them to hurry up and catch Julia. A few hours passed and the guards returned, but without Julia. "Oh no! What did I do? I could have prevented all this just by telling the truth." The guards found Elena, Rachel, Luke and Robert dead. I was overwhelmed by the guilt I would feel for the rest of my life.

## **Julia**

You read that right, I managed to escape. They never caught me. If you are interested, I now live in Finland and am completely free. Who would have thought it would end like this? I seem to have lied after all when I said, at the beginning, that I was not crazy and nothing like a savage.

Mentor: **Dora Božanić Malić**  
Prva riječka hrvatska gimnazija

*Ana Šamanić*

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## **THE DEED IS DONE**

*September 9th, 1942*

*I was never one for fairytales. The naiveness and pureness of them always felt forced. Our world now is far from it. It's shattered in particles, each one floating freely about. We are stuck amidst a war, slaughtered on our own territory. There is little a woman like me can do, but still I try. Mother always assured me that hope will persevere, it will light the path ahead of us even in the darkest of times. And in some other times, hope might've been useful. But not now. Now it is one of our enemies. Because false hope gets you killed quicker than a handgun.*

*September 11th, 1942*

*Carrie Louise keeps talking about how her husband died. She wails all night and it echoes around the neighbourhood. That old lady who lives in the orange house down the street doesn't appreciate it. „My husband died too, so what. You don't hear me keeping the neighbourhood awake at night. It sure won't help bring them back. Not that, surely. “ Whatever she means by bringing people back, I don't understand. She has this cat that sleeps on the porch. You remember it, yeah? The grey one with forest green eyes. It always has a fixing stare. If I didn't know better, I'd think it belongs to a mage or a wizard, like in those books your brother insists are read to him before bed. He misses you a lot, you know. Can't stop talking about that day we went on a picnic. The day before you left.*

*September 18th, 1942*

*Carrie Louise has gone mad. She rambles about some sort of trials, something used to conjure the dead. It's getting out of hand. Someone said they saw her on the grave-*

*yard three eves ago, she was apparently searching for something. What she would search for in a graveyard at 3 am is beyond me but I can't imagine it to be anything good. One of these days she'll get sent into an asylum. Her mother is already looking for options, said she couldn't take it anymore.*

*September 24th, 1942*

*We've been looking for her for the past three days. Nothing, not a single trace. Carrie Louise slipped into thin air. What that girl has been up to, God knows. It seems she doesn't intend for us to find her. I wish her all the good, wherever she is. I hope she's alive, but with the number of wolves circulating around the town lately, I can only imagine... Her poor mother. First she lost her son, now her daughter. Horrible times, these are. You blink once and everything you cherished disappears.*

*October 1st, 1942*

*They found her journal. They weren't sure who to give it to, so they gave it to me, figured out we used to be good friends. I haven't opened it yet; I suppose I'm nervous about what I'll find inside. I feel so ridiculous about it. Am I seriously scared of what I'll find in a journal? I'll force myself to read it one of these days. If not out of curiosity, then for the memories the two of us shared.*

*October 6th, 1942*

*I started with the journal yesterday. So far, it's all the usual things. I think the first entry is from three years ago. It was when she and Ethan met. Can you imagine it's already been so long? She seems so carefree in these writings; it feels like nothing truly changed. Both you and I know those are lies. Even the two of us haven't stayed the same. I keep forgetting to ask you how you're baring with all the pressure. I'm hoping for a response soon.*

*Truly yours, Jackie.*

*October 15th, 1942*

*I got so entrapped within this journal, I forgot to write. Carrie really gave this her all. You should see all the sketches! It reminds me of the drawings displayed at the museum. Every line looks so effortless and clean, like she's planned each drawing for years. I never knew she possessed such talent. And to think she never even bragged about it is astounding. Half the town would be babbling by now if it were some other*

*girl. I suppose that was Carrie Louise; always humble, never conceited and honest to the core. Everyone says you should be good, treat people nicely and act like a saint. Well, Carrie Louise was all that. And look where it got her...*

*October 22nd, 1942*

*My God, Tom, this is... I don't even know what it is. These sketches show inhumane things, depictions of nightmares. Where she had seen any of these, I... It has a sketch of a decomposing body, Tom. With all the rips and holes and the worms. It's all rotten, it looks so foul. The worst thing is, it looks so much like Ethan. I'm not talking about small similarities. It looks like him down to a t. It's so horrible, Tommy, it keeps me up at night. Why would she... why would she draw it at all?*

*October 25th, 1942*

*Every new page is a new horror, Tommy. There's so many of them, so many sketches and writings and poems... There were four pages devoted only to Egyptian mummification and then twelve more about how a body decomposes. This isn't usual information. It's not like they write in the newspapers about these things. How did she even get to this? Tommy, it feels so wrong reading this, but I just can't stop. I can't cease to continue; it feels like I'm part of a crime novel and it's all so intense.*

*October 29th, 1942*

*I'm not sending you this letter, I already know, just like I didn't send the last two. You're lost there, doing God knows what. Are you alive, I have no way of knowing. They reported you as missing in action two days ago. I'm not worrying for you. I know how to fix this. I WILL fix this. Just a day more and you'll be back soon, I feel it.*

*October 30th, 1942*

*I found that place Carrie wrote about in one of the latest entries. It's a bit above the graveyard, the witch's circle. All the trees form a perfect circle. The headstones are turned to its center. She wrote about it being centuries old. There's a certain energy stirring in the middle, like an ancient force awakening. The wind always picks up when you enter it. I tried it five times, every time it was the same. I'll be heading there tonight. The deed will be done. You'll finally get home.*

