
~ ~ ~

-----The Truth-----

~ ~ ~

The brother sat in an old, knotty tree of an unknown species, in the backyard of his parent's home, reading a shiny yellow book. The thin cheap pages rustled like giftwrap. The sister ran to the fence gate, and hurried to get to the house. But with a quick glance across the lawn, she slowed and quieted. Carefully, from across the lawn, the sister approached him with a cheshire cat grin.

"Would *you* like to look out the window?" the sister said.

"What do you mean, *the* window, like there's only one window," the boy put down his book, "and if you haven't noticed, we're outside!" the young boy looked around quickly, and pointedly muttered, "*stupid*," at his sibling.

"What was that, I couldn't quite hear you?" the girl taunted.

"Stop it. I won't say it any louder than that and you know it."

"Afraid of the ears of the world like a baby, are you?" the sister laughed, playful and cruel.

"Well, mom said it was true! Do think she was wrong?"

"Well," the sister smiled and said, "maybe Mom *lied* to us," she spat the word out like oil dripping onto a hot pan. *Lied*. It stood there and sizzled in the air.

"What did you even bother me for, a window that you made up, just to bother me? *You're* the liar!" the brother had the spit, but no sizzle. His words dripped out with pride and easy effort, but the sister had inherited all of the spice.

Slowly, she promenaded her knowledge in front of her brother. "There is a window," she began,

"You already told me that!"

"But this window," she said, "is *different*."

"What, different from a door, or a book, or a food bar, what?"

"This window shows the outside."

"All windows show the outside! They show the inside too! Don't you even know what a window is?"

"I know what a window is!" she defended. "This window shows outside the ship."

"Have you been talking with the old Professor who lives in the little shack on Oak Street?" the boy huffed, indignant with his sister's foolishness, "He's almost a thousand years old. He doesn't know anything. Pretty soon he'll go off to live in a happy tank."

"He is nine-hundred and forty seven." The sister defended, "and he has more

than half a century before he could even apply for the happy tank. I was talking to him about the Truth."

"The Truth isn't real, everybody knows that." The boy slid down from the tree branch he had been sitting in. "The Professor is just so old he thinks he remembers things that he Forgot©."

"He didn't Forgot©. He opted out." The sister lectured the brother, like a miniature Professor herself, "He was an adult when the Government stopped the Truth. But the Professor never Forgot©, and he always remembered. Now he waits for the young and ignorant children to come to him, and he will teach them the knowledge that he kept, even at great pain to himself, so that they may carry on the torch of human achievement, to--"

The brother yawned dramatically. "Stop it, sis. If you keep praising him so much, you'll blasphemy against the Government."

"No!" the sister objected, "No, because I know the Truth. And I know it's true. It's true because the Government said so. But then, people stopped wanting to know, and the Government let them forget! Now I'm telling you it's true! There *is* a window! Help me find it!"

The brother huffed at the sister's temper and frustration, when suddenly through the air came

BE-ep

Attention: Kindly refrain from speaking about the Truth.

be-EP

Both children stood in silence as the the wind shifted through the trees. They shared a glance, confirming the experience in each other's eyes. Eventually, their mother called them inside for dinner, which was oddly quiet that night.

=====

Three years later, the father looked, worried, at the day's events displayed on his pocket-glass's screen, sitting at the breakfast table once the children left for school.

"I don't like it."

"Honey, no one does. This just too big of a mess. Even the Government admits they made a mistake in releasing the Truth, even though we know it wasn't their fault. Honestly, if people would simply stop over-reacting, life could be much simpler." the mother rambled, sitting across from him, as she fiddled with a screen showing models and scattered papers.

"It's not that, although you are right, sweetie. It's people! First they want the information, then they want to forget it! And so the Government lets them Forgot© it." the father made the sign of the G on his chest, like a half-hearted prayer for his

species.

"And they should have just left it at that." the mother said, darkly.

"And they should have just left it when the Government told them the Truth! None of this, oh, no thank you, sorry you had to go to all the trouble of getting me this nice meal, just give it to the dogs, *thanks!*"

"People can't make up their minds."

"Well, not in groups this size. This corresponding community is only 17 billion. I've heard the golden number for mass decisions in 5.7 trillion, roughly the size of the Government."

"Well, you do know things, according to your degrees."

The father laughed, and started to put on his tie, "That's debatable. Honestly, I learn more from the Sociologist's Union's trade classes."

"Well, if you learn so much, maybe people should listen to you more."

"Oh, listen to me? Honestly, one person can only learn just how little he knows. Now, people listening more to the Psycho-Analysis Collective..."

"That'll be the day." the mother rolled her eyes and laughed.

"You know, I've always wondered why our corresponding community is so small," the father said, getting his briefcase, "We must be on the far reaches of the Horsehead area, maybe our whole galaxy is orbiting a black hole or something. I mean, it's the Government's choice, the population, but it always seemed strange."

The mother turned away from her shuffling piles of papers she was preparing for work, remarking "Well, for such a small group we've still made a few decent decisions."

"You think?" The father was surprised.

"We knew that people couldn't handle the information. Even though the whole planet was buzzing mad and yelling at each other, we still managed to pull together and decide that something had to be *done*. And maybe it wasn't the best course of action, but the Government let it happen and that makes it alright with me."

"Wasn't the best course of action? Forgetting© was horrible! Removing information from a brain is horrible! We're still recovering from the side effects, two generations later. Reduced creativity, focus, and intelligence for a whole population, it's just... a tragedy."

"It keeps me in business." she replied curtly.

"Yes, and if you had to Forget©, you wouldn't be able to be the best architect you could be. You would be dulled."

"But everyone else would be dulled too. You may know what exactly forgetting does, but I studied how it affected the world. The art and architecture from the F-generation is some of the most varied, interesting, and pure demonstrations of emotion and function. Never forget," the mother pulled one of the father's well-used

phrases, "that *dulled* does not mean *bad*."

A short silence followed, and the mother rolled up her screen and stowed it in her bag, and carefully arranged the blueprints she was working on. The father calmed himself with a breathing exercise.

"The people never needed to Forget©."

"The people never *needed* to know!" The mother snapped. At the father's hurt expression, she hurt as well. She took a moment to calm her anger. And she sat across the table from him.

"Bad things need to happen, sometimes. The Government knows it."

"I know it."

"I know you know it. It keeps you in business, right?"

"It keeps us all in business. Keeps us all moving. The human race grows stagnant if it doesn't have something to adapt to. We can't be happy if we aren't sad."

"And we can't have art without adversity. I'm going to go to work now," the mother said as she got up and grabbed her bag. Both the parents were smiling now, and they'd laugh about the whole thing later, when it was a solved problem. For now they agreed to disagree. They didn't have the solutions, and they didn't need to have the solutions. After all, that's what the Government was for.

=====

Ugh. You were right.

And how was I right again?

Cool girls have boring sleepovers.

This is something everyone but you knows by now.

But they're models! I thought they'd talk about...

I don't know, being models!

What are they doing?

They're all painting each other's nails.

While studying.

And talking about *diets*.

I'm so bored.

You must be. You're texting your brother
at a sleepover.

They don't have any food here. I managed to find
a food bar at the bottom of my bag, but I thought they'd

have fun food, like normal people have at a party?

These are not normal people. That's why
you went to this party, right?

UGH

So, not that I'm unthankful for a distraction from
calculus, but why text me of all people?

Because I forgot to tell you something.

Remember that window that the Professor used to
always talk about?

Stop being vague and cryptic.

I'm not being vague and cryptic

Yes you are

No I'm not

Then tell me what you're talking about!

I'm talking about the window!

Thanks. That tells me so much.

Shut up

Suddenly all my questions have been answered.

shutupshutupshutupshutupshutupshutup
shutupshutupshutupshutupshutupshutup

That's a great rebuke. I'll have to rethink my whole
argument

shutupshutupshutupshutupshutupshutup
shutupshutupshutupshutupshutupshutup
shutupshutupshutupshutupshutupshutup
shutupshutupshutupshutupshutupshutup
shutupshutupshutupshutupshutupshutup
encejnwjwnoicmimaimiocjionfui

How are you even on the debate team?

But I think I found the window

What

You mean the one that doesn't exist, that you made
up when we were young

No, I found the window

Then send me a picture of this real window

I took pictures

Send them to me

But they were deleted from my phone

No, it's not real

Look, the day after tomorrow's Sunday, alright, we'll go look
at it tomorrow

It's just out past the woods, only a little ways in

Can you describe this very real window

It's hard to describe

It generally is hard to describe things that aren't there

I'm waiting

It's like a chunk of the world is missing like
someone came up to the sky, pulled it down
and cut out a chunk and then they built a brick
wall around it to hide it, but the wall can't fill in the
gap, nothing can fill it, it's a wound in the world

and the stars fall out like blood

I believe you

ATTENTION:

Kindly refrain from speaking about the Window, or the Truth.

you better

Now I really believe you

We'll go see it sunday

=====

On Sunday, the children left their house early, as they had many times before in
their youths. The low light of dawn illuminated the edges of the trees on the edge of

the forest, the rest of it fading away into gray. The tips of the trees reached for the golden light, and the children munched on caffeinated food bars. They hesitated at the edge of the woods, because everyone hesitates at the edge of the woods, whether the woods are their childhood woods or unfamiliar, whether the trees are the teeth of the sea of dark or bright young saplings reaching for the light, whether one wants to or not. They both stepped in together, and as they walked their eyes adjusted to the dark, and the children did not turn on their headlamps, even though the dark of the woods was pressing. This journey was different. There was a feeling of pilgrimage, of respect, that pressed the darkness deeper into their eyes and kept the headlamps off, and spread the shroud of mute silence around the area, although the shuffle of clothing and food bar wrappers was loud.

They walked.

The children came to the edge of the woods. At the end, the light was brighter, more golden-soft-and-yellow, a warm light, that comes at the end of the journey. The light, warm and safe, told the children that they had reached the end of their journey, and gently pleaded them to stay and rest, like a good host. At this, the sister took the lead, and the children, with grim certainty, continued past the safe ending light of dawn. The light grew, less soft, less gold, and more yellow. As the minutes passed, the sky all around the world stretched and straightened into blue-- calm, careful, older, wiser. The children lead each other on, through the fields of tall wild grass. The scene was lush until it was not, suddenly well trimmed grass was the carpet, and in the distance was a neat brick wall. Although the wall was not notably tall, it went up and up and never stopped, simply faded away into the edge of the sky. The sister stopped at the wall, and looked at it. She looked up, and the brother looked up too. Sky met the wall, and blurred both. It was a difficult image to fit your brain into, and after a moment, they gave up. The sister followed the wall, one hand trailing along, feeling out the path ahead and the realness of this impossible scene, and the brother followed her.

She still had her spark, and that allowed her to plunge into this unfamiliar and senseless environment. The brother stumbled behind, cautious, uncertain. His connection to the world he normally lived in proved him less capable of dealing with impossibility.

He stopped suddenly, and looked at the short trimmed grass. He leaned down and touched it, as the sister moved forward.

"Is this fake?"

"What?" The sister turned, brought back from her silent thoughts.

"The grass. It's astroturf. Someone put yards of astroturf out here."

The sister snickered.

The brother chuckled.

They both burst out in laughter, and relief poured out of them in gushing waves, leaving the world around them colored brighter, and the sense poured in, and the silence rushed out. The children began to talk, about nothing, about everything, about school and friends and anything to fill the space. And as they talked they walked, the sister still trailing her hand on the impossible wall, and brother following right next to her, closer to the taller grasses and the world he knew.

They talked.

And they talked until they stopped.

They stopped dead, suddenly a new feeling rushed in, a third tide. The silence was thoughtful. The window--a window was the only thing you could call it, a place holder for a better word, and no word would fill it--meant something. It meant change. It mean knowledge, and things that could not be hidden, could not be covered up, could not be forgotten or *Forgotten*©, just talked about in serious tones, in the quiet hours of the day, talked about endlessly in cafes and laundromats and music stores and talked about until the world reached a decision, a real one this time, no more putting it off.