„Hey, mom! Look what I found at the bottom of your closet! “ Her mother, whose name was Jennifer, climbed up the stairs with a rushed tempo. „You know, Lillian, I

can hear you just fine. You don't have to shout. " „But mom, look“, Lillian persisted. Her mother grabbed the box full of letters out of her hands. „Where did you say you found this? “ „Uhm, on the bottom of the closet, towards the back. It was covered with your old dresses “, Lilly smiled. „I haven't seen this in ages. These were letters your great-grandma wrote to her husband. You didn't happen to read any of them, right? “ „Nope“, she said, popping the 'p'. Her hand was behind her back, clutching something. Jennifer tried peeking over her shoulder. „Then what are you holding? “ Lillian drew her hand from behind her back, revealing a blue lollipop. „I bought it yesterday while I was out for a walk. Doesn't it look fun? “ Her mother rolled her eyes and walked down the stairs, still holding the box. Lilly quickly pulled out a book from behind the dresser and made a beeline for her room. She gently shut the door and shoved the book under her bed. Moments later, Jennifer came into the room, a small frown pulling at her lips. „There wasn't anything else in the box, right? “ „I didn't really get a good look at it before I called you, but I don't remember seeing anything else.“ „Nevermind that. Let's go set the table for dinner, yeah? Your father should be home soon. “ The dinner had passed in the usual manner and Lillian went back to her room. She changed into her pyjamas and was readying herself for reading when there was a knock on the door. „Just wanted to say good night “, her mother said through the half open door. „Night, mom. “ The lights turned off and only Lillian's room was in light now. She slowly pulled out the book from beneath the bed. It was made of leather, with intricate carvings on each of the corners and swirling letters she couldn't quite decipher. It looked like it spelled out '*orbis*'. Feeling the sleep wash over her, she slid the book under the bed and turned off the lights. Through the night, her dreams were chased away by a glowing circle.

„You know, if you keep doing this, it'll be a major problem. “ Lillian turned her face from the sun. „Just five- fifteen more minutes. I'll get up then. “ Silence settled in the room and she made the wrong assumption that her mom had left her to sleep. Someone yanked the covers off of her. „Mom, seriously?!“ „Your fifteen minutes last for two hours. Get up and seize the day. “ Lillian groaned with distaste and went straight to the bathroom. Getting ready, she shoved the mystery book into her backpack and rushed out the door. „Going out for a walk. Be back in two.“ The town was as still as usual. The winter wind didn't pick up its speed so it wasn't chilling outside either. It was a lovely day for a walk and for once, Lillian was happy her mother had woken her up. She found her spot free and settled on the bench. The book was in her hands seconds later. She studied the covers for a short bit before opening it. The old pages made a rustling sound, like protesting for being used. On the first page it was written



in bold cursive: 'Liber umbrae'. Pulling her phone out of her pocket, Lillian immediately went to Google to search up the meaning. 'Book of shadows', it said. Why did it sound so ominous and why did her great-grandmother speak Latin? Her fingers automatically flipped the page. There was a sketch of a tree circle, the wind in the centre making a swirl. She was sure she had seen it before, here in their town. Was it that witch's circle above the graveyard? She flipped another page. They were filled with beautifully written words but Lillian could not understand what they meant. It was a blend of English and Latin, interlaced completely. Even if she managed to catch a few words here and there, without the whole sentence they'd make no sense. Something in her brain clicked and she reached for her phone yet again. 'Book of shadows', she wrote into the search bar. Her eyes scanned through the information, eager to know more. She read through several articles, each one making her eyes widen even more. Pulling herself out of the trance she had found herself in, she checked the time before shoving the book back into her backpack and heading home.

„You're late, Lillian. “ „I just lost track of time, mom, okay? It's not like I've been that far off from the house. I won't be eating now anyways. I have to work on my homework. “ The rest of the day was a blur. And the whole next day afterwards. And then another. She had lost herself completely in that book. She slept little to none and the bags under her eyes only sunk deeper. The curiosity devoured her, the need to know it all pushing back her boundaries. She had promised herself not to get distracted by this book, she did. But how could she stop now, when she was the closest she ever was to her goal? Her research went on for days when it suddenly stopped. The book was no longer important. She slept for three full days. She was slowly recovering from the exhaustion. Then, she woke up.

It was around midnight. The pale moon lit her room with a soft glow. She got dressed and sneaked out the house, flashlight in hand. She didn't take the book; she didn't need it. Every line was imprinted on her brain. As she neared the graveyard, she turned it off. Nobody had to know about her intentions. She slipped through the gates and headed straight for the hill above. The wind sang a melody with the fallen leaves, seemingly making the graveyard even more eerie. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up at the sounds. She made it up the hill, reaching the perfectly aligned trees. As she stepped into the circle, the wind picked up its speed, whirling in between the trees. Lillian turned on her flashlight and pointed it at the ground. „Request, only one. Answers I seek shall follow my voice. Hear the fate, I will “, she spoke into the empty air. The trees looked as if they were slowly merging, entrapping her.

She shook her head. 'Focus,' she thought. „I wish to know who I am.“ The ground beneath her feet shook and crackling sounds rang among the trees before something emerged in the centre. She neared it carefully, each of her steps louder than the last. Shining a light upon it, she had realised it was a headstone. It was a headstone... with her name written on it. She backed up quickly, hitting the trees. She had really been trapped. „Tonight“, the voices whispered, and she became one with the ground again, this time for forever.