And so the children talked.

"It changes things," the brother said.

"Things have already been changed. This just... makes us have to face the changes."

"We needed to face the changes. It's a good thing."

"What we should have done doesn't matter anymore. This is it, this is now. This is the truth," the sister insisted.

"The Truth. You can say that again," the brother said and paused, thoughtful, "So it's all true, then?"

"Yeah, the fuel supply needing to be checked, the air supply being outdated, the gene pool needing to be periodically supplemented with old DNA so we're adapted to planet life when we land, I mean, we could be a new species now. It's responsibility, and a new way of life, but humanity will pull together."

"No, well, yes, all that is true, but the *history*? All of those horrible things humanity has done, even the history of this ship has been, well, interesting. We'll all have to relearn the things we thought we knew."

"We just have to accept history. What worries me is our power of decision."

"What do you mean?" the brother asked.

"None of our decisions are valid on their own anymore. Legally, we're not citizens, we're a ship's crew and cargo. We need to have councils and supervision and paperwork, and anything not directly related to how the ship is run will be slower, decisions will take months."

"It's change."

"Yeah. More change than the last generation was able to handle."

The window showed the stars, and the stars lit up the minds of the children. The stars whirled around the children, and the mother and father, and all the people, and the spaceship they were all on, and on the new galaxy that their children's great-grand children would see for the first time, and around all the other people in the universe, and even the Government itself, and the stars whirled and whirled around themselves and everything, and the people would talk until talking was no longer important, and the human race moved onto brighter things.

~ ~ ~

-----The Future-----

~ ~ ~

The machine buzzed and whirred, sorting its little metallic guts into the places they needed to be as the entertainment sector started up for the day. It carefully printed out the sheets it distributed, ready to be cut to size. The bin of small, candy colored plastic bubbles, prominently displayed, was in order. As the sun rose in the sky, the entertainment sector filled slowly with older, second career people, out and about for an early day, and those with unusual schedules getting off work on their way to the residential area.

An old lady slowly made her way to the machine. Placing her finger on a button her print was scanned, and the machine awoke eagerly, clicking and buzzing. The paper was cut to shape, rolled and inserted into a delicate lilac bubble. Carefully the machine sealed the bubble with a breakaway button of melted corn plastic. A final shine and the bubble was ready. The large claw reached down and plucked the delicate object from the bin and carefully placed it into the old lady's hands. Even though the bubble could be easily opened by pressing the button at the bottom, the old lady, like everyone else, cracked it open on the edge of the machine where the paint had torn and chipped away. She unrolled the paper inside and read carefully, sounding out words like *doing well* and *tomorrow*. She smiled, patted the machine, and said with a backhanded ease, "Save one for me tomorrow, will you?", as she headed back to her shop and her pets and her memories and all the other parts of her life.

The little machine clicked happily as it prepped for the next patron. The old woman came by every day, at almost this time exactly. The paper always mentioned something about her grandchildren, a bit of the weather, perhaps a random factoid. She was allowed to know almost anything she wanted at this point in her life. And the the machine could do was be polite. So on the back of the old lady's future the machine always printed: *see you soon, Margaret*.

The day wore on for a few hours before anyone else approached the machine.

This time it was a new face. The entertainment district manager walked up to the machine, nervous, and cautiously pressed the machine's single button. This time the clicks were a little tense, slower than they needed to be as the machine clacked along and the manager squirmed. As the final movement of preparation ended, it was replaced by the buzz of the mechanical arm, which pressed the little orb of truth into the manager's hand with a firm but comforting pressure. He cracked the orb open on the side of the machine, and a fat little roll of paper fell to the ground, making the man scramble around for the thick wad of facts. The young manager was surprised as he unrolled and unrolled the paper, expecting the short vague riddles the machine had given him in his youth. Instead, he was greeted with paragraphs of straightforward advice and hints. He smiled wide with hope and pride. Looking up quickly, he threw a quick smile at the machine, patting it awkwardly, giving it a quiet thanks, and then walked quickly away to pour over the new information as the machine settled back into a state of satisfied sleep.

Although the information was not exhaustive, it was very helpful. Short, practical advice was the benefit that came from having most of your path in life planned out. Plus, the machine had a soft spot for new parents. The riddles were there to mesmerise and fill the dreams of children with glittering ideas, but the machine's advice was there to help give hope to adults.

The day wore on, the sun moved in the sky and the youngest kids got out of school. Mothers and their children went out for ice-cream, or somehow found time for quick break while doing errands. A small finger touched the machine. The machine began again to cut at the paper, and now quickly filled the lime-green bubble and cooled it. The movements required precision, every action had to be exact. The child's mother ran up to the machine, and the small plastic bubble dropped onto the ground. It bounced, once, twice, three times. It became lodged in the waste can across from the machine.

Oh well. The process began again. The mother placed the child's finger on the scanner-button, the machine whirled and this time, a light blue bubble was carefully dropped into the young one's hands. The mother cracked the bubble on the side of the machine, and the thin slip of paper poked out. The mother showed it to the child, reading along, "Tomorrow, you might need an umbrella."

As the day wore on, older and older students wandered into the entertainment district. Many small groups approached the machine and laughed over the results. The machine may not have appreciated the lack of care they took in the messages of fate, but more students than anyone else would risk the possible embarrassment and bad news for a glimmer of what is to come. They laughed over each other's hope while greedily searching for substance to feed their own. So the machine dutifully knitted

out the cryptic words and jewels of information. And each student left, pining even more for the future.

As the night wore on young couples passed by the machine. A rare few might, on other days, get a vague and nearly useless description of what may come, but on this night none stopped to get even a description of the weather. The entertainment center slowly cleared out, the lights in the shops and businesses went out one by one, until only janitors and lost and lonely people wandered, looking for something to do.

Tonight, a young woman approached the machine. As she pressed the button taped to the side of her head, stopping the music, she looked over the machine, first with familiarity, then while carefully weighing the odds. With a forceful breath, she pressed the button, starting the machine into action. It buzzed and tinkered hastily, pulling the plastic bubble from the container, ripping the paper and shoving the plastic bubble into the young woman's hand. She looked at the bubble in her hand for a moment, then pressed the button on the bottom. The bubble peeled open, displaying her future as the center of a flower. She smiled a little as she unfolded the paper carefully. But as her eyes found the words hidden in the letters her smile dropped, and her eyes became wet and angry. She crumpled the paper, shoving it into her jacket pocket, before dropping the colored flower on the ground and stomping away forcefully. The flower cracked as it landed, and lay on the ground among the dust, ticket stubs, popcorn, straw covers, receipts, and other forgotten memories, small and large.

=====

Margaret Stander called her daughter, who worked in town at a local bakery, during her lunch hour everyday.

"Hey, Mom. Are you calling to give me my daily report?"

"Yes I am. You probably know it's going to rain tomorrow."

"That's what's been going around. It's funny that old future-machine still tells you weather. We know we're in a spaceship, and the weather is planned, it seems kind of silly to keep guessing at it."

"Well, the machine tells me, I tell you. Charlie is going to call you today."

"Finally! He keeps saying that college is too busy. I tell him, the bakery is busy and I still have time for my mother!"

"Yes, you do, dear. And it's very kind of you to still listen to your old mom at your very difficult job. Takes a lot of concentration, baking."

"We can't all be brain surgeons, Mother."

"I just always felt you had more potential. Why not enter some contests, now that the boys are in college, expand the business?"

"You know I won't, mom."

A silence followed, worn thin from use, familiar and prickly.

"So what's going to happen tomorrow?"

"The bakery will still be doing well. Busy tomorrow. It's been busy today."

"There's a holiday this week, that always brings in customers."

"There is one other thing..."

"Mom? What is it?"

"Charlie is going to end up in the hospital."

"What! How? How is he- I mean how will he be- I mean, Mom, tell me!"

"It's going to be fine. It's just a chemical leak in the lab, everyone has to be checked out. Everyone will be fine. That's all I can tell you."

"We should tell someone."

"You know we can't. I shouldn't even be telling you this. Besides, you know. It will all work out."

Margaret's daughter smiled. "I know it will, mom. Things work out okay, in the end. Thank you for telling me. I don't think I would have been able to handle a busy day, with Charlie in the hospital, the not knowing. Alright, one of the new interns just burned something. I love you."

"I love you. I'll call you tomorrow."

"And get the fire extinguisher already- bye, mom."

Margret put down the phone, and turned back to her shop. The books of neuroscience, marked with doodles, pictures, stories and memories written in the margins sat on her desk. The store was almost empty, and the curious collection was rattled slightly by the many birds and shop cats who lived in a state of hesitant truce within the musty antiques shop. Margaret sighed, and smiled. She got out the box of broken things she was trying to repair, and started to polish a broken toy car. It wasn't going anywhere, and she would never think to sell it. It was aimless, but beautiful, a glass shell held in shiny metal gears and engine, all twinkling with an inner light. It wasn't made to travel far distances, or pull heavy loads, only to fill the day to day with a shard of something beautiful. Margaret laughed to the empty store and the rambunctious cats and the restless birds.

"Things just work out in the end, don't they?"

=====

The beginning of the afternoon was tinged with ending. The blue was fading out to a dull yellow. And Mark was emptying the trash cans, taking the remnants of people's lives from many small bags to another, larger bag, repetitive movement made his worn-out muscles and old joints creak. He speared the trash that scampered along the pathways of the entertainment sector, and he thought about his life.

He had started out in a fishing business, getting fresh, wild, hand-speared fish, and selling it in his little sea-side shop. He would take people out on the boats with him, the tourist experience, for a day's work. They would always wonder at how difficult it was, and how easy Mark made it look, casting and pulling nets, hauling gear to the boats, knowing the ocean like no one else could know the ocean. Of course, now everyone could know the currents and tides like the back of their hand, their cubical spiral designs had been unearthed and mapped out with the rest of the Truth.

In his second career he worked for a while as a restaurant supervisor, moving inland steadily, being bounced around from chain to chain that wouldn't take him in, always away from the sea. He said he was just getting too old to fish, but the sea was everything to him, good and bad, wrong and right. Live on a dangerous piece of the coast and eventually you get sick of hearing about drowned kids. It's easy to get sick of hearing their voices in the waves. It called out to Mark the same way it seemed to call out to those kids, the realness of it, but the structure, the knowledge, the familiarity, it pushed Mark away. The sea was the one thing with teeth in their lives. They just wanted to grab it, bleed with the realness of it. So Mark ran away.

So now, here he was, landlocked. Stuck here, cleaning up a planned-out world, still running with the ocean's tether around his neck. But this was his last week.

As Mark pulled the cover off the trash can across from the fortune machine, a lime-green plastic bubble popped out, hitting him in the face. He jolted back, dropping the bag again, but the lime-green bubble had spun off along the path. In a rare impulsive whim, Mark dropped his bag, scattering the garbage again across the pavement, and chased after the stray orb. Although it had been a while since his active days, the muscles from centuries of standing, running, and lifting all still flew to his command, and he gained on the bubble, even as he ducked and dived around, searching for where it was hidden. He snatched it, and stood still, breathing heavily in the calm and silent sector, prize in hand.

But he walked away with his age, slowly pacing to a table, lowing himself and cracking open the bubble on the edge of it and unfolding the paper inside. It was tantalizing, finding a piece of someone else's life, whole, intact and unread.

So Mark was surprised at what he found inside.