November 13th, 2019

Oh, mother, what have I done? I ruined that child's life. I ruined our life. Brandon-he won't even look at me. He says he doesn't believe me. That she looks too much alike her. And my poor Lillian, I had to change her completely. Her hair is now black and short and her eyes brown. She doesn't look like my little girl used to. But she IS my little girl, I know it. Under all of that she is still the same she was before it happened. She can never find out about it. About how that car hit her, and how she died, and how we lost her forever, and how I was so desperate that I had to do it. She can never find out because if she does, she'll go there and she'll die again and I won't be able to bring her back. I had to make it seem as if she was some poor girl I found wandering in the street. I managed to adopt her and bring her home. Oh, how happy I was to see her home! She tended to the flowers like she used to with that touch of hers. I swear, she could plant a lily in the middle of the Sahara and it would still grow if she would be taking care of it. „It's so uncanny how much she resembles your daughter“, they say. I just smile back politely and nod. I have 20 more years left, is what the whispers told me. When I did the process, before I got her back, that's what they told me. Just like they told my grandmother when she did it. When she made sure her husband was coming home. The process is always the same; you say the words, you make a wish and you learn of your death. I suppose it is one of the scariest things, learning when you'll die. But there is nothing in this world a parent wouldn't do for their child. It is what makes us so unpredictable. And till the day I die, I will do whatever it takes to keep her safe. Nothing will take my little girl away from me. That, I assure you.

*Mentor: Dora Božanić Malić*  
Prva riječka hrvatska gimnazija

*Laura Vidović*

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## **WHAT'S THE WORST THING THAT COULD HAPPEN?**

At the beginning of 2017, I opened the Notes app on my cell phone and started scribbling thinking it would be a waste of time, but my mom said it could help with so-called “unsolvable emotions”. I’d been feeling down for a while, seasonal depression hit me like a bus the year before and I couldn’t get out of it. I don’t know what it was, I didn’t want to leave my room, let alone the house, but thankfully, I decided I would finish the first semester of junior year at the online school. That was the smartest decision I’ve ever made and I was honestly shocked mom agreed to that, but she probably saw how under the weather I was! The only foods I would eat were Halloween candy and candy canes with occasional chicken nuggets on the side and usually, I’m the healthiest person I know, if I could say so myself. I was stressed because I felt like the career I decided I would study in university, pharmacy, wasn’t for me because as much as I liked Chemistry and Biology and just spending time in the lab in general, I couldn’t get a good grade no matter how hard I studied. All I wanted to do was dance, sing and act which I know aren’t safe careers, but it seemed like those were the only interests that made me happy. I also didn’t think I was a great singer because I’m a mezzo-soprano and the industry works by the system higher the notes, higher the paycheck. I do understand, but that didn’t help me as I’m someone who can hit only mediocre notes. I love dancing and think I’m pretty good, mostly in street styles, but I can’t even do a cartwheel, and let’s not even talk about ballet technique. I thought I was just average in everything I did and that wouldn’t help me in the future. I thought to myself that being average wouldn’t bring me to where I wanted to. I needed to change something, either stop being average or change my mindset about living a happy life as an average human.

When I opened my mom's Notes two or three days before 2047 to type out the shopping list, I pressed on the locked note out of pure curiosity. I, of course, knew the password because she used to use the same four numbers for everything that needed to be protected. She's really close with a few of her high school friends, so it was an obvious decision for her passwords to be their birthdays and not the birthday of her favorite and only daughter. It's fine, I'm not mad! She hasn't changed that password since 2019 and it honestly helped when I was online shopping because it was also the PIN for her credit card. I thought to myself *Mom should definitely change those four numbers!* and read the title of the note which was named "Future bestseller". It was last edited on January 1, 2022, and after a long scrolling, I concluded that those were her unsolvable emotions. One of the first notes of 2021 was "Who says I have to take a path that is flat and winds along the crystal-clear river behind which is a lavender field. There are a few giraffes and 3 baby elephants that look like Dumbo with their big ears and cute smiles! Also, there is a picnic basket with chocolate-covered strawberries and a bottle of pink lemonade. Although, I would most certainly have a strong smell of lavender attached to me, and Petra hates lavender... she would disown me! I can't let that happen! To the right, is a grove without a clear path full of rocks that I am not able to cross without a few bruises, maybe even some cuts and bleeds, but let's be honest, papercuts hurt so much more! At the end of that not-so-perfect path, I may have a field of sunflowers waiting for me... and I love sunflowers! There could also be 8 puppies and 4 cats, and those are much better than giraffes and 3 elephants because I can pet them and play with them! I could be wrong and I find neither puppies nor kittens, but what's the worst thing that could happen?" Only a paragraph was necessary to persuade me into spending the next 52 weeks typing random thoughts on my screen. I thought „writing unsolvable emotions“ would be a good excuse to spend more time on my phone and a good way to stop my mom's constant talking about her experience with writing everything down and how it helped her focus more. *I mean, I don't know, it might help!* is what I thought and didn't even know it would change me.

*The bird in our cuckoo clock just sang for the first time this year. Maybe 2047 will be better than 2046. To be honest, it doesn't seem that anything will change, but I hope that at least my mind won't be cluttered with random thoughts that only distract me. 2047 as a number is just ugly, it starts nice, with a twenty, but ends with a forty-seven. What kind of number is that? Forty-seven can only be divided by itself and one. It kind of reminds me of myself! I work well only with a few people, but if people are like me, a little strange, we click beautifully and create amazing things, just like 47 and 53 give a*

*hundred. Although, if I examine history with that number theory, 2020 was supposed to be a wonderful year, just look at how beautiful the number is - one twenty, and then another! Despite that, we've been learning about that bloody year throughout the whole first semester and we're nowhere near the end. If anything, the teacher is kind and often talks about her adventures from that year that has completely changed the way she looks at life. Mom said the same thing! She has learned to appreciate time with her friends, walking the school hallways, and good waterproof lipstick. These are such silly things from my perspective. I like spending time with my friends, but walking the hallways is a nightmare because there are always a few judgy stares for absolutely nothing. I dress up to trends and always try to incorporate some of my mom's old jewelry or dad's sweatshirt with some random basketball team on it. I would love it if I could dress as the girls on Pinterest, but I'm really tall! Maybe that's why they stare. Kids these days are cruel! Anyways, I have no idea what she meant with good waterproof lipstick, wasn't every lipstick good and waterproof in 2020?*