Dear Mark,

I know you're scared. I was scared, I've been told, before beginning my second lifetime. But you won't remember that you're scared, who you lost, or what you regret. You remember what you're made of. The limits you were stretched to, that's what you remember. You remember what it means, to have a new beginning. To learn everything over again, to follow old passions and find new ones. To look like you picture yourself, young, but different and new. To have a lifetime under your belt, and

still have room for another. Just keep going. You, Mark, the one you are now, you can last this week. Because at the end, the end of this life, when you enter that operating room, scary as it may be, it will be fine. You're not leaving yourself behind. You're finding the pieces that you forgot.

-a friend in the Government

P.S. I think you'll make your peace with the sea someday, Mark. A little more learning never did anyone any harm, and remember, the sea will change with you, wherever you go.

Mark looked up into the clouds and the sea in the sky, and he smiled. And somehow, the tide hit his eyes and dragged a wave of the warm cool pressure through him, washing the Mark that he was before clean.

=====

As Tali stomped away in the biting autumn night, she pressed the her SoundCore button, restarting the music in her head. Tali walked quickly, trying to hide the heat of her emotions in the chill wind of speed in a cold night. Eventually she came to the edge of the entertainment district, a small park, near a couple of thick industrial public buildings. She stared into the blank-eyed lights of the blockiest building in the distance, losing herself in what could be going on there, finding minutes dripping away.

Tali dripped through childhood memories. Her whole family, mom, dad, two sisters and even the cat went out one cold winter day when school was canceled, and built a deck and playground in anticipation of hot summer days spent playing. Her mother was obsessed with the future. She often said "No fruit is juicier than the one you will eat tomorrow." She built systems of managing knowledge, even designed a vending machine to give people hints of what's to come. The three girls grew up always anticipating the next move. Tali's mother always made the future look bright and open, if only you would study a little more, work a little harder, maybe take an extra class. The future is open, Tali. It will always wait for you, even if nothing else will.

Even if I won't.

Tali shook herself awake, checking her watch. 10:47. Alright. Four hours.

Just four hours.

Tali felt her legs harden to cement at the thought of facing her family now. Her youngest sister still lived with her parents, but the middle sister had just moved to a teenage residential area near a training program for her aviation specialization. She was still adjusting, awkward and young, delicately balancing the changes in her young life. Any little thing could send someone that young spiraling over the edge. There

were so many memories floating around the whole family together. Tali's first day at the art academy, her first day of school, her last day of non-specialized school. Her first gallery exhibit. In every scene the warm glow of family choked Tali at the base of her neck.

The whole family had been torn out of their places. Everywhere her mother's presence filled the family with a sense of wholeness, togetherness. Tali felt her heart being segmented like an orange, the protective skin already peeled off in pieces.

She looked down at the paper again, metallic tears held tension in her tongue. She wasn't ready. But no one was ready, no one would ever be ready. Tali got up, and walked back to hospital, back to pain and family and the land of failing health; all the worries of the world. She kept the paper in her pocket and the weight on her shoulders. Knew her job was only to quietly keep talking, remembering every little thing she could about what the future might hold, keeping the last moments of the five of them together, whole, alive.

In the shadows of Tali's jacket pocket the paper whispered.

3:13am

I love you.

Goodbye.

~ ~ ~

-----The Academy-----

~ ~ ~

"I first met the director on the last day I peed my pants."

The agent laughs.

"That's," he says, trying to stay business-like, "That's not something someone has told me before." He giggles in a high pitch. His desk stand says **RECRUITMENT AGENT CAMERON DIMANENZO, GROSS NATIONAL HAPPINESS**. His smile is wide and friendly. He simply can't help himself.

Easy prey.

I'm Charles Solstice. I make people laugh. Viciously, violently. I can stalk a target for days before they fall. Oh, and when they *fall*... I've sent people to the hospital.

"Oh, sorry about that, Mr. Solstice. I'm trying to be professional, but that's really not me. We do have fun here, usually."

"It's quite all right, Mr. Dimanenzo. And you can call me Charles." He smiles.

"Well, if I call you Charles, you have to call me Cam." I've calmed him down, and he thinks that's all I've got. Like that was my one joke, starting out this interview on a high note. I'll let him think that for a while. As Captain Fredricson always said, toy with them all you want, just always keep them calm. Calm is weak, isn't tense, ready,

prepared, won't flinch or brace for impact.

"So, I've said the punchline of my story, which is very simple. When I was a kid I peed my pants, usually whenever one of the other kids would try and talk with me. It's a bulletproof strategy, and has gotten me through most difficult problems in my life." Mr. Dimanenzo snickers. "And so one of the other children, the new student in fact, tried to borrow my scissors. So peeing, I believe, is the natural reaction." Mr. Dimanenzo is smiling a real smile, not the fake professional grin he had when I first sat down. I've managed to wipe off that first layer of skin, the protective mask. He's down to the second, the friendly, personalized skin, how he is around his prestigious friends, talking with his coworkers, at parties.

This story is developed from a truth, by the way. Although the truth was a little less picturesque. Yes, some kid asked to borrow scissors, and I peed my pants. The director of gross national happiness came to speak to the whole school, and every kid I knew saw me and my wet pants. I was already that kid, the weird one, the third grader who wouldn't talk to anyone. The director told us that we could be anything we wanted to be, that our goals were our own. And on that day, I realized, for the first time, that I did have goals. The goals that I whispered to myself at the end of the day, of getting back at the people who hurt me by comparing themselves to me, and talking to me. I could be more than them, in fact, I was more than them. So I began to plan, to watch and wait.

I believe I eventually took out that kid's eye with his own pair of scissors.

But that's my old work. Pain and fear is easy, anyone can make you angry, make you sweat. When you hurt someone, you don't control them, the fear does. You're just the button pusher. It's what Captain Fredricson taught me. Humor is art. You control people with jokes, make them want to be controlled. When you make someone laugh, you are better than them. There's a reason the only jokes I laugh at are my own.

"And the director inspired me," I continued, "to make people laugh. That was my goal, I realized. When people laughed at me, and gave me their attention, they gave me a piece of themselves. I wanted that...that openness. I wanted their laughter."

"Wow... really, I'm impressed. I certainly never thought like that when I was eight. And you never peed your pants again, even though it was a side affect of your social anxiety?"