*Honestly, I would LOVE to experience one pandemic! That definitely sounds bad, but I want to change the way I look at the world. I want to appreciate every good cake, bad dad joke, or not so perfect selfie. When they say 'Think outside of the box' I sometimes think I do, but when I listen to my mom and dad's stories, everything I do seems average. Generation Z dyed their hair pink or turquoise when they were bored and drove through suburbs screaming trash music that kids now listen to make fun of their parents. When they didn't have any special emotions in them they would lie on the cold bathroom tiles and listen to songs about emotions they had never experienced because they were afraid of being tied up... maybe that was just my mom, she's kooky! They were afraid to order a pizza or make a doctor's appointment but were the first ones to attack someone's racial or homophobic actions. When they were doing online school because of the pandemic, one day, someone on this vintage app TikTok said if the ratings on the App store fell under one star, the app would be deleted off the store. So, they did what was obvious - millions of teens went to the App Store and rated all the learning platforms with bad reviews. If they put their that much effort to studying and actually being present in school, they would be unstoppable! Oh, and there was a band of 3 brothers who were famous so the Z's decided they would make the fourth brother more famous than the band was. They were named like Jones or maybe Jonas Brothers, I don't know, because they really did become irrelevant. Gen Z held such power, it was unmeasurable! My dad was preparing for 27 days to ask my mom out on a date and he is the most fearless person I know. Generation Z was weird, but they had so much fun even with phones in their hands at all times!*

*They set some standards for us without which we couldn't imagine living! In 2020 they still had races being addressed as black and white and had protests around the globe fighting for equality, and they most certainly fought it out because we don't even name races – we are all the same! Also, several of my mom's friends had to come out with their sexuality and were scared of doing that. I think that's insane! What was the world they lived in? Wouldn't it be easier for everyone if people loved and dated who they wanted and for others to not stuck their noses where it didn't belong? Oh, and when we are at the topic of noses, up until March 2020 they never wore face masks, not even in public transport, and when you'd search face masks on Google, cosmetology masks were the first ones to pop – up. That's crazy! I don't even feel safe walking outside my house and school without a mask covering my mouth and my nose, and I have a hand sanitizer in every bag I own... just in case!*

*I should go back to the fam. I'm a little sad I'm not with my friends, but I'll be coming of age soon and there will rarely be holidays when I'll actually be home, with everyone who's family by blood and also the family my parents choose to love as they were blood-related, although I really hope that's not true. They're opening the 4th champagne of the evening, and maybe they have enough alcohol in them to give me a sip or two! Anyway, I hope this year is going to be like 2021 was for my mom and even though I haven't experienced it, I would love to experience it in 2047. 2021 isn't a nice number either! (PS. I hope I don't forget that I started writing this because of my mom's notes and I hope I don't forget to flood the screen with my emotions at least once a week).*

I wrote this minutes after midnight hit at the beginning of 2047 and I'm so happy I did. My curiosity changed my life forever and I'm so grateful writing notes changed me and not a global pandemic as I wanted in my very first note! It feels like I was preparing for my kids and grandkids to see this in 20 or 30 years. Although, I don't think people will still be using phones as we know them. Maybe the plot from Back to the Future will actually come to life, after a whole century, and we'll finally have flying cars and those shoes that adjust based on your feet.

Now, 6 years later, I've stumbled upon the notes that changed my life. When I read what I've been through in just those 365 days and what my struggles were when I was 17, I wish I could go back. I typed my emotions on my cell phone, and to some of the notes I even added some melodies and the sounds of my purple ukulele, no one needed to hear or see them, but they allowed me to live my life to the fullest, at least for that year. Still, the first song I wrote, I published about six months ago and today it has over a million streams which is insane because who would've known

people would like hearing about my problems in a fun pop song. Maybe this will become the song that my generation, Generation Beta, lies on the cold bathroom tiles and scream their lungs out to. Maybe my songs will become the breakup and lost friendships anthem. Maybe I am my generation lyricist, just like Taylor Swift or Olivia Rodrigo were for my mom and dad's. Even my mom had a dream that came to life this year. She has truly become the author of a bestseller and the notes that she named Future bestseller, really became a bestseller. Her quirky stories, which she wrote 32 years ago, just because she was bored, now knows the whole world and they love her. I'm so proud of her for achieving her goals, and she also changed her password to my birthday which makes me feel more loved than usual.

Now, when I think about how in 2046 I thought I was just average and that was bad, I laugh at myself! Why? Well, I had a picture book which I liked a lot when I was younger and it was about a supernova. The supernova was always sad because it wasn't the biggest or the brightest, but then it found a place where it was appreciated. They named it the Sun and it's now the most important star for people on the Earth. So, what I'm saying is, average might not be a bad thing because there are so many people around us who love us and need us. I graduated from university and now work in a pharmaceutical company. I am happy to wake up in the morning and mix chemicals and after 8 hours in the lab, come home and record songs, dance around or prepare for a play I'm in. I've accomplished everything 17-year-old me only dreamt about. Maybe, you'll also figure something like this out and live your life to the fullest so, open your Notes and just go for it, what's the worst thing that could happen?

Mentor: Tihana Pavičić  
II. gimnazija Osijek

*Helena Lucija Vuković*

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## **COBWEBS & BAR CORNERS**

A girl was sitting in the corner of a small-town bar, waiting for a boy in a lovely summer dress, neatly pinned-up hair and a smile on her face.

As soon as he entered and her eyes fell on him, she stood up and opened her arms. "Oh, babe, you're here! I've been waiting for quite some time now, what took you so long?"

His eyebrows furrowed in what seemed like painful sorrow and his eyes refused to meet hers in shame. She either pretended she couldn't see his pain or time rendered her oblivious - he couldn't bare to guess.