"No. Well, no. There was...well, not accidentally." Mr. Dimanenzo is hook, line, and sinker, caught and gift-wrapped. Lies are interesting. I like lies. I like lying. It's smooth, easier than chatting, explaining, talking. Talking, I had to learn that. Learn how to tell people the truth or, at least, a consistent lie, something people could use to talk to each other about me, use to understand me.

"Charles, I can see the passion is there. And we know your history, of course, and I've even seen your resume personally. But now I want to hear about your

education in your words.”

Education! I'm saying the usual things, things the Academy taught me to say. All the little lies that mimic the years that really taught me everything I know. The Academy of the Disturbed, and of course, Captain Fredricson, took it upon themselves to to unmake me and tell me how to cut through this world like the knife I was.

I started out in a normal preschool, but that was the only normal school I ever attended. The teachers there quickly realized that I was different from the other children, and recommended a magnet school for students with various mental differences. My family's psychologist diagnosed me with social anxiety, I got into the specialty elementary and all was fine, at least until fourth grade.

I did a lot more than stab out a kid's eye with scissors. Mental manipulation was my specialty. There were these two girls, best friends. By the end of third grade they wouldn't talk to each other, not a single word, not even make eye contact. I doubt they ever talked to each other again. I began getting sloppy, my tactics weren't refined. I was put on a teacher watch list when the clumsy kid somehow became clumsier near me, got hurt in the halls when we crossed paths, had to go to the nurse. The scissor kid got a pamphlet on how to stand up to bullies and I decided to put him in his place.

So with a kid in the hospital there was an intervention. I had to switch schools, the only question was who would take me. My parents were distressed, as they would be for the next several years. It was two days before the beginning of the new school year when we were approached by a government agent about The Academy of the Disturbed.

The program had an intense, nearly twenty-four-seven schedule, and I was only allowed to see my parents for a few hours Saturday and Sunday. I worked. We covered general topics intensely, with no room for specialization. We had high level classes: calculus, human history, literature, intensive essay writing, air and space engineering. Every one of my classmates was not only insane, but disturbed, a proven threat to themselves or others. We were out in the exercise yards for two hours a day, triathlon training, and kept the school in top condition, repairing and cleaning constantly, on an iron-clad schedule that never varied. I've been told that it was as intensive, if not more, than the old military schools. And apart from daily therapy sessions, we each had a mentor who lead us through our individualized recovery plan. Although many were new teachers, fresh out of job training, many were graduates of the Academy of The Disturbed themselves. That was how I first met Captain Fredricson, a recovering sociopath who had worked as a commercial fishing boat technician before finding his second career at the Academy. By day he worked long hours alone on older boats, with only the raging sea and his repairman's tools to accompany him, but by night he was a different person. He let himself become the thing he wanted to be, and gain the control he deserved over others.

He was a stand-up comedian.

He moved from town to town, following the boats and avoiding fame. At each bar or community theater he'd leave a fake name, do a set, and leave, never to return, unless in disguise, to hear what a legend he had become. He held people in the palm of his hand with one joke, made crowds of people abandon sleep for a whole night, made millionaires sign over their whole fortune to him. His greatest feat, one February, in a dive bar near the southern coast, was to encourage an entire crowd to follow him as he went deeper and deeper into the cold winter sea. The act was so famous in that town that it has created a midnight festival, when every man, woman, and otherwise runs into the ocean on the last night of February and howls with laughter in the icy waters.

He was an appropriate teacher for me, then. He knew from the first day, that I was something special, a gem of talent. It was just a way to make me work harder, when everyday he told me exactly how little I'd accomplished in life, how I would never be half as much as history's greatest men and women. He told me that I always had an ego the size of a whale. I know I do. There's nothing wrong with it. It's a good thing.

I was a quick learner. But comedy is an art, and it takes years to master an art. I didn't need dedication, and at first, I chose not to go the extra mile and practice my craft, I merely considered it a distraction amid the busy schedule of the Academy. Over time, I came to the conclusion that if I truly wanted to show my powers over the teachers and other students I would have to show them the powers myself, and practice exuding an air of comedy. Captain Fredricson always told me that I had to work my ass off if I ever wanted to be anything more than the sad, pathetic, refuse of society.

Not many were comfortable laughing at my jokes at first. But in a few years, the environment of the school changed in imperceptible ways and my newer jokes were given the response they deserved.

I decided to dedicate my life to comedy. Every second of spare time I had, every book I read, every sentence I said and video I watched became for the singular purpose of perfecting my art, gaining that perfect control over others that I know I deserve. My innate talent shows through.

"So you were really kicked out of a comedy club for being too funny?"

I mentioned before that I sent a guy to the hospital.

"Now, Charles, you're obviously a funny guy, with the papers to back that up. You could rule any stand up group you wanted to, you could own comedy media, from writing room to acting." Mr. Dimanenzo smirks, somehow thinking he has the upper hand with this question, "Why do you want to be part of the Government?"

Oh, Mr. Dimanenzo. You could never understand. You always think you have the

upper hand because you play your life in a sandbox. You think power is helping all the other kids build castles. You have never truly wanted anything in your tiny little loving heart, not in the way I have always wanted the things I deserve. I know who feeds me, who keeps a roof over my head, who carefully balances my life. I know who takes my variables out of the universal algorithm to decide what I'll have for lunch today, who I'll bump into on the subway. Who I'll marry.

The Government is the force that guides our lives into place, so the Government is the best of us, every precious individual who runs the lives of those below, hand picked for excellence and benefit to humanity. Mr. Dimanenzo thinks the world can fit in his sandbox. But that's his purpose. He is a tiny gear in a machine that's bigger than his mind can understand. But I know who pulls the levers. And I know that it's my place to take.

"It's all about making people happy. And really, making the most people the happiest they can be. Media stays in a single population group. Where else can you impact the entire human race? I want to really change people's lives, not just the minutes of their day."