"I'm— I'm here, yeah." He reluctantly pressed himself into her arms, and sat down across from her.

"I'll have a coffee with three sugars," she smiled at the waiter as he turned to him.

"Coffee. No sugar."

"What?" The girl chuckled. "You've never liked coffee!"

"Things change." He sighed and played with the napkin in front of him, anything not to look at the innocent ignorance dancing on her features. A fleeting thought marred his brain for a second, a silent, dangerous wish he had stayed in the corner of the bar with her, untouched by time and consequence.

But, if he had stayed, they wouldn't have to be sitting in this bar, and it wouldn't have to be this hard for him to leave the past and her behind.

"What's wrong?" She prompted quietly, as if a part of her already knew.



Like a broken record, he closed his eyes and uttered the sentence he had been repeating for two years, in the very same corner of the bar. “You have to let me go, Liv.”

A beat of silence.

“What are you talking about? Let you go? Are you—

“Yes, God, I’m—I’m breaking up with you, I’ve *been* breaking up with you for two goddamn years! I can’t do it anymore!” He shouted, not caring if anyone’s heads turned. There was so much pain and suffering in his strained voice, and then he looked up at her for the first time.

Cobwebs and dust collected on her pinned-up hair, her clothes were fading as time went on, but her face remained unchanged. The past was pulling her in and she embraced it, clung to it, as if the future wasn’t waiting for her out there - just outside of the bar. She was wearing her red summer dress with daisies on it, and it made his heart ache because the winter was raging outside of the bar doors. But, she couldn’t hear the wind howling mercilessly, inviting her to step outside into the real world, and she couldn’t see the snowflakes outside the window, promising to kiss the tears on her cheeks when she faced irrefutable verity.

He had no idea why he was coming back. He could’ve left her to fend for herself in the limbo between the past and the future, but they had that one thing in common - they both couldn’t let go of the past.

“We—We broke up two years ago, in this corner, in this bar,” he continued, forcing himself to maintain eye contact, “you didn’t take it well, you couldn’t accept it, so you didn’t. You stayed here just as you were that day, in this dress, with your hair like that and completely unaware of anything.”

She didn’t reply, so he went on, ignoring the tears of confusion welling up in her eyes.

“I’ve been here countless times after that. Some days I’ve tried talking to you like this, break up with you over and over again, and some days it would— it would just be a normal date with ice cream and laughter. I can’t do it anymore, Olivia. It’s,” he inhaled sharply, keeping his tears at bay, “it’s tearing me apart.”

“You’re lying.” That was the first thing that came out of her mouth, an attempt in denial which she was so well-versed in. Her words could’ve fooled him if he hadn’t looked at her face, her eyes red from the tears and her cheeks puffed. “You would never leave me.”

He pinched his nose and sighed shakily. "You can't keep doing this. It's destroying you just as much as it is me."

The waiter interrupted their conversation, carrying a single coffee on his tray and he set it in front of him.

"Uh, excuse me, sir, where's my coffee?" She questioned, but the waiter just muttered a 'Here you go, sir' to the boy and left.

"Every time we ordered anything here since... that day, you never got yours. You've tried with coffees, lemonades and ice creams, but the waiter only brings my order." He explained, but she was still looking at him with confusion in her eyes and furrowed eyebrows.

"You're the only thing here in the past, Olivia. Everybody and everything else moved on, but you and this corner stayed behind."

"You didn't."

"What?"

"Move on. You wouldn't be coming back here if you did."

That made him silent for a moment, made him think that he had finally made a breakthrough - because she hadn't ever gotten close to confessing her situation in the past two years as she did with that sentence. Then, it made him think of how he maybe never wanted her to come to terms with everything. Olivia was his memory come to life, the one thing in the past he could always come back to. If she made an effort to understand and to move on, where would that leave him?

*Did he move on?*

"What will you do if I never leave?" A question rolled off her lips that he wasn't quite prepared for. "Will you keep coming back? Will you ever be able to forget me, knowing I'm still waiting for you, every single day?"

He stared at her wordlessly, not sure if he knew the answers to her many questions.

"We could've had it so good," she continued, a lone tear falling on her cheek, "you could've chosen happiness with me, instead of... whatever this is. This is all your fault."

“My fault? How the— how is it *my* fault that you can’t grasp simple truths!?” He shouted. “How am I to blame for a situation I never saw coming?”

“I’m frozen here because of you—

“You’re *frozen here* because you want to live in a world two years ago, where nothing happened and it’s summer, and you’re waiting for me here for the first time.” He pointed at the table in an emphasising gesture, his voice and eyes slowly giving away the desperation that ate away at his heart.

His mind went to pick at that memory, the first time two years ago, when his palms were sweating and he approached the bar with heavy steps. The day he broke her heart, seemingly irreparably.

*Two years ago*

*“I’ll have a coffee with three sugars, please and thank you!” She smiled at the waiter, and looked at the boy expectantly.*

“I’ll have... uh, nothing.”

The waiter nodded and Olivia stared at the boy in confusion.

“I’m, uh,” he stuttered as he scrambled to find an excuse for her, “I’m not thirsty.”

“Alright... So, what did you want to talk about that’s so serious?”

He blinked a few times and he was positive he would leave a sweat-stained palmprint on the table with how anxious he was. Just because he couldn’t see himself with her anymore didn’t mean he stopped caring for her.

“Liv- I don’t really... I don’t know how to say this.” He huffed and ran a nervous hand through his hair. “I’m just-- God, I... I can’t do this anymore. Us. I can’t.”

He almost wanted to close his eyes and brace for impact, but he had to face the moment and look her in the eye, because anything else would be betrayal for something they once had. He expected shouting and broken glass, a scene that screamed heart-break like they do in the movies, but it never came.

She sat there, looking at the table in stunned silence.

“Please say something.”

“Is there anything I can do to make you stay?” She asked desperately, tears clinging to her eyes and he almost couldn’t bear to look at her.

“I—

“If there is, by any— any chance, that this could work...”

“—I don’t think there is. I just— I don’t love you like that anymore.”

The look she gave him in that moment, it could break a thousand hearts and then some.

It was the look of a person, a lover so desperate to clutch for something that is so far gone. She looked as if she could break apart at any given moment, or scream at him until her vocal chords gave up from exhaustion. She looked so broken, and he prayed she would find another who would fix her up for good. Perhaps even...

“Forever.” She whispered. “We said forever, you remember, don’t you? Under that... that willow tree and the stars...”

“I’m so, so, so sorry, Olivia. I—

“You never call me that.”

“What? Alright, Liv... I’m so sorry I couldn’t give you forever, but you’ll find—

“Is there someone else?” Her voice trembled and at his prolonged silence, she could come to a conclusion that she hopelessly refused.

*He sighed and put his head in his hands, deciding he couldn’t stay because that would be just about the cruelest thing to do in that moment.*

*“I’ll wait for you. For the entirety of that forever you’d promised.” She muttered, crossing her legs as tightly as she could. She leaned her head against the window and ...*

Stories like these, of the past, that are plagued with heartbreak and anguish are supposed to end only one way, with a sentence like, “*and they never saw each other again*”, perhaps a melancholic epilogue about the characters’ lives without one another, to drive home the loveless truth to the audience.

But this wasn’t like any of the stories that sit on the bookshelves with the number one bestseller title. These are the books that reside quietly in the nooks and crannies

of forgotten corners with no conclusion, waiting for someone to dust them off and write an ending.

Rarely anyone ever does.

He forced himself out of his head, out of the flashback tugging at his heartstrings and clenched his fists.

“I *am* sorry. I don’t know how many times I can—

“How is this fair?” She whispered, her tone desperately wanting to mimic agitation. “How is it fair that you’ve had your two years worth of goodbyes, happy and sad, and I’m just... stuck here?”

He sniffed, standing up. “You had one proper one, I’ve had hundreds of ‘*I’ll see you later*’s when I know, each time, that I shouldn’t come back.”

Their whole conversation felt off, as if the repetition of their meetings had worn off on them, even though she didn’t remember a single one. Their conversation had become a shell of the previous ones, because all the words had already been said, the hearts had already been broken and sometimes mended, every single outcome that could’ve been of him entering the bar and leaving it had already been done.

For him, the first few visits were heartbreak in its truest form, and the rest, a harrowing addiction.

Perhaps he craved the feeling of being so needed and loved by another that they are still waiting for him in the past. A sane person would argue that instead of love, that’s most certainly delusion; but there are no sane people in this scenario if one of them is stuck in the past by their own choices, and the other keeps coming back for them only to leave them once more, over and over again.

Recognizing the silence as a final one, he shook his head and put his hands in his pockets, heading for the door. “I, uh, goodb...” He cut himself off and chuckled with no mirth behind the action. “I’ll see you later.”

“Could you—could you stay? Just for a few more minutes?” She pleaded with big blue eyes that simultaneously resembled the moon and the oceans, how could he say no?

“I really don’t believe that’s a good— good idea...”

“I just want to talk, *please*.”

She was so small and fragile, crouched up in her corner, her own little pity party of cobwebbed heartbreak. She looked uncertain of everything except the fact she wanted him to stay, and he told himself a little white lie— *just this once*.

And if once translated to hundreds of times, then he would have no problem.

He sat back down across from her, and relief washed over her face as she reluctantly asked her next question. “Will you tell me... what happened when you first saw me here?”

“The day we broke up?” He questioned confusedly. “I thought you remember that.”

“No, no, not that. I mean when— when you saw me first. After.”

He shut his eyes, remembering the day and the fresh smell of her perfume which had faded considerably and he instantly wished it would just blend in with all the other days, not stick out like a sore thumb. That first day and the few following after were the worst.

“Are you sure—

“Yes.”

He hung his head low, but nodded. “I don’t know why I came back that day. I suppose I wanted to prove myself I don’t care, that I could sit in this corner and drink my beer and just get on with my life.”

She refused to meet his eyes, so he picked up the napkin he had fiddled with previously and twirled it between his fingers.

“When I got inside and I saw you sitting there... I completely lost it, Liv.”

*The second first time, two years ago*

“What are you doing here?” He furrowed his eyebrows and stomped over to her table.

She chuckled. “I’m... here for our date, you dork?”

“What?” The boy almost screamed out of disbelief. “This is... Jesus, what are you talking about?” His chest was rising and falling rapidly and he was positive that he could hear subtle ringing in his ears.

*“Babe, are you alright? Sit down, do you need some water—*

*“I don’t need to sit down, Olivia! What in the hell is going on!?” He shouted at her once more. “Please tell me you’re not going to be one of those creepy stalker ex-girlfriends, God, I thought we were good—*

*“Ex-girlfriends? What are you talking about?” She tilted her head and looked at him as if he had sprouted three heads on the spot.*

*He clapped his hands in an utter state of incredulity, running his hands through his hair. Approaching her slowly, he looked into both her eyes and was closely examining the rest of her features.*

*“Are you suffering from a stroke, Liv? Smile for me and stand on one leg, please,” he gestured for her to stand up.*

*“No, but I’m beginning to suspect you are,” she replied slowly, “what is going on here?”*

*“I--We broke up yesterday, Olivia? That’s what’s— what’s going on here.” The fact he had said the first statement as a question made it clear he was questioning his own sanity as well as hers.*

*The girl laughed. “What?Are you actually insane?”*

He decided to stop reliving in his retelling of the painful event abruptly, and she eyed him carefully, like he was the one falling apart and not her.