"It's a noble goal, Charles." Mr Dimanenzo smiles sincerely. I've taken off another layer of his skin- and gotten down to what is probably his real self, how he is around close friends and proteges. He's letting me see a piece of him as a sign of submission. "And it's why I am happy to help you achieve it. Congratulations, Charles. You are now officially a factor, agent, and citizen of the Government." He makes the sign of the G on his chest. I feel, for a moment, an inkling of pride. I worked for this. I deserve it.

Not my best work. I wanted the job, after all. I couldn't pulverize him, not like I do to strangers at parties. Plus, he was an easy target, didn't take my best work to get him to the level I needed him to be at. One little slice and I had him in the palm of my hand. I take his hand, and do the handshake, (business, firm but not too firm.)

As I leave the Government outpost the sun is shining with the same intensity it always has. I only realized it when those two kids revealed that the world we know really was a spaceship. It's caused a lot of changes, new workers and policies, a call for mechanics to fix ancient outdated air filters. We want to find out just where we're all going. Requests have been made to the Government, but they'll never tell. And everyone thinks them better for it.

I feel like I made this good weather, painted the sky with my powers. Soon enough I'll be in this universe's greatest point of power, among the greats and the giants, curving the human race to my whim.

And I'll make them all laugh.

~ ~ ~

-----The Government-----

~ ~ ~

The rain poured down, cleaning the lies and the hiding from the world, pulling the lost things from their cracks in the sidewalk and sending them on their way. A young man walked briskly through the residential streets, turning and twisting along tangled but ordered sidewalks. The streetlights blurred in the rain and the man's memory of them blurred together, this turn and that turn became a mess of whirling angles until the man was completely lost in his own neighborhood and the rain. Only the same house, repeating over and over, and a dark yellow glow kept the pace of the scene.

At least, until the houses stopped. The residential streets widened. The steady quiet pace of repeating lives mimicking each other in the night was replaced by the sluggish pounding pulse of industrial streetlights in the same key of yellow. On one side cargo trucks, passenger-less and driverless robots zoomed towards their destinations irregularly. On the other side, fields stretched on into the distance, bordered by wild fields of grass. The fields and streets went on, and the man slowed down. He walked on, deeper into the night, until he passed a farmstand. It was empty, the farmer having brought in their produce at a reasonable hour. He went up to the stand and leaned against it. The rain dripped down his face, masking the hot, angry tears that only nocturnal birds would ever notice. After several minutes of sitting and being rained on, the man got up. He couldn't go back. It was too far, too much, the world too strong and him too weak to go back after a simple, few hours off cooling off. He got up and walked on into the night.

Eventually the fields were hidden behind more houses, a new neighborhood. And so the man walked in a straight line, following the main road on and on, with no destination. The buildings opened up into a clearing, a community center. A small child care center, a playground, a meeting center, and side roads that lead to schools and other districts. And on the other side of the street from the young man, a spiritual center.

It was a simple yet beautiful building, with a tall, open entrance-way. Inside the building was a dome, with high, glassy, tall windows faintly glowing with refracted yellow light. The main building was open, and although the ugly square side buildings seemed to be full of sleeping people, the spiritual center was open. The light was welcoming, and most importantly, dry and warm. The young man quickly crossed the neighborhood clearing.

As he stepped into the entranceway, he began to shiver and chatter. He leaned against the hard planks of wood that made up the shelter and began to feel all the night time walking we had done. He found a bench inside that was not particularly soft but not particularly hard, and fell into a shallow black doze.

At around five am the lights in the center got brighter, more peircing. The light clinking noises of early-morning people going about their quiet business rattled the young man out of sleep and into something more shallow. But eventually, the noises stopped, replaced by the faint whir of papers shuffling. In that calm, the man had strange dreams, vivid and surreal, until a cool early-morning light and the gentle tapping rain and the shuffling of papers tugged him back into consciousness.

"Eu-aaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!"

"What! I'm sorry!"

"Oh, I'm sorry; you just startled me, my boy."

The old man, who was going through the spiritual center's paperwork as he drank his morning's coffee put aside his work and walked over to the young man.

"Is there a reason you're in my center at this time in the morning?"

"Yeah."

A heavy silence fell.

"Were you here all night?"

"Maybe."

"Well, if you'd like to tell me about it, I'll be there at my desk, doing paperwork."

The old man went back to his desk. Every now and then he would get up and pull papers from the myriad of drawers and folders hidden around the room before going back to his desk and incorporating them into the whole. The young man watched him for a while, wondering at him, about nothing and everything, things personal and universal. It was a look the old man knew well.

"If you have any questions, you know, we could talk about them. This is a wonderful place to have questions."

"I know."

"Well, do you have questions?"

"Yeah."

And the young man flopped down onto the bench and questioned the ceiling. Many silent breaths passed, punctuated with the shuffling of papers, and the opening of drawers.

"Look, if you're just going to stare at the ceiling, why don't you move to this front bench. It's got pillows on it."

The young man continued to stare at the ceiling. The old man sighed, and went back to his work.

"How does the Government decide who gets punished?"

"Oh!" The old man exclaimed, the young man suddenly sitting across from him in a front-row bench. "Well, the Government watches us all, which was part of the agreement that began on the very first generational ship sent out to colonize the universe. An agreement that, as we now know, we uphold the tradition of. The

Government tries to make us better people. The difficulties we face we can face better knowing that we will be lead to a solution eventually, and get slapped on the wrist if we try and stray from the best way to do things.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“Well, if the Government sees that you have been making life more difficult for other people, if you obstruct their happiness, then you will be removed from that equation, regardless of your own personal happiness. You will be put on the track to achieving some of your own happiness, but whenever you block someone else’s opportunity, their happiness come first. Call it punishment if you want.”

The young man carefully chewed this over.

“Then why the hell haven’t my parents been removed from the equation yet?”

The old man started to say something, but paused. He looked at the boy critically.

“If you weren’t in my spiritual center at five in the morning asking me questions about who deserves punishment I would tell you that the Government is thinking about the future happiness that comes from personal growth, and oftentimes friction with one’s parents is a natural part of growing up. But I don’t think that answer applies to you.”

The young man nodded. He sat forward, leaning on his knees in his place on the bench.

“I can’t tell you why until you tell me what’s happening.”

The boy stared forward blankly.

“I promise you that I won’t tell anyone. I have a promise of confidentiality of all information that we discuss in this center.”

“And if my parents come to this center?”

“Yes, you were here. I can’t outright lie to them. But we did not talk, and although I asked why you were in my center, you refused to answer. So I let you be and you eventually left.”

The young man thought it over.

“So, we live on a ship now?”

The old man looked disappointed and frustrated. He calmed himself, relaxed, and answered, “Yes. We were always on a ship, it was just hidden from us when we didn’t want to know it. We always wanted to believe the world was real, that what we did here would have a major impact on the worlds around us. But now that we know why we’re so cut off from the rest of the world, why very few of us can travel to the Government’s headquarters, much less anywhere else in the universe, we have to deal with the futility of many of our actions head on. We can’t vote. We aren’t part of the human race, and we won’t be until planet-fall.”

The old man looked at the young man for some sign of his words’ affect. The

young man's face was blank. The old man went back to his paperwork.

The old watch that the old man wore clicked quietly as the sun slowly woke up, cool light heating as the day stretched and yawned. Reasonable people made sounds of living and moving outside, walking and biking to work or play, walking their dogs, children playing on a day off. The spiritual center was closed today, only taking in those who wanted counsel, in between mounds of paperwork. But no one wanted counsel on a pleasant sunny Saturday, when the park and the movie theater and the beach could provide a better way to leak out the conflict in your heart and head.

"My parents think I'm not ready for an adolescent community. They say if I don't get straight A's I couldn't deal with balancing school and friends and living on my own. But I wouldn't be living on my own- I just- hm."

"Do you think you're ready?"

"Well, I... I think I should be. I should go. Otherwise I'll be behind, getting used to it with people who have already been living there for a year. I won't be ready at first. That's why you go."

"Well said."

"Thanks. I just think I'm allowed to be scared."

"You are. You're supposed to be scared. Terrified even. Your parents should be dragging you out of the house, kicking and screaming. But they should feel like you're dragging them."

"I've never dragged my parents anywhere in my life."

"But in a way you've never stopped dragging against them." The old man smiled kindly. "Is that why you decided to let go of them?"

"I never decided to let go of my parents!" The young man yelled, defensive. He looked scared at the accusation, as good-natured as it was. The old man made a small thinking noise.

"How old are you?"

"Fifteen."

"It is the year that most people move to the adolescent community."

"I know. I've tried everything. I got them to visit it--see the rooms, talk to the RAs, the counselors, the transition teachers. They said I would be too far away, that I would never visit."

"Would you visit?"

The young man is quiet. He looks at the old man with a kind of desperation.

"It's a difficult situation, I take it?"

The young man nods.

"So you left."

"No!"

"Then why are you here?"

The young man swallows. "We got into a fight. They said that they would let me go to this special community. I would go to a new school, where none of the kids knew each other, they all have crazy parents like mine. Except you don't really live there. You "practice independence in a safe and nurturing environment", just take classes about responsibility and they watch you the whole time until around seven, when you get shipped back home to your parents with a sheet about everything you did that day."

The old man is thoughtful. He thinks about every person he has advised, talked to, been a sounding board for. None of those situations are like this boy's, none of them are really like each other. No two problems have the same solution. It's risky. It's not ideal. The old man doesn't know how bad the situation really is.

"What school do you go to?"

"New Century Specialty. I'm in the music track, but my parents don't know that. I'd be moving into the music track community by "accident", hopefully."

The old man opens a drawer on the side of his desk, and pulls out a thick envelope and a pen.

"This is the New Century Specialty School independent adolescent re-application form. If you fill this out the school becomes your legal guardian. It's similar to the shared guardian privileges of an adolescent community, but I think it might be helpful in your case."

The young man takes the envelope, and the pen. He feels shaky, weak, devoid of life. He hasn't eaten in a while, and he barely slept. He doesn't think that he should be making decisions like this in the state he is in right now. But he opens the envelope and he reads and writes and signs, even as his handwriting shakes from exhaustion.

He looks at the old man.

"Thank you.... I really hope I mean that."

"I hope so too."

They are quiet as the young man fills out the paperwork. The old man watches, and thinks about how the Government works. It could be because of them that it was said that this boy finally got to be free to pursue his happiness. It could be said that it was entirely of his own power that he gained happiness. Perhaps some would argue that he was only falling out of one maze of supervision and rules and into the next. But it could also be that the Government is no more than a finely tuned machine, a system that works very well. A system that has been planned, crafted and corrected, over and over again, by so many people, until it allows for a solution to every problem. It's not a very spiritual idea, the old man thinks, but sometimes the most spiritual growth can come from the most mundane beginnings. Maybe a form can do more than save a life. It can change it.

When the form is finished the young man looks up. There is sadness on his face, but hope, too. The old man leans down and pulls a bag of cookies out of the drawer in

his desk.

“You look like you need these.”

The young man looks confused, having forgot about basic needs like hunger, but smiles for the first time as he eats.

“Now, you should walk over to the school with that, and you’ll give it to the man in charge of the adolescent community for that school. I know him fairly well. I’ll walk over with you as soon as I get these papers organized, alright?”

And as the old man and the young man finish up the paperwork, the young man's parents look for him, calling the community watch and the local news. They panic and cry, hard and fast, distress building on their faces and worry for the boy in the reporter who interviews them. But still the boy walks over to his school with the old spiritual advisor with him, and wonders if he will see his parents again, if he can meet them, and talk without losing a freedom he has hoped for, but not yet tasted. And the old man wonders if this is the largest problem he has ever tackled, not because of its scope but because of his personal involvement. And the rain slowly trickles down the faces of the people walking in its light spray, and the system that tries to keep them on their tracks keeps turning, pushed along by the very people it benefits. The ship flies through space, an artificial planet orbiting only the motivation it takes to finally find a purpose.