“What happened then?” She prompted, trying her best to conceal her glossed-over eyes from his ones.

“You didn’t believe that we weren’t together anymore, so I did what I knew best.”

She tilted her head and narrowed her eyes as to ask him to finish the sentiment.

“I left.”

“How did you leave?”

“Uh, through the door, I guess?” He eyed her questioningly.

He could tell she would’ve giggled if the situation hadn’t been devastating. “No,” she paused, “what did you tell me when you were leaving? Was it more of a... see you later than a goodbye?”

“That was the last time I told you goodbye.”

Her eyes were cast on the ashtray on the table, and just as the silence became too unbearable for him, she spoke up.

“So,” she licked her lips, “the whole point of all this is... me having to let you go.”

“I would say so, yes.”

She straightened her back and shook her head at him. “I don’t think you really have a firm grasp on what’s going on here.”

“What do you mean?” A glimmer of what seemed like disappointment flashed across her features at his clueless question.

“You just—just stop coming back here and focus on the one you left me behind for.” She fiddled with the hem of her dress grazing her knees, and all of a sudden she visibly shuddered. The hair on the back of her neck stood up, and she wrapped her arms around herself. She looked so frail and weak trembling in her small dress. Finally, the infinite summers were coming to a halt and for the first time, she felt the winter caressing her with its sharp fingertips.

He hung his head low in humiliation and defeat, a couple hundred of existential questions haunting his thoughts. “I—I’m sor—

“Current apologies for an unchangeable past are almost always futile. Save your breath.”

He slowly nodded his head and put his hands in his pockets. In moments like those, when their final moments would play out over the past two years, he always came to the same conclusion. It would have been so easy, if life always played out like the movies people secretly loved to indulge in - where everything is black and white, good and bad, and it’s so easy to reach for the happiest of endings. It would have been so easy, if loving and caring for a person were one and the same, and if you could never care without loving. And it would have been the easiest, if one day he just looked over at her in that bar corner, and realized he still loved her. If he had just picked her up and walked off into sunset with her in his arms.

But life never works that way, and that is precisely the reason for all those movies. To make us live vicariously through the characters with perfect happy endings so we temporarily satisfy ourselves by living in denial.



The saddest thing he realized over the two years sitting across from her was that he couldn't change the fact he didn't love her anymore no matter how hard he tried, or how many times he came back.

Ultimately, that led to the realization he wasn't coming back for her, but for himself.

"Goodbye." He half-smiled at her, trying to avoid the glaring pain echoing in his voice as he uttered that word for the first time in a very, very long time.

Just as he was at the door, she spoke. "Is she the one?"

The second saddest thing was that only one party would think about the answer, and it's the same person who asked the question. "Yes."

"Forever?"

"I—I asked her to marry me last night, Liv." He dragged the words out and almost squeezed his eyes shut as to avoid the pained expression on her features. "That's why I'm here."

"Oh." She tried her best to mask the tremor in her voice. "Congratulations."

For a brief second, he regretted making that their final meeting, but in the same moment, he tried to imagine how awfully tragic would a different outcome be. Him with a little more wrinkles on his forehead and crow's feet pulling at his eyes; a loving wife, kids and warm Christmas waiting for him at a place he could call home, and her, across from him, with the same dress with an unrecognizable colour and the cobwebs almost mummifying her. No one waiting for her, only her waiting for him, and the corner of the bar still being the place she called home.

"Goodbye, James."

He took her in one last time, and she no longer looked like heartbreak in its truest form, like someone who was forever cemented in delusions of the past she created for herself. She looked like someone who was tired of waiting and content with taking a first step into mending her broken heart. She was acceptance in its truest form.

Before exiting the bar, he took his jacket off and hung it on the hanger beside the door.

"It's freezing outside." And with that, he pushed the bar doors with all the strength he could muster, and disappeared into the freezing night.

*Ten years later.*

"Darling!" A woman's soft voice echoed through the hallways of the house. "You forgot your keys." She said as she caught up to her husband, just about to exit the house.

Taking it from her hand, he chuckled at himself and kissed her on her forehead. "Just what would I do without you?"

"Well," she smiled as she straightened his jacket, "you wouldn't have anyone to fetch you your keys fifty thousand times a week."

He put a stray strand of her blonde locks behind her ear and pressed a chaste kiss on her lips.

"We're going to have to unpack these moving boxes soon, you know?"

"Yeah, yeah, but first, you're going on a tour of the town tomorrow. Then we'll talk about unpacking. Love you!" He winked at her and she shook her head, letting him get out of the house.

Once he parked out of the driveway, he smiled to himself and silently thanked the lucky stars for gifting him a life wrapped up in the prettiest of bows, a beautiful family and a home that calmed his soul. If soulmates were truly real, a legitimate creation of the universe where every single person has someone tailor-made waiting to be found, he was positive he was married to his.

He had been living with his wife in his apartment for a few years, and when she gave birth to their gorgeous little girl, he decided to move them to his hometown and raise his daughter there.

Absentmindedly, he took a turn into a far too familiar street, the one with all the memories and the past.

Quickly realizing where he was heading to, he debated turning around and pretending he didn't remember a thing, but you can't always avoid your past. And even if he tried, it would be waiting for him, and he would have to pass the street sooner or later. He opted for the sooner version, and as he was approaching the place where the bar was, he realized that it was no longer there.

A sign was lit up in the front of the building that read *'Books'n'Coffee'*, and for some odd reason, he was compelled to park his car and go inside.

The feeling that resided in his chest was impossible to transform into coherent words, it wasn't sadness, and it wasn't nostalgia, but there *was* something there, perhaps even if it was microscopic, a quiet wish that the bar was still standing.

He parked his car and stood in front of the bookstore, remembering his last day standing on the exact same spot ten years ago. With an overwhelming desire taking over him, he pushed inside, wanting to know what had happened to the bar.

The bookstore was quaint and small, with a lot of pretty flowers and other plants interwoven in the bookshelves. A lingering smell of sweetness mixed in with the alluring scent of the beautiful flowers; he immediately knew he had to show his wife the place.

In all his awe, he almost forgot to ask about the bar, and as soon as he snapped out of his reverie, he noticed a woman behind the reception desk, with her back turned.

He approached slowly, still looking around and taking all the beauty in.

"Excuse me, miss," he gently called out for her, not wanting her to get scared of his sudden appearance.

"Just a moment!" She cheerfully exclaimed as she put some books aside on different piles, and turned around. "How can I help you, sir?"

It took him a few seconds for it to register, for him to make the connection and conclusion, but there was no doubt about it - it was her.

After all these years, it was her standing before him in the name of all things sealed in the past, and perhaps fate.

He thoughtlessly watched as she furrowed her eyebrows, him supposing it was her trying to connect the dots because it has been so long. He witnessed her cheerful expression turning into a perplexed one, then a head tilt of curiosity and finally the look of recognition in her eyes. His features were mirroring hers, he was sure of it.

She noticed that no words were about to pour out of his mouth, so she chuckled nervously, putting her hands up in a way that old friends do when they haven't seen you in a while.

“James! What— what a lovely surprise!” She smiled, and he made sure to analyze the sincerity of it, trying to see if there was any hostility dancing in her irises or a twitch in her lips as a sign of her holding back unsaid words.

Instead, he came up empty handed and realized there was no malicious tone in her voice and she looked genuinely happy to see him.

If he was completely honest, a part of him assumed she was still in the bar, and he was half-expecting to walk in and see her as she was ten years ago, but there were smile lines, longer hair cascading down her shoulders and there was the face of a matured woman. Not to mention, she wasn't in her red dress with daisies on it that would have lost all colour by now, there weren't cobwebs tangling in her hair and fingers - she was herself.

He wished to tell her a thousand different things at once; how truly happy he is for her, how alive she looks, how this was everything he desired for her... But none of it would stick to his tongue and come out of his mouth.

“James? Is everything alright?”

He blinked once, twice, and it came to his attention that he should speak to her, for the first time in two years. “Yeah, yes, of course. God, I just— we just— yeah. It's good to see you too.”

“Wow, we haven't seen each other in what, like twelve years exactly?” She remarked and crossed her arms, a thoughtful look on her face. “God, I feel too old!”

Just as he was about to respond nonchalantly and probably make small talk about the weather and nostalgia, her words ricocheted in his brain and he stopped himself before he could utter a single word.

Twelve years? Yes, it was twelve years since their actual break-up, but ten since they last saw each other... Did she not remember?

Choosing to ignore that, he forced himself to fuel the conversation. “So, what did you do, uh, after the... yeah.”

Not the best execution, but who could blame him.

“Oh, after the break-up? Well, as any teenager would, I impulsively packed my bags and spent the rest of my summer in a cute, little town in Northern Italy. When it

came to coping with things, running away was my forte, I guess.” She chuckled lightly and shrugged her shoulders.

That just wasn’t possible.

Was she lying to him, or better yet, lying to herself? What was going on?

*“You’re the only thing here in the past, Olivia. Everybody and everything else moved on, but you and this corner stayed behind.”*

*“You didn’t.”*

*“What?”*

***“Move on. You wouldn’t be coming back here if you did.”***

Memories of her words when they last spoke flooded into his head, and he could do nothing to stop them.

*“I don’t think you really have a firm grasp on what’s going on here.”* She said to him then, and perhaps he really didn’t.

The sole purpose of him coming back to the bar for those two years had been to get her to let go, but how was she supposed to do that if he was still holding her tight?

Maybe he was the one that kept her frozen in the past because that was the only way for him to leave her and keep a part of her at the same time.

*“You—You spent a summer in Italy, huh? Did it... help?”* He replied weakly, his head pounding from all of the sudden realizations crashing on him.

She smiled, showing off the gleaming diamond on her ring finger. *“Found a boyfriend there. We’re getting married soon, so I’d say it most definitely did!”*

*“That’s a-amazing. I’ve got a ring of my own, as well,”* he tried his best at a half-laugh and showed her his wedding band.

She let out an unintentional small gasp that he barely heard.

He looked up at her and she still held her polite smile, her face looking truly delighted at all the new information. *“So, who’s the lucky lady?”*

*“Oh, her name is Charlotte. We got married three years ago, and--and we have our*

wonderful girl Rosie... I'd say I'm a lucky man." He sincerely grinned, but his elated expression deflated once his eyes met hers. There was an emotion marring her features that he just couldn't pinpoint.

After a few beats of silence, he reminded himself of the question he had meant to ask when he first stepped foot inside the bookstore.

"God, I totally forgot to ask you," he facepalmed, "what happened to the bar?"

Something shifted in the atmosphere.

"They tore it down years ago."

The tone of her voice seemed somewhat nostalgic, and he understood - it was the bar where they spent most of their teenage years.

"Is this your bookstore?"

"Yeah! I discovered the love for books sometime ago, so..." She trailed off, and that shift in the atmosphere made him realize that it was time for him to leave.

He clapped his hands and clasped them together, looking at his watch.

"Well," he looked towards the door, "the wife expects me home soon, so..."

"Oh, right! I guess *I'll see you later*, then. I'm so glad we could catch up after all this time."

He was right at the door when he caught the mild emphasis on the usually common phrase, and it made him turn around.

Oh, how he wished he didn't.

The new clothes, the long hair and the big, shiny diamond all disintegrated into thin air, and her face morphed back into a nineteen-year-old. He clenched his eyes shut and opened them again, blinking hopelessly, trying to convince himself he was hallucinating.

"What..."

"I told you I'd wait *forever*."

